



STEVEN
YOUNG LEE

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ARTS
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Installation view. Photo by Ben Cort



Installation view. Photo by Ben Cort

APEX: STEVEN YOUNG LEE

For ceramicist Steven Young Lee, a mishap in the kiln presents an opportunity to shift his perspective and deepen his conceptual practice. Rather than a failure, the mishap becomes a visual representation of the artist's cultural identity. "Growing up in the United States, the son of Korean immigrant parents," says the artist, "I am often situated between cultures, looking from one side into another. Living and working in metropolitan centers such as New York, Chicago, Shanghai, Seoul, and Vancouver, as well as the rural communities of Alfred (New York), Jingdezhen, and Helena has raised questions of identity and assimilation. I have experienced being an outsider in the country of my heritage to being one of a minority of Asians in Montana."¹

Lee's work often involves in-depth research and close looking. In preparation for his APEX exhibition, the artist visited the Museum to study objects in the Korean collection, specifically the art of the Joseon dynasty, and he came to focus on three

particular pieces: two vessels, *Dragon Jar* (19th century) and *Moon Jar* (a contemporary example by artist Kim Yikyung, 2017), and the painting *Tiger and Magpie* (late 19th century). He was fascinated by the excellence of these objects, but in his reimaginings of them, perfection yields to failure, classical motifs become popular characters, control succumbs to surrender, and elegance coexists with kitsch.

Porcelain Jar with Cloud and Dragon Design in Inlaid Cobalt Blue (2019) is directly in conversation with the Joseon dynasty *Dragon Jar*, both displayed in this exhibition. The stylized body of a dragon (two dragons in the instance of the Joseon dynasty jar) wraps around the entirety of both vessels while decorative clouds create an atmosphere. In Lee's jar however, the creature is a cartoonish depiction that evokes the character from the children's song "Puff, the Magic Dragon." Between the head and the tail, Lee creates an opening tear that responds in the kiln, giving way

to its deconstructed form and slumping from its once perfectly upright, symmetrical design.

Lee used an inlay technique on *Blue Vase with Scale Pattern* (2013) and *Vase with Lotus Pattern* (2013) to create patterns that are precise yet visually graphic. Lee invites the viewer to see these vessels in much the same way he looks at historic vessels to understand the creative process. The forms are similar: their long necks have flaring mouths that seem to open to receive an arrangement of flowers. But like Lee's other vessels, they are torn in the middle, weakening their structure. As a result, the necks of the vessels appear as figures nodding in unison.

Adjacent to the pair of vases is Lee's similarly fissured *Blood Moon Jar* (2019). Modeled after the iconic *Moon Jar*, the work is the artist's response to the lunar eclipse he experienced at the beginning of the year while preparing for this exhibition. It is a striking object that speaks to history and to the contemporary moment. Whereas the traditional moon jar takes on humility of form, Lee's jar is seemingly opulent as a viscous red glaze generously envelops the vessel.²

Two older installations, *Fortune's Fortune* (2005) and *Instinct and Consequence* (2005), mark the beginning of his interest in ceramic production, which developed while Lee was in China as a visiting artist and lecturer at the Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province. These playful installations also



Tiger and Magpies, (detail) 2019. Photo by the Artist



Blood Moon Jar, 2019 Photo by the Artist

reflect his early explorations of his cultural identity: he first believed himself to be born under the zodiac sign of the rabbit, but discovered in his travels to East Asia that he is really a tiger. Lee turns the imagery into a preoccupation of form—a tower of many taunting rabbits. They stand like plush animals with their hands hidden behind them, holding either a bird or flowers. It is unclear if these are offerings or hidden possessions, gifts or tricks.

Perhaps the most ambitious undertaking in this exhibition is Lee's wall installation, *Tiger and Magpies* (2019). Made up of ninety-six porcelain plates, the traditional Korean folk art (*minhwa*) imagery of a tiger and magpies in front of a knotty pine tree is depicted in cobalt inlay.³ Lee captures the likeness of the pine tree, but replaces the traditional big cat with Tony the Tiger, mascot of Frosted Flakes cereal, and the singular magpie with Terrytoons duo Heckle and Jeckle. In Korean folk painting, the tiger represents the aristocracy, whereas the magpie represents the common people. With their very different social and even physical standing, the tiger and magpies relate to each other based on their very relational differences of class and behavior. By rendering this traditional art form as a large-scale plate installation, Lee gives the image a pixelated appearance, with pieces of missing information between the plates. He adds gold to the fissures and cracks, further emphasizing the inconsistency of the plate production.

Jar with Dragon and Clouds (2016) is likely the work that presented the artist with the most mishaps—and therefore the most opportunities. Lee describes how the coils of the large vessel came apart and the pot imploded in the kiln.⁴ Here the shards are put together in such a way to reveal both their exterior and interior surfaces. One can imagine how impeccable this vessel must have been before it came apart—its even curvatures and delicate inlays are all visible. What is also visible is the sand that stuck to the shards on the floor of the kiln, the breakages in the coil, and moments where Lee allowed the glaze to run and hang on the edges like stalactites. What sets this piece apart is its very process of

making and completion. Whereas Lee often creates immaculately controlled vessels that he then purposefully makes vulnerable so that they give way in the kiln, *Jar with Dragon and Clouds* violently revolted into complete deconstruction. The end result was an entirely new work of gesture and movement out of the broken shards, allowing the viewer to witness this vessel as a “vehicle of information,” as the artist calls it, a window into his working process. It is a transparent effort of the push and pull of making that defines Lee’s work in creating dissonance through harmony.¹

—Grace Kook-Anderson
The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art

¹ Lee, Steven Young, artist statement, <https://stevenyounglee.com/about/artist-statement/>.

² In the Joseon dynasty, moon jars were often created by joining two hemispherical halves, resulting in a voluminous globular shape. The porcelain ware painted with a transparent glaze further draws the relation to a full moon as well as Confucian virtues.

³ Referring to Korean folk art, *minwha* literally means “painting of the people” with popular subjects such as flowers, pine trees, water, clouds, tigers, carp, and cranes. These paintings were believed to possess virtues for the owner.

⁴ Lee, Steven Young. Conversation with Grace Kook-Anderson. February 21, 2019. Portland Art Museum.

⁵ Lee, Steven Young. Lecture, Portland Art Museum, February 24, 2019.

BIOGRAPHY

Based in Helena, Montana, Steven Young Lee (born Chicago 1975) has been the resident artist director of the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts since 2006. In 2004–5, he taught at universities in Jingdezhen, Shanghai, and Beijing as part of a yearlong cultural and educational exchange. In 2005–6, he was a visiting professor at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. In 2013, he participated in the *Americans in the Porcelain City* panel at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the exhibition *New Blue and White*, which featured contemporary artists working in traditional blue-and-white ceramics, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 2016, Lee’s work was featured in the Renwick Invitational at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC. He received his BFA and MFA in ceramics from Alfred University. Lee is represented by the Duane Reed Gallery, Ferrin Contemporary, and the Archie Bray Foundation Gallery.



Blue Vase with Scale Pattern and Vase with Lotus Pattern, 2019 Photo by Ben Cort

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Blood Moon Jar, 2019

Porcelain, glaze
16 x 15 x 18 inches

Porcelain Jar with Cloud and Dragon Design in Inlaid Cobalt Blue, 2019

Porcelain, cobalt inlay, glaze
20 x 15 x 14 inches

Jar with Dragon and Clouds, 2016 (wall installation)

Porcelain, white slip, glaze, epoxy, steel
40 x 58 x 10 inches

Tiger and Magpies, 2019

Porcelain, cobalt inlay, glaze, gold leaf, epoxy
96 plates, overall dimensions: 150 x 100 x 1 inches

Fortune's Fortune, 2005

Porcelain, colored clay
81 x 36 x 19 inches

Instinct and Consequence, 2005

Porcelain, gold plating, glaze
81 x 33 x 33 inches

Blue Vase with Scale Pattern, 2013

Porcelain, cobalt inlay, glazes
24 x 12 x 12 inches
Collection of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer

Vase with Lotus Pattern, 2013

Porcelain, white slip, glazes
24 x 12 x 12 inches
Collection of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer

Bunwon Kiln, Gwangju, Gyeonggi-do Province, Korea

Storage Jar with Design of Two Dragons Chasing Flaming Pearls, 19th century

Porcelain with decoration painted in cobalt blue under transparent glaze
19 x 14 inches diameter
Gift of Robert and Sandra Mattielli in honor of Donald Jenkins, 2004.7.10

Korea, Unknown Artist

Tiger and Magpie, late 19th century

Ink and color on paper
29 ¾ x 19 ½ inches
Gift of Robert and Sandra Mattielli in honor of Donald Jenkins, 2004.7.9

*This painting in the Museum's collection was reproduced to scale as a reference for Steven Young Lee's *Tiger and Magpies* installation



Tiger and Magpies, 2019. Photo by Ben Cort

APEX

An ongoing series of exhibitions featuring emerging and established artists living in the Northwest. Presenting contemporary art in the context of the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, this program continues the Museum's 127-year commitment to exhibiting, collecting, and celebrating the art of the region. APEX is supported in part by The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowments for Northwest Art.

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COVER: Jar with Dragon and Clouds (detail), 2016
Photo by Ben Cort

