AHL Foundation
Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Sungrok Choi
- Interviewer: Hyewon Yi
- February 16, 2022 / SUNY College at Old Westbury, NY
- Recorded and Transcribed by Jiyoung Lee (AKAA Research Fellow)
- 1 Video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Hyewon Yi (HY) : It's really great to have this opportunity to interview you. I haven't really interviewed you before. My name is Hyewon Yi and I am the Director of the Amelie Wallace Gallery at SUNY Old Westbury. Can you introduce yourself?

Sungrok Choi (SC): I am Sungrok Choi and I am a digital artist. I live and work in Seoul, South Korea.

HY: When I met you—I think it was in 2011—you were finishing up your education at Carnegie Mellon University, and I know you got your BFA degree at the Hong-ik University and studied painting, and then you changed directions with your art and education when you came to the US. Can you talk about that turning point within your artistic career? When did you decide to study electronic media and what was your experience at Carnegie Mellon University?

SC: When I was a senior in the Hong-ik University, I was trying to make something that was not based on canvas, which is a very important material for painting. I didn't like the form of the canvas. But I also didn't want to make any kind of oil painting. I made a lot of drawings and installations using mixed media. So after I graduated, I started as an installation artist and I used many found objects to make massive installations. Then I had a chance to join an exhibition in collaboration with some scientists.

HY: In Korea?

SC: Yes, in Korea. Before the exhibition, I made a small animation. I had to learn or study animation tools such as Adobe After Effects. From that point, I was really interested in making moving images, not aesthetic installation or drawing, so I wanted to study more. I worked with many programmers who program microcontrollers.

HY: Is this while you are studying at Hong-ik?

SC: No, after graduation. This was for my first exhibition in Seoul.

HY: You said 'microcontroller'?

SC: Yes. It is like an electronic part that moves the machine and wheels.
Then while I was preparing the exhibition, I was frustrated. Every part of the installation was very hard to get to move. After the exhibition ended, I decided to study more. After I got married, I decided to go to the States.

HY: So, how many years did you spend completing the undergraduate program?

SC: 4 years. The reason why I went to Carnegie Mellon University, there were many professors who worked with electronic media and research very interesting programs. They also have very good studios with manufacturing systems. That was cool. While I was there, I studied not only

technologies but also critical thinking when I made art. I studied philosophy and read about critical theories.

HY: Which professor or class influenced your thinking the most?

SC: Andrew Johnson. He was my main advisor. He was very influential. Not only as an artist but also as a good professor.

HY: A great mentor to you.

SC: Yes. I really liked his attitude and way of thinking. I actually met with him yesterday after 10 years. He is now 62 years old.

HY: I think that was a real turning point for your career, having spent your time in Pittsburgh studying at Carnegie Mellon, and also building this kind of mentorship with your professor. You're also teaching right now, so I think that must have been great to have good mentorship from Andrew Johnson. So, after you graduated from Carnegie Mellon, I know your first exhibition, besides your BFA show at school, was with the AHL Foundation in 2011, right?

SC: Yes, I was in the second year.

HY: Second year? And you were the winner of the competition.

SC: Yes it was 2011. I was in my last semester. I still remember, there was a ceremony and I realized that we were going to have a baby on the same day of the award ceremony! The ceremony was happening at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery. It was a really good experience.

HY: Wasn't it at the Art Gate Gallery?

SC: No, I mean the award ceremony. I remember Doho Suh's piece in the back of the gallery room.

HY: That's right. It's been almost 10 years since you returned to Korea. You came back to the US this year, and now you have this exhibition at Amelie Wallace Gallery showing six major works made since 2015. Let's talk about your recent body of work. I would like to ask you about the relationship between this concept of the screen. You said that you don't like this idea of oil painting on a canvas, but ironically, I think as a digital media artist you always deal with this rectangular screen as a kind of frame, like a place where you put your images, although the screen can change depending on the exhibition space. While I have been looking at your work, I have noticed your very conscious way of dealing with the screen. I don't know if you have ever thought about the idea of the screen itself.

Because some of your work has a very static screen that has a fixed composition, and within that composition things happen, like *Great Chain of Being*. Then you have other works that turn

that static screen into a dynamic journey, like *Scroll Down Journey*. So you have a different way of creating and using the screen either statically or moving within the static composition, you have stories unfolding and so on. So how do you compose the screen? Like, how do you compose your image within that rectangular frame? Do you think about the relationship between the screen and the viewer?

SC: I often realized while I studied painting that most visual art fits in the square format. I mean It's hard to see art in a circle or triangle shaped frame. The square format is the best way of showing something. Just like when you start making a canvas, we have a photograph and now we have a video and every screen has a square format.

HY: Rectangular, right?

SC: Yes. Everytime I make an animation or video, it feels like I'm making a painting. Even though it is moving, I still have to think about it aesthetically, just like a painting. One of my works is in the format of a panel painting from the mid-18th century. That's why I used a rectangular format for my artwork.

HY: I think it's something quite unique when it comes to your work. I'd like to shift the question towards this idea of navigating a space. I think it's a term or concept in video games, and in your work you mentioned that you are a first generation user of video games or computer games who experienced both analog and digital media. So my question is, in a work like *Stroll, Scroll and Sight* there is this similarity to *Scroll Down Journey*. There is one person walking slowly, it's a nice moving image. Within the video game, there are a lot of different kinds of moves. One is moving very slowly, while other fighting games tend to be very quick and violent in a very fixed way of enacting the motions between characters. I am just curious, what sort of video games you might have referenced for this type of navigable space that you are using for your work.

For example, 90s video games such as Myst and Doom. Myst had a slow-paced journey of mystery and Doom had fast-paced games killing monsters. In terms of speed and direction of movement, your work seems to be influenced by these video games. I would like to learn more about the factors of influence. Another question is about perspective: first-person, second-person, and third-person. You unfold the story by utilizing strategies of video games. It will be great if you can talk about this in detail.

SC: Yes, there is 'Myst', but there is also a game like World of Warcraft, a very historical game which I'm still playing. Players often hunt objects in the game, or they are able to catch objects that attack the player. It is like the meaning of existence in the game within such a landscape, that is, simply existing without a purpose. I think this explains what a contemporary virtual landscape is. Of course, there is time in the game. When the sun rises and sets, you experience time in a virtual space just like real time.

HY: You are referring to a specific story in a game?

SC: Yes, it's a story that takes place in a real game. The scenes I experience there, and in it, I can actually see directly the scene in front of me, I can see from above from a third-person point of view, and I can adjust the virtual avatar's point of view as I wish. People experience this kind of thing even though this is a staged narrative. For example, you can actually see and control the real world while using drones. I was very interested in advanced technologies that can adjust things.

Through that, we are experiencing more and more of the real and virtual worlds and eventually our real world is getting into the digital world. When we try to relocate somewhere, we heavily rely on our smartphones. If you want to meet someone, you have to text, or look at the map on your phone. I'm interested in that kind of process and interaction. One of my works, *Stroll, Scroll and Sight* is an example that shows how I try to make a work, thinking about how everything will look to us. My work shows the movement of people just walking around the world from three points of view. It shows the visual meditative movement and floating movements from three different viewpoints.

HY: And you made digital painting utilizing the views from a drone. What was the motivation for using drone shots in your work?

SC: When I was at Carnegie Mellon University, I discovered a lot of those points where technology, art, and industry connect. At that time, there was an issue with how the US military used drones in warfare and the ethical and moral standards, etc. And people talked about how and how long we can use this kind of technology. After I returned to Korea, a drone company called DJI made such drones popular. People could control a drone, and they could shoot the movement from the viewpoint as they wanted.

HY: Didn't you need to get permission to use drones in the military area and Seoul in Korea?

SC: I don't think that the restriction was crazily strict.

HY: When was it?

SC: It was around 2015. So people found a lot of interesting points in my work. At that time, there were not many artists who made videos using drones. Now that it is popular, it is used a lot by artists, and I think that phenomenon is interesting. As technology becomes popular at some point, various discussions about the use of drones arise. At first, I was very interested in the phenomenon that the issue of using drones was tightly tied to ownership and legal rights and then all the matters suddenly spread and disappeared.

HY: Now, let's talk about your most special work, *Great Chain of Being*. You made the first version in 2019 for an exhibition at Gallery Chosun, then expanded it to a full second version and exhibited it on the outdoor media façade of Paradise City resort in Incheon and its gallery space. It has a very interesting ancient philosophical idea in the concept. How did you develop the idea of making that work?

SC: At that time, there was a situation with technology and its development. It's like how artists make artworks by using drones, and then what kind of world we experience in the next stage due to new technology appearing. After 3D printers and AI robots came out, I actually started making robots. Looking at such a situation, I thought about what the 'elements' that make up this world were. What would it look like if those elements were to replace or create humans, that is, to create a version of the world today within the hierarchy? Starting from a sci-fi imagination, I created a story in the system, not a reproduction like painting usually does. So, if my previous works simply had a strong mediative aspect, such as changing landscapes or changing viewpoints, this work had more narrative elements added. I created a scene where the beginning and intermediate processes of each of those elements, and then a cyclical structure such as circulation that disappears, takes place.

HY: And you collaborate with Johann Electric Bach, the electronic musician. Could you tell us how your collaboration began, has been continuing, and how important this collaboration is in your work?

SC: Johann Electric Bach was introduced to me by musician friends when I was making *Scroll Down Journey* in 2015. I wanted to add a city pop element and a lyrical element to the work. *Scroll Down Journey* seems a little dry, but in fact, it contains social issues that we all experienced together, such as the sinking of Sewol Ferry. I wanted to tell a story where the audience looked at the dry city but had a melodic mood in there. Johann Electric Bach is a songwriter who makes mashups sampling music and uploading it to YouTube. Mashup is music that takes other things and mixes them up. The friend's music is Korean style, meaning it contains the so-called 'ponggi'. There is a unique feeling of Korean culture. The work was also collected in art museums and displayed so many times. In a way, it can be said that it is my first major work! It has been exhibited in over 10 art galleries and museums. Johann Electric Bach and I got along well, so we continued to work after that.

HY: That's interesting. Many of your works relate to advanced technologies, for example, *A Dog in Motions* displays a robot dog in various yoga poses, modeled after the robot dog developed by Boston Dynamics. This independent animation is also part of your work *Great Chain of Being*. I am not sure if I can compare it to Auguste Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*, but Rodin turned many subjects within it into independent works such as *The Thinker*. I thought that you could turn smaller motifs into separate, independent animations out of your large magnum opus.

SC: I thought the same.

HY: Please tell us about *A Dog in Motions*.

SC: It was the time when I was working on the *Great Chain of Being.* Creatures made with robots, what are they? Mostly, robots are in human form. At that time, a dog robot came out from a company called Boston Dynamics. That move was fun for me. So, I inserted a dog into my work *Great Chain of Being*, and I started working on what I wanted to express with a dog.

There are 12 pictures of horses running in *The Horse in Motion* by Eadweard Muybridge. By overlapping images with the pictures, I represented the robot-dog running, and after making it, I thought about what it would be like to make some useless movements. Because some robotic animals have to always have a specific purpose, not just for entertainment. It's always for something such as military or industrial use. So I thought about what would be fun when I do something weird or perform meaningless actions, so I ended up thinking of a dog doing push-ups and yoga.

HY: Despite your highly technical and highly-esteemed concept, I feel like the work went back to the early animation stage, because early animations tried to express such simple motions. Muybridge's movement of horses, too, relates to it. In my interpretation, this work is associated with the early period of animation and its history.

SC: Yes it is.

HY: Let's talk about your most recent commissioned work, *Genesis Canyon*, the media façade work at Asia Culture Center, Gwangju. You've been making 2D animations until now, but this time you made a 3D animation using a simulator program. The process itself is complex and the landscape itself, that is, the landscape of the genesis, the beginning of the world, is the subject matter. It has a philosophical concept and is divided into three themes—light, fire and water Could you talk more about it?

SC: When the Asia Culture Center first contacted me to do the work, it was still during the pandemic so the exhibition was being held at an outdoor space and everyone wanted healing. With all the exhibition spaces closed, it was easier for people to access the work if it was displayed outside. But rather than simply making artwork, I wanted to do more contextual, site-specific work. I went to see the topography and the structure of buildings on the site of Asia Culture Center and thought about how to compose the artwork. I wanted to express the primitive natural elements like the fantasy of Disney animation. I wanted to show audiences the aeration myth that makes up this world. I borrowed elements like air, electricity, fire, water, and nature to create Disney animation-like characterizations, and showed metaphysical materials and aethers that people in the past believed. Interestingly, cryptocurrencies like Ethereum are conceptually related to aether when it was named. It was interesting to see the concept of a currency created only with data. Dollars are physical currencies, but since the concept of cryptocurrencies is only made of electricity generated from code and blockchain relationships, I borrowed that concept and made the artwork in the Disney style.

HY: A hand appears in it.

SC: It's the creative hand. I had that thought. So, after I decided to create the artwork, I did a lot of testing. Because the simulation itself has some physics in it. That is, we need to think about the speed at which lava flows, how slowly it spreads, or how many bubbles are formed as the water flows down. How fast does the water slow down and spread? We tested the same thing over and over again, and simulated it until we got what we wanted.

HY: What kind of simulation program do you use?

SC: It's called Flip Fluids. What's interesting is that computer calculations can create any natural phenomena. There is an infrastructure in which digital and image technologies perfectly replicate reality. The concept of randomness, which is used a lot in coding, is very important. It's a natural phenomenon, and the most common concept when simulating with a computer is randomness.

HY: It is such a spectacular work. When I look at it, it shows your interest in technology and science, but also there is a warning about nature. I felt your poetic, environmental justice message about not harming nature. You can feel that in *Operation Mole* as well. I would like to learn about your critical position and political view.

SC: On the contrary, I think that kind of thing disappears little by little.

HY: In your work?

SC: Yes. The fact that I had to work with a serious message as a subject was no longer fun. As an artist's obligation - it's like I'm a very important person in society. Of course, it is an important one. But I think entertainment is also important. I'm on the borderline. Should artists make socially engaged work? I don't really know. I still look at our society with a positive perspective, and although I work with the theme of technology, I'm still a visual artist who has a standard aesthetic aspect in terms of art. It's a thought I've had for a long time. In the end, as an artist who is also a human being, beauty and aesthetics are important.

HY: Still, you can't ignore the social and political references in your work. In *Operation Mole*, North Korea digs a tunnel, and a scientist underneath the American embassy in South Korea makes something appear. They seem to reflect reality humorously. When I saw *Operation Mole*, I was reminded of the recent movie *Don't Look Up*. At the end of the movie, the entire world is destroyed in an apocalypse, then, it goes back to the primitive world. That part of the movie is very similar to *Operation Mole*.
(laughs)

SC: It's similar to the *Great Chain of Being*. Good things and bad things are not exactly defined. For example, a monster was captured and lost, but he went back in and after that, now that I think about it, the next project is to be his rebirth, right? In the case of *Operation Mole*, he chases after him and does something, but he eventually survives. I would say it is a realistic but ironic situation.

HY: You have a sense of structure in your work. I don't think it is completely illogical or chaotic, but there is separation between the beginning and the end. The binary composition can be seen in *Great Chain of Being*. Unlike the wild, chaotic aspects of works by Jon Rafman, your work is a lot easier to follow thanks to the structure of the story. I have two more questions. One is

something I said before. During the 1930s, the Rockefeller Center commissioned Diego Rivera to make a mural painting. Rivera included a face of Lenin in the mural and it was ordered to be erased. In the most capitalist place, a communist artist painted Lenin. In this vein, you are making digital projections and at the same time you are unfolding a public art practice. In both your works at Asia Culture Center and Paradise City, two separate spaces possess different social and critical functions. Gwangju has a historical burden due to the uprising, versus Paradise City that has a casino resort like Las Vegas. I would like to discuss the role of the artist when you turn on your work in these places. Of course, they are immersive and spectacular, but what is the role of public art in such spaces? Have you thought about it?

SC: In the case of Gwangju, the space of Asia Culture Center itself was like that from the beginning, and everything related to the project was strongly related to the history of Gwangju. I had thoughts like, should I reflect that too? Maybe I should do something really beautiful or something spectacular visually? Why do we always have to only focus on heavy, historical meaning? Wouldn't it be nice to create such an environment with a little more light and people coming to have an enjoyable experience on the site? In the case of Paradise City, I really wanted to make the space like a circus, with various things moving.

HY: You mean you made a work that can harmonize with each space.

SC: Why not bring the whole family to the resort and see something like a circus? It's entertainment, but I thought that I could spread out the things I wanted to express.

HY: Don't you think these outdoor media façade works had positive influences on the public? What is the difference of impact between installing your work in a dark gallery space versus an outdoor space?

SC: If you think about the traditional way of watching videos, in most galleries and museums, people go to a space similar to a movie theater to see the artwork, and at some point I didn't like it. It was like locking people up and forcing them to see something. I went to MoMA yesterday, and I didn't want to go inside of the screening room because the video was being screened in a small dark space. Since I started exhibiting in more open and outdoor spaces where people can experience the work while moving freely, displaying artwork in indoor spaces was no longer fun for me. Especially since I already tried to do something spectacular in my current projects. If I have a chance to exhibit artwork indoors, I want to do something more detailed or pictorial.

HY: Ah, and your work includes your signature somehow. You appear as a protagonist, or your face is inside as a signature. Like the way some Dada artists included their signature as part of the collage in their work, you, too, put your presence in your work in many ways. Did you consciously plan to put yourself into your animation or was it an impulsive decision?

SC: I needed a character anyway, but there was no such character that I could think of, so I thought it would be fun to put my face in it.

HY: In your work, a robot appears, but it also turns into a human face. Are these characters cyborgs or robots? I wonder.

SC: Hm..

HY: Cyborgs are genderless. Donna Haraway has written about cyborgs in the context of Feminism. Do these characters have a gender?

SC: Actually, someone saw my work and said that it is very masculine. I once pointed out that there are no female characters.

HY: Really?

SC: However, if you look at the *Great Chain of Being*, there are actually various characters such as men, women, children, grandmothers, and grandfathers. Although they all die or change at the end. But I don't think I ever thought about your question. Historically, cyborgs were depicted in a more genderless way, and female robots and male robots were created. I prefer the cute robots made by Honda.

HY: But, in your first version, your daughter appears. Isn't she the only one who doesn't die? Like an immortal figure. That's your daughter, right? Like a Futurist female!

SC: In fact, both father and daughter are shown. But only the daughter character remains.

HY: Was it intentional?

SC: I just did it because it was fun. While I am making art, my daughter often jokes with me when she sees my work. When she asked me if she was dead, I said I will save the daughter character.

HY: You wouldn't dare to have her die!

SC: I mean I would be so sorry. The character has to be eaten by monsters or burned to die.

HY: That's very interesting. Do you have any work or direction for your work planned for the future?

SC: Personally, I think I will work on expanding the *Great Chain of Being* to a trilogy. One is fire and one is water like this. The sketch is currently done, but it takes too long to complete one project, and I have to make projects where I have to make a living. I also want to make *Genesis Canyon* into a VR format. It all takes a long time.

HY: Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

SC: Thank you for giving me this opportunity. This is my 10th solo exhibition at Amelia Wallace Gallery, and it was fun because the audience was different from Korea. In Korea, people sometimes look at my work cynically, but even older people here grew up watching Star Wars, so basically, people tend to accept this kind of work in a fun way and try to enjoy it. There was also a student who was so absorbed that he tried to interpret this work. It was interesting because there were so many different audience reactions at the gallery today.