

# The Sacred and the Profane



## YOUNG-JUN TAK

BY JEPPE UGELVIG

Installation view of **YOUNG-JUN TAK's** *Love Your Clean Feet on Thursday*, 2023, single-channel 4K video, color, 5.1 surround sound: 18 min 53 sec, at the Atelier Hermès, Seoul, 2023. Courtesy the artist.



On most Saturday mornings the area around Seoul's City Hall is bustling with animated crowds of protesters. Whether traversing the musty summer heat or the bitter winter cold, countless demonstrators congregate there, dressed practically in brightly colored vests and wearing special hats to indicate their ideological affiliations. They show up in their free time to protest pressing issues of the day: corruption scandals, tax hikes, gender morals, and international politics, all blending into an auditory concoction of collective urban pandemonium. Drums, flags, television screens, flyers, and even musical performances produce a swarm of symbols in flux, a myriad of *isms* blending into a single, dense scene of moving bodies, all cordoned off on the side of roads or on sidewalks by the police. To any first-time visitor, these scenes of spontaneous yet repetitive sociality feel surreal and profoundly ritualistic, closer to religious ceremony than any form of organized political dissent. They evoke the teachings of Camille Paglia, who recognized that all contemporary cultural activity is fraught with symbols of a much older order: vanished realities that we act out ritualistically and compulsively with only a vague grasp of their structurally inherited nature.

Young-jun Tak sees the semantic and affective drifts in such cultural spaces and countless others: highways, gay clubs, churches, and contemporary art. The Korean artist's practice in sculpture and film examines the culturally symbolic, and continuously points to how social life structures itself, still, so stubbornly, around history-laden artifacts and fantastical images, which in turn become the best carriers of human history. The protests at Seoul's City Hall also figure as artistic primal scenes for Tak, whose background is not in fine art, but publishing. In 2014, Tak was working as an editor of the art magazine *Art in Culture* when social turmoil ensued after the Seoul city government scrapped plans to enact a human-rights charter mentioning sexual and gender expression following fierce protests from homophobic groups. Many of these groups are direct extensions of various Christian national organizations and so-called "mega-churches" that, despite comprising a relatively small percentage of South Korean citizens, have successfully pushed ever-more extreme public campaigns against homosexuality by appropriating neo-Confucian morals into a distorted patriotism. Tak encountered this firsthand when he participated in the queer parade in Seoul that same year, witnessing groups of extremist Christians blocking the procession by throwing themselves on the ground and forming a human chain by locking arms. Here, the most arcane clichés of religious devotion are reintroduced in the twisted ideological web of the contemporary; imported meanings from deep pasts, adrift in another society undergoing radical change.

Tak started researching and collecting the propaganda (including for various types of conversion therapy) that these Christian congregations were feverishly handing out. He then brought the material to a markedly different social and political context, that of Berlin, where he had relocated for love. But instead of the book he had planned to write on the topic, the material ended up as the motif of his first sculpture: *Salvation* (2016), a Madonna figure in human scale cast in resin and entirely covered by anti-LGBTQ+ leaflets. Applied in a densely layered style entirely in grayscale, Tak transformed the inflammatory political messaging into an aesthetic surface, into pure decor—a cheeky, and subversive, attempt to neuter its moralistic content. As an amalgamated religious object, half past, half present, *Salvation* is an invitation to reflect on the unlikely history of Christianity in the Korean peninsula, from a minority religion imported by imperial missionaries to a broadly normalized driver of neonationalism and conservatism. The artist's iconoclasm—*Madonna, queerness, hate*—is obvious, and purposeful, for it echoes the way that religion and its iconographies have so often been ideologically instrumentalized to feed the populist



YOUNG-JUN TAK, *Salvation*, 2016, resin, paper, glue, lacquer, 176.5 × 65 × 65 cm. Photo by Elmar Vestner. Courtesy the artist.

demand of the day, or inversely, to subvert the status quo. Tak underscores the fact that the social uses of images and artifacts remain profound: deep social meanings are lodged in them, and we continue to understand ourselves through them or in relation to them. They even communicate on our behalf. Yet they are always in a process of recoding, prone to endless reappropriation. Tak engages these objects to excavate these ambiguities, their potential for reinterpretative recoding—especially in a queer context, one that centers the idiosyncrasies of body, desire, and identities that must weave together meanings from the norm, or negotiate them in flux.

This not only concerns the contemporary uses and abuses of religious iconography, but the art histories embedded in their forms. "I criticize things in Christianity, but I love Christian art," Tak elaborates. "These visuals are not totally detached from moral principles, rather, they developed hand in hand. That's an irony of sorts. Christianity was a given structure for many artists in the past, and for me the big joy of experiencing Christian art and architecture is to locate some peculiar queerness in it. Back then, there were queer artists that couldn't reveal themselves, but they did somehow express themselves in Christian art. It's my joy to find these kinds of codes and symbols in history. That's my spiritual connection to the tradition."

In the past few years, Tak has developed an unusually resolved sculptural methodology that extends this logic of semantic reworking and sociohistorical uncovering to a variety of cultural objects, from the rarefied to the mass-produced. In fact, Tak's work often points humorously to the fact that the highly exalted is often also the most materially ubiquitous. A case in point is *Out of Season* (2021), which applies Christian wooden icons—by way of a collaboration with a Bavarian wood carving master family—to oversized white asparagus (*Spargel* in German) rendered in lime wood. As half-human, half-asparagus, the sculptures overlay the history of Germany's quintessential fetishized edible commodity (commonly referred to as "white gold") with its mythological history: white asparagus were traditionally harvested strictly until June 24, the ancient north European summer solstice or the feast day of Saint John the Baptist. In the sister work *Once in a While* (2022), a whole stack of these vegetables lie nested in a rusty metal basket, alluding to Germany's revered roadside vendors and market stands. "As a thing, the white asparagus is very silly, but it connects closely to German identity, to the politics of labor markets, and the massive infrastructures that enable their production and consumption. For me, it becomes a thing through which to deliver stories. There is a little window or crack through which I can tell a story. When you realize that, it all cracks."

Again and again, Tak overlays symbolic and materialist information with sculptural finesse. The history of signs is inevitably intertwined by the social lives of material commodities: the laboring bodies and economies that made them, the everyday rituals in which they partake. Even a culture so vast and abstract as Christianity can be broken down into common things, motifs that are never understood in proprietary terms, but rather as part of a cultural unconscious. Contemporary sculpture is that unique place where such information can be ordered and reworked, where we can be reminded of our investments in things, where tensions and paradoxes can be worked out poetically. And running through Tak's object lessons is desire, its intense impact on form: consider for example, *Holy Water* (2022), a marble holy water stoup filled to the brim with a silicone cast of the artist's own nipple.

There is always a dimension of autobiography in Tak's sculptural musings, if not by directly citing his own body then in gesturing to his own cultural and social positionality. Since falling in love, Tak has lived in Europe, and much of his work is an attempt to process the alien cultural aspects of continental culture. In *Our Holding in Their Gaze* (2023), a Christmas tree is rendered in a pyramid-like structure using dark green ceramic plates, each cast on body parts of an actual gay couple—one northeast Asian, the other European. As a fractured corpus of interracial desire, the artist's



YOUNG-JUN TAK, *Our Holding in Their Gaze*, 2023, ceramics, rusty metal, brass wire, oil, 255 × 155 × 155 cm. Photo by Elmar Vestner. Courtesy the artist.





YOUNG-JUN TAK, *Wish You a Lovely Sunday*, 2021, stills from single-channel video, color, 5.1 surround sound: 18 min 38 sec. Courtesy the artist.

tree recasts the Christian decorative object into something much more ritualistic—and indeed, the Christmas tree (Tak informs us) finds its origins in European paganism, which sought out evergreen winter branches for shamanistic purposes. Tak’s sculptures are a testament to what a move between cultures does to an individual’s perception: at one end, the aesthetics of diaspora, and at the other, that of a foreigner processing new visual and symbolic orders. “I can only work with things when I feel like I’m part of them. The Danish sausage, the Christmas tree, the German white asparagus; these are very mundane objects or things that felt alien or interesting, but then I live with them and become part of them. I also get accustomed to them and become one of them. There is nothing rational about culture, so there is always an implied process of understanding it. It’s a sort of inner conflict: why do I have to like it, be a part of it? Why is this happening to me just because I’m here?”

It is evident that an editorial logic still lingers in Tak’s methodology, which he explains as a process of making “a lot of material and information” look “tidy and nice” by way of “cutting off branches.” Visually, the artist relishes the deliciousness of highly produced images and tactile objects, and as in the case of the Bavarian woodcarver, forefronts rather than obfuscates his dependence on collaboration with technical experts. “As an editor, you supervise almost everything,” he explains. “From developing ideas and researching to assembling creative teams and thinking through the concrete materiality of paper and color.” Such a process often renders the contemporary artist as a kind of general “creative director” who thinks primarily about storytelling and its

various aesthetic means, and indeed, Tak is thoroughly “post-studio” in his process, often going without a place to work for long periods of time.

While the directorial mode of art is emblematic of today, film is perhaps the most difficult of mediums for an all-round contemporary artist to master: it demands large teams both during and after shooting, and has more in common with the workings of Hollywood than with conventional studio practice. Tak knows this, and his moving-image work seems to have emphasized a highly resolved visual language. Since 2021, he has premiered three video works made in close collaboration with cinematographers, performers, and editors, all circling around themes of desire and movement and the spaces these inhabit within the built environment. *Wish You a Lovely Sunday* (2021) plays on Berlin’s local double-entendre of “going to church” on Sundays, which for many in the world’s party capital means not religious ceremony but venturing to gargantuan nightclubs such as Berghain for endurance-driven bacchanalian rituals of various kinds. For the film, Tak paired two choreographers and two dancers to develop new works in response to two spaces—a neo-Gothic church and the iconic subterranean queer club, SchwuZ. Only hours before the planned recording, Tak swapped the shooting locations, thereby forcing the performers to reprogram their choreographies, the documentation of which is vividly juxtaposed in the film. As the performers negotiate the coded bodily practices embedded in their context-specific sites, we are invited to reflect on the humane coexistence—or even, similitude—of social rituals across communities. The queer performers play with mirroring, doubling,



YOUNG-JUN TAK, *Wohin?*, 2022, still from single-channel video, color, stereo sound: 8 min 25 sec. Courtesy the artist.

repetition, and alter egos as they explore the surfaces and corners of their sites, which in their presence become stages. And yet, overpowering architectures remind us persistently of Christianity's dualistic worldview that splits heaven from hell, good from evil. In a world where the answer to mental and physical wellbeing is both a sermon *and* a sex party, Tak ponders poetically about what even connects the two.

In another short, *Wohin?* (2022), Tak explores the ubiquitous German *autobahn*. Here, the camera cuts between shots of rearview mirrors while a car surfs a motorway in Berlin's outskirts. With the blunt depiction of gay desire, Tak stubbornly asserts that the *autobahn* has not only served as Germany's military, economic, and cultural backbone for the last 70 years, but also as an infamous gay cruising area: an infrastructure that connects places, bodies, and desires in myriad ways. As backseat passengers kiss passionately or gaze pensively at the sunset, several knickknacks—from Christian and Buddhist rosaries to the typical German "Wunderbaum" air freshener—dangle rhythmically over the mirrors.

Tak's most recent film project distills (or edits, if you will) even more minutely the logic of cultural binaries—man/woman, straight/queer, sacred/secular. *Love Your Clean Feet on Thursday* (2023) dives deeper into the imagined schisms between queer and Christian iconography: the spectacular Maundy Thursday ritual, in which soldiers from the Spanish Legion carry a crucifix through the square and streets in Malaga, is reimagined in Berlin's Grunewald

forest, another of Berlin's popular cruising sites, with a group of six gay male dancers. Layering associations, this strange ritual also evokes the infamous scene in Kenneth MacMillan's ballet *Manon* (1974), where the hyperfeminine protagonist is carried forward by a group of worshipping men without touching the ground. Tak's erotically laden symbolic shift of these performative moments is simple, but effective: carrying forward not Jesus or a woman, the gay male body punctures the polarized gender binaries embedded in most performance culture. *Love Your Clean Feet on Thursday* does not deny how all gender expression has been influenced by the dynamics of tradition, but it acknowledges this to only keep mutating its conclusions. Revealingly, Young-jun Tak is nowhere to be found in these scenes, or any of the scenes he creates. There is simply no need. Instead, he speaks evocatively through the act of ritual itself, through its actions and its objects.





YOUNG-JUN TAK, *Love Your Clean Feet on Thursday*, 2023, stills from single-channel 4K video, color, 5.1 surround sound: 18 min 53 sec. Courtesy the artist.

**Young-jun Tak** (b. 1989, Seoul) has had solo exhibitions at Philipp Zollinger (Zurich, 2024); COMA (Sydney, 2024); Atelier Hermès (Seoul, 2023); Julia Stoschek Foundation (Berlin, Dusseldorf, 2023); palace enterprise (Copenhagen, 2023); Wanås Konst (Knislinge, Sweden, 2023); O—Overgaden (Copenhagen, 2023); Efremidis (Berlin, 2022); SOX (Berlin, 2022); and Fragment (Moscow, 2021). He has also participated in international exhibitions at the High Line (New York, 2023); Chicago Architecture Biennial (2023); Lyon Biennale (2022); KINDL Center for Contemporary Art (Berlin, 2022); Berlin Biennale (2020); Seoul Museum of Art, SeMA Bunker (2019); and the Istanbul Biennial (2017), among others. He holds bachelor's degrees in English Literature and Language and Cross-Cultural Studies at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul. He currently lives and works in Berlin.

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