

## Rising Artist Emily Yong Beck's Ceramics Tackle the Power of Cuteness

Harley Wong  
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Portrait of Emily Yong Beck. Courtesy of Gaa Gallery.



Emily Yong Beck, Sailor & Miku Onggi, 2023, Price on Request

We've had "girl dinner" and "girl math." Is it time for "girl ceramics"? Emily Yong Beck's stoneware adorned with Sailor Moon and Sanrio characters is emblematic of the current zeitgeist of women in their twenties embracing their inner child with frilly bows and self-aware giggles. In some ways, it's never been a better time to be a girl again. But Yong Beck's works offer a more complicated picture of this trend of "girlification" by suggesting that there may be something rotten beneath the veneer of cute.

Deliberately cartoonish and imperfect, Yong Beck's vessels evoke a contemporary gloopy ceramics aesthetic that's indebted to the pioneering work of Sally Saul and duo Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Michael Frimkess. The popularity of this style was especially apparent in the group exhibition "Clay Pop"—previously on view at Jeffrey Deitch in New York in 2021 and at the gallery's Los Angeles location earlier this year—which included the likes of Ruby Neri, Alake Shilling, Woody De Othello, and Diana Yesenia Alvarado. Like her predecessors and peers, Yong Beck prioritizes rough surfaces and organic forms, rejecting the pristinely glazed uniformity refined by automation and instead making the artist's hand apparent.



Emily Yong Beck, installation view of "Same As It Ever Was" at Gaa Gallery, 2023. Photo by Lance Brewer. Courtesy of Gaa Gallery.

Currently exhibiting in solo shows on both the East and West Coasts—"Same As It Ever Was" at New York's Gaa Gallery through December 9th, and "Soft Power" at The Pit in Los Angeles through December 16th—Yong Beck recreates a cast of familiar Japanese cartoon and anime characters, which appear lumpy and lopsided on ceramics shaped after traditional Korean pottery. In *Sailor Moon Bottle Vessel* (all works 2023), uncanny images of Sailor Moon, Sailor Mars, and Luna wrap around a joobyong vase. Meanwhile, *Pokémon in grass vase* is modeled after a maebyeong vessel. In Yong Beck's hands, the veil of nostalgia crumbles to reveal a wider legacy. Behind the cult of cute is Japan's history as a major imperial power that colonized countries such as Korea, where Yong Beck was born.

In her ceramics, which are reminiscent of Takashi Murakami's early works, Chicago-based Yong Beck uses kawaii imagery to contend with the "cute-washing" that has subdued Japan's once-feared global image. The nation's cultural exports—Tamagotchi, Kirby, and Sonic the Hedgehog, to name a few—encapsulate the effectiveness of soft power in transforming national identity and international perception.



Emily Yong Beck, Hello Kitty Onggi, 2023, Price on Request



Emily Yong Beck, Clusterfuck Moon Jar, 2023, Price on Request

Yong Beck transmutes pop culture in a way that parallels the function of the traditional Korean vessels that inform her work. In Hello Kitty Onggi, several versions of the namesake character with her signature bow appear on a pot typically used for fermentation, the biochemical process that breaks down sugar. Indeed, this metabolic reaction is an apt metaphor for Yong Beck's work where saccharine subject matter is turned into something crude yet illuminating.

Not far from Hello Kitty Onggi in the Tribeca show, in neighboring SoHo, young women flock to the store Baggu ("bag" in Japanese) for the brand's collaborations with Sanrio and bow-obsessed fashion designer Sandy Liang. After all, the girls that get it, get it.