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WINTER 2016

Salt of the Earth

Korean designer Byung Hoon Choi presents an earthy new show at Friedman Benda.

BY STEPHEN WALLIS



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Elemental yet enigmatic, muscular yet exquisitely refined, the Minimalist creations of South Korean designer Byung Hoon Choi are anything but simple. Marrying East Asian traditions with a Modernist sensibility, his sculptural furnishings in stone, wood and metal are studies in harmony and balance, often combining contrasting materials and textures in evocative ways. For his first-ever solo show in the U.S., at New York's Friedman Benda gallery in 2014, Choi presented a series of benches carved from huge basalt blocks into lyrical forms inspired by calligraphic brushstrokes, with parts of their surfaces left raw and others polished to a lustrous black sheen. "We wanted to inspire Choi to work at a more ambitious scale and with different materials," says Friedman Benda partner Jennifer Olshin. "And having a show in a gallery like ours gave him the freedom to explore—to create works that have an ambiguity, raising the age-old question of whether his gem-like objects are furniture or sculpture."

Choi, who lives and teaches in Seoul, returns to Friedman Benda this month with a dozen new

pieces that will be on view through December 17. Once again he is working extensively with basalt, but the central theme this time is water—literally and metaphorically. The largest works are three basalt fountains (one standing nearly seven and a half feet tall) with gentle cascades running along smooth, dark channels carved into their sides. "In the East, there is a saying that the highest good is like water," remarks Choi. "Many scholars gained the wisdom of life while watching flowing water, and my fountains are an opportunity to go into a state of meditation and self-discipline."

The other defining element of the show is lacquer, marking the first time in Choi's career—one that spans more than 35 years—that he has utilized the material, as he puts it, "in earnest." Biomorphic tabletops, cut from red oak, are lacquered to the glossy smoothness of river pebbles and balanced delicately atop rounded bases of natural stone. The reductive character of the forms masks just how labor-intensive these pieces are. Choi worked with a master of traditional Korean lacquer to apply up to 20 hand-brushed layers for each piece, producing

rich, almost aqueous effects.

Because lacquer is also water-resistant, Choi used it to create shallow basins, some freestanding, others set into the tops of tables. And when they are filled, the shimmering surfaces of lacquer and liquid converge seamlessly. It's the kind of poetic gesture that defines so much of Choi's work, with its close links to Eastern notions of contemplation, reflection and inner stillness. For nearly 20 years, the designer has given most of his creations the title *Afterimage*, which he explains "signifies an imaginary and mystical encounter with a previous world not yet encountered." Passing through the cycles of life, we are connected to all things, even those that we are not immediately conscious of.

As Olshin notes, Choi's work invites thoughtful engagement and an open mind. "These are pieces for people who enjoy both the aesthetic and intellectual depth. They need a person to complete them—to sit on them, look at their reflection," she says. "The work is not easy and instantly graspable. If you like it, you like it in part because you can never fully get your head around it."