

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Wonsook Kim
- Interviewer: Jeong-A Kim
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- 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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Jeong-A Kim (JAK): A lot of interviews and writings about your work have discussed your figurative and illustrative style, which goes against the grain of the abstract work which was prevalent when you were coming up in the art world. I find it more interesting that your practice spans multiple mediums, and in fact your training is in ceramics and printmaking. Let's start from where you started. You've said before that you were frustrated with ceramics. What was frustrating?

Wonsook Kim (WSK): Ceramics has a lot of procedures and techniques. You have to wait for certain things, like wait for the firing. The kind of glazes or colors that you use, you have to wait and see [how they turn out] for about a week before firing and cooling. I'm an impatient person. Whatever I do, I want to see it right then. That was one of the frustrations. The other one was the limitation of the medium itself. I love the physical part of working - no matter what it is, it could be even cooking or cleaning, just moving my body - and ceramics involves doing a lot of that. I would have to move 100 pounds of clay here to work on it, and I loved the feel of clay and what it does. It's so invigorating and interesting. But it has its limitations - it won't stand, like this [gestures]. If you want it to stand like this, you need it to have all kinds of support. It involves a lot more engineering than I cared to think about. But I was interested in my tradition and the history of celadon.

After I got my degree, I applied for Hamada Studio in Japan [Editor's note: Shoji Hamada's pottery studio in Mashiko, Japan]. It's in a small town outside of Tokyo and at the time it was all traditional climbing kiln [note: anagama kiln] on the hillside, where you have a mound and another mound and you fire from the bottom of the hill. When we had a firing the whole village held prayers and parties. I worked as an apprentice for about eight weeks, and that really drove the final nail into the coffin for me. You get up at six, meditate, throw tea cups all day, and you trim the bottom. The master comes every day and looks through your work, and if it isn't good, then he uses his long stick to break it.

JAK: He destroys it in front of you?

WSK: Yes, because it wasn't good enough, which I agree, it's his standards. Not only did the medium have its own limitations, but it also had that kind of limitation for me. Drawing on a piece of paper the idea you have, coloring it if you want, making it into a painting if you like, that was much more attractive to me.

JAK: Although you're talking about drawing, you ended up doing printmaking next.

WSK: I was looking to stay in America after graduating, and I was doing a lot of woodcut prints. It's a Japanese tradition but at the time there wasn't a lot of differentiation between Japanese and Korean. Woodblock printmaking became the niche for me to stay here. I still enjoy printmaking, but again, it involved a lot of work. Rolling ink,

rubbing... But it was more immediate than ceramics because you can see the results. I liked the work process with the ink, how you add some more, scratch some more. We had an art student festival where you could sell your stuff, and I sold these things for 25 dollars. It was such an important source of income.

JAK: Your journey in printmaking was also exceptional. You trained with Jack Lemon, the founder of Landfall Press who had worked at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles. Your mentor, Harold Boyd, is also a noted printmaker. Would you mind describing a little bit about how that happened?

WSK: Professor Boyd is a very important mentor in my life. He encouraged me to work with my own images in the midst of the prevalent Color Field/Abstraction style. He taught me to listen to my own voice freely. After graduate school, I had an internship at Landfall Press. Jack Lemon and Ethel, his very particular wife, were running the print studio. I got the job, and though the pay was minimal, I learned a lot. They had such a hyper-militaristic regimen that you had to be there at six in the morning, and we worked till eight at night. I needed to show up thirty minutes earlier to make coffee for everyone. I was at the lowest rung. But I didn't mind that. You have litho stones to grind in a figure eight till you turn blue, then you wash it. That was my job. I was never good enough, because Jack would come in with a straight edge metal bar and the thinnest sheet of paper one can imagine, and he would put the bar on top of the stone and slide the paper through under the bar. If it didn't slide in smoothly, then there was a 0.0001 percent chance of a rough part.

Again, like my experience in Japan, a decisive moment came. We were printing Claes Oldenburg's baseball works as prints - we did seven or eight images of the baseball bat sculpture, and we worked till very late and everyone was very tired. My job was to sponge off the litho stone once the roller went through. Somehow I got my finger caught in the press - see my little finger is shorter here? When you print editions, you have to have a rhythm going, like this, but somehow I missed the beat. There was blood all over the stone. Jack just started screaming expletives. He was so upset because of the litho stone - the basic principle of lithography is that oil and water don't mix, so any other kind of liquid that gets introduced will ruin the whole thing. He was really upset. He grabbed my sponge to try to fix it, and he told me to get out. I didn't know where to go, so I took a bus to the emergency room. I still had my apron on! After that, when I was applying for other positions, he wrote me the most incredible recommendations. He told me I would make a fantastic printer, but I was done.

JAK: Despite the fact that you were working in ceramics and print, you were drawing in what little spare time you had. All of the works you made then were monochrome, or black and white. Why was that?

WSK: I was a little bit afraid of using color. I didn't grow up how children grow up now



coloring their coloring books. I wrote diaries, and I still do. I write and on the side, I draw a little something. It's all in black and white. I felt that was all it needed. Anything else was unnecessary decoration.

JAK: I feel some of the reason why your work drew attention once you moved from Illinois State to New York was that it was in monochrome.

WSK: It was. It still is my favorite place where I keep going back. Even though I love color, because there is another spectrum of things you can do with color, this is where it starts. A lot of time color enhances what I want to do, then it becomes an unnecessary kind of decoration. Even as I am finishing it, I think, "It didn't really need this." My first show in New York was at the Drawing Center, and a lady curator came to see my friend's work at Warren Street, which was next door. Back then Tribeca was a pretty dangerous place. She went to the wrong loft, which was mine, so I told her I'd take her to the right one. That's how we got to meet. She liked my work very much - she loved the black and white. Not only is it immediate, but it also had the Asian brush stroke.

JAK: I was meaning to ask you about that. I read this essay from one of your catalogues which described your ink drawings in a way that I thought was quite accurate because you're not trying to recreate an Asian ink painting.

WSK: No, I'm not. When I had my first show in Korea, I did not know anyone, I was just a graduate student graduating from an American university. One of the very well known Korean traditional painters came and he was a little bit dismayed at the way I used my brush stroke freely. He told me he was a little bit envious of my freedom. Once you train as a Korean traditional painter you have to follow all these rules and regulations - how to hold the brush, the intensity of the color, and you start with one line, then you do a bamboo, and then so on. You cannot go over the line once you draw. There is an order, a serious hierarchy as to the subject. You do a pine tree, then orchid flowers, then landscape - the mountains and water. Finally, you do the calligraphy of the poems or your name. You sit and draw a bamboo leaf until you cannot see anything else, that's how you start. I did do that for a short period before I arrived in the States, but it was a short-lived practice for me because it was so rigid. The bamboo leaves need different intensity - the one in the front is darker, then it grows gradually lighter as you go back, the light ones are for the back, and you can't do it in any other order. Korean traditional painting looks very simple, but in fact, it's very strenuous and each step is premeditated. It didn't gel with my impatience. I want to put down whatever I see. That's where my work's immediacy comes from. I hear that a lot from Korean traditional painters who can sometimes be very dismayed and disgusted that I eliminated the whole order and made this 'fake' painting, but some are very envious and think this is a very freeing experience. Thanks to a lot of people like Picasso, who broke the rules and let me break the rules following in their footsteps, I think I could continue.

JAK: You had a series of remarkable exhibitions. There is one, however, I couldn't find anything on, mainly because the organizer of the show, MoMA, doesn't have anything about it on their website. In 1982, one of your works was selected for a MoMA show. I would love to get this sorted. I think it is 1981's "New Works in Black and White", which doesn't have anything digitized on their website. I haven't seen your artist file at MoMA, which is off-site. This was the only question mark I had in your chronology. If you have any information, you should definitely give it to MoMA.

WSK: This might be a fun thing to do! Curt Marcus arranged that. I think I remember the work. It was a big jar, and three big holes were gushing water. I had two children and a husband at the time, so you see I found it quite draining. But if you look over the edge, you'll see the jar is still full and overflowing. Wishful thinking on my part.

JAK: If you find any information, you should probably give it to the MoMA library! The review I read of your Grace Borgenicht Gallery show didn't include the piece displayed but described it as 'Elephant Story'. I read the description but I couldn't understand it. Would you explain the work?

WSK: I have no idea what happened to that work. You know the fable about the three blind men each feeling an elephant and telling a different story?

JAK: Except your painting did not have three men.

WSK: There was a girl. It's me trying to figure out life, trying to figure out my state at the time, which was pretty tenuous. It's me saying if I say one thing, they only see it this way, an Asian woman doing black and white drawing, but I don't think that's what it is all about. I want to tell a lot more stories than that. Some people were looking at my ink work saying this is done all wrong, she doesn't have the right training. It was my take on the different interpretations of my work.

JAK: Your earlier works are fairly honest works. They are very raw. A lot of your black and white drawings are not comforting. There's one where a woman is screaming into the wild, into the black. I find it interesting no one commented on that part of your work. They weren't comforting drawings. Your smaller ceramic figures, on the other hand, showed comfort, or a desire to be in that kind of comfortable setting. But your drawings and paintings up until the 80s, or even the 90s, are quite disturbing. They mostly feature a single person, usually a woman, in various states of distress.

WSK: That's life. I can tell you the story of how I left Brooke Alexander Gallery. It was such a cushy, wonderful, grand gallery. When he picked me out of the Drawing Center show, which was my first show in New York, I was one of hundreds of artists struggling in a dark place. There was this art supply store called New York Central, which was one of the fancier places I didn't go anywhere near. He told me that I could go there and buy

anything I wanted. I thought, not only did I make art history now that I am picked up by a gallery but I am also rich because I can buy anything I wanted! He did well with those disturbing images. Then life got a lot better, and I wasn't as disturbed a person as I was before. But there was a silent demand for that kind of work. I wanted to do something else, make work that is not quite as pessimistic, dark or desperate. I think the art world is still like that. We want something that is disturbing, shocking, rather than something contemplative in a way that would make you think of other things. Something that grabs you, reflection that connects to our darker side and also lighter side. Life got better for me, I got a little more money and I didn't have to work as much. So I did paintings and drawings that reflected that but that wasn't welcomed, because he wanted more of these. I stayed there for about 4 or 5 years, then I realized that if I continue on like this, fulfilling the demand, I will be miserable all the time. By nature, I am not like that. I am a brighter kid. So I decided to leave.

JAK: The monochrome is something you continue though. Also in 2002, you returned to printmaking. You made etchings in collaboration with Normal Editions. You also worked with Corridor Press, which is owned by master printer Timothy Sheesley. I don't know what you made there. You also made work with Skip Barnhardt who was then at George Washington University. Would you mind describing how this came about and why? At this point in 2002, you were already very successful and well-known for polychrome works.

WSK: It was mainly a commercial decision and my nostalgia about printmaking. Yon Art, which was and still is my supporter, was a publisher. Several galleries were involved in this project that wanted editions. At the time, I felt my work was very expensive. After a while, your work is not your baby anymore with the pricing and all that. It comes under the control of several people. I wasn't completely comfortable about it, but it's a necessary evil, to have this invisible control. My work at the time was expensive, but not in the blue-chip kind of way. It was to make my work more affordable. But while doing the project, I really enjoyed it even though I didn't do all of the labor. It was an interesting reminder of draftsmanship, the changes you make.

The process is different now - they send me the zinc plate. I'm sure there are some traditionalists who do it on stone, but nowadays they do it on polymer or mylar paper. There is one side that is rough and one that is smooth - you can pick whichever one, so, for example, you can use the smooth side to paint, or use the rough side like textured paper. I would use oil crayon to draw. Because it is mylar, if I wanted to do different colors, I could draw on different layers on top of each other. We did up to seven colors. They were mostly etchings for Normal Editions. With Corridor Press, I made color lithographs. I made thirty or forty prints. Most of the editions were of 60 or 75. They sold well. The galleries liked it. I enjoyed the process very much even if the process happened because of the demand more so than my own willingness to go back.

JAK: Does this have any relationship at all with your introducing color into your drawings and paintings? Because you start your oeuvre with monochrome, then by 2000 you are doing mostly color. Is it because your exploration of line and space was relatively complete, and you wanted to work with the aspects of color that made you uncomfortable, as you mentioned before?

WSK: There are multiple reasons. I was uncomfortable with color because I wasn't very good at it; it didn't come as naturally to me as me picking up a pencil to start to draw. I did a ton of drawings in a series. In order to contain a series of drawings, I made a little wooden box. I put them in and decorated the box with images from the drawings. (*Giselle*, 1978.) It became a painting I didn't have to be afraid of; I could decorate this box without the formal concerns and decisions I thought that colors needed. It became a very simple thing, like my black and white drawings. The box became my obsession. It was an interesting but safe place to be colorful without making it into a painting, which is a serious commitment in color. So I was having fun decorating, then the side of the box is a beautiful interesting piece, and the front of the box is a nice painting, so if I divorce myself from the notion of it being a box and see each two-dimensional plane as an interesting surface, then that's how my painting and color evolved.

JAK: And that's why your paintings are getting larger as you get more comfortable with the idea of color. You're literally stepping outside of the box.

WSK: It's true.

JAK: I would like to ask you about more recent work. I found two shows which were very interesting developments in your practice. 'Loves of Outsiders' was shown by Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago in 2006. It then traveled to Gallery Hyundai in Seoul, Korea. Your materials here are interesting: why did you decide to use hydrostone? Why did you decide to make bronze cast sculptures which were a mix of monochrome and polychrome? For someone who started with the hand-made, these finished products have nothing to do with your hand.

WSK: If you just continue with the line that comes with the printmaking process, it was a commercial decision. I was always making figures and figurines when I was doing ceramics in school, I always had an interest in making little things. Who doesn't? We make pies, cookies, and mandoo. I love working with my hands, and I'm good at it. It's a continuation of that. But just how my painting evolved from painting the boxes, when I was making the series of works for 'Loves of Outsiders' - those were works about the lives of kisaeng and the courtesan women who were outsiders and related to the book I illustrated [note: *Courtesan Poets* by Wolhee Choe] - I wanted to make their image, instead of making it into a typical kisaeng portrait. So it came about because I made a statue, then made it into many different impressions, the way galleries would have liked. Hydrostone is plaster with stone powder in it. It is stronger than plaster. It has a beautiful

skin tone like color that you can't get. Chiseling stone is well beyond me. This was something I could mold. I tried many different materials, including bronze. Bronze is very cold. I wanted it to be warmer, more skin toned and strong. They can make editions, too.

JAK: I think hydrostone is also the material they use for making classical busts you have sketched in Korean art academies.

WSK: That is true. I drew that silly Venus a hundred times. Maybe there is a connection.

JAK: I was wondering if you did that on purpose.

WSK: No, I wasn't aware of that particular side. I was more interested in it because it is warm and because you can paint it. If you cast bronze, once it's cast it's done. You can maybe change the patina a little but that's it. I wanted this to be a continuation of my painting. It's monochrome, but it's painting, like skin.

But you know, the very disciplined technical training I received in Korea, that equipped me to do anything. When I came to the U.S. as a sophomore, I would go to drawing class and see these American kids didn't draw well. But because of my strict training, I could draw anything. The first year in art college in Korea, you draw one egg for the entire semester. If you look at the egg, it is incredibly complex - the shading, the color, the weight, everything. The second semester, you draw two eggs. Now when you introduce two, then it is an altogether different world because there is a relationship between the two; there is the position, tension, juxtaposition, composition. All of that stuff comes out. Then the next year, you do three. I didn't, because I left Korea, because I was sick of drawing eggs, and I wanted to do something else.

When I was taking the entrance exam to art school, you draw the plaster cast classical figures, and you do human figures. You never know what the exam subject will be - it could be a grandma. So you have to be prepared to draw anyone - a dog, children, a naked man, an old person. That's why when I sat down in America, I could draw anything. They thought I was a genius! This is why I got straight As and scholarships throughout my school years despite my difficulty with the English language, because I could draw.

JAK: There are two works in this show, which I think require some explanation. The first is *I Chose This Branch*, 2006. What's the backstory for this?

WSK: It's a poem by one of the anonymous kiseng in the book. She is talking about this branch, which she chooses to represent her lover who is leaving her. It's a brilliant metaphor that she chose a branch. She can hold it, it broke away from the tree which is her, their love. That is where this image comes from.

JAK: The other one, *Shadow a Bird*, 2006, you made in a much larger form.

WSK: The larger piece was a commission for someone's sculpture garden. It's a woman dancing, and when you raise your arms up, the shadow looks like a bird. She is wearing a hanbok, I guess. That reminds me, there was a Korean-American writer who told me she loves my work because they are all Asian faces. I never thought I was painting an Asian face.

JAK: That's interesting. One interpretation of your work I did agree with, was that your work was taking something very personal and making it so nondescript so as to make it universal.

WSK: That's what I thought. I'm not a portrait painter. I don't really care who she is - it's just a human, a woman. That's why I consciously avoid any kind of detail.

JAK: It's a very strange thing to say about your work.

WSK: I am not too worried about my identity much, it is all universal human experience.

JAK: In 2012, you had a show called 'Wonsook Kim' at Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, Korea, featuring cast bronze. You clearly make use of the lost-wax technique. Does this mean you can't recreate the work?

WSK: You can. I wanted to make my brush drawings hang from the wall without any background. It's like you're drawing on the wall, but it is more permanent. If I had been more cool and cutting-edge, I would have just drawn on the gallery wall, but I guess I'm too much of a materialistic person. I wanted to have something you can hang, a line drawing that hangs on the wall. I made it out of wax. You can heat the wax to different degrees for a different consistency. It dries and then you can hang it, but it is very brittle if you do that. You can make a mold of the wax, then they do the rest of the bronze casting, with a post about one inch so that it will hang off the wall for the shadows to come into play. I love the shadows, so if you cast the light just so, you can see the shadow interact with the line. It looks like two drawings on top of each other. I had a lot of fun doing this. The galleries wanted editions, so I did for a few pieces. But I wanted it to be fleeting, immediate so I am not doing any more editions. Now I just draw it with the wax, they cast it, and that's it.

JAK: Your more recent work was shown in monochrome bronze, and they had Greek mythological names - Rhea and Gaia, who are Titans. There was also one that was *Untitled*, 2012, which was 3-D printed and painted.

WSK: The 3-D printing was an experiment. I'm done with it. Instead of making it into a

bronze, which is a very lengthy procedure, my friend suggested trying it out. So I had it scanned and printed, but it's plastic. It didn't feel like anything I would like. They said you can pour extra plaster into it to make it heavy. I said, "why?" so that's a short-lived experiment. With Rhea and Gaia, I was making all these other female figures and I didn't want to make them have all these over-meaningful titles.

JAK: So you chose what you considered to be the most universal titles?

WSK: Yes. These women have their own chutzpah. It was mere convenience.

JAK: Will you continue to work in bronze? The plaster you picked because of the color, now you are moving into bronze. There is a different quality to the work.

WSK: No. I like hydrostone. The limitation is the size. You can't make very big statues, because they are very brittle. Hydrostone breaks in shipping. Bronze is preferred. It's almost like a black drawing. I have two foundries: White River Foundry and Sincerus Bronze Art Center, and they are in Indiana. They are very near me. I make the work in clay or wax and take it in or they can pick it up. I love this process much better than printmaking. I play with the clay. Printmaking is fairly final. Maybe this is too. This is so much more fun, because it is clay - it's Playdough time.