

# SunKoo Yuh's Workshop



## Haystack Mountain School of Craft

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*Shin-Yeon Jeon describes the experience of working with a generous instructor*

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*Above: The view from Haystack Mountain School of Craft.  
Below: The workshop participants.*



FROM THE 14TH TO THE 26TH of June, I had the chance to be in a two week residency program at the Mountain School of Craft in Haystack, Maine, US, to participate in a workshop, *Narrative Ceramic Sculpture: Minimal to Monumental* conducted by SunKoo Yuh. He is a well-known ceramic sculptor in Korea and the US. It was a great opportunity to learn his artistic world, materials that he uses and technical issues such as construction and firing methods. The two week period was enough time to get to know each other, both the instructor and participants, who came from all around the US and Canada. We had a great time learning about each other and bonding as a group, with all participants' passion and seriousness within the craft community.

Established in 1950, the Haystack Mountain School of Craft is an international craft school located on the Atlantic Ocean in Deer Isle in Maine. The campus is harmonized in a beautiful natural environment and received the Twenty-Five Year Award from the American Institute





of Architects in 1994. The school is internationally well known; it offers classes in one-week to two-week sessions during the summertime to teach a variety of craft genres in not only ceramics but also in glass, metals, surface design, blacksmithing, weaving, woodworking and more. The classes are focused on intensive studio practice under internationally and nationally renowned instructors. The participants range from beginners to advanced professionals in order to maintain a diverse student body, both geographically and in skill level.

The instructors are invited artists who are well known in the field. They work and eat with participants and studios remain open 24 hours a day and seven days a week, so that students can focus on their work at the pace of their individual development. The class is open to all skill levels. Depending on instructors, classes can run in many different ways. Sometimes they might use different genres of art, such as music, poetry or dance. Most staff members are also artists and they are open-minded, fully supporting programs so that participants can focus on their work with no disturbance. As a result, it is possible for people to solely devote themselves to the process of creation. Actually, using cell phones on campus during the workshop period was not allowed and it is a good example of how the school constructs that kind of creative environment.

The director of the school, Stuart Kestenbaum said that almost 100 students a year can attend classes without any charge, as beneficiaries of scholarships, work study programs, or as technical assistants. Although most support comes from donations by benevolent supporters and organizations, the End-of-Session Auction of the faculty members' and participants' work is a notable fundraising event which builds a small scholarship fund during each session of the program. None of the participants and instructors hesitated to donate their best work and actively buy the work of others. In our class, there were seven college students and six of them were able to be there as beneficiaries of scholarships from their schools, work study programs or as Technical Assistants (TAs) from the Haystack Mountain School of Craft.

There was a short period exhibition of works by instructors and TAs in all seven craft areas. Also, every evening there was an artist talk with a slide show by instructors. One session was assigned to all of the TAs where each one had a chance to talk about his or her own work for five to 10 minutes.

I have been researching "Expressionistic Ceramic Artists in the U.S who Create Human Figures" for the last few years and one of the artists was Yuh. As soon as I saw the school's brochure, I registered for

*Above left: The studio.*

*Above right: In class with SunKoo Yuh.*

*Below: A drawing by SunKoo Yuh.*





Above left and right: *Student work.*  
Below: *SunKoo Yuh's*  
*exhibition piece.*

the workshop. Finally, I could watch how he creates his work and listen to his artistic philosophy, stories about fellow artists, teachers and two artists who influenced his work in person. Also, I had a chance to hear about the stories behind his work, about his family and friends, from his wife, whose name is Minsoo, and who came there with him.

Most figures in his work are based on ordinary people in daily life (the mundane) that are not created from models or photos but from his memory. As he mentioned, he uses various forms, such as birds, tigers or lotus flowers from 19th century Yi Dynasty folk paintings from Korea to add more vitality to his work. Also, he draws a sketch of his work on a large sheet of rice paper before he creates a single narrative complex ceramic form. His brush strokes are so free and natural that a large scale drawing is completed within a short time. He hangs the sketch on the wall to create a clay work. It is inspiring to see him easily convert the drawing into a three dimensional sculpture. His process is intuitive and spontaneous, just as a well trained potter throws a pot without having to concentrate too deeply. The finished form, even without any glazes, before firing was still beautiful and I was amazed since it looks like a finished work that has integrity as a piece of an artwork.

We usually say that an artist interferes in all of the creation processes, from the beginning to the end, consciously or unconsciously. Yuh explained what he thinks of that statement. "The processes of building forms and glazing are done under control and it is possible to add, remove or modify it. At the climax of the ceramic making process, firing, it is out of my hands. I use 40 different glazes all over a piece, sometimes repeatedly and it is impossible to predict exactly what it will be like. The only thing I can do is do my best and cross my fingers. Everything is up to the flame. The same philosophy should work in our lives. There are definitely things we can choose, give up, or strive for. But sometimes, despite all of our efforts, the result is not as satisfying as what we expected. When it happens, it is not supposed to be controlled by us. We need to let them go."

Yuh is an associate professor at the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia, Athens. Since he teaches two classes a semester, he spends most of his time in his studio. He earned an MFA from Alfred University and was the recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant; the Grand Prize at the *2nd World Ceramic Biannual International Competition* in Icheon, Korea; the Elizabeth R Raphael Founder's Prize; and a grant from the Virginia A. Groot Foundation. Exhibitions include the Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York; Philadelphia Art Alliance; and the Tho Art Gallery, Seoul, Korea. Now his work is in the collections







of many internationally notable art museums; the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Icheon World Ceramic Center, Korea; the Oakland Museum of Art, California; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Artwork shows an artists' life and characteristics. His work shows the innocence of a child, the curiosity of a naughty boy and the acceptance of the awesome weight of everyday life. He speaks about his experiences, thoughts and philosophy using artistic visual language through his pieces.

He was one of best teachers I have ever met in the last 10 years in the US. For two weeks, he sincerely worked, sharing his techniques and knowledge with passion. Sometimes he was a story-teller entertaining our ears, a clown cheering our eyes with facial expressions and gestures and a philosopher elucidating secrets of life. One day, after the class hours, he went out to a fish market on Deer Isle to buy lobsters and crabs and threw a party for students at night. In the book, *The Art Spirit*, Robert Henri says, "Artists must be men of wit, consciously or unconsciously philosophers, read, study, think a great deal of life, be filled with the desire to declare and specify their particular and most personal interest in its manifestations and must invent." I think SunKooYuh is an excellent model of this quote.

With a little isolated location within beautiful scenery, a great instructor and an intensive working environment, all of the participants could not have been more open-minded after a couple of days. We simply felt we were home with old friends and family. Still, the experience of my time at Haystack and the people I met and worked with there hold a warm place in my memory.

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Shin-Yeon Jeon is a ceramic artist and a US reporter of *Ceramics Monthly Korea*. She earned her MFA in studio arts at Towson University and teaches Human Figure, Modelling: Concept & Process and Ceramics for major students as well as non-art major students as a part-time faculty member. Her work has been shown in more than 110 exhibitions in the US and Korea.

Above left: Before firing.  
Above right: Glazing in class.  
Below: Salt firing.

