Korean artist puts unique twist on ceramics

By Young Kim's exhibit at Art Access showcases her creativity.

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...nt smile, MiYoung Kim has the mind of a rebel.


After graduating with a fine-arts degree from the Ewha Womans University in Seoul, Kim left her home country in pursuit of a school where her creativity would be embraced rather than repressed. She landed at the University of Utah. And after earning a bachelor of fine arts degree, she moved on to teach ceramics in Korea and America.

She now holds private lessons at her home studio in Salt Lake City and continues to create at a frantic pace, often staying up until 3 a.m. to work on a piece. Some of her most recent efforts will be on display in a new exhibit that opens Friday, June 21, at Salt Lake City's Art Access gallery. (See schedule.)
Kim’s exhibit will showcase a lifelong bond with clay. “I always think I might have risen through the clay,” she said. “I’ve loved it since I was 3 years old. My parents were both in the medical field and they hated me playing with dirty things, but all I wanted to do was bring the wet, dirty clay inside. So I think I was meant to do something with clay.”

Opposing forces » In art and life, Kim is obsessed with the idea of yin and yang. The ancient Chinese concept (called uem yang in Korean) says that seemingly opposing forces — hot and cold, light and dark, positive and negative — are actually interdependent. This philosophy is at the heart of everything she does.

Kim uses fire to create pieces that resemble water. She paints hardened clay to look like soft fabric. And as she talks about her birth, she runs her fingers along the forehead of her death mask, a ceramic version of her face that she will one day take to the grave.

She insists that when you observe her art, you must look beyond the positive yang that stands out to see the contrasting yin in the background.

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"When I work with my things, I always see not what you’re seeing, but what’s hidden,” Kim said. "You have to see the negative space. That’s the difference between Korean art and Western art. Western art, you only see what pops up. Korean art, what’s underneath is more important.”

While yin and yang are always on Kim’s mind, her inspiration comes from a variety of sources. Her psychiatrist father made sure she was well-versed in multiple religions and philosophies, from Christianity to Buddhism to the theories of Sigmund Freud.

Religious notes » Kim’s religious background also will be on display in the exhibit. She will hang 108 white doves to represent the 108 defilements that Buddhists believe cause human suffering. And on her death mask, she has painted an adapted version of Genesis 3:19: “I will return unto the ground, for out of it I was taken; for dust I am, and unto dust, I will return.”

Kim is also fascinated by history. After watching a History Channel program about suspected witches who were persecuted in Italy, she decided to craft a series of witches’ hats to showcase at Art Access. The twisted, contorted shapes of the hats represent the suffering human body, while the crows perched atop the hats stand for the courage to fight.

Water plays a large role in Kim’s work, as well. She loves water droplets and changing waves and ocean movements, which she tries to express in geometric form. Sheryl Gillian, executive director at Art Access, said it was this aspect of Kim’s work that appealed to the gallery committee.
"The ceramics applications as a group were quite strong this year, but we were intrigued by MiYoung's use of the clay in that she pushes that medium beyond a functional vessel to look like water or look like fabric," Gillilan said. "She's innovative in that way."

Gillilan said Art Access holds just over 20 exhibits a year, and that Kim was chosen from a pool of about 75 applicants. She said she is excited for Kim's exhibit because it defies the conventional perception of ceramics.

"What [attendees] can expect," Gillilan said, "is that it will be different from what they expect."

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