

## Translating Culture – the Sculpture of Meekyoung Shin

"The origin of philosophy is translation or the thesis of translatability"

(Jacques Derrida from 'The Ear of the Other', 1982, p.120)

Meekyoung Shin's ongoing project *Translation* is about the process of transference and re-coding of shapes and iconography across cultures through time and space. Her work addresses the ways in which forms, decorative motifs and religious iconography are transformed by exchanges between cultures. Shin's soap versions of ancient classical sculptures and oriental vases relate to their 'translation' between East and West – how this inter-cultural transport affects the way they are understood and aesthetically appreciated. Translation is not only a linguistic activity but refers to processes by which cultural expression moving across national and cultural boundaries raises questions related to translatability, comprehension and loss of meanings. As in linguistic translation, some cultural knowledge is necessary to fully understand objects transported from one continent to another. Shin's *Translation* project proposes the idea that a vase or a statue can actually become a 'different' object when removed from its original setting and transported to a new surrounding. Through an act of displacement Museums re-contextualize artifacts that may have previously had a utilitarian or religious function to become 'non-useful' cultural objects of historical or aesthetic significance for posterity.

Shin's process of translation involves making a soap version of an object from a museum or private collection and relocating it to a new context to be viewed and reinterpreted by another public from a different cultural or religious background. Their expectations and appraisal of that object will vary according to their individual historical knowledge, circumstances and locale. Translation therefore denotes not only the art and craft of the translator, but also a larger cultural formation that emerges through the interaction between national traditions in the increasing globalization of art. With the present-day phenomenon of multiculturalism, boundaries are blurring and distinctions changing or disappearing. Artists themselves are becoming more nomadic so that their national and cultural identities are increasingly heterogeneous. Studying, living and working between London and Seoul for over fifteen years, Shin is both a participant and practitioner in the larger processes of cross-cultural hybridization that results in new indeterminate types of national and cultural identity. When Shin visited European museums and saw classical Greek and Roman sculpture for the first time, she experienced a personal sense of cultural and aesthetic alienation or displacement that she went on to express in her work. In an earlier incarnation of *Translation* (2002) Shin made a series of sculptures in soap after Greek and Roman marble statues in museum collections. Shin portrayed her own body and facial features in the pose of the ancient originals and also added some polychromatic colouring like the sculptures would have appeared during the Hellenistic era. In 2004 these were displayed in the British Museum's Great Court and included Shin's 'performance' where visitors could watch her sculpting the work in progress. In recent years Shin has moved on from depicting Greek

and Roman sculpture, to recreating Asian ceramics from blocks of soap and exhibiting them in public and commercial contemporary art galleries as if they were in a historical museum.

The antique Chinese porcelain that Shin has chosen to create in soap is the type that was decorated exclusively for export to Europe and America. The origin of 'china' as the generic name for ceramic products derives from the first introduction of Chinese porcelain to Europe when it was regarded as very rare and luxurious. The remoteness of China in previous times led Europeans to form an idealistic and exotic vision of its culture that became 'translated' in terms of decorative designs and motifs. In the 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries this export porcelain was believed by the West to be a quintessential expression of Chinese culture and yet it was never used or even seen by the most ordinary Chinese people. Meanwhile their artisans and traders were happy to participate in this fantasy or misconception by providing porcelain decorated specially to appeal to Western taste. Export ware is significant to Shin's project since it represents an expression of cultural mistranslation through displacement. Similarly many non-Western forms and ornamental motifs found their way into European decorative arts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century such as *chinoiserie*, a pseudo-Chinese style. Shin's reference to her vases' 'translation' is also alluded to in the way they are installed or presented; utilizing their custom made packing crates instead of conventional display plinths, and sometimes standing the vessels on a sheet of reflective polished steel. Their ongoing shipping labels are all part of their provenance as they become re-contextualized and 'translated' from their travel from one place to another. She is able to fabricate her soap vessels following the wide variety of traditional ancient Korean and Chinese porcelain shapes some of which she makes in undecorated pastel colours and installs in different combinations and arrangements. With her keen attention to detail and highly skilled finishing technique her soap sculptures resemble painted white and plain green celadon porcelain and even translucent glass. By training her hands to respond deftly to her mind, she has reached a point of impressive virtuosity, and an instinct for achieving a sublime sense of balanced rhythm and proportion in her work. A stunning example of this is the her soap version of an ancient plain white porcelain Korean 'Moon Jar' that she displayed at the British Museum in 2007.

Shin uses soap as her principal sculptural medium and believes its intrinsic properties have an affinity with her artistic notion of translation. In contrast to the solidity and permanence of sculptural mediums like bronze and stone, she regards soap's flexibility as an apt metaphor for multiple interpretations. For her its malleability suggests loosening the rigidity of cultural categories once believed unchangeable, while its softness and fragility expresses her feminist stance against the hardness and inflexibility symbolized by traditional 'masculine' materials. As part of a daily morning and bedtime washing ritual, soap symbolizes the measurement of our lives. Coming into direct contact with our skin it has a quality of intimacy absent from other sculptural materials. After continued use a bar of soap will erode and finally disintegrate as if to suggest the

passage of time. Shin also equates her own migratory lifestyle and a lack of a permanent base with soap's characteristic sense of transience and impermanence. Soap also has a fragrance that offers an experiential quality, which can evoke memories of a different time and place. Her choice of this medium with its connotations of the mundane and everyday, shares the sensibilities of the Italian Arte Povera movement whose works were often made from cheap and commonplace materials as a reaction against traditional art world values. In the same spirit as the alchemist who can turn base metal into gold, Shin transforms or rather 'translates' this worthless material into something precious. Soap is also a metaphor for society's obsession with hygiene and her *Translation – Toilet Project* comprises of soap Buddha statuettes placed in the toilets of art institutions and museums. These become worn down through public usage and afterwards exhibited in galleries like historical artifacts. Since visitors play an essential role in their creation and subsequent provenance, they form a stark contrast to real museum artifacts that were often once functional everyday objects rendered untouchable by their need for preservation.

Shin feels that she is constantly translating through the very nature of her work and by the need to discuss the reasoning behind it in different languages. Her practice is concerned with the relationship between the appearance of the original and its interpretation while addressing issues of authenticity, originality, copy and replication in the critical interface between concept and viewer. Nowadays it's possible to exactly replicate most three-dimensional objects mechanically by using feature recognition scan technology. Shin's meticulous handcrafted versions are surrogates rather than replicas that she refers to as 'ghosts' of the originals. The Romans copied Greek statues because they believed they could produce the same powerful aesthetic effect by following the 'perfect' sculptural forms of the originals. Some Roman versions of Greek sculptures are even regarded as being aesthetically superior in some respects than their older prototypes. But works of art are not merely objects to appeal to our aesthetic sense without regard to any notion of their origins and human contexts. They express and embody both cultural beliefs general to a people and personal character and feeling specific to an individual. When the work of art is expressive of the sensibility of a culture, it is also understood at the same time to embody the sensibility and authentic values of its maker, especially when different viewers in different contexts share those values. Shin's *Translation* project involves a rigorous creative process where her decisions as translator represent a sculptural negotiation between cultures to create new pathways for meaning. Sculpture is itself a 'translation', a means of conveying an observed reality by concentrating its essence both visibly and invisibly into what constitutes form.

**James Putnam**, London, November, 2008