

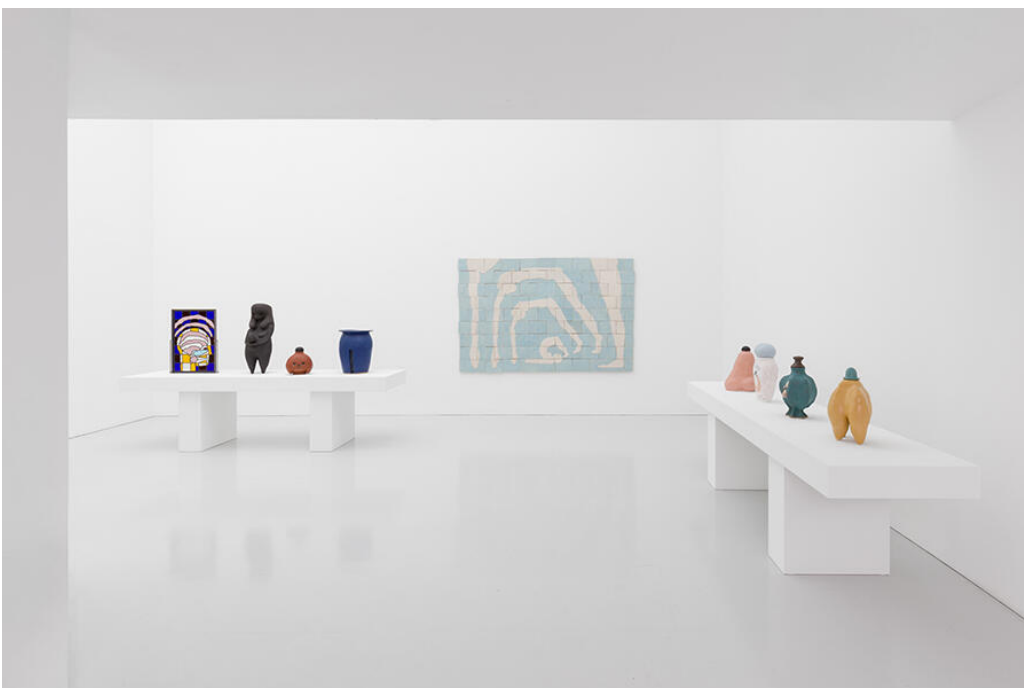
Renee So's Curious Perfume Bottles Evoke Stories of Imperialism

At Kate MacGarry, London, the artist's accomplished ceramic fragrance vessels reference East-West trade, exoticism and narratives about place

BY [SALENA BARRY](#) IN [EXHIBITION REVIEWS](#) | 09 JUL 24



'Colony', 'Snuff' and 'Opium' read the labels adorning the three oversized, earthenware perfume bottles in Renee So's fourth solo show at Kate MacGarry. Re-creating fragrances by Jean Patou, Elsa Schiaparelli and Yves Saint Laurent respectively, the sculptures (*'Colony'* by Jean Patou, *'Opium' Snuff Bottle* and *'Snuff by Schiaparelli' Perfume Bottle*, all 2024) allude to the British Opium trade in China, which is referenced in a number of works on show.



The artist reproduces the Yves Saint Laurent Opium bottle faithfully, albeit on a larger scale, but deviates from the original design by leaving a circular hole in place of the logo, divorcing the vessel from its function. This underscores its emptiness while offering up the container for scrutiny. Throughout the show, So draws attention to the historic realities obscured or omitted from the narratives constructed around collectorship.

The British illegally smuggled opium into China from India during the 19th century to help finance the tea trade. This resulted in the Opium Wars, which took place between 1839 and 1860, and concluded in the British colonization of Hong Kong and the opening up of China to British traders. So's choice to re-create these specific perfumes, some of which are still available to buy, speaks to the lasting impact of this historical event on Western notions of the exotic and the possibility of quantifying it into something collectible. The hollowness of the Opium bottle seemingly alludes to the artist's perspective on the value of such practices.



Renee So, *Woman Holding Cup XVI*, 2022, stoneware, 80 × 32 × 36 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London; photograph: Angus Mill

Also referencing the processes of colonization and trade more broadly are a collection of ceramic snuff bottles. Now prized collectibles in the West, these small portable containers for powdered tobacco originally emerged during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912). So's bottles take the form of a nose (*'Nose' Snuff Bottle I*, 2024), a bottle of eau de mer (*Eau de Mer Bottle*, 2023), a poppy head (*'Poppy Head' Snuff Bottle*, 2024) and a fingered lemon (*'Fingered Lemon' Snuff Bottle*, 2024). While the *eau de mer* (sea water) might be read as a nod to maritime travel, the poppy and nose specifically reference the British Opium trade. The lemon, on the other hand, alludes to trade between China and Italy during the renaissance. The Medici – the powerful banking and political dynasty – were particularly fond of this fruit and displayed it in the gardens of their Villa di Castello in Florence alongside 600 other varieties of citrus.

The snuff bottles not only reference trade between China and the West, but also the Occidental exoticization of the East and the construction of narratives about place – particularly as expressed through commercial value and the practice of collecting. A snuff bottle can be both an expensive trinket that demonstrates social class and a cultural artifact rich in historical symbolism which celebrates local design traditions. The artist’s oversized re-creations call attention to the loaded meaning these objects carry, to what is concealed and what is aching to be seen.



Also on show are the latest additions to So’s sculptural series of female goddesses (‘Woman’, 2020–ongoing), which draws inspiration from early fertility idols, as well as wall-hung ceramic works comprising tiles in brickwork arrangements, the largest of which depicts long-limbed female figures in arched formations as though diving (*Flow State II*, 2024). All but one of the works on display are ceramic. *The Information Age (Technicolour)* (2022), however, is So’s first work in stained glass. It shows a profile view of a person, not clearly masculine or feminine, from which pink arches radiate. Here, So seems to visualize a universe in which transparency is fundamental and all lived realities are acknowledged on an equal plane.

*Renee So is at **Kate MacGarry**, London, until 20 July*

Main images: Renee So, 2024, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Kate MacGarry, London; photograph: Angus Mill