



## YONG HYUN CHUNG

Jeff Huebner

In his ongoing "Empty Vessel" series, artist Yong Hyun Chung creates at the cutting edge of balance and tension, incorporating the yin-yang precepts of his Buddhist beliefs in the works' sense of "control and non-control," as he told me in his Chicago studio. The mostly large-scale stoneware pieces, which Yong began producing after he arrived in the U.S. from his native South Korea several years ago, are the products of unified dualities – of discipline and accident, design and risk. He is orchestrating – moderating – a number of processes whose conditions incline toward natural unevenness, entropy.

"The unpredictable results are the fun, exciting part of my work – it gives me great pleasure," explains the 33-year-old Yong. "I could make a form, I could glaze. However, in soda firing, the forms change the glaze, and every time it is different. I control many things in the whole process – but the firing is not controlled... It is a challenge of my technical abilities."

Yong's work has many variables. For one thing, there is the two-to-three-foot height.

"Because I'm a visual artist, I think I can have more influence on people with large-scale work, have more visual impact," he says. For another, there are the sculptural, hand-built forms, with "organic, human lines," as he calls them; they are often based on drawings and

### ILLUSTRATIONS -

- above - "Empty Vessel #0906" - Soda fired stoneware - 12 h x 29 w x 10 d in - 2009  
 right - "Empty Vessel #0902" - Soda fired stoneware - 21 h x 17 w x 12 d in - 2009  
 opposite page - "Empty Vessel #0901" - Soda fired stoneware - 26½ h x 14 w x 17 d in - 2009



start out “symmetrical, traditional” on the turntable and end up more abstracted after many alterations. “I pretty much follow my intuition, like jazz,” says Yong. And then there’s the soda firing, which lends his slip and glaze-treated vessels their shifting panoply of uncanny colour and rich texture effects. “I want to provoke questions,” Yong states. “Like: How did you build this? How did you treat the surface?”

The result is a body of work that is as cerebral as it is sensuous, that has both a physical presence and an inner spirit, both lightness and mass. (The vessels’ thick rims, which attract more soda, give the illusion of heaviness.) Examining the pieces in Yong’s Lillstreet Art Center studio, one is especially struck by their resemblance to the curving suppleness of torsos. That is no accident. Yong says, “Human relationships are very important in this life, so I keep thinking of connections between humans and ceramics.”

Yong, who was born and raised in Seoul, became more aware of the tradition and beauty of Korean pottery while earning his BFA at Kookmin University, a leading art and design institution. That included jade-green Koryo celadon ware (10th-14th c.) and the natural, rustic, white slip-decorated buncheong stoneware (14th-16th c.), which has been revived in recent decades. The buncheong style has affected Yong’s current pieces in form, clay body, and slip work.

But Yong wanted to move on and expand his horizons. “I just want to keep delving into something different,” he says. In 2005, he relocated halfway around the world to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and two years later earned an MFA. Yong had been drawn there because of its conceptual, inter-disciplinary nature; he cites Richard Serra, Antony Gormley, and Tony Cragg as influences, along with Jun Kaneko and Richard DeVore. But Yong found the School more conceptual than he thought. He took a cue from artists like Josiah McElheny, whose glass installations transcend craft, and staged exhibits at the School that consisted of installations using handmade pots, bowls, and vessels, “to suggest people’s different points of view of ceramics.”

Yong continued to cultivate new techniques and ideas. He was first exposed to soda firing at Chicago’s Lillstreet Art Center several years ago, and has had a studio there since 2008. “At that moment, I didn’t know if I liked it or not,” he says. “It was different. I thought, someday I’m going to do this more.” He did – and got hooked.

Ultimately, Yong’s “Empty Vessel” series – portions of which have been exhibited in various Chicago-area venues – is about human connectedness and social interaction. Always close to his family, he admits feeling lonely and isolated after moving to the U.S., gradually finding a like-minded community. The large pieces, and their kinship with the soft lines of the human body, partly grew out of that absence of family and community.

“There’s a theme in my vessels of sharing – of sharing something concrete or abstract, it doesn’t matter – sharing something through my work,” Yong tells me. “I think clay is a good object to have relationships with others.” He calls the vessels “empty” because their inner space invites full-filling and further kinship. As Yong puts it: “When you share it, it fills up with others.”

The artist is still discovering the possibilities of his materials and its methods. He still experiments with soda firing, learning how to control what he can – and to find poetry in what he can’t. As Yong knows, there are variations and surprises in everything you make. Life and art are like that, and that is accepted. Things always change.

*Jeff Huebner is a Chicago-based art journalist and freelance writer whose articles have appeared in ARTnews, Sculpture, Public Art Review, New Art Examiner, Landscape Architect, Labor’s Heritage, Ceramics Monthly, as well as the Chicago Reader, Chicago magazine, the Chicago Tribune, and many other local and national publications. Address: 1237 N. Maplewood Ave. Chicago, IL 60622, USA. Tel. +1 773-489-2340. [jeffwhuebner@mac.com](mailto:jeffwhuebner@mac.com)*



#### Yong Hyun Chung

*Education: 2005-2007 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, MFA in Ceramics. 1997-2003 Kookmin University, Seoul, Korea, BFA in Ceramics. Teaching experience (selected): 2009-Present Instructor, Lillstreet Art Center, Chicago, Illinois (taught multi-level wheel-throwing, hand-building and soda firing classes). Professional activities (selected): 2009-Present Ceramics Studio Coordinator, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. 2008 – present: member, Chicago Korean-American Art Association; Vice President, 2011. Exhibition history (selected): 2010 North Park Art Walk, Chicago, Illinois - Fortitude, Skokie Public Library, Skokie, Illinois - Sprouting, Noyes Cultural Arts Center, Evanston, Illinois - Faculty Show, Lillstreet Art Center, Chicago, Illinois - New work by Chung & Chaney (2 person show), Lillstreet Art Center, Chicago, Illinois. 2009 Material Witness II, Buckham Gallery, Flint, Michigan - Starting Again, The Long Hall Gallery, Greenleaf Art Center, Chicago, Illinois - Change, South Side Community Art Center, Chicago, Illinois. 2008 YARD, Open Space Gallery, Niles, Illinois - SAIC+DCB: Chicago & Busan Art Exchange, Design Center Busan, Busan, Korea - 8th Annual Cup Show (juried), Kent State University Downtown Gallery, Kent, Ohio, juror: Ted Vogel - Winter Residency Exhibition, Sally D. Francisco Gallery, Layton, New Jersey. Honors & Awards: 2007 SAIC Excellence in Leadership Award, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. 2006 Irving Sherman Memorial Scholarship, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. 2003 Honourable Mention, 21st Korea New Art Festival - Honourable Mention, 4th Ceramic Bowl Festival.*

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