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Ceramic artist Stephanie H Shih recreates food products in clay to explore cultural identity

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© Stephanie H Shih

Leaning into her Taiwanese-American roots, ceramist artist Stephanie H Shih fuses art with activism to explore identity in pantry products.

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"Clay is the most direct route from what's in your head to what's in your hands," said a friend of Taiwanese-American artist Stephanie H Shih about the medium of ceramics, and it's something she's held onto through her work. "I love looking at an object I've never sculpted before – like an egg carton or a loaf of challah (Jewish-origin bread) – and figuring out how to turn it into a hollow ceramic form."

Shih creates ceramic collections that centre on mundane, traditional, yet mass-produced pantry items found in many Asian-American homes. Think Spam, Skippy peanut butter, Horlicks, KitKats, Asian vinegar and condiments, rice and confectionery.

Her lifelike presentation of these objects aims to explore their transportation across cultures to understand their integration into different societies and varied affiliations across diasporas. Born and based in the US, Shih's work weaves in aspects of her heritage to translate her understanding of her mixed identity – with her parents hailing from Taiwan.



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Knowing that there isn't a defined way to see and understand cross-cultural nuances, Shih shares her views: "Many people describe immigrating or being the child of immigrants as being split between two worlds, but I find that view to be somewhat limiting. Borders—whether political or cultural—are a social construct, and I don't think it's possible to draw a line down the middle of your lived experience. Rather, I like to think that immigrants and their children exist in a space that blurs those very lines – and that's what I'm most interested in making art about."

Her work explores how these objects' meanings can transform communities – revealing their reinterpretation between homelands or different resettled communities. The physical creation of these objects means that new emotional memories can be made and acknowledged in their ceramic form.

The process of creating a new ceramics collection is quite intricate and requires a lot of planning. Shih tends to focus on a particular community, location or idea at a time to hone in on a specific theme before sketching out the series – "to make sure that the concept is robust enough to be the foundation for an entire solo show."



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Each piece takes three to six weeks to create, but Shih works on up to eight objects at a time. She hand-builds each with stoneware coils before painting them with underglaze, bisque-firing them, painting them again, glazing and firing them one last time.

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With a new solo exhibition launching in February at Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, that focuses on the cultural history of the city's Chinatown through associated objects, Shih proves that there's no end to her exploration of this theme.

"With this body of work, I'm continuing to branch out from my focus on food to other artefacts of domestic life, including books, videotapes, and other pop cultural objects," she says.

Shih also incorporates activism into her practice, which she thinks is central to how she moves through the world. "It's only natural for me to use art as a means for exploring activism," she concludes.



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