



ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: *Korean American Moon Jars*

Crafting ideas

Steven Young Lee talks to *Isabel Andrews* about how his Korean-American heritage has influenced his practice

Steven Young Lee's ceramic art takes many forms, be it functional thrown wares or vessels that playfully subvert the form or decoration of traditional Asian ceramics. More recently, he has made sculptures by skilfully sabotaging thrown vessels, inserting splits and tears in the wet clay before allowing the piece to slump or even explode in the kiln.

An American of Korean heritage, Lee has long researched Korean ceramics to interrogate his own identity. He often employs traditional forms – be it the moon jar or other Joseon dynasty vessels – but decorates them with pop culture references such as Godzilla or Puff the Magic Dragon to create a visual dissonance. These he carves exactly for days at a time, using a traditional Korean inlay technique called *sanggam* and a palette of blue and white. Through these means, Lee addresses the paucity of Asian-American imagery in his childhood.

Despite producing ceramics as close as possible to technical perfection, Lee's concept of craftsmanship lies instead in the execution of ideas – about identity, about what the here-and-now looks like, about what makes a pot

'perfect', and about how the intention of an artist relates to value. His relative youth belies an artist established at the top of his game: Lee's pieces routinely appear in national museums across America, and he recently stepped down after 16 years as the resident artist-director of the revered Archie Bray Foundation, nestled in the foothills of the Montana Rockies.

FASCINATION WITH CLAY

Lee was born in 1970s Chicago to immigrant parents who prioritised his education and professional achievement. Unusually among his peers, his father was a talented artist, earning a masters from the Art Institute of Chicago before working in graphic design. Aged about eight, Lee became fascinated with clay when his sister came home from a ceramics class with a sculpture of the family dog. At high school he was introduced to throwing on the wheel. 'That's when everything became really obsessive,' he says. 'I was mesmerised. I spent all my free hours learning to throw and trying to figure out the whole process. My friends thought I was crazy, but I couldn't stop.'

His talent was obvious to his high-school teachers, who suggested a career in ceramics, but Lee dismissed the idea because he was always encouraged to focus on academics. 'My teacher looked at me and said, "We need artists to be good thinkers too." He was making the case for art simply being a different field.'

Still, Lee chose to study business at the University of Iowa, before eventually switching to ceramics, taught there by 'Chuck' Hinds and Bunny McBride. He transferred and completed his degree in ceramic art at the New York State College of Ceramics, Alfred University. Upon graduating, he secured a summer residency at the Archie Bray Foundation. Established in 1951 by brickmaker Archie Bray, it was the first institution in the US to offer a residency programme devoted solely to ceramic art. First through the door were Peter Voulkos and Rudy Autio, whose work, in time, crossed the divide from traditional craft to contemporary fine art.

Lee's first impression, however, was underwhelming: 'When I got there I thought, "This is the Bray? Are you kidding me?" It was pretty humble back then – romantic,



ABOVE LEFT: *Another Time Another Place* ABOVE RIGHT: *Culture Blind* FAR RIGHT: *Jar with Tiger and Clouds*

more than state-of-the-art.' Yet it proved to be a pivotal experience, as Lee observed how diverse makers managed their studio time. 'I was resident with professors, retired high-school teachers, people I had read about in *Ceramics Monthly*, and yet we were all equal. That stuck with me as it made me realise I had to figure things out myself.'

Afterwards, Lee moved back to Chicago and set himself up as an artist. 'I got a tiny apartment and made pots for three-and-a-half years. Just getting a feel for what the lifestyle was like.' He sold elegant, functional porcelain wares at street fairs. 'I would hear things like "Do you have this in purple?" or comments about my work having an Asian aesthetic. It made me think about how my work was being read by the public. I would just file it all away and start wondering how I felt about those comments. "Can I make it in purple?" "Why don't I want to?"'

FRESH CHALLENGES

Some of these thoughts Lee later tackled in New York, when he returned to Alfred University for an MFA in ceramics just a year after 9/11. In a time of national questioning, Lee began to take ownership of 'being a second-generation Korean or first-generation Korean-American.' He delved into the history of Korean objects and inlay, while enacting an awkward shift towards making sculpture in the form of abstract porcelain fragments. 'I kept running up against why things were not turning out the way I wanted. That was the beginning of me contending with expectation and failure. But by stepping back, I got into the habit of seeing the result was more interesting than what I had been trying to do,' he explains.

Constantly seeking fresh challenges, directly after completing his MFA at Alfred, Lee took a year-long fellowship at the Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute, just outside Jingdezhen, China – the birthplace of porcelain and a city

whose streets are lined with remarkable feats of creation. With rudimentary Chinese, he took advantage of the near-industrial approach to craftsmanship there – different components of the ceramic process undertaken by a range of craftsmen in different factories – to generate his ideas more quickly. His resulting series, *Made in China*, includes towers of close to 100 press-moulded rabbits referencing Western Easter bunnies as well as the Chinese Zodiac.

Perhaps as importantly, for the first time Lee had the experience of blending in, appearance-wise. He noted that his experience of living and teaching in China differed from that of other Western visitors. These thoughts crystallised in an epiphany of sorts about a year later, while he was teaching Asian ceramic techniques at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, Canada, to Asian students from overseas – techniques he had learned through the lens of Bernard Leach's apprentices in America. 'I started to try to understand how Leach's influence came to be, and how it evolved from the original sources he was trying to promote. It's so fascinating how information and influence take form.' In other words, culture is always on the move.

Lee's expansive thinking and easy demeanour no doubt helped him land the role of resident artist-director of the Archie Bray Foundation in 2006. 'I always told people it was my dream job. I don't know how I got it – I was pretty young and relatively unknown – but perhaps not everybody applying saw the potential of that position,' he says.

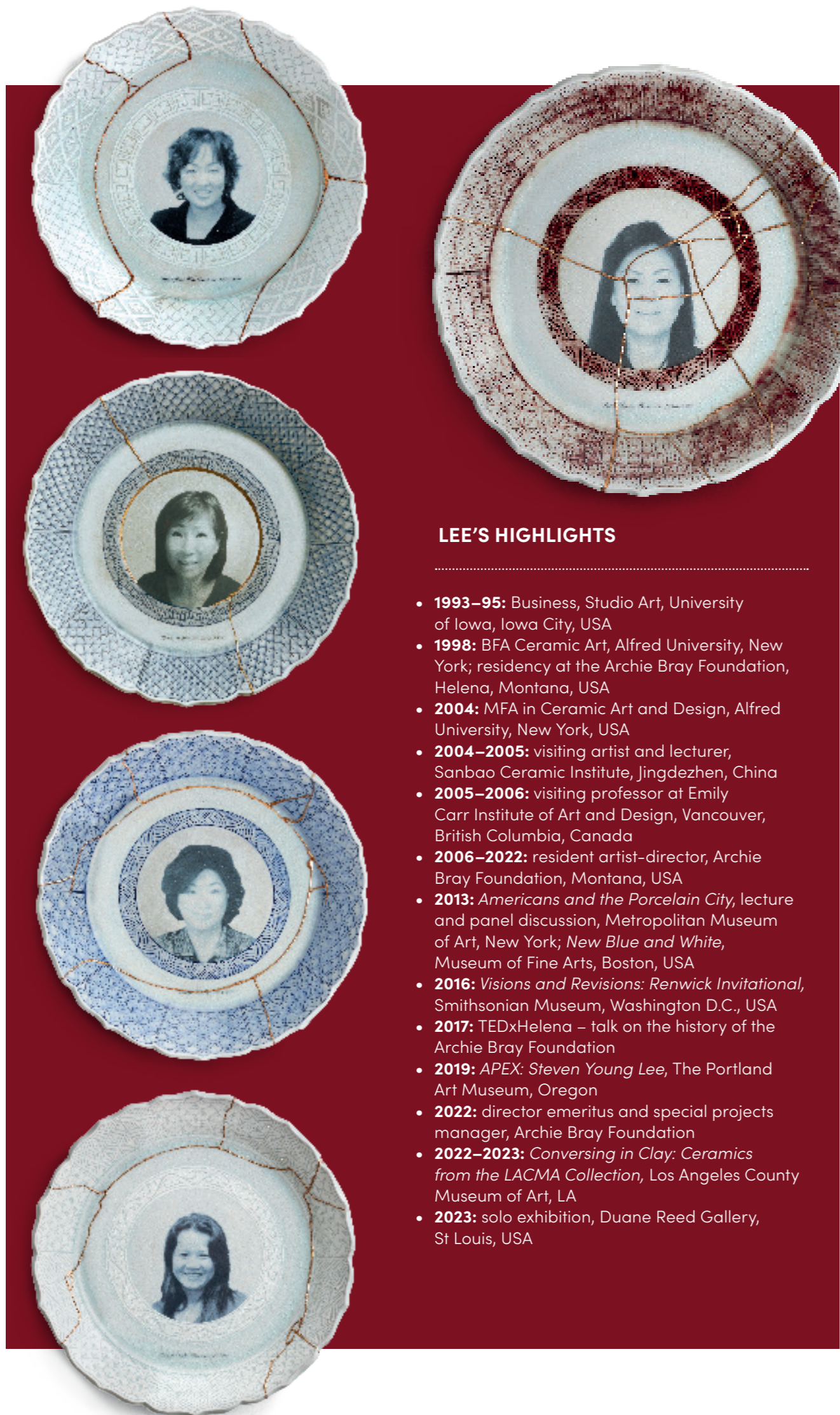
Some 12,000 square feet of artist studios had recently been built, following the Foundation's first successful capital fundraising campaign, and there was a palpable sense of 'what next?'

Lee set out to increase the financial support available to resident artists, as well as introducing state-of-the-art technology, such as Blaaauw kilns, to complement the



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Images: courtesy of the artist; Duane Reed Gallery



LEE'S HIGHLIGHTS

- **1993–95:** Business, Studio Art, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA
- **1998:** BFA Ceramic Art, Alfred University, New York; residency at the Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, Montana, USA
- **2004:** MFA in Ceramic Art and Design, Alfred University, New York, USA
- **2004–2005:** visiting artist and lecturer, Sanbao Ceramic Institute, Jingdezhen, China
- **2005–2006:** visiting professor at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
- **2006–2022:** resident artist-director, Archie Bray Foundation, Montana, USA
- **2013:** *Americans and the Porcelain City*, lecture and panel discussion, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; *New Blue and White*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA
- **2016:** *Visions and Revisions: Renwick Invitational*, Smithsonian Museum, Washington D.C., USA
- **2017:** TEDxHelena – talk on the history of the Archie Bray Foundation
- **2019:** APEX: *Steven Young Lee*, The Portland Art Museum, Oregon
- **2022:** director emeritus and special projects manager, Archie Bray Foundation
- **2022–2023:** *Conversing in Clay: Ceramics from the LACMA Collection*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, LA
- **2023:** solo exhibition, Duane Reed Gallery, St Louis, USA



LEFT: *Shattered Dreams and Movements of Change* **ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Jar with Tiger and Magpies



existing on-site pursuits of kiln building and the production of Bray Clay. ‘Artists have to have that freedom and support to experiment, to push at the edges of the field – even when it is uncomfortable for everybody,’ says Lee. ‘That seems the value of it.’ Under Lee’s tenure, applications to the Bray increased by 60%, including a significant increase in international applications.

In 2021, Lee oversaw a \$6-million (which also included an endowment gift of \$15 million) overhaul of the 26-acre historic brickyard campus, creating new gallery spaces and offices, and he is always busy fostering creative partnerships at both community level and with pioneering international artists, such as Theaster Gates.


When asked about the tension between running a not-for-profit organisation and his own practice, Lee chuckles: ‘It was always such a fine line!’ He walked it well: the previous 10 years have been peppered with shows and lectures nationwide, including a solo show in 2019 at the Portland Art Museum. For this, Lee made work responding to Korean objects in the museum’s collection, including a 19th-century *Tiger and Magpie* folk painting. He produced an installation of 96 wall-hung porcelain plates – his largest work to date – swapping out classical motifs for Kellogg’s Tony the Tiger and Heckle and Jeckle from Terrytoons cartoons, all gently rendered in traditional blue and white. Some plates, which cracked in the making, Lee deftly mended with kintsugi, a centuries-old Japanese practice of repair work in gold. Not everyone will recognise his choice of American pop-culture references, which are particular to his childhood, but these disconnects also hold value for Lee.

NEW WORK

Earlier this year, and six months in the making, Lee had a solo show at Duane Reed Gallery in St Louis, full of collapsed pieces in rich glazes emulating historical colours. Among the works was a slightly different piece, *Shattered*

Dreams and Movements of Change, a series of plates Lee produced to commemorate the six Asian women brutally murdered in the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting, which galvanised the Stop Asian Hate movement. The work goes on show at the Korean Society, New York, later this year.

Lee has stepped down since 2022 from full-time involvement in the Bray, becoming instead director emeritus and special projects manager, to free up time for his solo work. He is now busy renovating a commercial space in Helena that will house his new studio. Yet, as we wrap up the interview, he enthuses about *First Fire*, an upcoming project with artists Cannupa Hanska Luger and Raven Halfmoon to engage indigenous artists using traditional techniques such as pit firing, with a view to establishing these practices at the Bray. ‘We are all just going to work in the studio together and see where those conversations go from a position of gathering,’ says Lee.

It seems apt that he is settled in a part of America affectionately known as Big Sky Country; for Lee it seems that the sky is the limit. 

For more details visit stevenyounglee.com; archiebray.org