Perhaps time is the single most important determinant in how we understand ceramic. It isn’t just that the discipline has a dauntingly deep and pervasive history—we are aware of fired clay objects from as early as 29,000 BCE—but that we have superb examples of them, from them through virtually every age up to the present. The lasting power of fired clay is unique: no other art has a lineage as ubiquitous or intense as this. Inevitably then, it bears on all contemporary artists who seriously engage with it. Contemporary ceramic has to deal with an ever-present memory, one that cannot easily be elided, and this is an inescapable factor in its aesthetic make-up.

Nowhere is this sense of cultural memory more powerful than in Korea, which has been host to a vital ceramic culture for millennia, and at various points in that long history, has been thought to be unrivalled. It took celadon to heights that even the Chinese struggled to match, and for some of us, the painterly porcelain vases of the Middle Chosun Dynasty are among the greatest achievements of world art. We understand as specific Korean contributions various types of relief and incised wares, and the magnificent form known as the moon jar.

As with painting and sculpture, it isn’t always a blessing. Grand canons have the power to stultify experimentation, and to intimidate artists into unnecessary respect and imitation. Nevertheless, the greatest art in the modern period—and especially the greatest ceramic—has been that which forms a relationship with the past—absorbing, commenting, challenging, and even denying its implications—in order to make art that moves us on.

Ree Soo-Jong (born 1948) has long been recognised as one of Korea’s principal ceramic artists. Interestingly, while his output for several decades has essentially been about the vessel, in the extraordinary context he grew up in, his formation as an artist was quite different. His early reputation was driven far more by a sculptural approach to practice. Through the 1970s and 1980s, he developed...
a wide repertoire of organic, raw, abstract forms, which occasionally tipped into architectonic structures. He also worked with the human figure. Vitally, he has always been engaged with painting and drawing, running this thread alongside his ceramic activity. He is the painterly draftsman par excellence, and in many respects, drawing underpins everything he does.

He occasionally worked with the vessel through his earlier career, but it was really only from the mid-1990s that he committed to it in an ongoing, obsessive way. Thus, he previously had a career of pushing, testing, experimenting, in which clay was moved through a wide repertoire of idioms, before the determination to focus this exploration on pots.

His work in the current exhibition essentially comprises of a number of groups, each of which is an essay on the moon jar. The artist doesn’t say a lot in front of his work, but when I met him in his studio, he tellingly pointed out that traditionally, the rounded form of the moon jar was achieved by throwing two bowls, and then joining them together to create a spherical form. The join would be smoothed out, to hide the process. Soo-Jong frequently exposes the join to make it a core element in the vessel. He then uses his extraordinary technical control to push the form into new terrain. His language of lines, splashes, drips, dints, tucks, dents allows him to transform the moon jar into an emotive arena, a site of unmediated expression.

One of the artist’s great signature pieces is a tall white vessel derived from a moon jar, with a single dramatic gestural black brush mark across its face. It is a spectacular, existential statement about the fusion of past and present, and a quintessentially Asian – Korean approach to the painted vessel. A sublime level of confidence brings thrown form and painted surface into unison, and painting and pottery become the same thing. This method and philosophy of the painted vessel was known to Europeans by the later 19th century, but it was most effectively brought to Europe by Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, who worked together in Japan. They returned to Britain in 1920, exactly a century ago, and profoundly impacted Western studio ceramic. So the visual language at work in Soo-Jong’s moon jars is now a truly international idiom. But few have ever practiced it like this; he has taken the idiom, and brought it profoundly into the 21st century. His moon jars are among the greatest pots of our time.

Ree Soo-Jong knew Hamada. Much like the Japanese master, there is a profound straightforwardness in his vision of practice. Art historian Choi Gong-Ho commented that Ree Soo-Jong does not use exaggerated rhetoric when he talks about his works. This implies that he thinks that true works of art are created when working with clay with your own hands rather than playing with words. He believes a day’s physical labour is far more honest than ten seemingly great concepts. So, he says, working is his life.

He is acutely aware of global developments in artistic practice, and of the ideas that underpin it. But his life is squarely based in making things. This sense of artisanship, of doing, seems to be part of the Korean attitude to culture. Lee Hun Chung (born 1967), describes his attitude to practice in much the same way as Soo-Jong. He tells us that “art is not a denial of ideas, but rather, an assertion that they cannot exist in isolation from the object. The role of the individual artist is to expose ideas through materials.

A generation younger, Hun Chung’s national reputation is as an artist who has engaged with conceptualist approaches to practice. He often works with large-scale installations, that deliberately confound any demarcation between the various disciplines. Art critic Chang Dong Kwang tells us that “Lee is a potter, sculptor, designer, architect, painter, installation artist, poet, and labourer, because he is full of raw human character.” He also
refuses to acknowledge any meaningful space between abstract and figurative art. Much of his work is multimedia, with large-scale ceramic sculptural forms at the heart of things. Running through all of this, is a socially-engaged range of imagery. The artist tells us that: “it feels good to live as an artist as a member of society, no more, no less.” His work resonates with what he finds around him, and is driven by an ongoing commentary on life. While there is subversive wit at work, the overwhelming feel of the whole is invariably of a joie de vivre, a gladness to be around, and alive.

As part of this creative vortex of activity, the artist still engages with the vessel, and ceramic as a material of architectonic and design potential. Over the last period of years the artist has developed an extraordinary range of furniture, effectively by expanding the role of the thrown vessel. His chairs, stools, tables and daybeds are created from modeled and thrown ceramic. Large vessels become stools, or the support for a daybed. He uses the related technology of cast and polished concrete to create the flat planes to make the furniture work. More classically, large planters fill interior space, and function as major features in interior space. This work is the core of the current exhibition. And interestingly, he is still engaged in production pottery, running BADA, a company that produces a range of wares for a wide audience.

The Korean ceramic scene is one of the brightest and most complex in the global arena, and it remains at the heart of the national culture. The country boasts impressive ceramic theme parks, and it isn’t by chance that the world’s most important regular international gathering of ceramic art is the Gyeonggi International Biennial, near Seoul. When we peruse the work of these two extraordinary masters, brought to England in quantity for the first time by Messums London, we realise why.
REE SOO-JONG

1948 Born in Seoul
1971 B.F.A Hongik University (Major in Ceramics)
1978 M.F.A Hongik University

COLLECTION
The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (Japan)
Taipei City Museum (Taipei)
Victoria and Albert Museum (London)
Royal Ontario Museum (Canada)
The National Folk Museum of Korea (Seoul)
Hongik University Contemporary Museum (Seoul)
E-Land Group (Seoul)
Sangmyeonsan University Museum (Seoul)
Milal Museum (Seoul)
National Art Museum of China (Beijing, China)
A member of International Academy of Ceramic/IAC

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2019 Aigukdong Byeolgung KNCH (Buyeo)
2017 EFN Gallery (Seoul)
PiccPloc Gallery (Taipei)
2016 Yu Hyeon Dong KNCH (Buyeo)
2014 Gallery J (Seoul)
ZIEN ART SPACE (Yongin, Korea)
2011 Gallery Date (Pusan, Korea)
Gallery Dam (Seoul)
2008 Tong-In Auction Gallery (Seoul)
Song ART Gallery (Seoul)
2007 Gallery Dam (Seoul)
Seoul Open Art Fair (Seoul)
2006 Tong-In Auction Gallery (Seoul)
Gallery Dam (Seoul)
2005 Gallery Ban (Busan)
Yeongsang Gallery (Seoul)
Tong-In Gallery (New York)
2004 GaNa Art Center (Seoul)
JoHye Gallery (Beijing)
Namoo Gallery (Seoul)
2001 YuFei Gallery (Fukuoka, Japan)
GaNa Art Space (Seoul)
McKuminTo Gallery (Seoul)
1998 To Art Space (Seoul)
1997 To Art Space (Seoul)
1995 Woowon Gallery (Seoul)
1994 Gallery Pusan (Busan)
1993 Sungdam Art Gallery (Seoul)
Sampoong Gallery (Seoul)
1990 To Gallery (Seoul)
1988 To Gallery (Seoul)
1987 To Gallery (Seoul)
1986 To Gallery (Seoul)
1981 Kwanhoon Gallery (Seoul)
Chulhee Buncheong, 2006
Ceramic
25 x 25 x 27 cm
Moon Jae, 2012
Ceramic
40 x 40 x 51 cm

Moon Jae, 2012
Ceramic
37 x 33 x 51 cm
Moon Jar, 2019
Ceramic
51 x 51 x 45 cm

Moon Jar, 2019
Ceramic
50 x 50 x 51 cm
Moon Jae, 2015
Ceramic
45 x 45 x 49 cm

Moon Jae, 2015
Ceramic
47 x 47 x 45 cm
Moon Jae, 2015  
Ceramic  
43 x 43 x 43 cm

Moon Jae, 2015  
Ceramic  
37 x 37 x 40 cm
Chulhwa Buncheong, 2006
Ceramic
20 x 20 x 26 cm

Chulhwa Buncheong, 2006
Ceramic
24 x 24 x 27 cm
LEE HUN CHUNG

1967 Born in Seoul, Korea

EDUCATION

2007 Ph.D Architecture Kyung-won University, Kyung-ju-do, Korea

2000 Art Forum 2000 as a Head Jury, Peru, USA

1995-96 San Francisco Art Institute as a Teaching Assistant

1993-95 M.F.A. Sculpture, Graduate School at San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, U.S.A.

1991-95 M.F.A. Ceramic Sculpture, Graduate School at Hong-kung University, Seoul, Korea

1991-93 Hongik University Ceramic Research Center as a Researcher

1986-91 B.F.A. Ceramic Sculpture, Hongik University, Seoul, Korea

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019 LWOO ART Space, Seoul, Korea

2018 Sophia Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2017 Aveul Art Hall, Seoul, Korea

Lotte Gallery, Busan, Korea

The Segye Times 30th Ceremony “With Project”, Seoul Art Foundation Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2016 R and company, New York, U.S.A.

2015 Gallery Artside, Seoul, Korea

2014 Park Ryo Sook Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2013 One and J Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2012 FOGON Gallery, New York, U.S.A.

2011 Irozo Space, Seoul, Korea

2010 Lee HWAIK Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2009 Studio Gallery, Busan, Korea

2009 MSU Copeland Gallery, Bezman, U.S.A.

2009 On the Table, Daegu, Korea

2008 Seon & lusa Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2007 Park Ryo Sook Gallery, Jeju, Korea

2007 SP Gallery, Seoul, Korea

2006 U-Ri-Gu-Rut RYU, Seoul, Korea

2005 JRRa Gallery, Rome, Italy

2005 Venezuela Caracas City Hall, Caracas, Venezuela

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019 KIAF, Coex, Korea

2019 Art Mining: Korean Craft Exhibition, palazzo Litta Milano, Milano, Italy


2017 Craft Trend Fair, Coex, Seoul, Korea

S.D.F.A. Chicago, U.S.A.

2016 Craft Climax: Gyeonggi Contemporary Craft 2017, Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art, Asan, Korea

Design Art Busan, F1963, Busan, Korea

2015 Seoul Metropolitan mayor Award

2015-96 San Francisco Art Institute Scholarship

FELLOWSHIP/AWARDS

2005 Seoul Metropolitan mayor Award

1992 Seoul Contemporary Ceramic Contest, Special Selection Award

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Jinro Foundation on Culture, Seoul, Korea

Arts Institute Foundation, Montana, U.S.A.

Hongik University Contemporary Museum, Seoul, Korea
Day Bed, 2019
Glazed Ceramic
73 x 149 x 77 cm
Planter, 2017
Glazed Ceramic
54 x 49 x 72 cm

Planter, 2017
Glazed Ceramic
51 x 51 x 96 cm
Muncaron Stool, 2016
Glazed Ceramic
49 x 49 x 41 cm

Stool, 2012
Glazed Ceramic
77 x 39 x 22 cm
Mushroom Stool, 2017
Glazed Ceramic
49 x 49 x 55 cm

Table, 2018
Glazed Ceramic
102 x 64 x 24 cm
Surfing Boat Table, 2019
Ceramic, Concrete
177 x 70 x 26 cm