



WANSOO KIM TABLE MONSTERS

GALLERY GUIDE



The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we are exhibiting, teaching and learning.

Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are: Wansoo Kim's Table Monsters

by Veronica Kavass

They hide under beds, lurk amongst trees, swim at the bottom of lakes, peek up at us through sewer grates. When considering a monster, the initial question concerns *where they are* rather than *what they are*. Their environments contain and ensconce them. A monster's setting is their outermost layer of skin. There is no Big Foot without a forest, no ghosts without their buildings. In the exhibition *Table Monsters*, Wansoo Kim's creatures live under their carapaces of tables.

Which came first: the table or the monster? Do the tables actually serve as some sort of snail shell equivalents? Or are they meant to be distracting facades for the grotesque? The table portion of the sculptures are representative of traditional Korean furniture—this can be seen in their shapes and lines along with tabletops designed to hover close to the ground. Except Kim's tabletops aren't close to the ground because monsters are either pushing them up to awkward heights or propelling them close to the ceiling in states of flight. Sometimes you can lock eyes with monsters peering through cutouts in the tables. In other cases, they are simply recognizable because they contain that amorphous monster blob form. They aren't scary, but more of the borderline friendly monster archetype. Still, are they here to wreak havoc? Or are they just existing the only way they know how?

Perhaps the best way to grasp the story of the table monsters is to look at the artistic trajectory of their creator. Kim majored in ceramics at the Seoul National University of Science and Technology where there was heavy emphasis on technique and material. "Because Korean ceramics has such a rich history," Kim explained to me, "everyone in Korea has a sort of pre-conception towards studying ceramics. Because of all this social pressure—[and] even though I kept making pieces in college—I was always confused..."

In 2013, Kim studied under Hoon Lee at Grand Valley State University in Michigan where he was encouraged to explore all aspects of his art making and question methods he'd learned (along with spending a minimum of 16 hours in the studio a day). During this time, Kim cast a critical eye at traditional Korean ceramic objects and became fixated on the fact that the interiors of vessels weren't ever glazed. "Is it because no one looks inside?" Kim asked. In considering the disparity between the treatment of the interior and exterior, he turned them inside out "to reveal what was hidden." He made ceramic vessels with beautiful, intricate interiors but unfinished, rough exteriors. Kim also questioned the material of clay in relation to the more common material of plastic. While clay was an important part of his culture, he didn't know if it was truly meaningful to *him*. Thus, he created a series of sculptures in which ceramic objects were contained within plastic vessels. The monsters followed soon after...

When artists shine spotlights on monsters, they call for viewers to confront the embodiments of their fears. For graphic novelist Emil Ferris, the main characters in her book *My Favorite Thing is Monsters* expose the bigotry she witnessed against the protest culture of 1960s Chicago. The Texan artist Trenton Doyle Hancock voraciously adds to his never-ending realm of monsters to highlight racial violence in

this country. Of course, monsters came out of the woodwork in droves following Trump's election. In 2018, *Artforum* writer and editor, Elizabeth Shambelan wrote: "We're living in the era of evil clowns and ludicrous monsters because they're what crawl out of the cracks when the bedrock breaks."

If Kim's Table Monsters are allegorical, they would likely be in line with art historian Craig Owens' theory on allegorical impulse:

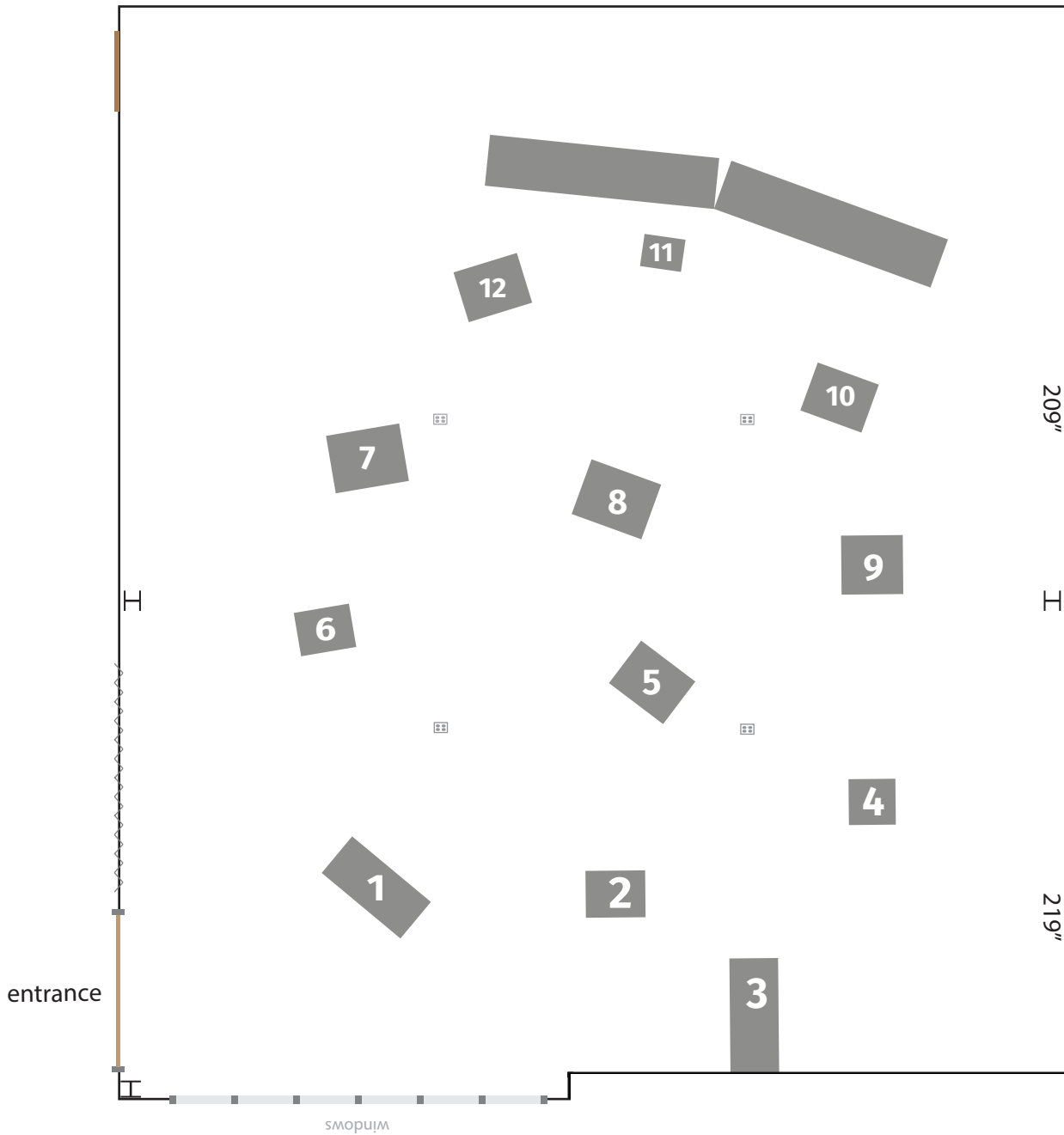
Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present—these are its two most fundamental impulses.

In Kim's practice, there is an active shifting around of how the past correlates to the present. Perhaps when he started his development as an artist in Seoul, he felt boxed in to a tradition which had been revived due to being estranged during Japanese colonial rule (several decades before his time). In his initial training in ceramics, he felt restricted by historical convention, but eventually found a way to simultaneously celebrate and question his cultural past. Because sometimes (often) there is a gulf between honoring tradition and giving an object meaning. Some artists straddle this gulf but when it becomes too wide, invention and imagination have to come into play. And in Kim's case: monsters have to come into play. Even if they don't know what exactly they are going to do with the tables at the end of the day.

Veronica Kavass is a writer and criminal defense investigator based in New Orleans. She holds a MA in curatorial practice and critical theory from Chelsea College of Art in London and an MFA in creative writing from University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. She has written catalog essays and art reviews for numerous publications such as *Guernica* and *Burnaway*.

She is the author of *Artists in Love: From Picasso & Gilot to Christo & Jeanne-Claude* which received the IPPY 2012 Gold Award in the Fine Arts category. She recently completed a book of essays about the immigrant histories of her hometown of Nashville and is currently writing a book on the way memory and language works in the criminal justice system.

Oh and she co-hosts the podcast, *Thick as Thieves*, with her best friend Sara Estes on the history of art crimes.



- 1. *Snail* , earthenware, stoneware paper clay
- 2. *Camou-flagged*, earthenware
- 3. *Two Cuboids*, stoneware paper clay
- 4. *Flying Monster* , stoneware paper clay
- 5. *Four-face*, earthenware
- 6. *Split and Branched*, stoneware paper clay

- 7. *Red Rockets*, stoneware paper clay
- 8. *Two Tables* , earthenware
- 9. *Elegance and Eloquence*, stoneware paper clay
- 10. *Three tables*, stoneware paper clay
- 11. *Flying Monster No.2*, stoneware paper clay
- 12. *Table-lifting*, stoneware paper clay

Wansoo Kim

Bio

Kim was born and raised in South Korea where he received his BFA in Ceramics from Seoul National University of Science and Technology. He earned an MFA in Studio Art from University of Nebraska – Lincoln in 2018. Before arrival to Austin Peay State University, he participated in an Artist-In-Residence program at Belger Crane Yard Studios in Kansas City. Since moving to the United States in 2013, he has shown his works regularly in national and international exhibitions.

Artist Statement

In my eyes, the world is composed of both revealed things and hidden things. I interpret my surroundings based on this idea, seeking to realize my ignorance and awareness. With this in mind, I create objects in which dichotomous ideas are present, and use their physically revealed and hidden aspects in order to represent the greater human struggle to see and understand what is hidden from us.

The notion of inside and outside is one of my particular subjects. Upon observing an object or a structure, we see only its external reality. I aim to present the unobservable, often presenting the inner reality of things at the same time as I present the apparent outer reality. In this respect, my works can become a gate leading viewers to an invisible space, counteracting the conception that what we see is everything.

I also question what sustains our daily lives. An individual's beliefs and perceptions are created not only by personal history, memory and experience, but also by society's tradition and culture, accumulated throughout human history. I interpret this invisible background as a spiritual support for individuals by materializing it as physical supports. Thus the idea of verticality and horizontality is another fundamental in my works. I see great value in the physicality of human beings and all structures under the force of the gravity. The ground is horizontal and is our base. We always stand vertically on the ground. On top of legs or columns is the ceiling or the roof, sandwiching us between two horizontal lines. Vertical structures are a symbol representing human beings. I am aware of their struggle to overcome gravity. In this respect I focus on developing and expressing an imagery of verticality, which is a form compiled of vertical structures that I have observed such as a column, the legs of humans and animals, and ordinary table legs.

These ideas become more tangible when they are articulated in formal qualities in the works. Physical dichotomy exists in the works as a natural phenomenon. Masses and spaces, regardless of the shapes and dimensions, are always composed of visible and invisible parts, defined by where we stand and what we perceive. I scrutinize and bridge this with the idea of inside and out, top and bottom, front and back, and vertical and horizontal structures. As I build a three-dimensional form, it naturally generates interior and exterior surfaces as well as vertical and horizontal structures. I am fully aware of these natural occurrences and apply my awareness of these physical dichotomies to my understanding of culture, society and human behavior, correlating ignorance/awareness with hidden/visible.

The works are an assemblage of recognizable and unidentifiable elements, intended to evoke an environment where realism and surrealism coexist. Through both distant interaction with the works and personal closer examination, the viewer's accessibility to the space and experience is restricted. By creating this experience for the viewer, I propose to question our perceptions, our beliefs, our ignorance and our awareness.