

# AHL Foundation

## Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Sung Ho Choi
- Interviewer: Eleanor Heartney
- January 24, 2018 / AHL Foundation office in Chelsea, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Jeong-A Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2017-2018)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Eleanor Heartney (EH): What was the path that led you to New York?

Sung Ho Choi (SHC): I'm very lucky that I have parents who supported me as an artist. In Korea, maybe in America too, being an artist is not considered a favorable profession.

EH: Parents say, "You're going to starve to death!"

SHC: Yes, they do. They say you will be cold and starving as an artist. But my parents were very generous. I went to art school in Korea – Hong-Ik University – in 1973. I did military service for three years during my studies and I graduated in 1980. Most of my university professors were leaders of *Dansaekwha* – Park Seo-Bo, Ha Chongyun, and so on.

EH: Was that the kind of work you were making?

SHC: Well, they were very influential at the time. One of my professors, Mr. Im, was very encouraging about my work. I produced similar work that was monochromatic, minimalist art. I was working on nature-based subjects with hexagonal shapes using a transparent medium, to make crystalline impressions. In the later part of my college years, I decided to come to the United States to further my career. I went to Pratt in 1981 to study painting and printmaking.

EH: Did you find it was a very different kind of education?

SHC: I came to the United States because I wasn't satisfied with my education in Korea. At the time, many of my peers were imitating the trends of the Western art scene. Whatever they saw in an international art magazine, they would copy it right away. I didn't want to do that, because I didn't feel good about doing that. Around that time, photo-realism was very trendy. So was *Dansaekwha*.

EH: I think a lot of the Asian artists who I knew back in the Eighties were working out of photo-realism. It was a Western approach that seemed to fit in with their background.

SHC: The O.K. Harris Gallery showed photo-realism. But I was more on the side of monochromatic minimalist painting. That continued after I came to the United States. I did several years of similar work during my early years at school that was geometric and monochromatic painting.

EH: Then you started to use objects. What changed?

SHC: After I did geometric hard-edge, abstract art, I did black monochromatic drawings on objects. I started the series in 1983 when I went to the Bronx to the New York

Botanical Garden. I saw a huge tree trunk, several hundred years old and saw in the section of the trunk the lines representing every year. Several hundred years all there in age rings! I was deeply impressed by that. That night when I returned to my studio at school, I started drawing works similar to the rings, but not just copying the lines. On a black flat surface – cardboard or wood – I would draw with graphite. Graphite's shiny quality against black tempera which is very flat, gives a strong contrasting visual effect. I was so excited about this. At the time my professor was the sculptor Gillian Jagger and she was very encouraging and excited about my work, too. There's one particular work I made on a long piece of wood panel, 72 by 18 inches wide, which has an arc-shape formed with layered graphite lines. Most of the time I used found natural and discarded objects like driftwood, cardboard, but mainly I used slate. Around that time, Pratt was undergoing a renovation of its classrooms, and they were getting rid of all the blackboards on the classroom walls. I took the blackboards back to my studio because they seemed to fit my work. I loved that surface and the broken slate edges. I covered them with flat black tempera and used graphite. I was so excited with the outcomes and enjoyed working with slate. The works were still very abstract. I also made a huge round drawing shaped like a petrified tree trunk. Those works still resonate with me – but I stopped that series around 1986 when I graduated from Pratt. Many of my peers went back to Korea to become professors or pursue some other academic setting to teach, but as I said earlier, I didn't like the education system and art scene in Korea and there were also a lot of politics involved in getting into academia. I didn't have the confidence to adjust to that kind of setting.

EH: But also, while you were here you got to know other Asian artists and you became involved in activist groups.

SHC: That's around the time I gave up abstract painting, too. I had applied for my green card, adjusted my status, and got married. I had decided to stay in New York. I met many colleagues including Mo Bahc, Hye-Jung Park, who worked for the organization producing independent documentary films, then Um Hyuk from Canada and many other friends who were interested in contemporary and Korean progressive art. We started a study group in 1987. We read books about postmodernism, which was very popular at the time. The group was about five to ten people, and we would pick a textbook and a subject. Everyone would read it and one person would translate it. Once a month, we would meet to discuss it. The translator would hand out copies of the translation, people would correct it, and so on. We did that for a few years, maybe two or three years. As part of reading about postmodernism we became more interested in activism in New York. In the Eighties and early Nineties, there was a lot of conflict between the Korean-American and African-American communities.

EH: That was the time of Rodney King [Ed note: Los Angeles riots of April and May, 1992 following acquittal of police officers videotaped beating Rodney King].

SHC: I think that was a little later. Korean-American immigrants grew in population after 1965 with the revision of the Immigration and Naturalization Act [note: The Hart-Celler Act of 1965 abolished a quota system of migration based on national origin] and particularly in the Eighties. More Koreans came here. They went to all sorts of neighborhoods to open their own businesses and came into conflict with the community.

EH: Well, the neighborhoods they could afford were the ones often in more troubled areas. I came to New York in '83.

SHC: Right. There was already the Red Apple incident [note: Family Red Apple boycott of 1990-91 which was the African-American boycott of a Korean-American owned shop, Family Red Apple, in Brooklyn following an assault of a Haitian woman by the shopkeeper]. Then comes 1993 and the Rodney King assault. So many such incidents. I came to know groups of minority artists, such as Godzilla, a pan-Asian group, and Latino artist groups. There was a booming solidarity between the Asian-American and minority artists groups. We organized several exhibitions as Artists Against Racial Prejudice after the boycott because New York City was bubbling with this racial tension. We held shows such as *The Mosaic of the City* [note: *The Mosaic of the City: Artists Against Racial Prejudice*, July 1- July 28, 1990, Center for Art & Culture of Bedford-Stuyvesant], *Public Mirror* [note: *CommunNYCations: Public Mirror: Artists Against Racial Prejudice*, September 13 – October 7, 1990, The Clocktower, MoMA PS1] and *Marginal Majority* [note: *Marginal Majority: Artists Against Racial Prejudice*, April-August, 1991, Aaron Davis Hall, The City College of New York].

EH: These shows all had a political orientation expressing the desire for inclusivity and you said that your work changed as a result.

SHC: They were about race. I had focused on work dealing with the issue of race from around 1987 or 1988. I made work about immigrant related issues. Godzilla organized in 1990, earlier than SEORO (note: SEORO (서로) Korean Cultural Network) which was founded in August 1990. Korean-Americans needed a very progressive cultural group.

Around that time in 1987, Mo Bahc had opened his gallery, Minor Injury, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. After graduating, I was looking for studio space and Greenpoint had very cheap rent. I talked to Il Lee first about the space, because he had a studio in SoHo which he found too expensive. I took both Il Lee and Mo Bahc to the studio space in Greenpoint. We liked the space. It was a huge factory building with nothing in it except a few artists' spaces. So we took the space and worked together to build internal walls, wire it and add piping for water. There weren't a lot of artists around at that time. Chan Seung Chung came to New York around that time looking for a studio space and I linked him to a real estate guy so he got a space there too. Once Minor Injury opened, more artists came and then Greenpoint became an artistic neighborhood like Williamsburg, the next town. I know Jimmie Durham is having a show at the Whitney now

(note: *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World*, November 3, 2017-January 28, 2018, Whitney Museum of American Art). I remember he was in a group show at Minor Injury.

EH: It wasn't just about Korean artists?

SHC: Minor Injury was a gallery for local minority artists, not just for Korean American artists. The members of SEORO also organized many exhibitions and many seminars. SEORO wasn't just a fine art organization. We covered literature and music, too. We worked from 1990 to 1994.

EH: Why did SEORO come to an end?

SHC: The members of SEORO had their own personal issues which made it difficult for them to continue the activities of SEORO. Mo Bahc went to Korea as he had planned, for a job. Then I had a serious personal tragedy. At the time, *Across the Pacific* (note: *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean-American Art*, 태평양을 건너서: 오늘의 한국 미술, October 15, 1993- January 9, 1994, Queens Museum of Art, August 23-September 23, 1994, Kumho Museum of Art) had opened at the Queens Museum of Art. SEORO had proposed the show – I have all the proposals and other related documents. The Queens Museum tried to find a place for the show to travel within the U.S. but couldn't get the funds matched. The show moved to Korea in the following year to the Kumho Museum of Art. That was the only venue. Jane Farver went to Korea for the show. I went to Korea with all my family for the show. But my wife was very exhausted with running her business and she couldn't come back to the U.S. with me. Worst of all, I had to leave my children, too. That separation was my tragedy. I came back to the U.S. alone and in that state, I couldn't continue with my activities.

EH: Maybe it was also time for SEORO to naturally cease its activities. *Across the Pacific* didn't get to travel nationally, but it was the first show for Korean-American artists. That's where I first saw your work. It was held at a moment when the art world was turning towards investigations of different cultures. The show helped to spark a lot of attention to this cause in the mainstream art world. After that, those artists became more visible outside of the Korean-American community.

SHC: I believe *Across the Pacific* influenced the Asia Society to start looking at contemporary art. Before that show, they were looking at more traditional Asian art. But afterwards, they believed they should follow a new direction. So they hired Margo Machida to organize *Asia/America* [note: *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, February 16-June 26, 1994, Asia Society] the following year. That show was so successful. It traveled all around the nation, compared with *Across the Pacific*.

EH: Still, it was a step forward. One step leads to another, creating an environment where people are very interested in Asian art. The Asia Society show was also pan-Asian; perhaps that was part of the reason it was able to travel more.

SHC: Since then, there have been a lot of exhibitions related to Asian-American art.

EH: Let's talk about the concept of Asian-American art. I know within *Godzilla* there was a lot of struggle with that issue, being Asian-American as opposed to being a Chinese artist or a Japanese artist or a Korean artist. Your work is very much about that hyphenated identity. Your work is about someone who comes from elsewhere and observes America. It is about America but from a very particular point of view. Part of that comes from your own experience. How did being an immigrant affect the kind of work you were doing?

SHC: Since 1986, I have been looking at Korea from here, so some of the work I made dealt with issues in Korea or were related. For example, my work, *My America*, 1996, and *Their Korea*, 1994, relate to each other. *My America* is composed of images from different media such as American magazines and movies. It is a ceramic tile mural in the shape of a jigsaw puzzle, and it is my personal view of America. *Their Korea* is about misinterpreted images of Korea in historical photographs and documents, TV programs such as M\*A\*S\*H and is also in the shape of a puzzle, and it is 'their' view of Korea. You said hyphenated identity, and it is true, my life was changing. I couldn't continue with abstract art with this change of lifestyle. I had to make money. I got a job at a Korean grocery store and I found myself dealing with conflict around me. It affected me so much that I had to look at myself as an immigrant and also look at America's history of racial issues. I did work referencing the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights movement. In *Centrifugal*, 1999, I used hand signs citing those used in Jim Crow signs that would segregate whites and blacks. As a citizen of America, I am alienated from my mother country, Korea, but I still think about it. In *A countries*, 1990, where the Korean flag is surrounded by the four superpowers, Russia, China, Japan and America, with the background image representing the chaotic situation in Korea. My works deal with issues from both the countries I lived in. I am looking at Korea from America and vice versa.

EH: Your work has very serious content, but often it is funny and witty. The roulette wheel, for example, shows you find a way to present the topic with humor.

SHC: I use very mild humor, not attacking, aggressive humor. It may be my nature. I want to be a 'good citizen', not be destructive or angry. I think people are more interested in something funny.

EH: It's more persuasive that way, too. I also want to talk about the kind of objects you use, such as lottery tickets.

SHC: Starting in the Eighties I used kimchi jars, newspaper clippings and my immigration suitcases because they are materials I am dealing with everyday. It's the same with the lottery tickets. While strolling New York City streets I saw a lot of immigrants lining up to buy lottery tickets, dreaming they would become millionaires. The first work I made in 1993, I pasted the lottery tickets on a panel, and I wrote with ballpoint 'American Dream' (*American Dream*, 1993). I didn't continue the series then. In 2005, Exit Art had an open call for an exhibition about America, and I submitted it and they chose that piece (*Other America*, 2005). Many of my works become recurring in this way.

EH: It's also because the issues come back, but they come back in a different way. For example, your work has a long time focus on immigration and the experience of being an immigrant showed a certain picture of America, and I feel like we are in a very strange moment right now, politically, where suddenly both of those concepts – being an immigrant and what makes someone an American – have been hijacked. Your work has always addressed those topics. Do you feel that your art can talk about some of those changes where immigrants are suddenly being seen as the enemy and Americans are only the ones who are white people living in the Midwest? The picture of America as a beautiful mosaic seems to be under attack.

SHC: In the beginning when I was making the works in *America* it was because of my personal life changes around 1987. While the series is still ongoing, my interests have changed. Now I do photography or I make my *Genusham* works. With this series, I use fashion brands such as Gucci or Hermès. I recently read again your article "Recreating Sturtevant" on an appropriation artist, and I think we are doing similar things. [Note: Eleanor Heartney, "Recreating Sturtevant," *Art in America*, November 2014]. I use fashion brands but I'm trying to change it in some way. My latest work looks like Hermès scarves but I am slightly changing them and trying to relate them to colonialism, such as the context of how Western culture came to the Americas from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the Catholics and Aztecs conflict. The younger generation is very sensitive to famous brands. I am making a commentary on that. It isn't just fashion that is impacted by that. For example, in Korea, if someone graduated from Harvard, he is looked at without any skepticism as to any claims to genius. He's from Harvard, so of course, he is a genius. Society has made people blindly follow these brands. I am not sure how I can describe my new project. I changed the logo of Louis Vuitton into Louise Witton. I'm still experimenting. I like to explore the area between what is seen as original and what is seen as fake through fashion. My works look like fakes.

EH: There is a thread going from your earlier work through to this because isn't this a question of how to create an identity? An immigrant creates an identity through blending the influences of their original country and their new country. People also create an identity by blending all these things they buy. Both methods are about creating an

identity and whether it is real or not.

SHC: I try to go for different reasons to find what my identity is, maybe. I am not sure what I am looking for. Maybe all my artistic career could be a fantasy. I don't know what is real or not. One of my biggest life-changing moments was when I did a series of works called *Forever Young*, 2011. It is a big lottery ticket based work on five different wood panels covering the ten Korean traditional symbols of longevity. I used glitter for effect. In 2011, I lost my son in a traffic accident. He wanted to become an artist like me. My life was changed by that. I created two additional works for him, *Mountain God*, 2014, and *Repose*, 2015. Since then, I have lost a little bit of motivation to continue my art. This March will be the seventh anniversary of his death. I have continued to create *Counting Up*, 2010, since 2010. I take a picture of myself every morning in the same setting and same light. That's going to be a life-long project. But I feel like I've lost the past several years. Maybe *Genusham* is my way of asking what is the meaning of art, or even what is real? It's also a reflection of my disappointment in the art scene, at artists around me. It's not just about fashion, it is about everything around me. Human relationships, society, and my own psyche.

EH: It's not just you. There's a lot of discussion about that in the world of social media, whether people are authentic anymore. These kinds of relationships people have on social media, are they real relationships? How all of us relate to the world has changed in a very dramatic way.

SHC: I'm questioning even the art education I received. The professors I learned from in college were artists who went to Japan to study art. My professors' Japanese professors went to Europe to learn Western art. A Japanese professor learned Western art from Europe and then taught my professor in Japan, then I learned art from my professor in Korea, so did I get the right education? Am I fake or real?

EH: Well, this is a midlife crisis. We all get there.

SHC: This is what is driving my fake/real project now.

EH: You've done a lot of public artworks, some significant pieces. Do you find your approach has to be very different?

SHC: My public art is about being a good citizen. I like to see a harmonious, nice, good society. I don't want that environment to change. I like to make artwork that really makes other people think. Politicians fight each other over very stupid things. I want to make good art that reminds people to think about why they would do something negative or stupid. Maybe it's too politically correct.

EH: You like to be positive.



SHC: I like making positive art. Why should I make very aggravating art that doesn't make you feel good? I should make art that is beneficial to society.

EH: You don't do angry art. You want to create a vision of what the world can be.

SHC: Right. In my art, I deal with environmental issues, racial issues, and all kinds of things. Western culture influencing Eastern culture. Powerful people oppressing the weak. I like to speak about these things and public art is a good fit for me. I wanted to do as much public art as I could. Luckily for me, I got commissioned by the New York City Percent for Art to create two permanent murals. One is *My America*, 1996, the other is *American Pie*, 1996. In both, I talk about multiculturalism and America. Another one is an outdoor installation called *Morning Calm*, 1999, in Seattle. This work addresses the separation of North and South Korea, where the two Koreas are floating on the water. The park in Seattle [note: Sandpoint, Magnuson Park, Seattle] was previously a US Navy yard which had sent battleships to the Korean War. While strolling the barracks of the Navy yard, I was thinking about the separation of the two Koreas. The two Koreas are drifting on water and the wind makes them connect, or not. They float freely. Korea used to be known as the Land of Morning Calm. Not anymore. Perhaps this was more of an ironic or sarcastic reflection on present-day Korea.

EH: But again, it's still a gentle approach. Can you separate out what is American about your work and what is Korean about your work? Is it even possible at this stage?

SHC: I feel like I'm an orphan. Many people commonly say, "Korea is my mother country," but this is my adopted country. I go back and forth, but when I go to Korea, that country is not the country I used to live in anymore. It's changed. I feel very isolated. Here, I'm not fully integrated into society. This is a very ambiguous situation. I don't know. I'm drifting.

EH: You're like the two floating Koreas.

SHC: Right. I think maybe that ambiguity could be my strength. Let's see. That's why I keep questioning this Western culture that came here several hundreds of years ago and how it influenced America. I try to explore the Catholic or religious missionaries who first came to Korea. Korea is very Christian now and traditional values are disappearing. It's chaotic, but I like to observe it. Like the lottery tickets or the kimchi jars, I want to keep finding elements for my art.

EH: And use it in a way that has multiple meanings.

SHC: In my statement I said that I am trying to connect all things. I want to be like an alchemist. I am trying to blend all the different elements. I am trying to make something

valuable out of them. I have a long way to go. It is very frustrating. It's like being in a desert. It's difficult. That's why I try to pursue a more balanced life now. I exercise, I do calligraphy, I teach. I want to enjoy my life, too.