

retail therapy



Ceramics Monthly: How did moving to the US from Korea and immersion into a new culture affect your perceptions and make you assess your involvement in consumer culture?

YehRim Lee: It was not easy. I remember my first day in Long Beach, California. I was so excited for the new experience that I bought an airline ticket before I had a place to live, so I found myself a frightened resident of the Motel 6 until I found an apartment. These initial months were exciting, but I wasn't prepared for the loneliness I would feel as well.

Consumerism feeds on loneliness and emptiness. It suggests that all problems can be solved through material things. Having yet to discover my own personal means of fulfillment, I'm sad to say I often fell into this cultural trap. But some cultural differences helped my growth as an artist. My education at the University of California Long Beach and later at Alfred University in New York, changed the way I perceived making and studio practice because the pedagogy was different than what I knew in Korea and China. Alfred, New York, is a very small town, but isolation strengthened my introspection and made me separate desire from action, which ultimately loosened the grip that consumerism held on my earlier life.

CM: Your work explores consumer appetite, gluttony and excess, luxury and decadence, while you are currently living a life that is more austere and frugal. Does making the work substitute for the act of participating directly in consumer culture?

YL: When I started to make this kind of work, I made massive sculptures without considering the logistics of storage and transportation. As I found myself through my work, the size and complexity were very much a reflection of ravenous consumption—the desire for visual beauty so previously

prevalent in my life. Art is not a substitution for problems, it is a solution. Through my work, I was able to recognize the unmet needs that I once fed through "retail therapy," as they say on *Gossip Girl*. Materialism itself is often still reflected in the work. Many pieces are built around a more permanent structure surrounded by wrappings of plastic, fiber, and paper, like a packaged good that lost control of its form and function. Often the impermanent materials are discarded once an installation is dismantled.

CM: Travel or living outside of our home country often makes the experiences we have of our own culture and exploration of our own selves more acute. Can you describe your experience with this?

YL: My father is an Onggi potter. Onggi is a traditional Korean pottery form originally used for fermentation of food like kimchi. So, my childhood was surrounded by ceramics and studio practice. As an angsty teen, I used to resent ceramics because my father's studio was in the countryside. I longed for cityscapes and urban adventures. Ironically, though, the separation from my home and my culture caused me to desire aspects of that life that I previously resented. The longer and farther the separation, the more I began to reflect on who I was as an individual, outside of any one culture, as a participant in many cultures. The striking contrast of ideas about individuality, gender roles, and consumer culture between Korea and the US, inspired my purpose for making. I found that clay grounded my identity through cultural resolution, a way to mediate, motivate, and make sense of different perspectives. Through clay, I could mold my own terms and life.