

**EMILY YONG BECK**

**WHISKERS ON KITTENS**

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Gaa Projects Cologne

*"When the dog bites, when the bee stings  
When I'm feeling sad  
I simply remember my favorite things  
And then I don't feel so bad."*

-Favorite Things from the Sound of Music

Central to the work of Emily Yong Beck is the duality of cuteness. Comforting and powerful, deceitful and soothing, Yong Beck employs cuteness through a familiar cast of characters. Through vibrant and tactile ceramic vessels, her work surveys a range of art historical movements. From traditional Korean ceramics, Serves Porcelain and cultural phenomena, including baroque aesthetics, Kawaii culture, and American cartoons, Yong Beck interrogates imperialist legacies of cute-washing in favor of a nuanced and vivid understanding of how media, craft, and cuteness can be used to obscure violence.

Using a range of cultural references from the Sanrio Family to Loony Toons, Yong Beck expands narrative genres and charts the progression of American cartoons, Japanese Manga, and folklore as they move into the realms of wide-reaching cultural phenomena and the character licensing industry. Looking at cultural production as a means of enjoyment, entertainment, and novel forms of expression, Yong Beck pairs contemporary and vintage American cartoons and Japanese anime to bring into focus the parallels and contrasts of regimes that have used cuteness as propaganda and a means of national re-branding.

In wartime United States, Disney, and Looney Tunes spun a story of patriotism and urban nostalgia for country life. In Post-war Japan, Kawaii used anime, Manga, and games to revitalize the country's image and offered an escape through the fantasy of an idealized image of childhood. The evolution of both continued long after previous generations first felt their impacts. Repurposed and refashioned to fit the psychological and cultural needs of subsequent generations, the less savory and more sinister aspects of these cultural phenomena are often lost but also absorbed.

Why do people like cute things? How can one relish in the joy of cuteness and address the atrocities committed in its image?

Yong Beck answers both of these questions. At the intersections of media, political regimes, and personal expression, her work subverts the familiarity of mass-produced and manufactured objects. While addressing the loss and trauma of the history of the Japanese occupation of Korea and more broadly the racism, classism, and sexism perpetuated by many forms of mass media, Yong Beck also offers something forward facing. Yong Beck merges the vibrant, celebratory, and joyful through personal and collective memory while bearing witness to intergenerational trauma and cultural erasure.

In *Whiskers on Kittens*, Yong Beck's most recent works feature traditional Korean ceramic Buchenong vessels and moon vases. These historic Korean forms are noted for their technical perfection, and use of material and decoration. Interwoven with her blend of hand-building and glazing techniques, Yong Beck's work parts from these traditional forms. While sharing a similar care of adornment and depicting animals and folkloric characters, Yong Beck utilizes stoneware saturated by vibrant glazes applied onto scratched images and sculptural elements extending beyond vessels' edges. A typically male-dominated field, Yong Beck, born in Korea to a Korean mother and American father, has had a distant and diasporic relationship with Korean craft. Examining her family's history, Yong Beck develops a personal connection to traditional crafts, techniques and mass-produced media, drawing comparisons to the duality of her own experiences.

To go back to *The Sound of Music*, in its title, Yong Beck's exhibition references the chipper melody and verse of *Favorite Things*—a song of self-soothing and imagination. The lyrics evoke images of raindrops on roses and girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes. Like Yong Beck's sculptures, the song offers escape and comfort while also situated in the context of war, conflict, and erasure.