

Emily Yong Beck: Spoonful of Sugar at New Image Art, Los Angeles



Emily Yong Beck, *Spoonful of Sugar*, 2022. Glazed ceramic. Courtesy of the artist.

When I attended the opening night of Chicago-based ceramicist Emily Yong Beck's solo exhibition *Spoonful of Art* at New Image Art, I noticed she was wearing a neon green dress. This type of neon green conspicuously complements the bubble gum pink and sky-blue color rainbows and Hello Kitty cartoons glazed on her ceramic vases. Her generation, Z, is notably obsessed with Y2K aesthetics: playful pop colors and cartoon graphics. At first glance, her ceramics look like a simple homage to that—and it's perhaps my initial intrigue of her work. The pastel colors along with adorable images, hypnotize viewers and transport me into an Alice in Wonderland-type frenzy that I don't want to leave (because after all the turmoil of recent global events warrants escapism). However, this sweetness is only an illusion—a complex aesthetic tactic practiced past and present, by nations to eradicate histories of violent colonialism and imperialism.

Drawing from her own Korean lineage and influence, Yong Beck uses this exhibit to address the phenomenon of Japan's "cute-washing" as a way to obscure their imperialist past. Today, the ultimate form of cuteness as we know it is Kawaii culture—the culture of cuteness in Japan. This culture refers to anything that is adorable, childlike, vulnerable, such as fictional characters Pikachu, and, most notoriously, Hello Kitty: a third-grade fictional character with no mouth and a red bow. On her vases, Emily subverts this Hello Kitty image by putting her alongside depictions of supernatural tigers, which serve as a symbol of power in Korean folk art or "Minhwa." Yong Beck also employs methods from traditional Korean pottery like celadon, a traditional glaze used in Korean ceramics. Compared to Japan's highly commercialized Kawaii culture, Korean Minhwa is usually produced by unknown artists who have no formal training. Contrasting Hello Kitties and Minhwa tigers not only centers this tension, it also embodies Yong Beck's resistance to cute washing and its role in obscuring Japan's colonization, which was fueled by beliefs of racial supremacy.



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Although today Kawaii is a prominent aspect of Japan's broader culture, the culture of cuteness wasn't always the case. In 1965, the television show *Gilligan's Island* featured a racist caricature of a Japanese sailor who portrayed how people in the US viewed Japan at the time: a militaristic empire that colonized Korea and bombed Pearl Harbor. Fast forward to the 2001, when *Spirited Away*, a film about a young girl who enters a world of spirits and witches, quickly became a favorite for US audiences. Miyazaki's film even went on to win an Oscar in 2003 for Best Animated Feature—the first non-English movie to ever win this award. Within the last couple of decades, Japan radically changed its image from aggressor to whimsical stranger. People in the US now think of Japan as a dreamy oasis filled with fantasy and manga characters.

Yong Beck's work doesn't just criticize Japanese cute washing, either. Japan isn't the only country that has employed this tactic. Many of Yong Beck's vases emulate the shape of Sèvres vases, an allusion to France's own version of cute washing. In eighteenth century France, the Sèvres Factory's production of delicate creamy white porcelains was used to push a white supremacist agenda. Yong Beck brings attention to this history by using Sèvres techniques in her own approaches to ceramics. The gold luster on the crown of her vases is also inspired by traditional French ormolu.

Yong Beck's collection also reminded me of Yoshitomo Nara, whose work was recently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In Nara's portraits, he features Japanese pastel-hued depictions of cartoonish children. At first glance, these children are innocent and cute; but they are contradicted unapologetically with darker imagery. Nara's children carry knives, saws, and flaming torches, smoke cigarettes, and hold signs that say, "no nukes" and "no war."

Before I leave the gallery, Yong Beck tells me "If people want to just see my work as cute, I'm fine with that. The conflict can only be seen when you step closer."

She's right, we have to make an astute examination of the vases and also have knowledge of the culture to understand these contradictions.

Yong Beck is a young artist who is well trained, and her promise is clear. As she continues to explore and develop her artistry, I hope to see more pieces that do not shy away from being bolder with the incorporation of Korean folk art. I know that as she did in *Spoonful of Sugar*, Yong Beck will continue to ask and discover: What is beneath the veil of beauty that we buy into?

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