

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Hayoon Jay Lee
- Interviewer: Donna Gustafson
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- Recorded and Transcribed by JooHee Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2021-2022)
- 1 Video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Donna Gustafson (DG): Where were you born?

Hayoon Jay Lee (HJL): I was born in Daegu, South Korea, but mainly I grew up in the Gyeonggi-do area near Seoul.

DG: And what was your childhood like?

HJL: I have a lively, creative, but very warm-hearted family. I have two brothers and two sisters, and overall, I'm the second youngest. My sisters are amazingly artistic people, especially talented in painting. My older brother was a rugby player, who competed internationally. And my younger brother was and is very skilled at music. I would have to say we are in a way a very gifted family, and we owe much of that to my mother, who, sadly, passed away almost 25 years ago. She was a very beautiful, wise, and compassionate woman. And she was the glue that held our family together.

My father was very strict. He was smart and capable but could be harsh. I was the feisty, rebellious one. I have often thought of myself as the “black sheep” in the family.

DG: Interesting. It's nice to know that you come from an artistic family and that you yourself were the feisty one because you were the one who came to the U.S. to study. So, what was it that made you decide to become an artist? Do you remember as a child deciding this was really something that you were going to pursue? Or did that come later?

HJL: No, a desire to pursue a career in art came much later. I knew from an early age that I had some artistic ability. I was interested in art, but my sister, who is three years older than I, was a child prodigy. She started painting when she was five years old and she was already selling her art before she was in high school.

At school, she won every art competition and earned every award in art. She was the star of my family. I could not compete with that. I was the “tomboy” who explored the countryside, climbed trees and mountains, crossed streams, went fishing, and got into mischief.

I didn't study art in Korea at all in a formal way. I guess I learned over the years just watching and looking over my sister's shoulder. Eventually, I started to realize what I could do. Anyway, I did not make art while I was in Korea. Actually, I worked for the government.

I did not emigrate to the U.S. for economic reasons, but because frankly I did not fit into Korean society. I came to the United States as an adult, so learning the language was a

tough challenge. American culture was shocking and strange to me, and I felt somewhat alienated. My older brother (and his immediate family), with whom I stayed, had a really beautiful garden. To revive my spirits, I would walk around the garden, look at the flowers, and I was inspired to make some drawings and small paintings. And then one day, while I was alone in my room, I started copying master drawings, paintings, and even magazine covers. When I finished those early attempts at art, I placed them under my bed (where they remained for a long time).

An important turning point in my life came when my eldest sister, the first in my family to settle in America, asked, “Why don't you take an art class with me?” So I took one non-credit sculpture class. To my surprise, the professor liked my work and wanted to see my “portfolio.” Uncomprehending, I replied: “What kind of folder do you want?” I had no idea what the term portfolio referred to.

DG: [laughs]

HJL: He said, “Not a folder, a portfolio.” That is, he wanted to see whatever artworks I had created up to that point. So, I dug out all my old scribbles from under my bed. Surprisingly, he was impressed, believing that I had some artistic gifts that I might wish to develop.

He suggested that I take a full load of classes, and that the Art Department would provide scholarships to pay for my expenses. I had never received a scholarship in South Korea. And that was the beginning of my art education. The Professor's name, by the way, my first artistic advisor, was Orest Poliszczuk. He was from Ukraine and a wonderful mentor, honest and very direct.

DG: That's great. Does your brother still live in Maryland?

HJL: Yes, my older brother, my younger brother, and my eldest sister. They all are in Maryland. My other sister, the childhood painter, lives in Seoul.

DG: Was it the experience of those first few art classes that made you decide on a career as an artist?

HJL: No, I, wasn't thinking initially about becoming an artist even though my professor said I have “something good.” I just started taking a lot of art classes, learning the fundamentals of art and picking up skills from a lot of different instructors.

Then, when I went to MICA it changed my whole outlook. It certainly helped that the school largely paid for completing my BFA with scholarships.

DG: Yeah. MICA has a very good reputation for being an interesting, innovative place.

Do you feel as if studying at MICA gave you a particular insight into what you wanted to do, that might have been different if you were somewhere else?

HJL: When I was doing my BFA at MICA, it was an eye-opening experience for me. Because before then, I made naturalistic sculptures from clay, bronze, stone, and wood, etc. employing traditional methods. I'm a very good welder, believe it or not.

DG: Yes, I remember you told me that.

HJL: At MICA, I experienced a bit of a shock. The other students were much younger than me. They were all like my nephews' and nieces' ages. I was able to fit in because I looked young at the time. I worked well with them, but they were super smart and energetic young people.

It was very challenging for me. The critiques were very hard. There were long theory-based discussions. The professors asked really tough questions. Some students cried. Really, they did. I struggled initially, but those were the things that also made me very excited. I love challenges.

DG: Did you cry?

HJL: I didn't.

DG: Good.

HJL: Well, I would cry at home, not in front of other students. On the whole, I was very happy. There was so much for me to learn. I was willing to grow. So, I was like, okay, bring it on. I worked closely with my classmates. They respected me, and I managed to complete a lot of projects during that period.

After I completed my BFA, I applied to get an MFA right away. I felt that I did not have another moment to lose.

DG: So you're in a hurry now.

HJL: Yes. I was accepted by a number of schools, including Rutgers University, Cranbrook, the University of Maryland, and MICA.



And I visited all the campuses, except Cranbrook, but since they did not teach theory, I ruled them out. Ultimately, I ended up at MICA. I guess I was more comfortable with their program. They offered considerable financial support. I did not want to graduate with a lot of debt. So yeah, I went there.

DG: When you were first starting out and doing your MFA and thinking about being an artist, were there particular artists that were inspiring to you or important to you while you were thinking about your own career path?

HJL: After finishing my MFA, I felt lost. In art school, they don't teach you how to survive in the real world. So, to continue my art apprenticeship, I took part in a number of different art residency programs. I went to Sculpture Space in Utica, the Fine Art Work Center in Provincetown, the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, the Byrdcliffe Artist in Residence Program in Woodstock, not to mention other residencies abroad. I went to meet other artists and to learn what they were doing. And I did some important networking as well.

I already loved classical art and I learned so much from studying Michelangelo and Rodin. But at the same time at MICA, I learned about many contemporary artists. Ana Mendieta is one of the performance artists, who inspired me. Chakaia Booker was my advisor. I really like her large work with rubber tires. Ann Hamilton is another artist I really admire. Shirin Neshat is another one. I don't know if you know about Isamu Noguchi, a Japanese artist, but I love his sculptural objects and concepts. And I am fascinated by his life story. Each artist has their own story. Compelling stories and ideas make their art particularly meaningful. When I look at their art, I gain a much deeper level of understanding. Those artists have really inspired me very much. And of course, people around me have had an impact as well.

DG: It's very interesting. Because all the artists that you talked about are multimedia. Shirin Neshat does videos and Isamu Noguchi did sculpture, theater design, even playgrounds and parks. And Ana Mendieta did some performances and photography of herself and different things; so that's really interesting because your work is also multi-faceted; you do performance and video. I've seen paintings and drawings, and you do these wonderful reliefs/paintings. What do you call them?

HJL: Mixed-media Reliefs would probably be more accurate.

DG: It's very interesting to think of Isamu Noguchi when I'm looking at your work.

HJL: Yes, someday I would like to visit his studio in Japan. For now, when my spirits are low, I will sometimes go to the Isamu Noguchi Museum in Long Island City. It is a great place for quiet, solitary contemplation.

DG: Yeah. And an incredible story of his life in America, right?

HJL: Yes. Certain aspects resonate with my own personal experiences.

DG: Wow. That's intriguing, but I won't ask any questions about that for now.

HJL: Yes. Another time.

DG: One of the things I thought about in talking to you previously and also in looking at your website has to do with how you would describe yourself--as an artist, as a woman artist, and as a feminist artist, if you think of yourself, in those terms.

HJL: First and foremost, I'm a person living in the United States. I'm also a Korean woman.

I am a Korean woman artist. I'm female and proud of that fact. Also, I believe there should be equal rights in life and art. I really respect the Guerilla Girls for publicly talking about feminism and the struggles of women in the art world. I took several classes in feminist theory at MICA, and they helped me understand the thinking behind it and its application in public and personal life. Oftentimes, when I discuss feminism with people, they express varying points of views. Generally, they think it applies to women who hate men. But it has nothing to do with hate. Rather it is an affirmation of basic universal equality.

So yes, to answer simply, I consider myself a feminist artist.

DG: And would you say that thinking about gender, thinking about women in the art world, and women in the world, is an important part of your concepts, processes, and production?

HJL: Absolutely. Many female artists influenced me. Early on, I watched how my mother lived and I saw how much she struggled raising five kids. She needed to have her own voice, but that was not permitted at the time. I watched my older sister and how she tried to find her way under very difficult circumstances. Throughout the history of Korea, the position of women has not been an easy one. They did not have many legal rights and they lacked access and opportunity to achieve economic independence.

During the Japanese occupation, it was even worse. Young women were deceived, kidnapped, sold, and forced to become sex slaves. The testimony of surviving “Comfort Women” really speaks to me. I have to work to make the world better for women like me and for others.

Incorporating themes and motifs and addressing issues of concern to women is natural for me. I don’t have to think about it. It just comes through. Based on what I see and what I know about how women live and think. It’s like breathing air.

DG: Can you describe how your experiences being a woman in the world and seeing how other women are in the world or have to accommodate themselves to the world? Is there a way that you can say that has come through in a particular work of art that you’ve done or in a series of works, or is it something that you see as a through-line through your work?

HJL: My performance art particularly contains echoes of the life of women. I use my physical being to reflect on human rights and specifically the condition of women. For example, I held a performance called “Scream-speaking,” inspired by feminist filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha.

She studied people, especially women, who experienced trauma. Sometimes their condition is so severe that they cannot speak. Now, I cannot feel exactly the way they do. I cannot speak for them; but as an artist, embracing Trinh T. Minh-ha’s theory, I can at least “speak nearby” them.

So, in my performances, I can use my body metaphorically to embrace the spirit of other women, of all women. This symbolism also manifests itself in sculptures and paintings in the form of abstract wombs, ova, and sperm imagery. There is a sense of fertility, creation, struggle, living in spite of it, in other words, the parameters of existence.

I have my own way of describing and depicting all these consequential things. I have been engaging in discussions wherever I go, when I deliver lectures and present artist talks at Pratt, Seoul Women’s University, and other institutions. I weave the substance of these conversations into my artistic practice. Thus, related themes and motifs find their way into sculptures, paintings, performances, and videos.

DG: Yeah. Interesting. I have so many questions, but that’s a wonderful answer. And I see exactly what you mean.

One of the things that I wanted you to talk about a little bit more is, because I consider myself a feminist also, is the idea or the importance of women's space, right? Because I think women's voices are often silenced or constrained.

Let's say even if they are speaking as they would they're not, or they're misunderstood. So, there is a real value in a woman's space. I just wanted to see if you could elaborate a little bit more on that, especially since you're talking about what is it like to go to a school of young women, who are young artists and you are speaking to them and you have a way of communicating that I think is freer. And less constrained than if it was a school that perhaps was mixed gender.

HJL: Feminism came to me as a reaction to my home life. My father plainly stated that he did not think women need higher education. He said they should focus on marrying older “wealthy men.” I prefer the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Virginia Wolf about the importance to women of gaining economic independence.

At art school, there was a very high proportion of female students, probably close to 80% to 90%. That's great, but what prospects did they/we all have? When I came to New York City, I quickly noticed that museums and galleries are largely selecting the works of male artists to exhibit and sell. I had a lot of questions about the art world. And I remember talking to one of my graduate school advisors. I still remember his name, but I won't mention it here.

He said, don't forget who you are. I said, what do you mean? He said, look at you. You're an Asian woman. You're short. He actually said: “You're short and you're an Asian woman.” And “You're pretty.” Meaning that I was “not going to make it” in the “real world” as a New York artist. I chose not to accept his reasoning.

I wanted to go to New York because New York is a mecca for contemporary art. I wanted to learn. Certainly, it was difficult. I worked extra hard, especially during those first few years, to gain acceptance as an artist. I did not wish to be defined by someone else's notion of the “real world.”

And when it came time to earning an exhibition in New York, that was another challenge.

It is hard enough for a white woman artist, but for a Korean woman, it is even more difficult—I have to say that racism, sexism, and classism are prevalent in the art world.

I struggled, but I continued to apply for opportunities. I put myself out there; when there were opportunities, I took them. When I came to New York City, an art critic asked me: "Do you want to wear a Korean hat, or do you want to wear an art hat."

I wasn't sure what that meant? I think of myself, for the most part, as a human being and an artist. The writer elaborated: "If you want to wear a Korean hat, I can help you." Meaning: There is a community of Koreans and Korean artists here. They have their own solidarity, but they're a minority. So, they help each other.

But I said, no, I'm an artist. I'm going to wear an artist hat. It doesn't mean I will forget who I am as a female Korean artist. So that was it.

I don't know if I answered your question, but this conversation calls to mind my resistance, from an early age, to my father's efforts to control me. He would say: "A woman has to be submissive. You have to obey and not talk. Do not look me at me when I talk to you." But I always looked him straight in the eyes, and that infuriated him.

Growing up, I had a lot of conflict with my father. I tried to be respectful, but his expectations of me were way beyond what I was willing to meet. Ultimately, I needed to have space and not someone trying to impose their will over mine. Of course, you have to have a financially secure position in order to achieve independence and make art on your own terms. Again, I don't know if I answered your question fully because that might take hours and hours.

DG: It's not a question to really answer, but I think what you said answers the question and leads us in another direction.



Hayoon Jay Lee, *One Breath*, 2019, over 1,500 burnt and unburnt rice bags, rice, garlic, kitchen and dining ware from Gwangju city, Gwangju Museum of Art in Korea, Photograph by Kim Do-Yoon and Courtesy of GMA and Artist.

DG: One of the interesting things that I noticed while looking at your website, was your project “One Breath.” I was struck by the difficult notion of trying to represent breath or breathing in visual terms, which seems impossible on some level. So, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that and specifically, how can you visualize something that's not visible and what are the implications of trying to do that as an artist?

HJL: There are some things that are invisible, but we still know or feel that they're there. The nature of being is breath for me. Basically, what I'm trying to say, is that individual breath is equal to the life force of being human, of human beings. I have incorporated breath in a number of projects, but especially one that I did in the Gwangju Museum, called *One Breath*. It was a large installation that I worked on for three months. During the course of that time, I met a lot of people, including some who had lost their

businesses. Many, many people don't have the money to sustain themselves. So, I represented these individual people in art, and it felt like I was including their breath or their breathing. Their being, or their breath, is *hoheub*, or *sum* in Korean, which is not literally the same as in English. It's more than just breathing.

For this project, I went “dumpster diving,” looking to find abandoned vessels, plates, utensils, and other kitchen wares. I did not see these things as garbage, but as individual objects associated with the life force of their original owners. And then I had to make a title from that. It's almost like all those objects I found (and the people to whom they belonged), they are a collection of breath.



Hayoon Jay Lee, *One Breath*, 2019, over 1,500 burnt and unburnt rice bags, rice, garlic, kitchen and dining ware from Gwangju city, Gwangju Museum of Art in Korea, Photograph by Kim Do-Yoon and Courtesy of GMA and Artist.

Thus, the project became *One Breath*. It was a very large installation, with more than 3,000 rice bags on the wall and hundreds of broken vessels, kitchenware, and abandoned stuff on the floor. Collectively, they form one big breath. Everyone struggles. And in that struggle, there is resilience and beauty. I don't want to call this dynamic

poetry; yes, it is poetic, but I think breath is much more meaningful than that. I see or sense more things than other people. Let's just leave it at that. Breath is what I feel.

When I see homeless people walking by, I pray for them. I cannot give them money all the time, but I always say, "God bless you" or "Amitabha Buddha Guanyin Bodhisattva" [*amitabul gwanseeumbosa*]*]—a Buddhist way of praying. I'm not particularly religious, but I pray for them like that. That's something I can do.*

That is breath. My speaking is breath. Sharing my energy's breath. I don't know if I answered your question, but that's what I believe.

DG: That's a beautiful answer. I think that's terrific. And when I was looking on the website and I thought that the object in the background appears almost like the wind.

Maybe we should go from thinking about breath because that was such a wonderful answer and really opened up the idea of symbolic thinking and using abstraction to carry very large messages. I think that's part of what I see in your work. And so, let's turn to and think about rice because rice, obviously I think like breath is one of these very big, also tiny, possibly insignificant as a single thing, but enormously important in the world, in your work and in life.

First of all, when did you start using rice and how long have you been working with rice as an artistic media?

HJL: I remember a particular moment when I was an undergrad. It was 2005; all the artists went out together for dinner. No one wanted to eat a lot of rice because they didn't want to gain weight. But as a Korean of my generation, we learned not to waste food.

I grew up in the 1960s and 70s, when Korea wasn't a wealthy country. And my mother taught me not to waste food. We weren't very poor, but she still valued food. She always prepared a separate bowl of rice to offer to a stranger, a beggar, a homeless person, or a Buddhist monk. Whoever passed by, she would offer it to them.

One day, I asked her, why are you giving away food? What about us? What about me? And my mom told me that I have to understand we are not living alone in this world. Since we all live together on this earth, it is absolutely necessary to share. That is some amazing wisdom from an extraordinary woman. Of course, in 21st-century America, things are very different. Food is everywhere. My mother was shocked when she learned that there were TV shows in which people have fights with food.

Anyway, I asked the waitress in the restaurant to pack up all the leftover rice for me to take home. I put it aside for a while, but one day, I used a little of it to make small objects. It was sticky enough to act like clay. So, I brought those rice things to my studio and left them in the window to dry. It became hard as rock, which intrigued me, but then I completely forgot about it for a while. Not long after, I was doing some bronze casting and I almost lost a toe in an accident. That made me think that maybe I should find a new medium, one that was more original, and which would allow me to expand my artistic ideas and practice.

The answer was in my studio. I was drinking coffee and looking out the window and I happened to notice my little sculptures there. I touched them. Maybe I can play with these things, I thought.

So I started experimenting with rice sculptures. I made small ones and large ones; I made objects that I could wear, like armor and a helmet. Some of it reminded me of a costume and mask from a traditional African ceremony. And then, I used rice in performances.

I contacted some people and they found it very intriguing. I continued to do a lot of things with rice from that point. And then one day I realized that rice and me, we are one. We cannot be separated anymore.

DG: That's great. That's wonderful. And now you work in this incredible way where you use rice to create these paintings/reliefs. Could you talk a little bit about this process?

HJL: When I have a project to do for an exhibition, including a large installation, I need to really focus my thoughts. I come to my studio, it becomes my sanctuary, my place of peaceful contemplation.

I have to clear my mind, and working with one rice grain at a time, using a pair of tweezers, it helps me to calm my mind, reengage with the project, and actually achieve a meditative state. So, I place the grains one by one on a panel. When people in South Asia or Korea plant rice, they have to push the seeds all the way down into the paddy, or they will fly away by the next morning.

I hadn't thought about this before. Someone told me that what I am doing is almost like making my own rice paddy. So that's the way I do it; usually, I have a general idea about the composition. Sometimes, after listening to the news, or reading a book, or watching a movie, an idea for a pattern or motif strikes me. Then, I just sketch a little bit. I draw on the piece. I write down some of my thoughts on the board and then start

making again. Sometimes I think of specific details, but other times, these little seeds have more power than I do; and I follow them wherever they want me to go.

In other words, sometimes the process is intuitive. It's hard to explain. I instinctively follow the design that "they" make, and then something happens and then other things happen. At times, I don't like the direction that I am taking. But I cannot change it right away. I have to wait for the right moment to go in a different direction. So that's the way I make my rice reliefs, as best that I can describe the process.

DG: Is this a work in progress?

HJL: Actually, it's done.

DG: It's done? Okay. That's wonderful.

HJL: This one panel is oriented vertically, but actually, it can be angled almost any way. My tendency has been to fill up the space entirely with rice. But I am learning to let go a little and trying not to be too obsessive. I have to keep telling myself: 'Don't be so obsessed.'

DG: A learning process. Always.

HJL: Yeah. I am always learning about myself. Forever!

DG: So, that brings me to one of the questions that people always want to ask. And I'm sure you've been asked this question before, but how do you know when something is finished?

HJL: Sometimes when I look at a piece, my desire is to go on. I want to do more. And then there is a little voice telling me, 'You need to stop.' In my experience, when I disregard my natural instincts, I always regret it in the end.

DG: Can you go back?

HJL: No.

DG: No, it's done.

HJL: Well, with paintings, it's possible to make changes; but for these rice reliefs, you can't. I would say that continuing when you are finished is a kind of egotism. To put it

another way, your selfish desires are in conflict with your good sense. To use a food analogy: You and I go out for dinner. The food is great. It's so good, that even though you already feel full, you still want to finish to the last bite, right? And then you regret it. Deciding when to finish a work of art, it is essentially the same thing.

Leaving a bit of empty space is actually quite fulfilling. I'm still learning that lesson though. Sometimes, I struggle with that concept. But then, I step back, and when I get the signal from my inner self, I can accept the need to just leave it alone.

I will walk away for maybe one week and then come back and look at it again. Sometimes, I will realize that the work needs just a little tweak here and there.

DG: Does that signal get stronger as you get older? For example, two years ago, if you had that little signal, would you have thought, oh, that's nothing I'm going to keep going. Whereas now you know that signal, and so you've learned, right?

HJL: Yes, before I would make my works with an intensity that would make some people exclaim: 'Wow, I can't breathe.' And after seeing some of my past paintings, a professor of mine said, "Jay [my American nickname], you can make a thousand paintings with the energy you put into that one."

My drive, or some may call it obsessiveness, can be a strength, but it can also be a weakness. So, I'm striving to achieve balance—it's not easy, but I'm learning.

DG: I think that's the life of an artist, isn't it? You always keep learning because you can never stand in the same spot. You have to keep moving forward.

HJL: Yes, like water. If it stays in one place, it becomes stagnant.

DG: We [at the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University] have this wonderful small piece that Jeffrey Wechsler gave us. It's very intense, small but covered entirely with rice. We're going to hang it in September at the museum. You have to come and see it.

HJL: It is a very small piece. Maybe I will have trouble finding it.

DG: I'm going to put it with a couple other small things. It'll form a nice group. It'll hold the wall well next to some bigger things.

HJL: Oh, good.

DG: Yeah, it'll be great.

HJL: Thank you. I'd love to go see it.

DG: So, you've also used rice a lot in performances. Did that happen first and then you decided to work with rice on paintings and reliefs, or did that happen at the same time?



Hayoon Jay Lee, *Beyond Life & Death*, 2021, wooden table, rice capsules, animal bones, kitchen and dining ware, (approximately) 42 x 144", main dining room at the King Manor Museum in Queens, Photograph by Jong Sun Lee and Courtesy of Artist.

HJL: It all happened together, I guess. Sometimes when I create an installation, I will also do a performance in the installation space. On other occasions, if someone invites me to do a performance separately, then absolutely I will do a performance on its own. Generally speaking, for my own projects, I will do both. As you mentioned earlier, I'm an interdisciplinary artist. I like the energy involved in joining objects, spaces, and movement. It works really well, creating an overall harmony of action and non-action.

But maybe I can talk about my King Manor Museum exhibition, *Beyond Life and Death*, which included presenting rice in all different artistic formats. I was selected to

participate in a yearlong project sponsored by the Jamaica Center for the Arts. It was a challenging research-based endeavor that happened to take place during the height of the pandemic. I studied, how people in Jamaica, Queens, a diverse but struggling community, how their experience around food changed as a result of Covid. The project had five parts: research, a street performance, a workshop, an installation, and a separate exhibition displaying documentation from my research.

For the public performance, I walked around downtown Jamaica interacting with strangers, talking with them about food insecurity and sharing food with them. Thinking back, I was pretty daring, a small Asian woman talking to strangers in a not very peaceful time. But my friend, the British-American poet, Cheryl Moskowitz, tagged along and watched over me. And a videographer was there filming every interaction.



Hayoon Jay Lee, *Beyond Life & Death*, 2021, wooden table, rice capsules, animal bones, kitchen and dining ware, (approximately) 42 x 144", main dining room at the King Manor Museum in Queens, Photograph by Karen Santiago and Courtesy of JCAL and artist.

HJL: After that, I invited a small group of female community leaders to join me at the King Manor Museum in order to discuss food issues. We talked about how their organizations were helping women, and especially how, in their experience, women deal with food during a time of crisis. In the last phase of the project, I created an installation in the dining hall of the museum, which dated from colonial times. One major theme of the installation was hunger. I practiced fasting to be able to

empathize with those who don't have enough to eat and to be in the right frame of mind to create art around that idea of hunger. For the installation, I made "rice pills," literally filling empty medicine capsules with grains of rice, thousands of them. They are edible; they don't taste particularly good; but they represent a kind of hunger medicine. I also collected animal bones to be part of the work: chicken, turkey, and quail bones; whatever bones that I find when I am out walking; I collect them and put them in my collection for future use.

By the way, the King Manor Museum is very unique institution. It was originally part of an estate and working farm belonging to Rufus King (1755–1827), a United States Senator and signer of the US Constitution.

DG: Really?

HJL: He was a very important figure. Anyway, the museum has original 18th-century kitchenware, cutlery and beautiful silverware. I absolutely wanted to use those items in my installation.

To handle the 18th-century objects, we had to wear gloves. I laid them out on the table along with broken pieces that I brought, intertwining with rice pills, the “medicine” that I created, containing all different colors of rice: black, red, and white. It represents the past, the present, and particularly what’s happening with the pandemic.

So, it’s very colorful. And then, there are the bones, sized and arranged from small to large. Some of them appear to embrace the glasses, cups, and other objects. Again, I think we can find breath in that juxtaposition. Life and death are present; the joys, the struggles that people are facing. Ultimately, the installation represents a celebration. We are all there as equals at the table. That brings me back to Rufus King. Although no saint, I respect that he paid his workers. In that era of slavery, he did not have pay anything, but he did. That’s one of the reasons why I wanted to have a site-specific installation at the King Manor Museum.

The street performance was one of the most interesting things that I did at that time. I made a funky hat, and I walked around wearing it and asked total strangers questions like, “Hey what do you think about food during the pandemic?” Some people jokingly asked, “Who are you? Who the hell are you?” But they were surprisingly nice. And some people said, “Food is expensive” or “I think the government is not doing well.” They talked insightfully about their struggles. One woman said, “I cannot leave my home.” Or, “There is more domestic violence during the pandemic.” Some people could not go anywhere because they don’t have any money. Where can they go? A shelter? The shelters were mainly closed because of the pandemic. If they could go to a shelter, it is not their home. They would not feel safe there. They would rather stay at home because they have children. They want to protect their children.

When I heard those kinds of stories, it brought tears to my eyes. As I was doing my art project, I became very emotional. Their stories became my stories, became *our* stories. It was a very interesting experience. In the workshop, I held with female activists, we had some really penetrating discussions in which we dissected burning social issues. It sometimes feels hopeless, like you are throwing a little egg to a rock. It’s discouraging, but you cannot stop what you are doing. There’s a Korean expression: ‘Many drops make a flood’ (*galangbie baji jeojneunda*). In other words, if you stand under a drizzle of water long enough, your underwear can get wet. You never know. You have to have faith in yourself. And you have to believe in humanity. Otherwise, why is it worth living?

Anyway, individual grains of rice are tiny. But they are like living beings. Individually, they are weak, but collectively, if you touch them, they feel as hard as rock.

DG: It looks like fur.

HJL: I know! Visually, it appears soft like fur, but it is not. I am working with rice, but those grains, to my mind, have their own individual and collective voices. That may sound strange. What can I say?

DG: The way you've talked about breath, it's the combined tiny moments that become eternity and become absolutely many things.

HJL: Take Buddha, he only ate one grain of rice to subsist while meditating in search of enlightenment. Without one small grain, nothing grows. Or put another way, one grain can symbolize the whole world.

As you know, in the north of Norway, there is a seed vault to replenish the world's supply in case of doomsday. We are all worried about global warming. The seed is the most fundamental thing to life.

DG: Yes, it is life.

HJL: It is true.

DG: The Jamaica show that you did at the King Manor Museum; it's closed now, right?

HJL: Yes, it closed about two months ago.

DG: It sounds like a great project.

HJL: It was really fun. I love projects like that. Where I can study. At the art residency program Sculpture Space in Utica, New York, I was a fellow for two months; I studied the whole area. There were more than 3,000 abandoned buildings. I was like, oh my God. I didn't know that.

I was a stranger; it was almost like I was invading their space. At the very least I had to be respectful as I asked: What was there? Who lived there? I love to learn new things.

DG: You're a perennial student. That's great. Let's go back to my questions. Do you want to talk a little bit about some of your performances that I watched? You seem to



talk about rice as a commodity, as something to be consumed, but also there's a lot of rice in motion that becomes a very beautiful kind of display of movement. So, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about all the meanings of rice, and how you hope to unlock those meanings for your viewers. And maybe it'd be interesting to think about the view of viewers from Southeast Asia, from Asia, from Korea, for whom rice is really a sort of tradition, a heritage, a history, which is different from many Americans' view of rice.

I think depending on the audience, rice can open up this extraordinary avenue, or may be seen as exotic. That's something I'd love to hear what you think about, or if you think about that already while you're here in America doing these performances.

HJL: I have been asked that question before. Performance is something you have to be there physically to see. Watching video of a performance doesn't convey the true sound

of it or of people's reactions. And the performance is a spontaneous thing. I'm not the ring master. The audience brings its own energy. A recording cannot capture any of that. As an artist, I am inviting people to participate, and they have a choice not to do so. There is something indescribable when everyone comes together during a performance.



Hayoon Jay Lee, Bursting NY, 2013, performance with mixed media, 45 mins, performed at No Longer Empty: Clark Tower in Long Island City, Photograph by Manfred Koh and Courtesy of Artist.

Rice is usually consumed through your mouth, but if you use it as a medium to pour on your head or on other people's, and then throw it away, what begins as a celebration of abundance becomes more like wasting food. My mom would not approve of that. Before I do anything in my performance, I make sure the floor and the work site is clean.

Sometimes I put paper down to cover the floor. For two reasons. One, is cleanliness; the second, is to amplify the sound of rice falling down. The sound of falling rice on paper is beautiful, almost like raindrops. That is a kind of music, which is very spiritual

in a way. And I am helping people, particularly Westerners, to realize, 'Hey, there is something more than food here.' To get the full effect, I want people to experience rice physically. I invite people from all different backgrounds to my performances, people who are very different from me. Sometimes, they get scared because what they are seeing represents the unknown for them.

The unknown almost always frightens people. Initially, they tend to react defensively, of course. That's okay. Then, it's my job to comfort them. Telling them it's okay to be here. So I invite them to come where we are all standing, and then I slowly pour rice on their head. After a moment, they start laughing with relief. Soon, they feel comfortable and later on, it becomes like a celebration.

DG: It is a kind of baptism.

HJL: A baptism, a celebration. You could say.

DG: Not in a Christian way.

HJL: Right, a benediction, a sharing, or celebrating, however you want to put it. I think it's really amazing.

At the end of my performance, the audience takes the remaining rice with them. I always provide brown paper bags, and say take as much as you want. Some people take quite a bit with them. I reassure them that the rice is fine to eat, but that they should wash it carefully, removing any debris, before cooking it.

Any remaining rice, I usually donate to nursing homes or homeless shelters. I also bring some back to my studio, which I recycle in my art. Or, I eat it. I love rice. I cannot live without it. I eat some every day!



Hayoon Jay Lee, Bursting NY, 2013, performance with mixed media, 45 mins, performed at No Longer Empty: Clark Tower in Long Island City, Photograph by Manfred Koh and Courtesy of Artist.

DG: And as your mother instructed you, you don't waste it at all.

HJL: No, I don't.

DG: Let me just ask you another question, because I'm fascinated by the idea of you as a bone collector. Tell me about that. How long has that been going on?

HJL: A long time ago, I don't remember the exact year. I think I was a little girl. As I told you, I was a tomboy walking around the countryside. Sometimes, I would bring little bones home, which my sister found extremely unpleasant. I think I was fascinated by their shapes, especially when the flesh is completely gone. Only the fundamental structure remains. And when I see those things, on some level, it is very creepy but also quite strong and beautiful. I see a duality involving life and time when I reflect on bare bones. So now, I collect them regularly, especially chicken bones.

When I go to restaurants, I ask people if I can have their leftover bones for my dog. It's not a big deal. Last Thanksgiving, I carved a twenty-pound turkey with the idea of salvaging the bones for my art. Turkey bones are really beautiful and big. I cleaned them carefully and boiled them to remove any remaining marrow. I put some bleach on them too. That way I kill all the germs. Afterward, I air dry them, and then gradually, after about a month, they become pure white. In some cases, I will paint them to achieve a bone color effect.

Mostly, they turn a really bleached white. When I look at them, I find them very appealing and reassuring in a sense. I am brought to the realization that we eat and eventually we die. After a great deal of time, our bones will disappear too. Actually, hair and bones are the last parts of the body to disintegrate after burial.

And, by the way, I'm also a hair collector.

DG: Oh, I didn't know that.

HJL: I collect only human hair. I have done a lot of projects with it. I mainly collect women's hair. I ask them for their hair after they get it cut. It represents their individuality. I keep the hair with the person's full name, phone number, email address, and ethnicity.

I make art works from this hair. For instance, I used tiny bits of Korean women's hair to form the characters of the Korean national anthem. I continue to collect hair from people who live here in the United States and other parts of the world. I'm saving it for a big international project. I was going to talk about that later if you have time. I am hoping that it will eventually be part of big museum exhibition.

So far, I have collected hair from more than 200 individuals.

DG: Wow.

HJL: People freely give locks of their hair to me. My proposed installation will form the words of the Constitution.

DG: The American Constitution?

HJL: Yes. The American Constitution created with the hair of people from all over the world. I would particularly like to “write” the Bill of Rights in this way. It will include the names of the nations of origin of all the people included in the work.

The installation will also include the plastic bags that contained the hair; handwritten letters from the owners of the hair will also be displayed.

DG: So how are you going to use hair to write? Are you going to sew it or are you going to glue them?

HJL: No, I used to sew them, but I don't do that anymore. There is a small hair relief in my studio. It is actually made from my own hair, and it reveals how I work with this medium.

DG: Oh, okay.



Hayoon Jay Lee, detail of *Beyond Words (Korean Anthem)*, 2011–2021, Human hair, ink, acrylic, rice paper, 12 x 12" (each), varies, McKenna Gallery at SUNY New Paltz (adjacent to the Dorsky Museum), Photograph by Jong Sun Lee and Courtesy of Artist.

HJL: The art work forms a Korean letter [*han*]. My process is to chop the hair very finely; then it becomes like charcoal. Sometimes you add slightly longer pieces, so they stick out like a relief. I created a whole series of them; there are more than 30 panels, each 12 x 12 inches. Some of them are in a show.

DG: And where's this show?

HJL: New Paltz. In the Samuel Dorsky Museum. They are arranged along a hallway at the school. I have

been thinking about doing a major hair project since I was in college.

But I need a large space. I need someone to curate the show. I have a really nice collection of people's hair, including from some important people as well. Of course, all people are important to me, but I mean those who have impacted my life greatly. I would like their hair to play a significant role.

I have my daddy's hair too. He passed away a few months ago. Thank God. I still have a piece of him. So, I will be using that too.

DG: That's amazing. I love that idea. And of course, I watched the Senate hearings last night and the Constitution came up a hundred times. Protecting the Constitution. It's a very good time to be thinking about the Constitution, and all of the many diverse communities that have played a part in building the United States of America.

HJL: I am reminded of when I went to Israel and visited the Holocaust Museum there. That was a very moving experience. The United States Holocaust Museum in Washington DC is also amazing historically and artistically. It is a reminder of what can happen when amoral people take power and put aside democracy.

DG: Yeah, and there's a whole tradition of Victorian hair jewelry. All of those things. There's a long, interesting history of art around using hair.

HJL: I am absolutely committed to this material.

DG: Wow. Fantastic. And I didn't know anything about the bones and the hair, but that's really very interesting.

HJL: I love using materials that have some meaning in history.

DG: Yeah. I didn't get to see your show in Jamaica, but I was looking at the slides and I really did notice how beautifully linear those bones are, those chicken bones that go in waves around the plates and things. They're gorgeous.

It looks great. So, did I miss anything? Is there anything else that we should add? We must be close to the end of our conversation.

HJL: I think you covered it pretty well.

DG: Yay! It seems like we did a lot. We got a lot further than I expected and I certainly learned a lot. So, that was really great.

Thank you very much. It was a pleasure.

HJL: No, thank you. I enjoyed talking with you.