

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Kakyoung Lee
- Interviewer: Juyoung Yoo
- June 23, 2016 / Kakyoung Lee's studio in Brooklyn, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Juyoung Yoo (AKAA Research Fellow 2015-2016)
- 4 Video files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Juyoung Yoo (JY): Can you briefly describe your artworks?

Kakyoung Lee (KL): My works are inspired by everyday scenes; trivial memories that easily slide by. For instance, I record mundane scenes such as waiting for a light to change at a crosswalk or the back-and-forth movements of the subway - .

JY: What are the most important criteria when creating your artworks?

KL: I find all the layers of everyday life very important. The news only shows us what seems to be the most important or interesting events to people. However, our everyday life consists of so many layers that relate and connect to one another. Those layers repeat and make up the present, but what we see and remember is only the one layer. So, I find not only that top layer but also the other layers very important, and I focus on the daily and mundane events/layers that we often forget so easily.

JY: You capture movement and scenes of everyday life; can you tell me about your art making processes?

KL: So, I use many layers in the process of image making. Stop motion is one technique. It requires a lot of layers of images to create a video that is about 30 seconds or a minute.

JY: Do you think about the order while making it?

KL: No, I just record my day to day life. I take photos while I am driving my car, walking, or pushing the stroller. So, I reference those everyday images. For instance, ordinary scenes like a father and a daughter playing frisbee. There are 6 images per second.

JY: If I remember correctly, I didn't see these materials (aluminum foil) in your previous works?

KL: I often work with everyday materials like notepapers and post-its. I find these materials attractive and use them very often because I think the lines make everyday life very flat and objective.

JY: Pavement?

KL: Yes, I took photos while walking. My recent works reference a lot of these images. I used to focus on things that move, but now I focus on things that are still. However, everything changes, time flies, spaces change, and everything around us changes. So, I am interested in making still images into moving images.

JY: You work with both prints and video, what are the pros and cons of both mediums?

KL: Printmakers know well; you need to print dozens of test prints to make one final print. For instance, to make one print (copper plate), you have to sketch and then print it on a sheet of paper. But, you can't tell how much the print is completed until you try it out. So, in most cases, people start printing midway through the process. As a result, piles of test prints accumulate. With all the piles of test prints and the final print, you get a moving image. However, printmakers usually show their final prints only, and you don't see the processes. I find this process as important as the final product. So, this train of thought brought me to where I am now.

JY: Do you prefer to use people and figures as subjects?

Kakyoung Lee: Yes, I draw people, and they were in my past works as well. I am always interested in the figurative. I don't know why but I guess because I am a human?

JY: Everyday life and daily life don't have to involve humans, right?

KL: I guess I think of the layers as human relationships.

JY: I saw past works where you repeated the process of drawing and erasing.

KL: If I work with plates, layers of lines accumulate, and as I repeatedly print, the past lines get lighter, and this repeats.

JY: So, are you trying out new techniques based on the previous works?

KL: Yes, I personally like this repeated process of accumulation and disappearance, but it takes so much time. It takes about a year to create a 30 second video. So, I want to try out different works because of technical reasons. I insist on printmaking because it makes images indirectly. It's like fiction, but I reference my everyday experiences to print, so I am minimizing the fiction. And I am making monoprints because the copper plate prints take too much time.

JY: I am interested in hearing about your life stories as much as your artworks. What made you come to New York? If you compare artworks made in different locations or times, how are they different or the same? Would you say that your Korean heritage or time in Korea are influential?

KL: After I finished graduate school in Korea, I showed my works at exhibitions, and I made/ illustrations. I got interested in bookmaking. However, there was no place in Korea where I could learn about bookmaking. So, I came here to study bookmaking at Purchase College. I came here in 2001 and intended to stay here for two years but the program wasn't what I expected. Instead, I developed the print-slideshow I made back

in Korea.

JY: It's been about 15 years since you arrived in New York. What was most challenging for you as an artist?

KL: I think artists always struggle. But, there is always happiness and satisfaction after the completion of each artwork. It is also challenging balancing being an artist and a mom. I think most women artists feel the same, but this is life.

JY: What motivates you to work?

KL: I don't need any motivation. I just do what I do. I am compelled to make art when I see an interesting image. But, it takes time. It's not like something I can do in a day. The process of making the time is more challenging than the work itself.

JY: Throughout your artistic career, what were some of your successful or most rewarding moments? For instance, a memorable exhibition?

KL: Exhibitions are actually one of the most stressful things for me. Preparing an exhibition, and thinking about how the viewers might assess and respond to it is all very stressful, but I feel ecstatic when I am making one and each of the artworks.

JY: What are you working on currently?

KL: I made two works, and I recently showed one at Jamaica Flux Center for Arts and Learning. At the gallery opening, I made a moving image and it was very fun. People move in one direction and in clusters in museums. So, I recorded those observations. Also, like the blocks of pavement street, I made those kinds of works too. The scenery, it's fun. Also, I am working with these coffee cup holders, I have worked with these materials in the past. If you unwrap them and connect them together, they create a big circle. This was a metaphor for everyday life as it repeats and circulates. I drew paintings with coffee too. These are all materials that can be seen in our daily lives.

JY: Do you have any advice for younger Korean or Korean American artists?

KL: Well, I am not sure if I can give any advice as I also struggle, but many artists who came to New York from Korea feel nervous because the two places are very different. Artists feel nervous when they can't see anything visible and sometimes think time is too slow, but actually, time flies. I think they can see things if they just take the time and enjoy what they are doing. I hope artists enjoy what they do and stop feeling nervous about the immediate outcome, which they may not see. I think that is the most important thing.