

# AHL Foundation

## Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

### Interview

- Interviewee: Hong Seon Jang
- Interviewer: Annie Dell'Aria
- March 6, 2020 / Zoom
- Recorded and transcribed by Soojung Hyun (AKAA Research Fellow 2019-2020)
- 1 video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Soojung Hyun (SH): Before we start our interview I would like to ask a simple question to better understand your career. Why did you decide to live as an artist in the United States after you earned your MFA?

Hong Seon Jang (HSJ): My original plan was to pursue my art career here in New York. That's why I came to the United States in the first place. But since you ask, I actually, after graduating from RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology), started my own business for a couple of years and hadn't pursued an art career at all during that period, but somehow I changed my mind in 2007.

Annie Dell'Aria (AD): That's great. So, because you're talking about how your practice transitioned around 2007, I'm curious how you came to your current body of work. This work feels very conceptual, where each material and referenced form has cultural and social resonance that ping off each other. Can you discuss your earlier practice and how you came to this body of work to start us off?

HSJ: In the beginning of my art career I followed what the New York art scene wanted from Asian artists actually, a kind of painting based on craftsmanship. I was doing it for a while. In 2007, I visited Korea and somehow I was inspired, and then I started thinking I should start my own narrative. Somehow bring back my own memory and bridge my experience between two cultures. I started thinking about my background since childhood and all my experiences from my country and my experience here.

AD: So that was a real turning point? Who are your main influences?

HSJ: Yeah. Right after my father passed away. You asked me what my biggest influence is. My biggest inspiration is my own father who was a musician, pop singer actually. He was very recognized and he influenced me a lot in many ways, such as bringing a lot of art books filled with Greek statues, Renaissance paintings, all this Western art. So, I started thinking I should pursue an art career. That was at the age of five, so since then I was always thinking of being an artist and I am an artist now.

AD: Did you ever think about going into music because of your father?

HSJ: He tried to teach me the piano, but he also cursed me a little bit. See my fingers are so short (*laughter*). I can play some flute, so you might see me with some kind of instrument.

AD: Well thinking about how your main influence is your father, maybe we can turn to your work. I'm really interested in your approach to the readymade and how you take objects out of their context. I was drawn to a few works where there is a complex interplay between your use of craft and the meticulous quality you discuss in your earlier



work, and a more conceptual use of the found objects, particularly *Prayer Rug* (2014), *Island* (2018), and *Ghost* (2018). In *Ghost* in particular, there are ivory tusks made by Ivory Soap on a found crate, which has smells and an associated touch. And then the sculpted tusk forms which I think show craft and also alludes to ivory. So I'm curious about the role of craft and process in your works, especially in the more conceptual ones where it might not be immediately apparent.

HSJ: So, those three works you mentioned I associate with my own experience -- childhood memories, my military memories, and my experience as a father at home related to my own culture. The relationship of father and son is a very vertical system in the family. For instance the work, *Prayer Rug* is based on my memories during mandatory military service as a Korean man. My character is that of an artist and I didn't like dealing with the system. I found all those items on eBay. I had to bid on each item so it took me a couple of years. After a while, the costs began to add up, so it became a challenge to purchase everything I would have preferred to own.

AD: From the United States or from Korea?

HSJ: United States, but then I sourced it from everywhere, from all over.

AD: So people sell them after they earn them?

HSJ: Yes, one was considered a very precious item. It's for your good behavior, war hero, whatever. You receive this precious item and then someone gets discharged. Craftsmanship on that, it's not necessarily craftsmanship so much, it's already made.

AD: Wow.

HSJ: My father was a Buddhist, he converted to Catholicism and then forced me to become Catholic. It's very common in Korea, the father always demands his son follow the path of whatever he points at. I became Catholic. Whenever you walk in the church you see holy water and it's almost like you're cleaning yourself. I have a daughter, seven years old. I always want to feed her good food. I'm a good cook, actually. I used to be a sushi chef and I'm really fast with a knife. The kitchen is a place where life and death are determined somehow. I see it in a religious way. You cook and cut the animals and you cut them into pieces. If you think about it, it's something's body that you're consuming. You live with that nutrition. So it's about life and death. I was thinking about our fundamental existence. It's not political. But somehow, I connected to this idea, as I mentioned in the statement. Because I'm raising my kid I started being concerned about other kids, seeing this problem in the world, our kids, even children being exploited. Some poor countries like India, for example. In order to get this marble countertop these kids work all day for one dollar. The marble countertop is made using Ivory soap bars and animal bones. As a father, I started seeing others struggle, especially children. I



had another piece, *Wishing Well* (2016) which is based on the same idea. It's a similar kind of sculpture.

I also adopted this economic viewpoint towards the world, because North Korea, South Korea, two ideals coexist here. So the 38th parallel line between North and South was determined by others, Americans and Russians. It relates to that map piece too, *Permanently Marked* (2018), I can talk about it later.

And the third piece, *Ghost*, is related to my religious idea. I always thought I doubted God. Maybe if you believe in God you might believe in ghosts as well. So the smell of this Ivory Soap always reminds me of these people with a scent of the wealthy class in my childhood. While the scent was not visual, the fragrance stuck in my memory. So I was questioning the value of art that isn't visual. Somehow you can make it visual by using ordinary things. This specific item (Ivory Soap) is carved to appear like a religious artifact. So I try to make connections between these objects. Furthermore, I would contend that the position of religion in relation to warfare in various periods of human history has often resulted in tragic consequences.

Regarding the “process,” you asked me how important craftsmanship is. I'm very skillful. I realized I can make many things with my hands. Somehow I started integrating skill and concept. Sometimes. It depends on the project. It's not the main process, the craftsmanship, or what do you call that? Transfiguration. I just do whatever I want to do.

AD: So, you mentioned *Permanently Marked* (2018) and I wanted to talk about that one because when I look at it, it seems like it took so long. And it was so methodical and almost mindless or frustrating. I'm wondering how long it took you and what it was like to go through such a repetitive process. Maybe you can talk a little bit more about the conception behind that work. I love the idea of the line and the history between North and South Korea and the line as obscuring it. I love that.

HSJ: For us, since we were small kids, we started learning these things, that there are two ideologies that coexist. The map is very important to us because we always know there's a line between us. It's an ongoing problem. So that idea is how to see the world within the map. I often play with words and language because I often get frustrated with my own English. And it's not about language, it's about communication. I learn something from my experience. I often invite my struggle into my work. You probably have realized my play on words. So when I saw this specific object called a “permanent marker,” there's no such thing as permanent. As I said, life and death always happen. It's the law of the universe. It's a cycle. And we believe in this ideology, this idea, the value, but it's not permanent, it's always fluctuating.

Going back to that map, *Permanently Marked*. I'm questioning the border between countries based on my experience with my own country. If you look at old maps, it's



slightly different from current maps because the borders were changed. Throughout history, it's always changing. That changes the way we believe in things, like something seems very strong, but is very fragile. Mindlessly, I just wanted to remove everything with a permanent marking and at the same time the English word "marking", meaning it's marked -- this land is marked. So I just play on words about the process.

AD: So it's almost like through literalizing the marking of the land you're completely obscuring the land and almost erasing it.

HSJ: Yes, going back from the future, it's beginning or end, just like the Bible says.

AD: On that same line of thinking about geography and relationship to nation, I thought that *Union* (2016) was interesting too in this appropriation of the flag. Something else that we think about in the context of marking. The found object at first seems very exuberant and reflective, but the material itself alludes to displacement and violence and refugees, as you say. So I'm curious if you can discuss where it was exhibited, I wasn't quite sure where it was flown.

HSJ: It wasn't an exhibition. In 2016, I participated in a residency program where artists came from all over the world. And 2016 was the year when Trump was running his campaign. I was in Maine and saw millions of American flags. It was almost threatening. It was a first experience for me. At the same time, the residency I was participating in, in the beginning, there were so many issues in the world, like the refugee problems, or kids getting killed in Syria, all these things are happening. So we started discussing. There were 65 artists, American artists were the majority, over 50%. But in the end they always talked about black and white issues. They don't care about what's going on in the world. And I decided to make this flag, a stolen flag. And people didn't know what was going on at first because it's gold, signifying the high-class. And it was almost like a sound inspiration as well, wind blows, it's crumbling. Can you imagine? The material, which is plastic or vinyl, crumbles...

AD: Mylar I think.

HSJ: Mylar, yes. It sounds very interesting with the wind together. People were not getting what it is. But they enjoyed what it is as art, the sculpture. It was a very literal work in a poetic way and it's not aggressive. But with wind, a flag is very political anyway. No matter what, it states, 'Acknowledge your country'. Everybody got it at the end, they enjoyed this gesture. I think it was pretty successful.

AD: I think it's interesting too because the problems that it's alluding to are problems that are created because of nationalism and because of these borders. And I can't help but think of it in a more contemporary way of all the photographs of the children lying under the Mylar blankets in the US border detention camps. I'm wondering, is this



something you would do again or in another context?

HSJ: I would. After that I noticed a lot of artists utilizing this flag form. Some artists even use the Mylar, the pattern embedded, this specific Mylar, like the American flag. So is it really worth doing it again? I don't want to repeat something somebody's done already. My initial response to these experiences was seeing these billions of American flags associated with totalitarianism, nationalism. At the same time, these artists are talking more about themselves. So that's my silent message to them.

AD: You brought this up a little bit before when you talked about objects that you use and appropriate that allude to South Korea and your background. Often to your experience growing up in the midst of, you mentioned military drills, suppression of free speech, and limited access to consumer goods. I'm curious about the notion of displacement in your work. This seems to really connect to how you take materials and put them where they're not supposed to be, particularly in something like *Bunker* (2013) or *Community* (2014)). In what way does your work deal with displacement conceptually, formally, or biographically?

HSJ: Displacement. I transform things into something else. My own displacement from this very culture of Korea into this culture. I had to assimilate at first. The assimilation process was there and if you call it displacement, I can call it that too. But that specific work, *Bunker*, is also my own experience. We have so many bunkers everywhere in Korea. Even though we don't recognize what they are, as children we played in abandoned bunkers everywhere. Because the war is still going on, it's not finished yet. So I was talking about functionality, how the functionality of desks can alter into a bunker because of these different political ideologies. As a kid, you have to experience this unwillingly. You're educated in this way, almost brainwashed -- I don't want to call it brainwashed -- and you become this person as an adult imbued with nationalism.

AD: What made me think about that with *Bunker* and *Community* as well was that you are taking material that's normally lining the floor, that's marking a space, and using that to cover something. So it's like either the carpet or the tile that we stand on is suddenly now a protective surface for furniture. Furniture keeps recurring again as well.

HSJ: I made a series of four works with the same process. Taking furniture or a pedestal or other things. I made *Community* during a residency in the Czech Republic for a month and a half or two months and at the end we had the group show. I was walking around in the crowd and looking around and talking to artist friends. I learned their history, what they achieved, and how they struggle with this history as well. I wanted to make a monument for the people, so the furniture was donated by the local community. To me, the furniture is very personal. You live with it. You spend most of your time at home and you touch it, always living around it. So it's very personal. But once it is outside of your household it becomes very strange. I wanted to collect those things as a



metaphor of the people and then put them together as a whole. I wanted to highlight the people, the community. That's what I did.

AD: I think that's so interesting because I used to live in New York City and I remember that it was so strange to be walking down the street when somebody was moving or they would just leave their furniture out on the street. And it is a kind of strange feeling when you encounter a desk by itself or a couch by itself. But to put them all together it takes on a very different form to see them together as a monument rather than these abandoned, formerly very personal objects scattered throughout the city.

HSJ: You have a very strong attachment to your own stuff, your furniture. Like I love this, I love that. Then when you decide to just put them outside...

AD: Yes, there's a sadness there, but there isn't a sadness when you put them all together as a monument.

HSJ: People always comment that there's a dark humor in there, a sadness. I don't know, maybe I'm a sad person.

AD: I wanted to ask you about the way you deal with police violence. There is much dark humor in the work, *Pied Piper* (2016) and *New Balance* (2016), especially given the fact they are alluding to children.

HSJ: As a kid I saw police authority, or government military, beating civilians to death in my country. We went through this struggle for democracy back in the 70s and 80s. I remember these things. Now that I am here in the United States, there is a lot of news about police beating black men, in some cases, beating them to death. That work, if you are referring to craftsmanship, I didn't even touch it.

AD: Obviously, it's very readymade!

HSJ: I bought a police baton from eBay, outsourcing as I try. It has been transformed into a functional musical instrument, a flute. I'm living in New York, so if you walk around the city you see police barricades everywhere. A way of controlling the people, the direction, the cars. There's always the idea of this whole process...it's controlling. Rather than just being controlling, *New Balance* (2016) looks like a children's seesaw but it is made with a police barricade, and the idea of balancing this authority.

AD: To transition to some of my last questions, I'm curious about *Change* (2016). That lives entirely in the everyday world, circulating as currency, lots of hands touch it, no one knows that it's art. How do you approach working in the public realm, outside of the gallery? And do you see this as a significant component of your practice or something you want to do more? And a related question, I wasn't sure which one was your percent



for art projects, so that's a second question, but we'll start with *Change* (2016).

HSJ: *Change*, you said, it is from the word, "change" [currency]. It is an interesting case because there's a homeless guy, I've seen him for at least 10 years, always in his regular spot. Whenever I pass by, his voice is like, "Change~ ." Sometimes I'm depressed because I have to take care of my baby at home when my art career is not going well, but ironically, when I hear the word "Change ~ , " this changes my mind. However, let me go back to this idea of value. What is value? what is money? To be honest, it's a number now, not even physical... For instance, if you talk about Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, almost everyone knows this specific work. But not everyone has seen it. It's information spinning around in the world. So it comes down to the physical work, how it functions. I want to do certain things, like, I want to address storytelling. I made this penny in gold, carefully colored it with oil paint. I spent it on the street. That is my exhibition, rather than having a physical work at the museum.

AD: I am also curious to know about your Percent for Art project at PS 339 in Woodside, Queens.

HSJ: That was for an elementary school in Queens, in Woodside. I won the competition that I applied for. My proposal was making this specific and kind of magical work for kids. I had this piece that I was selling a lot. I made specific works to sell -- this conceptual art, whatever, never sells. And as an artist I have to sustain myself. I made this very tiny work with a type press. It was a metal type press. I wanted to use a wooden one for the kids. It's very logical and kids don't know how this civilization has started. Text contributed a lot to our current civilization. Google is based on text and computing is based on text. I recreated this Google image out of wooden press parts. Kids like it.

AD: I have such a better understanding of your work now. That was very illuminating.

SH: In New York, some artists say this is a diaspora situation. It's a diaspora situation connected to displacement. I was curious as to why interested in these social comments. I understand your work not only as social commentary, but connected to your own life experience and to how you understand these surroundings. Another question: When I read your CV, I noticed you have participated in many international residencies in locations such as the Czech Republic, Tokyo, and the United States. I'd like to ask if residency programs give you opportunities to develop your own career through more open relationships with other artists. How do they impact your ideas overall?

HSJ: I've done so many. I've been called an artist residency guru, which I'm not supposed to be called. A residency is one of the ways of building your career, but it shouldn't be everything. I understand how the market works and the position of a



Korean artist not yet being highlighted in the market. Collectors and galleries don't consider Korean artists highly yet. A residency is a great way to meet people. I met a lot of great people. From those encounters I've been introduced to many other people as well. It is a good opportunity for artists and a great way to see yourself. If you're stuck in one place, it's hard to have an objective viewpoint. So I try to grasp that whenever I go away somewhere that is not familiar. When I am in a place where I feel very strange, I start thinking of other processes or other ideas.

HSJ: I want to add one line of Aristotle, he said "Human beings are by nature political animals." I am a politically exposed person, that is what I am doing now.

