

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Kyung Youl Yoon
- Interviewer: Peter Frank
- Translator: Chunbum Park
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- Recorded and transcribed by Jiyoung Lee (AKAA Senior Research Fellow 2021-2022)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Peter Frank (PF): I want to give a little background on Kyung Yool Yoon before we start. Kyung Yool Yoon has lived and worked in the New York City area since 1995. He was born in Gangjin, Jeollanamdo, and was active as a young artist in Seoul. He moved with his family to Spain in the 1980s. He studied art at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. He continued his professional career in Spain, so he was an established painter and sculptor by the time he came to New York. Yoon was already working in an abstract style when he came to the United States, bringing together manners and techniques from East Asia and Europe, and he maintained this relatively traditional (if still abstract) direction for two decades. But in the early 2010s, he expanded his method to incorporate aluminum and other malleable metals and thus began his “Cubic Inception” series. So, my first question for Kyung Youl Yoon is, what made you start making bas relief compositions that rely on aluminum and metals?

Kyung Youl Yoon (KYY): I began to make bas relief compositions with aluminum in order to escape the two-dimensional picture plane for three-dimensional space. This is to form a multi-dimensional or multi-angular point of view of objects from the picture plane’s simplistic point of view. Also, I wanted to attain the physical nature of the material in my work.

PF: Okay. then it's a matter of going from two-dimensional to three-dimensional in the work but not leaving the wall. Did you do any pre-standing work in the *Cubic Inception Series*?

KYY: I have many experiences in the pre-standing sculpture and modeling of the sculpture.

PF: Before the Cubic Inception Series? or After?

KYY: I have worked with many plastic sculptures and forms when I was studying sculpture in Madrid, Spain but now I have a different style.

PF: How do you see the Cubic Inception works continuing your exploration into combining styles that span the East and West?

KYY: The Cubic Inception work is the meeting of the materialistic representation of the West and the transcendental nature of the East. The stained glass and tile art of the Arabian and the Saracen art of the Middle East, begin from the material and connect with the spiritual, leading to the world of pleasure. The Middle East is topographically the center point of the East and the West. I also wanted to explore the relationship between

materiality and spirituality.

PF: That's an interesting observation. Because after all, Spain was once a part of that middle eastern culture. Was that your first exposure to the Middle East in Spain?

KYY: You're right. If you go to Granada, Andalusia in Spain, there is Alhambra palace and if you look at the ceiling which is made of stained glass, you get the experience of a different kind of feeling, out of this world.

PF: You see the specifically Middle Eastern Arabian cultural phenomenon?

KYY: I would agree with that because, in the Middle East where the Eastern and Western sides meet, there must have been a crossover. The spirit of the West and the East must have met there.

PF: Ok. In your suggestions of industrial landscapes – which may be seen from the air – there seems to be a message about the environment and climate change. Do you want us to think of that ecology when we see these works? Are you making a deliberate statement?

KYY: Depending on the feeling or the life experience of the person looking at my work, the freedom of looking through the eyes of each person is open. As the aluminum container that was thrown away is reborn as an artwork, this is a small kind of metaphor to think about how we must treat the discarded waste that is overflowing around us.

PF: Ok. There is a metaphor. There are some metaphorical references, but the metaphor or references are left open for the viewer to understand.

KYY: So based on the individual emotion and experience of the person, the work appears differently. In the process of throwing away waste in the environment, which eventually becomes an artwork, how can we treat the discarded waste or objects? So, subsequently, going beyond that kind of meaning, there is also a question of how we treat the environment or the process of using the discarded waste as an artwork.

PF: Alright. It must be pointed out that Yoon refers to the issue of discarded waste because of where he finds the materials. Can you tell me something about where you find the

discarded waste?

KYY: I acquired food containers from an opening at the gallery that I direct. I don't think it's important to consider where the aluminum comes from but the fact that the aluminum is recycled.

PF: In terms of form, the Cubic Inception works bring to mind the aerial landscapes, maybe even maps, of urban and industrial spaces. In fact, your studio is only a few miles from the north end of the Jersey Meadows. Are you evoking any particular places, or are you inventing your own places?

KYY: As mentioned in the previous question, people can look at my work and can appreciate it individually. And they can think differently from the artist. Just as everyone does, the person's life around him or her would appear as something extracted. As I live in the Metropolitan area, I visualize the Manhattan cityscape that is seen over the Hudson River from the slope in New Jersey and the modern cities. When I was young the topology of numerous rocks around the river or the mountain ranges that have many mountains would have been crazy. Although this sort of background would influence the work's composition, the important point is that the combination of numerous aluminum cubes is of multiple points of view and multiple sides. I think how the cubes spread out into infinity, and how material things give us spiritual influence and make us dream. These are the most important things.

PF: As low reliefs were hewn from soft metal, the *Cubic Inception* works are very tactile. Many of the segments have their own textures. Do you want to evoke such sensuousness?

KYY: For the painting that is a two-dimensional picture plane the main element is an illusion. In other words, it is what you draw and what it looks like. But the work of Cubic Inception is the material itself. It is not like an object, but it is the object itself. As it is the object itself that influences all sensations, the art appreciator and the artist can think freely while looking at it and exchange thoughts as well.

PF: And you're saying that the Cubic Inception works are things unto themselves but that they have an essential quality.

KYY: Cubic Inception is not illusional but it is a material and thing unto itself. It can be seen

through multiple angles and influences the viewer in particular ways.

PF: Do you see the pictorial space in the Cubic Inception pieces as establishing real landscapes, imaginary landscapes, dream landscapes, or some other kind of space?

KYY: Our life is always in a determined state and we are used to common sense, and it is very easy for everyday life to pass through fixed or set thoughts. However, by experiencing a different point of view that we occasionally encounter, we get to have different thoughts or feel flashing ecstasy. From the ever-changing view of the city that I look down on from an ascending airplane, I escape the crowdedness of daily life and fall into a very still kind of meditation. From the world of material reality, in one moment, I am led into my mind to a world of imagination and spirituality. I am made to think differently with just a small change in my point of view. The multiple perspectives, layers, and sculptures of the infinity of *Cubic Inception* join and scatter. I experience that all is one and one is all. One can have many different thoughts through a change in perspective. My work is a metaphor or mechanism of these things. I believe that the history of humanity is the effort going forward, to experience a visible world beyond what is visible to us. Lastly, the landscape that I approach, the one I feel comfortable with, depends on how I see it. From urban sceneries or the ocean where many things spread out, it all depends on how you look, and your state of mind. The important thing is the communal sense that the objects have and that I have. Communication is communion. Even if you look at a beautiful landscape, if your mind is not connected to it you and the landscape don't fit and there is no communication.

PF: Why do you use recycled, essentially found, aluminum instead of fresh, newly produced metal?

KYY: Discarded aluminum food trays are considered trash. But the very idea that this trash can become a work of art is a reversal. The age of mass production and mass consumption is formed through the dichotomous understanding of product and trash. Ultimately the work must be discussed as an environmental issue. I ask how much junk was alleviated from the act of my creating the art. It can be an act of looking at the object contemplatively - in other words, a method of peering into or carefully examining it.

PF: Do you consider the Cubic Inception works as paintings? Sculptures? Both? Something else entirely?

KYY: I do not want to prescribe my work as being a painting or a sculpture. It can be said

that it is liberating to let things be without classifying them.

PF: Do you relate the Cubic Inception series to the work of any other artists? Are there historic artists who have influenced you? Are there contemporary artists to whom you feel close?

KYY: Even as there were paintings that were made from multiple points of view of Cubism from Cezanne to Picasso, although there were painters who dealt with the object-ness prior to them in art history, these had the qualities of appearing to be multiple points of view but not actually be the multiple viewpoints themselves. And my multiple point view means we can examine the object and discuss our thoughts in multiple and broad ways. In addition, we can also think that an event or incident manifests multiple ideas and experiences. From that point, we can avoid the black-and-white logic.

PF: Are you still working on the Cubic Inception series, or have you evolved toward another body of work?

KYY: I am now using plexiglass as a material. I make compositions with clear cubes that I paint lightly and the inside of which is visible. This is because it has the material quality allowing the inside to be seen from the point of view that is outside the cube. Therefore, it can be a metaphor for arriving at a place where everything can be seen and can become open without boundaries.

PF: It's a perfect place to end I think. With and without boundaries I think this is a universal goal that people making art and looking at art want to achieve so thank you, Kyung Youl, for making art that has striven for the longest time to break down boundaries and open up perception. Thank you.

Y: Thank you, Mr. Frank.