

# YoonJee Kwak

## Capacity for Virtue Capacity for Breath

by Glen R. Brown

The vessels of Korean artist YoonJee Kwak appear vestigial, half-ghostly, as if in some measure relieved of their worldly weight but still retaining through their lingering presence a resemblance to the fully material members of their kind. The ethereal impression is not, however, a result of negation; rather, Kwak's method of construction subjects mass to a fundamental integration with space in a positive assertion of the intangible. The effect is of pottery mimicking macramé, with its net-like patterns of knotted

ords and the equally defining gaps formed regimentally between them. One senses in the symmetry and complementarity of mass and space the rudiments of an ontological metaphor—being and nothingness, body and soul, infinite aspiration in finite form. Consequently, Kwak's vessels conjure anthropomorphism, but in a manner more figurative than figural; their impression of human being is more a matter of rhetorical persuasion than of visual resemblance.





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1 *Breath*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, colored porcelain, gold luster, 2019. 2 YoonJee Kwak in her studio in Helena, Montana, with sculptural vessels, 2020. 3 *Breath* (alternate view).

### Anthropomorphism of Pottery

When perceived by the most common means—through structural and functional analogy—the anthropomorphism of ceramic vessels follows a seemingly natural and universal logic. Feet, whether attached to pots or to human beings, serve to carry masses above the horizontal plane of the earth (or its parallels in floors, tables, and the like); mouths, gaping in the lofty regions of bodies, above spreading shoulders and rising necks, engage in an ongoing activity of receiving and expelling air, food, and drink. Such analogies have no doubt been perpetuated through convention, a long history of employing anatomical terminology that encourages the eye to encounter resemblances between clay and flesh. At the same time, myriad examples of anthropomorphic pots—from pre-Columbian figural ollas of the Americas to 17th-century Bartmann vessels of the Rhineland and modern Mambila beer jugs of West Africa—suggest that human beings, across multiple historical and cultural divides, have been naturally inclined to project their own formal and functional features onto pottery, and in a manner consistent enough to imply universality.

So much for the somatic side of human being, but what of the psychological? To what degree does the anthropomorphism of pottery arise from the mind encountering a semblance of its own workings in the allusive qualities of a vase, bottle, or jug? If and when such mental mirroring seems to occur, to what degree is that impression culturally circumscribed? These questions constitute the core inquiry of three recent series of porcelain sculptural vessels by Kwak, who is a 2014 graduate of the Rochester Institute of Technology's MFA program in Rochester, New York; a former long-term resident at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana; and a current resident artist at Pottery Northwest in Seattle, Washington. Kwak's ceramic anthropomorphism begins not in isomorphism, a one-to-one paralleling of features; rather, it originates in a common Korean metaphor in which the magnitude of a person's character is likened to that of a vessel (*geu-reut*). Of a particularly generous man, Kwak explains, one might say, "*Keun geu-reut eul gajin saram*," implying that his capacity for generosity is great.

### Perpetual Incompleteness

A variation of this metaphor provides the figurative foundation of Kwak's 2018 series *Bottomless Pit*, a reflection on human limitations and the melancholy of unquenchable desire. "When you think that you've put everything into your vessel, your personality," she observes, "it's not enough. At the bottom there's a hole, so even if you put something more inside, it won't be filled." This incompleteness is endemic and a mark of humanity. After all, perfect personalities are the exclusive attributes of gods and narcissistic politicians; the vessels of human beings are inevitably sieves. This metaphor is presented straightforwardly enough by the *Bottomless Pit* vessels, which by means of their open-work coil construction are deliberately made to be subject to leakage. Their porosity, in other words, is inextricable from their existence but also from their conceptual essence, which is bound in perpetual incompleteness.

The problem of representing this condition in a physical medium is the same as that confronted by the phenomenologist sculptor Alberto Giacometti, who, striving to capture human beings as an amalgam of ungainly material and pure intentionality, produced slender, pitted figures that hover in an atmosphere of pathos on the fringes of materiality. A Giacometti nose is both there and not there; both represented and not represented. Kwak, however, has dispensed entirely with the lineaments of torsos and limbs, eyes and noses—and, in fact, in most of her work with iconic representation altogether. There is no potential in her vessels for portraiture, and

any typecasting that might seem to occur is not deliberate. "When I'm making my vessels," she explains, "I'm not really thinking that I'm making this kind of person or that kind of person. I want to speak more universally about the human."

The potential to do so was not an original influence on the series; rather, the *Bottomless Pit* vessels began largely with the technical challenge of investing coil-built forms with an effect of airiness. "Before," Kwak recalls, "I used solid coil building and hoped that my vessels would look like they were breathing." This led to experimentation with a technique of joining small bits of coils to create open, grid-like walls that were vaguely biomorphic, like imaginary cross-sections of the alveoli in pulmonary tissue. Representation of lungs was not the intention however; rather, the permeable surface evoked breath as a free passage of air and vulnerability as a condition of anything that must depend upon air for its continued existence. "The vessels," Kwak says, "become rock hard after firing but still look very soft, as if they were holding air inside. That made me think of the title *Bottomless Pit* and how I could build a personality into the vessel. I was thinking of how some people look very soft and how in their minds they may often see themselves as not enough."

### Evocation of Humanity

Early vessels of the *Bottomless Pit* series, such as *Three Blue Moons Jar*, a reference to the traditional Korean moon-jar form, featured sparse applications of glaze descending in thin rivulets, along







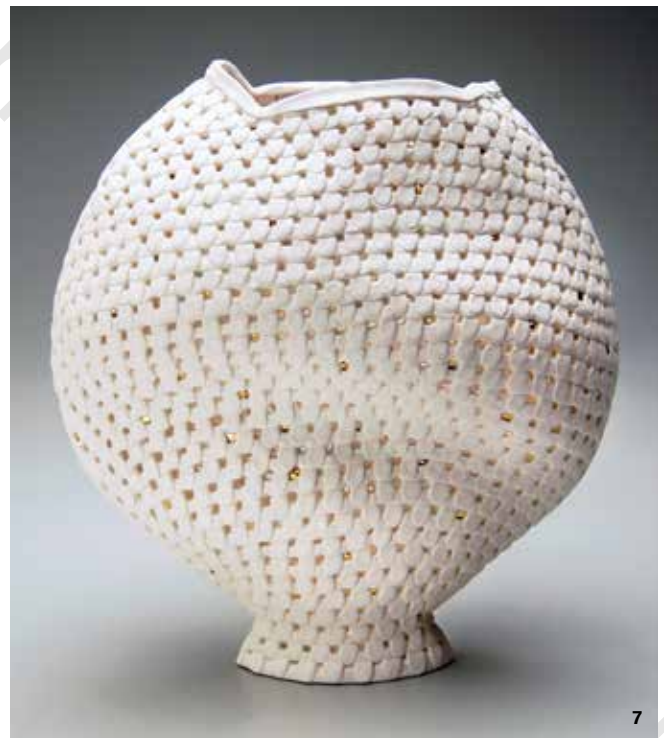
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with accents of gold luster and bands or patterns of coils brightly colored with Mason stains and contrasting with sections of pure white porcelain. While Kwak later abandoned glazes, she would carry the luster and Mason stains into her next group of figurative vessels, the 2019 *Breath* series. Color would be crucial to content in one of these, a pair of stoppered, long-necked bottles evocative of the Asian ambrosia flask. The neck of one ringed in orange and that of the other in pallid teal, the vessels are pointedly distinct from one another in color but identical in all other respects. Their pairing cannot be mistaken simply for the reiteration of form typical of production pottery. At the same time, the symmetry between them is pervasive enough to suggest more than an incidental resemblance. “It could be yourself,” Kwak reveals. “One vessel is that part of your personality and the other is this part: you have to embrace all of your situations together.”

Serendipity played a role in the first of the *Breath* series pairings, *Blue Stars*, in which one of the vessels partly collapsed during firing and the other—marked subtly with pellets of blue-stained porcelain pressed sporadically from the inside out through holes in the walls—suffered a slight laceration to the belly: in effect, an open wound that Kwak highlighted in gold luster. Like a kintsugi repair, the luster aestheticizes a mark of vulnerability, but for Kwak it is key to emphasizing the wound as “a bridge, a road for breathing, an opening for breath.” If the stopper suggests a sealed mouth, the lustrous wound might be the equivalent of a tracheotomy incision, though Kwak views both the porosity and the containment of her vessels as equally positive. Containment is crucial to metaphorical conjuring of personality as a capacious vessel, while the porosity of



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4 *Unnatural Nature: Landscape series*, to 22 in. (56 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, colored porcelain, gold luster, 2019. 5 *Bottomless Pit Series 3*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, colored porcelain, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, gold luster, fired to cone 018 in oxidation, 2018. 6 *Bottomless Pit Series 1*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, colored porcelain, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, gold luster, fired to cone 018 in oxidation, 2018. 7 *Soft Moon Jar*, 13½ in. (35 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, gold luster, fired to cone 018, 2019.



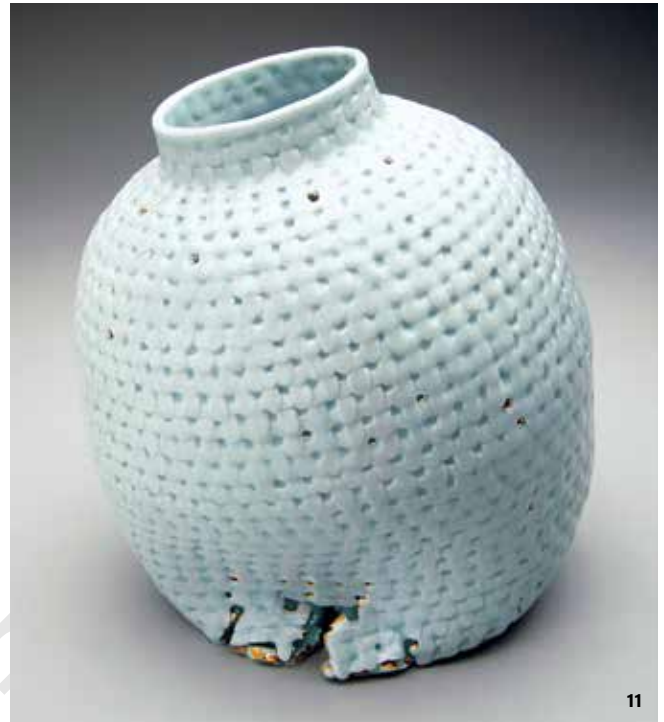
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**8** *Breath, Blue Stars*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, colored porcelain, gold luster. **9** *Bottomless Pit Series 2*, 10¾ in. (27 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, colored porcelain, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, gold luster, fired to cone 018 in oxidation, 2018. **10** *Soft Vessels—wall series*, to 19 in. (48 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, gold luster, 2019. **11** *Sincerely*, 12½ in. (32 cm) in height, handbuilt porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, gold luster, fired to cone 018 in oxidation, 2018.

holes and wounds, though it signals the perpetual incompleteness and insatiable desire of the bottomless pit, is also a means of breath, and so vital to the vessel's evocation of humanity.

The other vessel integral to *Blue Stars*—slumping like a deflating balloon or a boxer reeling on the verge of defeat—would prove to be the impetus to Kwak's most recent series, the *Soft Sculptures*, begun late in 2019. In these works, the slumping of vessels is a consequence not of accident but of artistry. "The accidental scars and collapse were not enough," Kwak explains. "I wanted to control the softness." Building into the vessels an organic undulation then laying them flat and further slumping them in the kiln, she invested the forms with an anthropomorphism still metaphorical but now also consciously analogical, biomorphic.

Paralleling the dual modes of reference to the human, and confirming Kwak's work as an investigation of the universally evocative through the culturally specific, has been the persistence of the Korean moon jar. "I would really like to speak to people in this work about how in Korea we describe someone who is generous as someone whose vessel is big," she asserts. "I want to talk universally about the human through my vessels, but I'm always thinking of that theme."

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