



PRESS RELEASE

So Distant, So Near: The Land of Morning Calm ***Ji-Young Demol Park and Lee Lee Nam***

From 20 March to 30 June 2024

My last letter to you dated the 9th instant from St Moritz, which we left on the 15th by motor car and travelled over several mountain passes to the lake of Thune in the Bernese Oberland and there passed several days with my sister and brother-in-law from where we visited some other beauty spots in the Valais, returning home by easy stages on the 23rd instant. The weather during our stay at the Engadine had not been very favourable, but still the change of air, which is very bracing in the altitude, did us a lot of good.

Alfred Baur, 25 August 1938 (excerpt from his correspondence with Tomita Kumasaku)

In the wake of the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Switzerland and South Korea, our museum has chosen as its subject the representation of the landscape so treasured by its founder, and of mountains in particular, so essential in both countries.

It also provides an opportunity to recall that a little over one hundred years ago, in the winter of 1924, during their trip to the Far East, Alfred and Eugénie Baur stopped off for a few days in the streets, markets, museums, and monuments of the Korean capital. A magnificent collection of celadon wares with inlaid decoration dating from the Goryeo kingdom (918–1392), acquired a few years later by the Swiss collector, also testifies to the valued link between our museum and the Land of the Morning Calm.

In keeping with the previous two contemporary encounters, *Of clay and silk* (2019) and *In praise of light* (2022), our exhibition *So Distant, So Near* offers an original dialogue between two contemporary Korean artists in the company of a selection of ancient works from the Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet and the Fondation Baur: drawing on centuries-old links between cultures and objects, materials, colours and motifs, the ink-bathed mountain peaks of Ji-Young Demol Park and Lee Lee Nam's animated mountains resonate with the creations of the painter Jeong Seon (1676-1759): emblematic of the Land of the Morning Calm, the representations of mountains created by this great master, the "inventor of the Korean landscape", like the jade-coloured celadons and the purity of the white porcelain of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), have never ceased to move generations of artists. Among them, Ji-Young Demol Park and Lee Lee Nam excel as much in their fruitful relationship with this heritage as in the power of their respective universes, which are geared towards a certain re-enchantment of nature.

Curator: Laure Schwartz-Arenales, director of the Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art

Scenography: Nicole Gérard and Lucien Bösiger with the participation of Corinne Racaud and César Preda

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With the exceptional participation of Musée national des arts asiatiques – Guimet, Paris and Musée d’Ethnographie de Genève



SO DISTANT, SO NEAR, THE LANDSCAPES OF THE LAND OF THE MORNING CALM

“The deliciously fresh, light air of Korea, the land of morning freshness. [. . .]. On the railway line along the inland sea in weather of extraordinary splendour. The whole Earth seemshalf-liquefied in the light and the blue [. . .]. In Korea, I have rediscovered the great currents of the earth, solid gold, the mountains of categorical substance, the great Koreans as melancholy as herons...”

The “Land of Morning Freshness”, described here by Paul Claudel in his Diary of May 1924, is also the country discovered by the Baur couple the same year, during their trip to the Far East. “Souvenir” photographs taken on the hills of Gyeongseong, present-day Seoul, during the Japanese occupation (1905-45), records their presence in landscapes that were still little known to Europeans compared with those of their Chinese and Japanese neighbours. They show the capital’s architectural, vast wooden buildings crowned with a polychromatic range of decorated tiles, and, besides Eugénie, a small escort of figures in traditional costume, some wearing the tall, transparent hat made of horsehair and bamboo, shrouded in loose-fitting tunics made from ramie and linen ; the characteristic whiteness of their clothes, so prominent in the Korean aesthetic, was conspicuous to passing Westerners, for whom it became an identifying feature of the country and its culture.

Refined by the fluidity and elegance of their forms, whether left plain or decorated, the celadon *cheong-ja* works (青瓷) of the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) reflect images of idyllic landscapes, clear or rain-filled skies, and green, fertile land. The link between the great tradition of landscape painting and this highpoint of ceramic art can be seen in the different stylised or lyrical treatments of the motifs closely associated with an Arcadian and scholarly vision of nature, whether this is expressed through the tones and luminous effects of the jade-coloured glaze or through the union of their decorative elements – celestial, plant, and animal – which are often imbued with a strong symbolic value.

Like the Cheong-ja, with which they share, with the changing of the seasons and hours of the day, the variations of green and the light of crystal, the Diamond Mountains (*Geumgangsán* 金剛山), which lie on North Korea’s southern border, are a major reference in the identity of every Korean, as well as an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Although it was neglected during the long Joseon period, whose administration imposed an ideology based essentially on neo-Confucian values, this land of enlightenment, a refuge for Buddhist monks driven out of the capital, nonetheless continued to loom large in Korean culture. A distant object of desire, and in spite of the estrangement of its monasteries, at the start of the eighteenth century it also offered an unprecedented proximity: with the development of travel and with hermitic aspirations, many walkers and pilgrims ventured out on the mountain paths and bridges to tackle the Diamond Mountains’ peaks, admiring magnificent panoramas

from the pavilions where they halted. Their jagged granite peaks that glitter like diamonds in the dawn dew, their pine forests, the red of the autumnal foliage of oak and maple, and the purity of its translucent waters overhung by deep gorges together intensify the spirit of the mountain, Sansin, celebrated in syncretic harmony throughout the country. The splendours of this landscape, both familiar and distant, have never ceased to nourish a myriad of nostalgic dreams, so much so that even beyond Korea's borders, the eminent Chinese poet of the Northern Song, Su Shi (1037-1101), lamented the fact that he had not been born in the kingdom of Goryeo, where he would have been able to see the Diamond Mountains

Of all the artists and poets who have evoked their special relationship with the Diamond Mountains – both near and distant – there is one in particular who unites and symbolises all their diversity and different facets: often associated with the birth of a typical landscape art, of which he is one of the standard bearers, the painter Jeong Seon (鄭叡, 1676-1759) owes his exceptional fame to his pioneering and central role in the pictorial movement of the Joseon era known as “real landscapes” (*jingyeong sansuhwa* 眞景山水畫). With the goal of depicting landscapes based on the realities of the land, this type of painting, like the inlaid celadons of the Goryeo Dynasty, was distinguished by an innovative reinterpretation of continental sources that were also well known to the Koreans, who regularly sent embassies to pay allegiance to the Ming (1368-1644) and then Qing (1644-1911) Chinese rulers. While cultivating links with the great Chinese tradition of landscape painting, these exchanges also brought the kingdom of Joseon into contact with Western culture and the sciences in favour among the European missionaries at the imperial court.

Among those who have followed in the footsteps of the great painter Jeong Seon, and who recognise affinities with him, Ji-Young Demol Park and Lee Lee Nam stand out for the originality and fruitfulness of their relationship with this heritage. Initiated like the historic painter of “real landscapes” to a vast body of art very far from their native Korea, of which they constantly question and combine the sources, these two creators interpret the landscape, mountains in particular, making it a medium for meditation, a link with the beauty of the world both past and present.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF JEONG SEON, JI-YOUNG DEMOL PARK

As a child, I lived in the Seonsan-eup region surrounded by gentle mountains that I associate with moments of sharing and closeness with my family, especially my mother. When she went to the Buddhist temple, she often took my brothers, my sister, and me with her. In order to reach the temple, we had to climb the forest paths and, during these small ascents, she encouraged us to marvel at the nature all around. When she wanted to make a wish or a prayer, she would collect stones and place them on small cairns often placed in front of beautiful trees, explaining to us that each element was precious and had to be cared for.

I also have a very sentimental relationship with ceramics. Until just a few years ago, my mother used to make all sorts of kimchi, which she fermented in jars she placed in the garden. When I was younger and developing my video work, I made installations featuring ceramics in which images related to my childhood were projected. This is why I am happy and honoured to present my ink drawings alongside the magnificent ancient works in the collections of the Baur Foundation and Musée Guimet; the decorated tiles seem to be in union with my work, and I am touched by the moon jars in particular, on account of their refined form and emptiness, free of any representation.

Ji-Young Park Demol, catalogue of the exhibition, 2024

For over ten years, Ji-Young Demol Park has painted the splendour of the Alpine landscapes. For this exhibition, we invited her to pay a visit to her native Korea, to the land of moon jars and stone Buddhas, of the celadon-green rice paddies and pine trees, and of the mountains of Jeong Seon, to which she feels so close. During two stays between October and February, she followed in the footsteps of the great painter Jeong Seon, from the hills of Seoul, Inwang, Namsan, and Naksan, northwards to the peaks of the Taebaek mountain range: the fruits of her pilgrimage are now here for us to see.

It is light that sculpts an image. On looking carefully, I realised that what I saw was not the ink but the white space between two lines, the space of the light absorbed by the paper, and the snow burst with light, almost real. Like an ideogram.

Elisa Shua Dusapin, in *Winter in Sokcho*, 2018

Her production lies at the confluence of two artistic cultures; her fascination, while very young, for European art, perspective especially, her mastery of which is clearly evident in the skilful architectural constructions of her panoramas, is met by a powerful concept, the breath (Qi 氣), to use a term associated with the very origin of Far Eastern landscape painting, which immediately thrusts us into an inner and contemplative world. In her studio, as though in a photographer's darkroom, water, ink, and a few colours come to life as they interact, in harmony with her emotions. Prompted

sketches, and with sweeping gestures, she recreates the marvels she has discovered on her wanderings. A virtuoso with the brush, she unhesitatingly sculpts shadows and reliefs, orienting and modulating the nuances of the washes, blue in all its intensities, a few touches of pink, and glimmers of an expressive yellow, wrapped in mist. Lastly, in the reserve of the paper, in the margins and the heart of her painting, she imbues the white with a thickness of snow.

Ceramics, which have been part of the artist's path since childhood, also permeate her universe. Ji-Young Demol Park's compositions also suggest the sobriety of the *buncheong*, the "powdered celadons" produced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, whose dynamic and abstract decoration – incised, stamped, or traced in iron brown – is vigorously expressed on grey-tinted stoneware accentuated by a thick, white slip. Above all, the revelatory role given to emptiness and ellipsis, so characteristic of Ji-Young Demol Park's landscapes, recalls the purity of monochrome glazes and the moonlight whiteness emblematic of traditional Korean culture.

On your discovery of Ji-Young Demol Park's first "portraits" of her native country, you can't help but be struck by the authenticity of her world, as it drifts here and there with the same rare harmony between geographical precision and an "impressionist" approach; the majestic Swiss mountain ranges carved by sparkling glaciers, the mauve slopes of the Matterhorn, and the shores of Lake Geneva lapping at the feet of a Geneva that seems to have risen from a dream, and which offers itself, infinitely white, to our imagination, all converse with the distant Korean landscapes. Obscured by gnarled pine trees, traversed by mythical ridges that alternate between jagged lines and feminine curves, the misty mountains of the Land of Morning Calm have never been so close.

IN THE LIGHT OF JEONG SEON, LEE LEE NAM

In keeping with the vision of the painter Jeong Seon (1676-1759), who symbolises the traditional expression of the Korean soul, the works exhibited here are the fruit of my very personal interpretation of how I understand the contemporary world: they are an attempt to capture the spirit of the “celestial light” jingyeong as it flourished at the end of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910).

Lee Lee Nam, 2023

Seemingly in stark contrast with this silent tribute to the mountains by Ji-Young Demol Park, is Lee Lee Nam’s digital and sound work, with its profuse palette of colours and perpetual movement, however minimal. What is involved in this interplay of media and dimensions is a certain positioning with respect to art and nature. Lee Lee Nam’s approach, as expressed in his interpretation of traditional Korean landscapes, cuts a poetic path, attentive to the smallest fragment of life that he awakens to our gaze.

In the world’s vanguard of digital animation, aware of the superficial exaggeration associated with the rampant development of these technologies, Lee Lee Nam focuses on the essentials, the relationship with time and light, the appropriateness and suggestive power of colours. Inspired by his experience of three-dimensionality and comparative research into the aesthetics of Asian and Western cultures, his virtual creations query a diverse range of masterpieces into which, like an orchestra conductor, he infuses a rhythm, a choreography.

Among these “living paintings”, landscapes that revisit iconic works from the Joseon period, such as An Gyeon’s *Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land* (ca. 1440-70), and the Diamond, Namsan and Inwang mountains, all evince an especially delicate chromatic lyricism. Jeong Seon’s multidirectional approach to the depiction of mountains is reflected, over the course of seasons and eras, in a kinetic, immersive, and dreamlike presentation that tends towards a fusional encounter between the viewer and the landscape.

The artist also sometimes delicately communicates his dreams, or his concern given the changes taking place and affecting all living things, and mountains in particular: the unrestrained urbanisation of the countryside in the 2000s, the tensions on the borders between the two Koreas, tomorrow’s world populated by buildings of miscellaneous futuristic design. This reality scrolls before our eyes, with the menacing rumble of military aircraft and helicopters streaking through the clouds, in the reflections given off by glass towers, and the back-and-forth of cable cars that, like so many fireflies in the night, feverishly nibble away at the slopes of the sacred mountains.

*The twelve thousand peaks of Gaegolsan, * who could portray their true image?
Their perfumes float to the farthest reaches of the eastern seas; their powerful Qi
dominates the whole world. The hibiscus flowers glow with pure radiance, the pine and
cypress trees hide the door to Enlightenment. Even if you walk all over the mountain,
how can you compare your joy with the joy you feel when you look at this image from
your pillow?*

* the name of the Diamond Mountains in winter (referring to the “bare” or “skeletal”
mountains, in their coating of snow)

As in this poem, written in a corner of Jeong Seon’s most famous view of the Diamond
Mountains, and which is inspired by the tradition of “reclining travel” (*wayu* 臥遊) in
scholarly painting, the animation of the mountains and water is, for Lee Lee Nam,
above all an exhortation to meditation and mental wandering.

Steeped in Confucian thought, these aspirations to contemplative travel are also
expressed in the immaculate whiteness of the monochrome coatings, onto which Lee
Lee Nam sometimes projects the landscapes created by his digital palette, as well as in
the motifs and forms of the scholar’s tools in the blue-and-white porcelain of the
Joseon dynasty. Between emptiness and fullness, islands and enchanted mountains,
rendered blue by cobalt oxide, emerge and vanish, to the rhythm of the brush and
quivering of ink and water.

Texts: Laure Schwartz-Arenales, curator

English translation: Timothy Stroud

USEFUL INFORMATION

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Dates	20 March – 30 June 2024
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art Rue Munier-Romilly 8 1206 Genève – Suisse +41 22 704 32 82 www.fondation-baur.ch musee@fondationbaur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2 pm to 6 pm, until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
60 years of the museum Tickets	Free admission every Saturday Full CHF 15.- Unemployed, disabled people and students CHF 10.-
Press contact	Leyla Caragnano, +41 79 220 56 25 communication@fondationbaur.ch
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Cultural Mediation	Marie Wyss, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits	Wednesdays at 6.30 pm 27 March, 10 and 24 April 15 and 29 May, 12 and 26 June
Private guided visits	Reservation required mediation@fondationbaur.ch