

Towards New Expressions: The Art of Grace

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Ten years into a new century we have enough distance to look back at the last and begin to understand the revolutionary journey that took place in the art world, one which started as an anti-establishment art movement in Europe and which culminated in a global community of artists who were emancipated from traditional media, forms, content and aesthetics. To those on the outside looking in, a common perception of contemporary art in the last decades was that it had become largely inaccessible, no longer always employing media or forms recognisable as 'art' and often so heavily conceptual that to even ask of aesthetics would be a faux pas. Reactionaries argued that in turning away from art historical traditions a void was left in aesthetics and formal art appreciation. If the best of contemporary art, or at least the most expensive and infamous, was solely concept-driven, what would become of the notion of really *making* art? The question becomes ever more significant in an age saturated with images, digital technology and rapidly disseminated information. What place is there for cultural traditions, craftsmanship, laboured processes and physical acts of creation? And can they any longer be used to create a relevant dialogue in contemporary culture?

These pertinent and fundamental questions face the modern twenty first century artist and are addressed head on in the work of the American-Korean Debbie Han. The artist champions the unification of form and medium with deeply conceptual work that endeavours to understand the ways in which we navigate the modern world. Central to Han's work is an enduring interest in how human experience is shaped and conditioned by contemporary culture. Han's work has always been characterised by the dual forces of painstaking, diverse craftsmanship and attention grabbing pieces which cause shock or surprise the viewer. However, rather than create artworks that simply provoke an empty sensation, Han employs these tactics to create an arena for cultural debate, deconstructing social patterns and questions of identity.

An early example of this approach can be seen in Han's *Hard Condom* series (2001-2003) where small bronzes take the form of soiled condoms, a highly coded object that makes for uncomfortable viewing. However, admiration for Han's technical skill and the unexpected wit of her confrontational imagery leads the viewer to an arena where one can interrogate the complexities of society's reaction to something as innate as sex. Han's work is certainly conceptual, but is in many ways a direct rebuttal of the earlier conceptual artists she encountered as a student. Han bridges the gap between ideas and form, producing works that make us stop in our tracks for one reason or another, marvel at the craftsmanship and then engage with the issue at hand.

Interrogating cultural patterns, individual and collective identities, and how one cultivates an understanding of their place in the world has become the *raison d'être* for Debbie Han, who herself inhabits the complex status of being born Korean but having lived in the United States for most of her life. Upon returning to Seoul in 2003, Han was an outsider and there is no doubt that this objectivity lends her work great strength. Her position as a culturally disembodied artist propelled Han to deconstruct and document what was happening in Korea and Asia more widely. As an American-Korean woman navigating the city, Han was immediately struck by the forcefulness of the western beauty mantra. Korean women were spending billions of dollars every year on cosmetics and plastic surgery to conform to an 'ideal' type of beauty, specifically a eurocentric one. More than 60% of women in Korea have undergone cosmetic surgery to reconcile their natural appearance with what is deemed more attractive by society at large. The statistics reveal that the act is no longer a choice made by a liberated individual, but a procedure deemed necessary for success. Even language underscores the gravity of the situation; facial plastic surgery in Korean is translated literally as 'face correction.' In response, Han began to tackle what the polemic feminist author Naomi Wolf described as 'beauty myths'. The standard of beauty set for Asian women is not only naturally unobtainable but entirely homogenous, disallowing any sense of individuality and therefore having huge ramifications for personal identities and how these women encounter and navigate their world.

Han tackles the perversity of ideal beauty by setting it on a global stage in the sculptural series *Terms of Beauty* (2004-2007). The artist appropriates the apotheosis of ideal western beauty, the face of classical Venus, and incorporates the facial features typical of various cultures. The heads feature prominent additions that vary from 'Jewish' noses to African lips and oriental eyes. By refusing to conform to accepted standards of beauty and introducing the notion of individuality, Han's work makes the viewer consider the pervasive beauty myth which dictates our culture. Han further celebrates cultural diversity and tradition in her unexpected choice of material. The busts are created from celadon, an ancient Korean ceramic type which is seldom employed by contemporary artists - no doubt due to the sheer difficulty and laboriousness of the process. The choice underscores Han's subject matter as it is a reaction against the dictates of western art history and furthermore it casts the artist in the role of regenerating the creativity of centuries past. For the following three years, the artist further challenged herself by increasing the size of the busts and employing another ancient ceramic type - white porcelain. Han uses both celadon and white porcelain as a metaphor for looking back to understand where we are now, but rather than languish in ancient Asian culture she uses the material to raise questions about her contemporary world. By rejecting the supremacy of western marble, Han brings the beauty of the celadon back into focus and contextualises herself amongst the legacy of Korean artists of centuries past. She uses the past to empower the future, resisting the urge to wash it away with borrowed cultural identities. Simultaneously, in her appropriation and manipulation of subject matter, Han celebrates individualism and naturalism.

Han built upon the potent combination of traditional Asian mediums and the cultural practices which govern identity in her *Sports Venus* series (2008). The works are created from Korean lacquer inlaid with mother of pearl, an extremely labour-intensive technique that entails over 20 processes to create every artwork. Employing a medium which dates back thousands of years, Han's challenge was to incorporate Asian craft into the contemporary arena, not only lending it a new relevance but having it underscore her subject matter. Again Han utilises the powerful icon of Venus as a signifier of the ideal and drives a debate about the inescapable dogmatics of beauty. The rich dark brown sculptures are almost the antithesis of pure white marble – the artist seems to almost pitch the two ancient cultures against each other.

Using delicate mother of pearl inlay Han introduces modern motifs from the world of sports on to the heads; the stitching borrowed from an American football slices across Venus' head like an angry scar. Venus has entered the arena of sports, making explicit reference to the notion of ideal beauty as a new form of sports entertainment and something which can be exchanged, improved and commodified. Han draws attention to the futility of trying to attain ideal beauty for it is a game where the house always wins, as the model championed is a fabricated illusion.

Testament to the enduring appeal of Han's practice is the artist's unwillingness to settle into one medium alone, or even one genre. Resisting the categorisation of an artist who solely employs traditional processes, Han created a new departure for her work by utilising contemporary digital technology. The *Graces* series is crafted by employing cutting edge digital expertise which allows Han to alter the photographic image pixel by pixel for optimum plasticity. The move should be understood as part of an ongoing demonstration by the artist that the act of making and visual appeal need to reclaim their status alongside conceptual forces and philosophy. What Han's digitally manipulated photographic work shares with her celadon and lacquer sculptures is time intense, extremely laborious processes which ultimately underscore the meaning of the artwork.

The *Graces* series continues Han's critique of artificially cultivated notions of beauty and cultural displacement by combining the typical body of an Asian woman with the face of an idealised Greek sculpture. Subverting the practice of figurative sculpture and portrait photography, Han navigates the boundaries between illusion and reality and between western standards of ideal beauty and the reality of contemporary Asian women. Han's *Graces* are contemporary nudes dressed up as ancient statues and presented against a deep black background. The background may be devoid of signifiers or context but should not be misunderstood as an empty space; instead Han is creating an entirely non-specific annex to reality where an arena for debate and conference is generated. Han's hybrid form juxtaposes real contemporary Asian female bodies and ancient idealised female faces and by doing so reflects upon the female form as an enduring art historical motif in the west and the perversity of a contemporary woman, Asian or not, being judged by this standard. The employment of what can be described in its simplest form as digital retouching brings to the debate

the concept of the fabricated female form in contemporary photography: big and small in the right places with no trace of aging or imperfection. But more than simply a comment on digital makeovers and the superficial Eurocentric beauty standard which perversely dominates the Asian market, Han is asking bigger questions. The artist employs beauty as a signifier, something which is constructed around a complex set of socially specific codes and therefore speaks of culture at large and how human experience is shaped by these conditions.

Han's latest body of work *The Eye of Perception* (2010) is in many ways the apotheosis of a creative and conceptual journey that began when she returned to Seoul as an adult. Taking as her subject matter the cultivation of a beauty myth that pervades contemporary culture, both western and Asian, Han set a new challenge for herself by deconstructing her own processes as an artist. Building upon the sculptural expertise acquired through the making of *Terms of Beauty* and *Sports Venus*, Han creates clay Venus heads amended to display typical facial features of different cultures. But the new series is not sculptural. Han resists the three-dimensional medium by photographing her sculptural endeavours and presenting them as digital images. Each artwork consists of a series of layered images, containing up to four photographed sculptures. As a result of the layering and resulting blurred lines, the final image manages to capture both a sense of volume and movement. It is as if the ancient Venus heads have been physically awoken by Han and pulled into a contemporary debate about the dogmatic beauty myth they have come to symbolise. Han's technique in many ways sits outside of the traditional parameters of photography: she appropriates an ancient motif, refashions it by hand in clay, takes hundreds of photographs before firing the artwork – ironically the point at which it becomes redundant - and then layers the images to create hybrid 'photographic sculptures' from her own work. Han has started to cultivate new work from her own work, challenging the parameters of both sculpture and photography and traditional and contemporary processes.

The Eye of Perception is the culmination of Han's work to date, juxtaposing and developing upon her past series, both sculptural and photographic, and heightening the debate that the subject matter generates. Highlighting the exquisite balance of concept and technique, Han is a great advocate for a twenty-first century

art that generates real debate by regenerating the potency of ‘making.’ Her philosophy and quest to understand the constructs of the human condition are deeply entrenched in her practice, but she does not allow herself to fall victim to her intellect. Moving between mediums – and never choosing a simple process – Han’s work demands attention not just for its subject matter but for its craftsmanship and distinct visual appeal.