



Choi Byung-hoon's traditional Korean lacquer on red oak from his Water Meditation series. Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Byung Hoon Choi

CULTURE ART

A beautiful bridge of thought

Designer Choi Byung-hoon's elegant works span two forms – basalt and traditional lacquer – to express his Zen principles in an exhibition in New York

The elegant works of Choi Byung-hoon, known as the father of Korean design, span the two creative forms, says Marc Benda, co-founder of New York's Friedman Benda gallery, which is staging an exhibition centred on the designer.

“Choi's work is a beautiful bridge between craft, sculpture and design, which in theory are very discrete ways of creating things,” says Benda.

The gentle sculptures on show in the Byung-hoon Choi: Water Sculptures exhibition – his second at the gallery – combine Indonesian basalt wrought by the designer and lacquer work created by artisans following his instructions. The roughness of the stone stands as a perfect complement to the smoothness of the lacquer.

Viewed together, the works have a reposeful, meditative effect; the sense of balance and harmony embedded in the structures perfectly expresses Choi's self-proclaimed Zen principles.

It's the first time that Choi has worked with lacquer, a craft that dates back to the Neolithic period.

“It's an ancient technique, and the knowledge we have of it is vanishing,” says Benda, noting that there is a long tradition of the craft in Korea. “Lacquer is a bridge to tradition, a bridge to the past, and a bridge to excellence. It was created without technology, and without a formal understanding of the material, but the artifacts created with it can last for centuries.”



Deep in thought. Choi Byung-hoon is considered the father of South Korean design. Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Byung Hoon Choi

Choi has put his mark on the process by adding a red dye, which gives the finished product a burnished glow.

The volcanic basalt rocks, which are very heavy, delve back even further into the past. “Choi is very conscious that the rocks stood somewhere for millions of years,” says Benda. “He takes them into his hands, and makes them into another shape, so that the rocks will exist far into the future in another form. There is something very philosophical, something very beautiful, about that.”

Choi, who sketches his designs first, doesn't just embellish the rocks, he makes them into something entirely new, says Benda: “He interacts with the rocks and gives them shape. He uses them to create something. That's his authorship.”

The designer says that his work is steeped in the Buddhist principles of balance, harmony and natural forces.

He has also expressed an influence in Taoism, and the interplay between Yin and Yang. Choi has said that he hopes his work will create a mental space, which allows the viewer to reflect on universal values.

“I see Zen in multiple levels of Choi's work,” says Benda. “It's in the poise of the pieces themselves, in how they balance. It's also in the way that the artworks seem to be at rest with themselves, the way they are complete in themselves.”

Why does Choi choose to express his art in the form of furniture? It's a way of including a human element, says Benda. “The beauty of design in general is that humans are much more than observers in a work of design. They are part of the creation,” says Benda. “If you're making a chair, it will only be a good chair if you take note of the fact that someone is going to have to sit in it, whether philosophically, or in reality. In design, people are part of the process.”



Basalt and black granite have been used in these Afterimage of Beginning series of works by Choi Byung-hoon. Photo: Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Byung Hoon Choi

Choi, who was born in 1952, is also an influential professor, and sometimes exhibits his artwork alongside that of his students. He says his work is part of the long tradition of Korean art, but he also has international influences. “He comes from a generation of artists who were already very fluent when it came to crossing borders,” says Benda.

“He and his contemporaries would have been exposed to art from Japan, Western Europe and the US.”

Choi looks both forward and back, says Benda: “He is challenging the traditional notions of sculpture in the East and West. But he's also going back millions of years to explore the earliest ways mankind gave form to its ideas.”

[Byung-hoon Choi: Water Meditation](#) is on until December 17