

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Sun You
- Interviewer: Ethan Greenbaum
- May 1st, 2022 / Sun You's studio, The University of Oregon
- Recorded and transcribed by Ethan Greenbaum and Jiyoung Lee (Senior Research Fellow 2021-2022)
- Edited by Ethan Greenbaum
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

Use of Interview Transcript of Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

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SY (Sun You): When the AHL Foundation asked who I wanted to interview me for this archive project, I said you.

EG (Ethan Greenbaum): Because I was there (Laughs).

SY: Yes, but also you are a great artist, a great thinker, you write well and given our life together, I feel like it will be interesting. So here we go—What's your first question?

EG: I will do my best. My first thought was to ask about your attitude towards language. In the past, you've expressed some resistance to linguistic or conceptual explanations for your work. All your pieces are titled 'No Title' and you've stated before that you prefer the work be seen as a specific set of material forms the viewer encounters on their own terms. But we're doing an interview. So, I'm wondering if there's some way language could be used in terms you like? Are there any words, phrases, or other ways a reader can engage with your art?

SY: See? I knew you would have a good question! I think you're right. I really feel like language, especially in my work, is inadequate for many reasons. My process of making is intuitive and spontaneous. I don't begin with a concept that could be explained in a conversation. I often think that words or titles or statements make things seem greater than what they are and I'm not interested in that. Also, I'm an immigrant who came here as a teenager. There is still a sense of inadequacy—a feeling I'm not good enough in either English or Korean. Another thing I see in my teaching is that academia places such a high value on writing and articulating your ideas. Working with undergrads, I often feel this can be overemphasized and that they are better off learning their craft rather than explaining it.

Oh, and for some words: I would say it's probably more helpful to think in terms of verbs like unpacking, pinching—or adjectives like small, playful, flexible. What other words could help people to understand my work? Modular, lighthearted, modest...yeah, I think that's about it.

EG: You've used some of those words in your show titles like 'Glorious Modest'. You've also said the exhibitions are the one time when you make up titles. It's such an efficient process—You can create titles for all the works at once!

SY: But also when I do title the exhibitions, it's not necessarily explaining what the work is about. Sometimes it's not even related to the art. Some titles are related to things like the venue or my state of mind or an inside joke. It's more like an independent fiction—not necessarily a meaningful explanation for what I made.



EG: So my second question also relates to a sort of resistance on your part regarding conventional markers of artistic ambition. Some examples: in place of historically venerated media like oil paint or marble, you use ready-made, common materials such as Sculpey, costume jewelry, or wood scraps. The works also push back against other typical benchmarks of grandiosity. Rather than large scale, you often make small, intimate things that invite a viewer close in order to really see them. I'm thinking of your wall pieces composed of jewelry, magnets and razor blades. They invite intimacy but also have an aggressive edge. Another example: rather than singular, monolithic statements your works are typically modular, fragmented or dispersed. Your small sculptures twist in the wind, relying on magnets and gravity in arrangements that change each time they're installed. You hinted at this with some of your descriptive words but can you talk more about your motivations in working this way?

SY: Again, great question. There are probably many ways I could answer but one thing that seems to have influenced me is the experience of moving around a lot for teaching and art. I've traveled a lot and lived in Korea, Germany, and many places in America. I think that's really affected how I think and work. I prioritize lightness and flexibility. I don't want to make things that require fixed production sites. I want to make art spontaneously and I want it to be easy to pack. I'm also a small person so I made a rule a long time ago that I'm not going to make anything that requires a second person to carry. I think the fact that I studied painting also affects the sculptures I make. I'm not trained in things like welding or woodworking. I don't have those skills and I'm not interested in them. A lot of my sculptures are unmade—just pulled from the life and objects around me. Ultimately, it's a sort of life philosophy—nothing is static, we're always changing and moving. The goal of making art that is supposed to be forever or have some sense of permanence doesn't reflect what's true.

EG: What you described is really lovely. It also swims against the motivations I think so many artists—and people—have: to create something that will outlive them. It's sort of a cliché about ambition. Given your disinterest in all this, what is it that drives you? Why do you make art?

SY: The fact that I've lived in New York for the past 15 years is telling of some kind of ambition—or at least a desire to be part of a bigger dialogue. But I don't feel pressure to measure myself by any pre-existing model of success. I'm grateful that I have opportunities to show and occasionally sell my work, but I've never been motivated by outside confirmation. For so long, no one cared what I was doing and that was okay. I also feel like growing up poor and not having a specific role model—I didn't even know what it meant to be a practicing artist until I came to New York—is part of this attitude. I didn't have anything to follow, so I had to invent and that invention brings a lot of freedom.

So why do I keep doing it? I think it is really a self-serving thing. I really enjoy having my own space, being there alone and making things. I really enjoy the process. I have a lot of great studio days. It's mostly fun. It's just when exhibition dates and venues are set that I experience stress. Before that, I get to play with materials I wasn't familiar with or make things I didn't make before. I don't even care about the final look of it or the product of it until it becomes some sort of public event.

EG: Great. That's all I had. Did you have anything you wanted to add?

SY: No thank you so much for the short but fun conversation we had!