

# AHL Foundation

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

- Interviewee: Myung Gyun You
- Interviewer: Suzy Taekyung Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2018-2019)
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- Recorded and Transcribed by Suzy Taekyung Kim
- Edited by Jiyoung Lee (AKAA Senior Research Fellow) & Katie Yook (Project Coordinator, AHL Foundation)
- 15 Video files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Suzy Taekyung Kim (STK): I am very happy to meet with you and learn about your art practice. Before talking about the artworks and your practice, can you share how you began art in Korea and your time in Japan as an art student?

Myung Gyun You (MGY): In Korea, after I completed my bachelor's degree I started as an emerging artist. I was lost and decided to pursue a degree and I got my Master's degree in Japan.

In Japan, I had the opportunity to learn more about Korean contemporary art. Because, after all, modern art is considered a product of Western history, and maybe Asia is in a position to participate in the greater flow of history? Anyway, Korea is very close geopolitically and historically to Japan, and in particular, the special point where modernization started in the context of a former colony, I conversely examined Korea from a Japanese perspective and had a chance to have a more diverse view on Korean contemporary art.

While I was in Japan I learned about Korea and myself. Despite the geographically close proximity, I noticed modernization in Korean art was slow compared to Japan. I learned more about the modernization of Japanese art and in the process of understanding that, it also worked as a mirror to reflect upon art in Korea. I stopped my art practice and started again around 1996.

STK: How did you overcome that break after moving back to Korea?

MGY: I was living in Tokyo for 8 years and the first 5 years were a continuous struggle. I was very much distanced from the art scene back in Korea. When I returned to Korea after spending 8 years in Japan, I had a hard time adjusting to my own culture. Even after returning to Korea, I had to focus on making a living for my family. During this time, I was able to make public artworks, which can be viewed negatively in Korea. I paid off the debt. However, after a long period of silence and giving up being an artist, an opportunity suddenly opened up to me.

One of the commercial galleries in Seoul, A Gallery, offered me a solo show. This exhibition brought special meaning to me. Through this exhibition, I was able to follow the path of an artist again. This was my first solo show and I began another chapter in Korea. As I was preparing the show, I scanned the present art movements and realized the trends in art dealt with political or social issues focusing on the role of society, not necessarily about the individual. There was an emergence of biennials. On the other hand, the current art scenes are more open to the individualized worlds of artists. Also, art shows are more event-based.

In other words, I believe that art is a creative act that is produced in the process of finding the essence of the world and the true self, breaking away from any notion of universal concepts or legacies of mankind. I was confronted with this conflict or

embarrassment between my personal thoughts on art and the currents of contemporary art that were oriented toward social functions, I fell into a deep dilemma. I couldn't make anything for a while but then I started practicing my art because I was given a chance to explore the market in China during that time. I felt limited in the Chinese market without sharing much of my own artistic world. As all artists experience closer to their shows, fear of showing caused much delay in production. I had to do something and I finally went up to the mountain where a lot of the unemployed were staying. I spent much of my time there, and started consistently sketching. Finally, I was able to find "something". No relation to Impressionism but I saw light, then came insects, insects going through metamorphosis. I experienced the heavy weight of trees, tornadoes, and nature.

STK: When did you decide to move to the US permanently?

MGY: In 2012, I had a group show, *Korean Eye*, in London and coincidentally my mother passed away. With my mother's death, I decided to move to the US. I had no plan. I knew nobody. I started residency programs to get away from my everyday routine because I didn't have enough money to settle down in New York. The first city I came to was New York City. I started my life homeless, sleeping on the street and in art studios. After a severe winter in NY, I moved to the South. With \$3500, I bought my car, which was both my main vehicle and sleeping pad. There were a lot of problems but I used to work as a truck driver in Japan at one point so I could easily fix the car and update the parts.

STK: Your move to the US was your start of a nomadic life. How did you survive?

MGY: As I was touring the US from residency program to residency program, I had a chance to live in Georgia in 2018. Also, I was participating in a residency program and I was wandering around nature a lot. I had a strong impulse to collect fragments of the earth and use them as the main material in my artworks. In Arizona, I was able to live approximately 3 months. I became friends with the small villagers and retired artists. Because of its geographical location, I became one with nature. I thought of On Kawara's works. I became more curious about the evolution of earth, history, and mankind.

In other words, if On Kawara's work narrated the history of mankind, I think I can say that I saw a more primal part of nature, perhaps the existence of a universe that transcends time, and the infinite space beyond the existence of mankind.

If I call On Kawara's sphere to be the history of earth, I was able to see the history of the universe and furthermore, the existence of humankind became an emotional matter rather than a factual entity.

Last year I participated in an individual residency program, Thicket Ucross Residency run by Ucross Foundation in Wyoming. I discovered coal mining and it was drastically different from the mining in Korea. I came across various forests. I was led to Nebraska. I built a bridge over the lake and lived there for a bit while constructing the bridge.

With all of these experiences in the Midwest and South, I understood the prehistoric existence of giant forests. Upon the explosion of Yellowstone and the layers of all the geographical stratum, all kinds of existences derived from the “forest”.

STK: Your earlier works also relate to forest. Very renowned art critic of modern art, Chiba Shigeo, once called you “a person who came from the forest.” Was he an important figure in your art career?

MGY: Chiba Shigeo has been observing my work since a long time ago in Japan and is one of those people who have been watching me to this day. Also, in 1996, he selected me as a participating artist for an important exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, where he introduced Korean art to Japan. Since then, he and I have shared many thoughts and opinions about my work. Perhaps, it can be said that he is the critic who has the closest and most profound understanding of my work.

After spending much time in Japan, I returned to Korea and did not make any work, Chiba was looking for me to include me in the show, “Modern Art in Korea.” Chiba was preparing this show for the last 3 years and with my inclusion, I was able to ease into the Korean art scene.

STK: How do you store all your works while you live a nomadic lifestyle?

MGY: I don’t have a permanent studio. I live and work in my car so I spend much of my time in public libraries. I relocated myself from the storage in Philadelphia. During the time I was spending in Nebraska, I made large scale works for the show in New York but I had to discard everything due to storage difficulties. I ended up throwing away my artworks after taking photos of them. I don’t have enough space at this moment. Due to the combination of storage and studio space, I think about possible projects constantly and if necessary I sketch and document on my computer.

I avoid giving my work away or putting them in someone else’s storage. It is meaningful for me to keep them as part of my memory; I don’t like treating the artworks as if they are second hand or used objects.

STK: As much as your work derives from your very unique lifestyle, your work reveals greater and universal aspects. What are your inspirations and how is your lifestyle affecting the artwork?



MGY: I do not belong to any specific society because humans have consistently moved and migrated. The stereotype of the state may be the product of a specific political group. For example, Native Americans from North and South America are believed to have migrated from Asia across Alaska to North and South America. I think that the reality of evolution and the flow of diverse cultures that have flowed through the long history of mankind is deeply embedded in the genes that exist inside of me. Perhaps I continue my artistic practice as a means of escaping from systems and notions, and to find my life, freedom of thought, and ultimately my real substance.

I rarely interact with society, my work does not require a bridge to certain cultures or themes. My work is myself and I am unified with my artwork. There isn't any mediator between the work and the creator and my life. On the other hand, artists invent their own unique languages to portray certain cultures or societal and political issues. Society comes in as a stepping stone for these artists to represent and translate what artists are trying to express. However, in my case, I don't have a mediating connector. I am living as part of nature and the spontaneous encounters that I experience with nature are fully expressed in my work.

During the in-between times from residence program to residence program, I usually do not have any place to go and live in my car. In between residences, I spend the majority of my day in national/municipal parks and park my car at gas stations at night. I used to spend a lot of time in Utah. One day, I was passing by I-70 highway and the car stopped in the middle of the night. I managed to park my car in the parking lot at one of the national parks. I had a revelational experience. Surrounded by complete darkness, I stepped out of the car. All of sudden all the trees appeared to be giant arms caressing me. The entire forest engulfed my body as if the whole mountain was fondling just me. When I woke up in the morning, I drove all the way up the mountain and in fact I was at the peak of the mountain. I looked down and saw the layers of life and stratum after stratum. These thousands of square kilometers of the earth's surface struck my eyes and possessed my existence. Some animals drifted by but with no human presence, I was in the center of the universe and the weight and the colors of the earth suppressed my body and turned it into a puff of debris. I experienced complete lightness even in the absence of my body, almost to the extent of death. This experience of death is a continuous source of inspiration for my work.

STK: Due to the size of your work, I associate your pieces with public artwork. *Photosynthesis*, 2011 at Fort Zachary Taylor Historic State Park in Key West is an exemplary piece for its presence as a public artwork. Do you have any plans to make more public art in the future?

MGY: Yes, I would love to make public art. I like using recycled materials for site-specific public art works. I had a funny incident during my residency in Key West. When I first started the project, I ordered 600 pieces of 2' x 4' wood boards, 2" x 4" x 15' lumber and



people could not trust me to order the materials I needed for this project. People thought I was out of my mind to order 600 pieces of wood board. Lumber imposed a danger to the people because of the nature of how the park is used. They did not approve my materials until four days before the opening and due to my persistent requests for the materials, they finally brought them. I asked for 2 additional assistants and 2 ladders. As a result, I finished the large scale road resembling a Japanese temple walkway several hours before the opening. The scale of this particular piece was colossal. I put lamplights along the ceiling of the walkway to signify the rebirth of self from an old-self as you walk along the way. It was during January and Key West was full of strong rays of sunlight. The reflection of the sculpture itself illuminated and glowed like the sun.

STK: I can relate to the difficulties you go through to realize a large scale work in such a limited time period. How about other works? Can you share some of your process?

MGY: Most of the time, I have a difficult time beginning. I always start with a thorough sketch and I only propose artworks that are possible to realize. For instance, in 2013, I received the Artist Fellowship from Socrates Sculpture Park. I prepared the sketch using CAD to be more accurate with measurements. The work had a narrow bottom to give the illusion of barely standing on the ground. The panelists rejected it due to the potential danger to the public. The East River had just experienced Hurricane Sandy. I assured them that despite strong gusts of wind or even a hurricane, my design would be able to withstand the elements. In the end I had to modify the design to complete it. During the time of completion, I snuck into the park and made a small room for myself underneath my work and slept there for several nights.

Suzy: It is very fascinating to hear about each of your works and your process. What are your plans for the future?

MGY: I am going back to Wyoming in April. I would love to get in touch with the director from one of the coal mining companies. I want to utilize the actual earth and coal from the mining industry without having to deal with social or political issues. In recent years, the coal industry is considered a major cause of global warming, and there are conflicts with environmental movement organizations and agencies. I hope the permission process will go smoothly. I made several sketches for this particular coal mining project. I invented some pigments and colors for this work out of acrylic medium bounded with commercial grade pigments combined with earth and coal. I predict this material will last at least several hundred years.

STK: Your artwork delivers a heavily spiritual aspect. It is almost like a revelation to me, as if another being is exiting from your work. From your stories, it occurs to me that your nomadic lifestyle happened both naturally and unwillingly but at the same time, you are embracing it in order to create art. Art that exists beyond the existing art world and in our contemporary art diaspora.

MGY: The biggest lesson I have learned from this nomadic life in the US is related to meditation and continuous thought chains. There are unexpected accidents such as ending up in the emergency room. I don't have anyone to talk to so I learned to think for myself and arrive at the best results, remedies, or decisions on my own. I am constantly in search of myself asking why I am going where I am going as an artist. This search for new meaning in myself is my life journey. Finding nature and nature's meaning in life and art are the luckiest moments for me. I have come to the conclusion that I need to live my fate truthfully without resistance and that way I can fully live life in the "right" way.

Starting with the residency in Wyoming in April, I will go to Nebraska back to Wyoming, Connecticut, Philadelphia, and Tennessee until mid-December this year, and finally Korea. In 2020, I really hope to come back to New York. At first when I arrived in New York for good back in early 2010, I was hiding in street corners. When I come back in 2020, I want to be back with my own place in New York City. From my past experiences in Japan and Korea and this journey in the States, I believe that I cannot rush or bypass the experiences I have to experience. When I truly live in the moment that is given to me, I do my best to live slowly and patiently and in the end, everything will come together and resolve with the best results. I tend to think hopefully. Art comes in as I live my life fully and honestly, as my art and my journey are unified. My art is not just art but my life. I come to this life as a speck of the universe and I have to be sincere. Before categorizing my work as art, I earnestly long to represent the absolute truth. The very act of making art is the act of expressing my existence and my life. Unifying life and art and translating this real life experience into art is my job.

I rely on residencies as a key tool for my survival and I am deeply thankful to the United States for providing me with this essential tool to survive. I have always loved my life and I never parted with art. To maintain art as the only path in my life, I worked in various jobs, I lived anywhere, I drove trucks, I worked in restaurants. Among all these real experiences, I never gave up on art. Along the way I had dreams of becoming an art professor at art institutes then went downhill again. I worked as a construction worker to sustain myself as an artist. When I came to the states I knew it was my last chance to realize my art as my life. I am very determined and I will be back in New York, in 2020!