



“Donut Rush” by Jae Yong Kim May Be the Happiest Show in Chelsea

December 18, 2014

by Pat Rogers

Jae Yong Kim’s installation of small sculptures might be the happiest in Chelsea. After all, when doesn’t the idea of a sugar-glazed donut bring a smile? Since last month, Kim’s clay glazed donuts have been drawing children and adults from the sidewalk into Lyons Wier Gallery on 24th Street to see the unusual installation in the gallery’s project space. At the Miami art fairs, a similar donut installation had the same effect at Art Miami. So much so that the gallery had to install a velvet rope (of sorts) to keep fans from getting too close while photographing selfies with the art or examining sculptures that appear to be the real thing.

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“Donut Rush” installation at Lyons Wier Gallery, New York.

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Firing clay with three types of glazing to create handsize sculptures of happiness is no accident. Donuts make Jae Yong Kim happy (the real ones and his clay artworks). However, Kim’s art is not pop but conceptual. His sculptures—sometimes incorporated in mixed media installations—channel his exploration of finding his way as a professional artist and discovering his own definition of what a successful life in America could be for him and, later, his family.

“The donuts I see as a possibility of working out problems situations in my life and address how money is handled and treated in America,” said Kim. My parents spoiled me and after 2008, things fell apart. It was like a genesis to me and I had to figure out what I wanted and what brought me and my art joy.”

Before there were donuts, there were snails.

A sculptor first, Kim’s first iconography in both sculpture and installation featured clay snails that represented societal and psychological “battles.” Presented in the solo show “Lust for Donuts” at Blank Space in 2012, the works were primarily snails cloaked in monochromatic white or chrome. The snail’s symbolism of creatures who are searching for home was a match to Kim’s experience of emigrating from South Korea to America to attend college and study art and then remaining to begin a life here, he said. They also represented his experiences of trying to figure out how the world of finance and business works in New York City and being stymied by advice and

conversations revealing priorities that were foreign to Kim.

The art, while also made from clay, were dark conceptually and had an edge. Donuts appeared for the first time as symbols of greed and gluttony. One donut was stuffed into the mouth of one of the snails. Another sculpture, *Blah, Blah, Blah*, was a single donut cloaked in shimmering gold and crystal. Missing was the lightness and the simple universal joy found in the art he makes now.

“People would talk to me about how to make money, and what they were doing and I didn’t understand what they were saying,” recalled Kim. “It was like they were talking in a language I couldn’t understand. *Blah, blah, blah* was what it sounded like to me. When I talked, it was they didn’t understand me, just like I didn’t understand them. So I decided I would make up my own language to say what I think is important. In “Lust for Donuts” [at Blank Space], one of the snails had a donut in his mouth. This was the first time I made a donut out of clay. I started making more donuts because this is what made me happy.”

Kim’s sculptural focus eventually morphed completely to donuts—giving in to his passion for the dessert, the happiness it brings him and embracing the philosophy of joy and living life on his terms—even if it differed from advice given to him from financially-focused friends and acquaintances on the ways of life in New York City.

Even among happiness, some darkness lurks. Donuts are a treat but they aren’t all good, said Kim. Eating too many donuts will cause weight gain and health problems. Donuts, sweets and junk food are typical fare for those living in poverty or just above it, he said. Cheap and yummy, donuts also give a quick burst of energy which lets you keep going. They also can provide a satisfying balm when life and trying to get by is difficult.



Donut sculpture by Jae Yong Kim, 2014. Fired clay, glaze and underglaze,
4 x 4 x 1.5 inches.



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With time, Kim developed different donut forms and began using the shapes like different types of canvas to explore painting and color—both new to Kim. For Kim, his paints are underglaze, glaze, overglaze and Swarovski Crystals. The investigation also became linked to art history. A fan of Yayoi Kusama and her pumpkins, an attempt to form perfect dots by hand led to the realization of its difficulty, said Kim. A devotion to attaining perfect resulted in recurrent donut creations a la Kusama. An interest in abstraction lead to donuts featuring free form drips in the tradition of

Jackson Pollock, said Kim.

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Most recently, Kim’s son expressed an interest in the stars. This lead to a new direction of donuts that channels the glistening quality of far away lights that spark the imagination.

Recurrent shapes that include Mickey Mouse ears and a variety of donut types (think jelly, crullers, glazed and traditional) allow for a freedom, of sorts, to play with color, paint (through glazing), and art making. A self-proclaimed perfectionist, the shapes of each donut is unique and carries the mark of the artist’s hand, said Kim.

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Clear Conversation Loaded with Attraction

Gallerist Michael Wier said he was attracted to Kim’s work immediately and had a one-two sensation: The familiar confection struck first and brought joy while intrigue by subtle meanings infused in the work quickly following.

“Each unique sculpture has a clear and concise conversation loaded with its own attraction and

dialogue,” explained Wier. “When I first saw Kim’s installation, I thought, *Oh, how I love donuts*. Then a conceptual dialogue ensued: *This one looks tastier than that one...but wait, that’s Kusama’s influence on this piece and Jim Dine’s on that one, a little Murakami over here...*

“Kim’s obvious use of these motifs begs the questions: Is the viewer visually consuming a donut, an artwork, or the art world at large?,” continued Wier. “Is Kim’s work a caustic comment on the art world’s rampant strides towards mass consumerism or possibly a poignant statement about the gluttonous effects of an over-caloric ‘art’ community or is it simply a treat?”

“Once these questions are satisfied, the viewer can move on to consider Kim’s nods to designer Louis Vuitton, the value of precious metals, mass-market appeal and one of my favorites, Disney. When one recognizes the Mickey Mouse shaped donuts, an interesting conversation ensues about Walt Disney. And, depending on one’s perspectives, consuming a “Mickey” donut can vacillate from just ‘plain fun,’ to Disney’s influence (for better or worse) in the development of post industrial America, World War II propaganda and the entertainment business, all rolled up into one ‘tasty treat’.”



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Conceptual ideologues aside, the donut sculptures are just plain fun. Kids love them, said Kim. For these young art viewers, Kim now makes sure his installations are family-friendly.

Jae Yong Kim is a graduate of Hartford Art School (West Hartford, CT) and Cranbrook Academy of Art (Bloomfield Hills, MI). Kim’s work is featured in the collection of the Han Hyang Lim Ceramic Museum in Korea and has been the subject of numerous group and solo exhibitions. They include American University Museum (Washington DC), multiple galleries in Michigan and Connecticut and New York City.

Kim lives in New York and works from his studio in Jersey City, N.J. And, yes, his studio looks like a donut shop.



Jae Yong Kim in his studio. Courtesy Lyons Wier Gallery.

BASIC FACTS: “Donut Rush” by Jae Yong Kim remains on view through December 20, 2014 at Lyons Wier Gallery, 542 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011. Can’t make the show? Contact the gallery for info...Kim’s donuts will continue to be made fresh daily. www.lyonswiergallery.com.

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