



## WORK LIFE: MEEKYOUNG SHIN, ARTIST

### *A day in the life of an artist*

**Meekyoung Shin, 45, is an artist. She grew up in South Korea and moved to London where she studied at the Slade School of Fine Art. She lives in Wimbledon**

As an artist, my working day isn't very structured, but I've been so busy lately with exhibitions and projects that I usually get up between 7am and 8am. The first thing I do is check my emails on my phone; I deal with galleries and curators around the world so I need to respond quickly. If I'm working in my studio, I get dressed in a full boiler suit, although it doesn't get very dirty as I create sculptures out of soap. For breakfast I have coffee and cereal with fruit, then I walk across my garden to my purpose-built studio.

My current exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery displays my Translation Vases series, where I reproduce ancient Chinese pottery using soap. I began work on the collection when I moved to London from Korea in 1995. To create the works I make a silicon mould, pour in melted soap and wait for it to harden. I then carve out the inside and inlay the exterior with coloured soap or draw patterns using natural dye. It's always interesting to see how people react to my work – they're often amazed that they have been crafted so meticulously out of an unexpected material, but for me, it's more important that they understand the meaning behind the work. It's about two cultures colliding; I'm playing with the past and present, opulent and simple, East and West.

I'm always looking for inspiration and I find it everywhere, from exploring the streets of London and New York to visiting museums. For example, I saw some Parisian glass vases at Tate Britain, which inspired me to create my collection of soap vases with a glass effect. One of the projects that I'm most excited about is my new large-scale equestrian sculpture titled *Written in Soap*, which was erected recently in Cavendish Square, London. A statue of the Duke of Cumberland stood in the same spot from 1770 until it was removed in 1868 due to disapproval of his actions during the Battle of Culloden, and the plinth has remained empty ever since. The only image I had of the original sculpture is a drawing from the rear, so I had to reinterpret it while trying to stay as close to the original as possible.

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The sculpture is carved from two tons of soap donated by Lush and is 3.2 metres high – it was too large to create in my home studio so I worked in a studio in Hackney Wick. It took six months to create, working from 7am to 8pm with a short break for lunch. I got fed up with going to the same cafe every day so I took a lunchbox with rice from home. I have planning permission for the sculpture to remain in the square for one year and over this time it will be eroded by the wind, rain, snow and heat. This doesn't concern me though; my work is designed to erode, a bit like a ghost.

I travel frequently for work, as I had exhibitions in San Francisco and New York last year and I have a show in Taiwan and two in Korea next year. Most of my buyers are professional collectors and museums – my work isn't very collectable because it's made out of a transient material that doesn't have any value, so rather than purchasing the work as an object, buyers need to understand the concept fully. I prefer to sell existing works as I find it stressful creating specific pieces for money.

When an exhibition of my work opens, the gallery hosts a private view party with wine and canapés for invited guests before it opens to the public and I also do interviews to promote the show.

In the evenings when I finish in my studio, I like to relax; I enjoy cooking Korean food, watching television and reading, before going to bed at 1.30am. The past couple of years have been so hectic that I haven't had much time for entertaining with my artist friends – I've just finished one project and I'm already getting calls about the next few, so it often feels like I'm running a marathon.

**Korean Eye 2012 is at the Saatchi Gallery until 23 September; [saatchi-gallery.co.uk](http://saatchi-gallery.co.uk)**

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