

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Younhee Paik
- Interviewer: Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
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- Recorded by Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
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- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Joo Yun Lee (JYL): Why don't you start from the beginning.

Younhee Paik (YHP): I was born in 1945, so I'm from the distant past. I was born in Seoul, and I grew up in Chungun-dong throughout my childhood, under a mountain. Under the big Bugaksan. Since my childhood, I have always lived in areas with beautiful scenery. I think that's why I appreciate nature more. I attended Ewha Girl's Middle School, and then an arts high school. My mother really loved the arts, and particularly music, since she had majored in music. She wanted me to play the piano, so I learned, but I hated practice. No matter how well you play, they keep telling you that you made a mistake. I took art lessons from an early age so I would go to outdoor drawing lessons and competitions, and sometimes I would win prizes, so that was interesting. When I told my mother I wanted to draw as well, she said I could play the piano and draw too. I was a happy child, since I had parents who gave me so much support. My mother thought that if I went to the arts high school I could do both music and art, but of course, once I got there, they said I could only do one. I couldn't do both. I found the piano boring because it was something that someone had already completed, and I had to just practice and practice, yet still make mistakes. With drawing, whatever I did, no one said I had made a mistake.

In my senior year of middle school, because I had to prepare for high school and continue art, I went to an art after-school. It was probably one of the first. Kim Byung-Ki and You Youngkuk were the teachers and it was a place for artists to meet and research as well as to teach. They had to teach to earn their income. It was called the Modern Art Research Institute. It was somewhere near Gwanghwamun, I think a department store is there now. There was another younger artist, who was younger but has now passed away. He was the first Expressionist in Korea. If I can remember his name later, I'll tell you. I went there in my senior year of middle school. It was great. After my school lessons, I would draw there every day and go home in the evening. That's when I met Park Mija, who had been an artist in Seoul for a long time. She lives in Europe now, and has exhibited with me at Hyundai Gallery a couple of times. She's my senior. Anyway, every evening I went to the institute to draw. One day, Kim Byung-ki – you know he is quite funny – looked at me and said, "I think you could draw." I thought to myself that it was a sign that I wasn't entirely devoid of talent. His remark encouraged me. I applied myself to art.

It was easy to get into the arts high school. The first homeroom teacher I had there was Mi-ae Moon. Moon had just graduated from Seoul National University and started her first career. She was my homeroom teacher. Moon had so much energy. I learned a lot from her. The teacher told my mother that she should open a studio for me at home, because otherwise I would just draw at school and not do any more. That was an important motivation for me. My mom thought I would play the piano and draw, but no, so she decided since I'm just drawing, to rent a small room next door and told me to draw there. I went by myself during the evenings to draw and it became a habit. The arts high school was a wonderful experience for me. Whenever I was there, I was happy. Then I went to Seoul National University. When I started there, Kim Byung-Ki

had already left for the States. Then I was learning from Chung Chang-sup and Moon Hak-jung and other teachers.

At university, strangely enough, I didn't really take drawing seriously because I was busy going out. When I was at school, of course I did what I was told to do. I'm strange. Artists aren't supposed to like school. But I really liked school. There are always friends. You always learn something new. I thought it was all fun. Since I attended school so much, my grades were pretty good. But I didn't really tackle my art seriously. At the time, no one in my household, including my mother, really worked on what they had majored in at university. My mother, even though she had gone to music college, ended up as a regular housewife. She was always attending to my father and respected him. Since my mother had lost her opportunity to continue her music, she really pushed for me to continue my art. But even so, the atmosphere was that a woman should quickly get 'married well'. I thought so too. I had already met my husband in my freshman year at university. I thought I should quickly get 'married well,' but actually after I graduated and went to my post-graduate degree, I realized that no, I should really focus on my art. I went to the San Francisco Art Institute. It's a great school with many famous alumni. They don't teach you any theory, they just want you to make art. The most important thing was to go to your monthly seminar with your art. That was really hard. I couldn't speak English very well but I had to do the seminar. But it was there that I realized that without art, I could not live my life. I had already become engaged at that point, so I needed to get married, but I started worrying about it. 'Would I be able to continue making my art after marriage?' I probably married too young. If I think about it now, I married at 24 years old, in Korean age around 25 or 26. I was so young. We had been together for so long, we thought we had to marry. But luckily my husband didn't tell me to stop making art and he even prepared my canvases. He did his best to support me. When it came time to graduate from my post-graduate degree, they said I needed to have a baby. Now, I am generally a good follower of instructions and a model student. Since my mother told me so, I thought I should have a baby. I really started worrying then. I got pregnant. After I graduated, I was pregnant, and even at six months, I held my growing stomach with one hand and painted with the other. I had to hold my stomach with one hand because it started getting so heavy. My desire to make art only grew more. After I had the baby, I had to draw while the baby was sleeping at night so I was chronically sleep-deprived. I think I have spent about twenty years on around five hours of sleep. I guess I was young enough that my body got used to it. I slept deeply and slept during the weekends.

I remembered what Kim Byung-Ki had said to me, all those years ago when I was in high school. That became a source of strength for me. He is such a funny man. "Why are you always in the classroom? You should go outside to see nature and play in order to make good art. Why is everyone in the classroom?" he would say, and then, "If you go out and fall in love, you'll make good art," and then, "If you get married, you'll be able to think deeper thoughts, and if you have a child after that then you'll have a much better imagination," is what he said. When he was saying it at the time of course we just

laughed at him, but after I had my own baby I thought about it from time to time. 'Since my footprint is bigger, and I've accumulated more life experiences, I will definitely be able to make better art,' is what I started thinking. I couldn't help but reduce the amount I slept. As I reduced my sleep time, I kept on painting so that even after I had children I always had one solo exhibition each year. Opportunities kept coming my way. Places big and small asked me to exhibit so I did, for over 45 years. My wish was always to sleep more, but now that the children are grown and away at university, I can sleep more, and draw whenever I can. After my postgraduate degree, there wasn't really anywhere to go. The galleries didn't even look at my work. There is an artist colony of about 200 artists at San Francisco's Hunters Point. In the old days, it was a navy fort, but they split up the building for artists. It's famous, but the neighborhood is a bit rough so people were scared of it, but it's actually all right. I was there for 20 years without any incident and when I was about 60 years old I thought, instead of getting energy from being with a crowd, I can do it by myself. Even though the open studio is really big and there were customers, I thought instead of all that, I could do it by myself for a change. I needed a big studio because my work was getting bigger. The ceiling was 10 feet high, which wasn't enough space for me to hang my ceiling works. I looked around Oakland, which is near San Francisco, next to Berkeley, and there were lots of artists there because the rent was cheaper. The surrounding nature was beautiful. I got a piece of land there and constructed a big studio at 60 years old. I moved in when I was 63. It's been about 8 years.

I am really happy. If I divide my life into chapters, it would be my childhood, after marriage, coming to New York, and this is about the fourth chapter. That was the first time I made a really large work, I titled it 'Chapter Four,' and there is a big halo with a ladder going upwards. It is oil on aluminum. You will see it in my slides.

JYL: When did you come to New York?

YHP: New York was much later, when I was around 53 or 54. I had lived as a California artist for thirty years when my mother died of cancer. When my mother died, I started making so much work. The children had come East for their universities. Their dad said he had to live in Seoul. He said his mother who was living by herself needed him and he wanted to be the filial son. I didn't think I could live under my mother in law, so I said, I will go to New York since the children are there. So let's live going back and forth. Well, this is something the world knows..... I made a big decision in coming to New York. My mother had died. My husband had gone to Seoul. I didn't even have a reason to be in New York. California was comfortable. It was comfortable and easygoing without competition and where I had been since I was younger so it was an easy place but I thought I needed the challenge. My father had told me a long time ago – my father protected me a lot, I was so lucky from childhood that I didn't have to earn my living – my father said, "You can't live like a flower in a greenhouse." If you get protected like a flower in a greenhouse, you become weak. I thought about my father's saying and I thought it was time for me to get out of the greenhouse, now that I no longer had a

mother, or a husband, or responsibilities. I needed a journey for myself. That's why I wanted to come to New York.

At the time, I got to know a woman artist who had a studio on Broadway – I met her through Kyungsung Lee, the National Museum director whom I know – and she was a young lady. She had a studio in New York but she wanted to use it for only 6 months and then go to Seoul so she was looking for someone to take over the lease. I thought, well, I don't know anyone in New York, this is like a freshwater fish going to sea.

Outside of the greenhouse, it is stormy and even if there were sunlight, this plant may not live. I should still go at least once, before I get even older. I decided since I am no longer a housewife, I would only bring one bundle of my paint brushes and some clothes. I didn't bring one single plate. When I got to the studio, it was pretty rough. It was a fourth floor walk up. As I was preparing the studio, think how heavy the equipment is, I had to take up the lumber for my easel. I had barely prepared the basics when a mouse appeared. One day, there was something that just swept past me so I looked and found a mouse under the bed. I was so scared and I couldn't sleep. What could I do? I couldn't go back because of a mouse.

JYL: Don't they have mice in California?

YHP: No! I didn't see any in Seoul, either. They are all new buildings. I guess it's dirtier here so they have more of these things. I fought a lot with the mice. During six months, I killed seven. I deployed all sorts of methods. I can still picture it. I was so surprised. I didn't know anyone. My parents weren't here and I was living here and I wondered if I could do it, because I was lonely. At night, lying there on the single bed, I wondered if I could wake up the next morning. It felt like I was entering blackness. I was so lonely. I heard that people die of loneliness, and I wondered if I would be dead in the morning. It was really hard so I started journaling. It was also a record of my work. I think maybe next year or so I should publish it. It's been over 13 years since I published a catalog, actually 14 years. I made a lot of new work since then. So perhaps I will publish that before I die. I think I should, before my memory starts deteriorating. I will try next year.

JYL: It seems nature is a very important part of your work. We could think about this in two ways, as in the general term of 'Nature' or, nature as part of a new environment. Would you be able to articulate those two strands, how nature continues to influence and inspire the large works. And also address how you worked in Seoul and for a long time in California and New York. I am sure you have been to other places. What kind of influence did these cultural environments have?

YHP: Even as a child, I knew that when I was in nature, I was happy. I remember the first time as a child when I felt happy. I went with my grandmother to a hill to gather some mountain herbs and I remember feeling as happy as a child's mind can be. It was next to the sea. It was during the Korean War, near Song-do. I think I was about 4 years old. During the Korean War, we went all the way to the end of Busan and I saw the sea

for the first time. The way the ocean was flowing was initially a bit scary, like an animal opening its mouth. Growing up next to the sea I started liking water, and the flow from the sea felt like it was linked to my body, that flow. You can find a flow in my work, always. I think that idea started with the sea. When I was a child I would sit by the sea for ages. Then I came to Seoul, and then the States. California is a place of impressive nature. When I arrived in California and went to the San Francisco Art Institute, I loved the color of the foliage and the quick flow of the clouds in the sky. When I was attending college in Seoul I really liked action painting, similar to de Kooning, which we learned. I have lots of gestures in my work with big brushes. I worked hard at the action painting style. When I came to California though, I saw the light, which was incredibly strong, and where there was the strong light, there was a strong shadow, and the contrast. I drew a lot of light and shadow. If I think about it, the San Francisco Art Institute is a really great school. The teachers were great and they left you to your work. The specialty of that school was leaving you alone. They don't ask for this or that. Some students do get lost in that. If you have no motivation to create work and you don't, there isn't any particular drawback. I was a hard worker, because I like living to the fullest. That was when I started really seriously painting in depth. Then I went to India. In India, I rediscovered light. California's light is sunlight, with a shadow. That was the strong light I thought of, the light from the sky. When I went to India I saw the people's lives there, which were so poor yet spiritual, and something emanated from that. The culture and religion, it wasn't light from the sky but light from the mind. When I saw statues of the Buddha in caves, even though it was pitch dark without any light, I started seeing a soft glow. I learned about the lives of Indians, their way of thinking, which wasn't to worry or fear poverty but to believe in an afterlife. They smiled a lot. I also saw so many dreadful things. A lot. I saw cremations, on the roadside, at the river banks of the Ganges. The stairs leading down to the Ganges goes to the river floor and they just do cremations on those stairs. They believe that to be cremated by the Ganges is a blessing so they come from far and wide to do that. It was truly horrifying. They do it in an open field, they put the body on some hay and then everyone watches it burn. The family aren't even crying as they watch this. We were scared watching as tourists. They turned the body! They said you need to turn it at least three times to make sure it burns well. It looked like charcoal. I have to say I was so shocked at what I saw. Meanwhile, the family isn't even crying as they watch, and instead act as though the deceased were going on a journey. I also saw so many cripples, I don't know why there are so many of them. I heard that in India since there are so many beggars, at least if you are crippled you have a chance at getting money. I even heard rumors of mothers deliberately crippling their children so that they have a chance to earn from begging. I saw people who could only walk backwards because of their deformity. anyway, I saw all sorts of things.

JYL: When did you go to India?

YHP: It was before I turned 50. I think I was around 45 years old. I was so scared, but I



learned about spirituality and religion from the Indians and then when I came back I couldn't draw the sunlight and shadows any more. I depicted light emanating from the body. If you see my work...they all glow like this. There's a sun spreading its light, and whatever it is I made the light glow. I don't think I have such works here but anyway the light changed for me. Then of course, to draw that kind of spreading glow, I had to start using the drip method. I couldn't do it very well with a brush. I had to pour it to spread it around. Put the canvas on the floor to make it spread out.

Then my mother died, and I focused on this method. My mother was in hospital staring only at the ceiling for a whole year and a half, and I felt so awful that my mother was looking at a ceiling which had nothing on it, when the foliage was so dense and beautiful but my mother couldn't see it and had to just stare at the ceiling. What could I put on that ceiling? We stuck pictures drawn by my nephews but I couldn't put my work on it, especially because they were so big the hospital wouldn't allow it. I could only think about it, what could I put on the ceiling for my mother. I didn't actually have time to make any work. When my mother was sick, during that year and a half, I went to Korea eight times. It was exhausting. Whenever I went, I was the night nurse for two weeks because my sisters had been doing it during the day every day. I couldn't make any work. Then my mother passed away. After she died, I wanted to do something for her, and actually not just for her, but I kept on thinking about it. I wanted to stick something on the ceiling. I started it that way then as I did it, it became fun. In the beginning, I put the canvas on the floor and kept drawing the sky.

JYL: I have a question about that. You talked about water. You were influenced by the action paintings of painters such as de Kooning, but I see that using water is important and special in your work. Could you explain in more detail the use of water in your work?

YHP: Since I was a child I liked water, so I always looked to see how you draw it. Asian artists draw it with a fine brush, and Japanese artists are so good at drawing waves, but I couldn't draw it that way. I couldn't do the finer things. One day, I saw that in making a print you wash the plate with turpentine, and it creates this water mark. I thought I should try that out in a painting. You can't draw water with a brush. I just poured the water. I couldn't draw it so I poured it, and then the water as it went flowing created its own painting. You draw water with water, not with a brush. I just kept pouring with the water. It was so fun. It was very spontaneous, so accidents that I hadn't intended kept happening, but you had to use that. I created a lot of works with water. For ceiling paintings, it's the best. You wet it, the canvas is on the floor and you completely soak it, so that when you lift it up the water just drips off. Then [goes off to find a tool] you mix it in a small pot like this, like you're cooking [gestures movement]. Then you pour it on the ground. See here you have the dark blue, then you mix some white and throw it on. It is very satisfying. Things I hadn't thought of would come out. You have to use those things, the ones I didn't plan. You don't think of erasing them, you use them, and that suited my personality. I drew this stuff so that a lot of sky paintings came out then. I had

thought about my mother so much, because she was in Heaven, so I kept drawing the sky.

After that, I went to Prague. In Prague, I saw many cathedrals as I went around the place. The cathedrals were so beautiful. I bought a lot of books that had architectural renderings of the cathedrals. When you see the churches of Prague, and their plans, the Romanesque church, it is so beautiful. The constellations in the sky, a church on Earth, the stars in the sky. I always wanted to draw an integration of the sky and the earth. It's no fun just looking ahead. You either have to look above or below, and change the viewpoint to think of something interesting. I was thinking about how to draw the earth and the sky. An architectural plan is the result of human culture, and geometry comes from humans, while space... what God made is light and organic matter. If I were to integrate the two, I was thinking I should draw the stars above the cathedral. I worked on this theme a lot.

I think I forgot to tell you about another chapter in my life, why I draw a lot of fish. This came out before the cathedrals. I love nature, and whenever I go to the park or to the sea I come back with inspiration. So, I went to Yellowstone Park, it was just after a wildfire. If you see my catalog, there are some drawings of fish bones. I was affected by the miles and miles of burnt landscape – it was sad and scary. When I saw the blackened tree branches standing like this [gestures skywards], it looked like fish bones standing up towards the sky. If you stand fish bones up, they look like tree branches, you know. They were so black. At the time, my mother had passed away and my heart was full of pain. I thought about the thirst of a human soul. All those dead, blackened fish. The thirsty human souls. I started drawing the fish standing with their mouths open towards the sky. I really was drawing initially the trees screaming towards the sky, but they became fish. The fish always get lost in the mountain, because there is no water. They are looking for water. After a while, I decided to move away from fish and draw boats.

When I arrived in New York, I started drawing boats. I was embarking on a new journey. A freshwater fish doesn't know if it will survive in the ocean. I was debating whether or not to go but then I thought it is better to die in the ocean than to die in a pond. I could get eaten by a bigger fish, or drown in a flood, but at least I would die knowing what it was to live in the ocean. It is better for me to die in the ocean rather than die here comfortably without knowing it. That's why I started my adventure. I made a work titled *Here to There*, which has a yellow bridge in it. In the old days, a bridge was a rail track that was placed between valleys, so I thought I should draw one and it immediately came to me. Instead of drawing a train crossing that bridge, since it is so obvious a train could cross that, I drew a boat. If I had that painting it would be easier to explain. It was such an important work for me. [Moves].

[While pointing at catalog] This is the fish I drew in Yellowstone... This is a sketch, *Dead Fishes*. I drew it at Yellowstone. I am by nature a very positive person. I kept wanting to insert light. The ripple of water. This is the wildfire. What's strange is that collectors bought such a wild painting. It's a very sad one. The fish start rising like stars towards

the sky. I didn't want to draw the fish swimming happily, even if they met the water, because that is so obvious. If they get to the ocean.... I didn't want to draw any more struggling fish so I started to draw boats.

I forgot to mention one more thing. There's a reason why stairs keep coming up in my work....

JYL: I am curious about the stairs but also about the ladders.

YHP: Stairs and ladders. The reason why they keep coming out is because when I was raising my children, my studio was in the basement. I had to go down there after putting my child to bed, but the child wouldn't sleep. I had to go down those stairs every day after the children were sleeping. The stairs to the basement were pretty steep. Getting to that was such a big struggle for me. It was only a couple of meters, but it was a big distance, like a couple of miles for me. I started by drawing the descent of the stairs. Stars keep coming out, but we always aspire to reach upwards. The stairs send me above the earth, so do ladders. They are symbols. I like stairs a lot. I still like them... [Flipping through pages]. Where were we? Where is that yellow painting from my move to New York? This. [Points to *Here to There*, 1998]. I was resolute in my determination, when I came to New York. This is where a train would pass by. This is the bridge that links the valleys. I drew a boat instead of the obvious train. After a while, it looked too much like landscape so I got some rotten pieces from a lumberyard and stuck them on, and it looked pretty good. It was the same type of wood as what I had drawn. I added another piece, and it became a cross. Just like the one Jesus had to bear. I do go to church, though I'm not a very devout believer. I have to go to church since my family is Christian. I believe a lot in the Bible.

JYL: Tell us about your aluminum painting technique.

YHP: That started after I came to New York. When I came to New York, I felt the culture was different, there was a different horizon, all the buildings were sparkling. It's easy to leave water marks on aluminum. What you do is, you get a roller and cover it with a lot of oil, and you add black paint and if you spread it, the roller starts sliding everywhere and you get the watermark. It is a bit like painting a calm sea. I made a lot of work with aluminum and ink. The reason why that is so good is because the canvas is a relatively inflexible surface, but this is something you can shake like this, the aluminum. The water moves around. It is easier to get the effect I want. I loved the new surface. But one problem is that it is very easily scratched. You can't add texture to it easily. It's very shiny, so it doesn't stick. Nowadays when I use Korean paper (han-ji, 한지), I feel great.

JYL: Apart from the plans of cathedrals, you have space and the universe as your backdrop and there are a lot of geometric elements in them. It seems like one of your styles.

YHP: It became a style, but in terms of chronology, remember the fish became boats, and there's a piece where I drew the hull of a boat. [She gets up from her place]. When I started drawing boats the geometric elements came out. Since I was drawing geometric lines, I didn't really just want to draw boats, so I was thinking about something else but boats and cathedrals actually have similarities. The middle of a boat is called a nave, and cathedrals have naves, too. We take boats for journeys, and cathedrals take us on our spiritual journeys. You feel you're on some kind of boat at church. There's a relationship between the two, is what I thought, so I started drawing the cathedrals. For me it was like exploring something pioneering to see the geometry of stars.

JYL: Other artists in their geometric patterns can make it feel mathematical and somewhat cold. This seems like a constellation, there is a fusion of elements and you can feel the spirituality.

YHP: That's right. There is a relationship between stars and cathedrals. They say that when building a cathedral, they align the cathedral columns with constellations. They are not so different after all. I found that out much later by chance. I drew many cathedrals, but cathedral architectural plans, I can't change them freely, I have to follow the plan and sometimes that is boring for me. I don't have my own freedom. I can pour paint and draw stars.

After ten years, I tried something else. Nowadays I draw trees. I found a place with many trees to build my house. When I was a child, my father used to take me up mountains every day. My father studied geology. Whenever we went to the mountains he was explaining things to me, telling me which mountain was old and which was young, and why earthquakes happen. I found it so interesting. My father really loved trees. Sometimes, when he came back from the forest, he would say, "I saw a couple of real beauties today," and we would be so shocked, thinking that he had gone to see courtesans, but in fact, he was talking about the trees he had seen on his way. That's how much he loved looking at trees. I think I'm a bit like him. When my father took his walks, he would take me because I was the youngest daughter. I just have this habit of looking at trees. I have recently moved to a house that has so many trees around it, and I always tell them they are my children as I stroke them. I guess that's why I ended up drawing them, too.

JYL: Your working method of drawing with water seems to encourage the scale of your works to grow. You started with the ceiling work for your mother, but when one looks at your Stony Brook exhibition [solo exhibition, "Ascending River," Staller Center for Art, Stony Brook University, New York, Sept. 6 - Oct. 22, 2005], it is apparent that your work changed from drawing to installation. It feels like the viewer will have a very different experience of your work, and you mentioned earlier you find drawings hung on the wall uninteresting. When you think about the installation of your work, what are some of the important considerations?

YHP: Our horizon is limited by our regular, frontal view. When you look up, it feels great. I think if we had the habit of regularly looking up or down rather than just staring ahead, it would make us feel better mentally. All walls are just square, square, square and hard, so if you make them rounder, it feels better. I think there is an element of comfort. It's a problem of perspective and angle. Do you always want to just stare ahead, how about looking up. I think you spend at least seven or eight hours a day facing the ceiling when you sleep, so it feels like there should be something on there.

JYL: I think the acrylic on the floor is causing a reflection.

YHP: That's important, actually. If you use acrylic sheets on the floor it protects the floor and you can walk over it. The ceiling painting becomes a reflection on the floor, and the reflection becomes something that looks like an underwater presence. We like staring into water, don't we, when we're children? You get back into that child-like mind, because it feels like you are staring into water. That's why the lower layer needs to be black. If it is a white layer, it doesn't show very well. I put a dark layer underneath. If you have a lighter layer on top, the reflections show better.
[...]

JYL: It connects with your ceiling work.

YHP: Yes, it does. I put these under the ceiling to link them. That's a reflection, and if we look inside, we will see a deeper, different world, almost like the viewers are swimming in space. I wanted to give them that feeling, that special experience.

JYL: Your installation at the Daejeon Museum of Art [part of the group exhibition, "A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," Sept. 30 - Nov. 25, 2010] was also....

YHP: Yes, I did the same thing. I had a very large room. If I had another space like that, that would be great. The best space is if there is a mezzanine so that you could look down on the work, but at the Stony Brook exhibition there was no mezzanine, so you were looking down from the second floor. My current studio has a mezzanine. The ceiling is high, so if you go up the mezzanine you can look down on the work.

JYL: For your new work, will you be focusing on trees?

YHP: After drawing faraway places and space, nowadays I am drawn to themes that are closer in proximity to me. When I travel, I always take a sketchbook with me and draw trees. I always look out to the trees in the yard of my studio. It's been a year since I started working on trees. I really enjoy adding traditional ink to Korean paper [*hanji*, made from paper mulberry, Oriental paperbush or mulberry bark]. I love drawing, so doing it doesn't take so much effort, it just flows out of me. It doesn't take very long to

make one of these works. Just three or four hours. Now I've drawn this for about a year, I want to do something with color. I started thinking, what can I do with color on the trees?

JYL: You seem to enjoy the texture or materiality of your materials.

YHP: I do. Perhaps it is because I am Asian, but I didn't realize how comforting and great it was to use Korean paper. The feel of the paper is great. It is the first time I am using it.

[...]

JYL: You said you had an exhibition at least once a year after you married and had children, and you said when you came to New York you felt you had done your duty and were no longer a housewife. It seems while it was very hard for you to maintain your work, I think you in fact succeeded in doing so, but you seem to feel that you were more of a wife or a mother during that time.

YHP: That was the main role for me. I continued my work for at least five or six hours [every day]. When the children were asleep, I worked from nine p.m. to two a.m. so I lacked sleep. I woke up at 7 a.m. to pack the children's lunches and send them to school. I did both. But at least I didn't have to earn money. If you had asked me to earn money, raise my children, and continue my work, I don't think I could have done all three. We could make do without my earning any money. I am so grateful to my parents and my husband for that. Despite all of that, I would have drawn ten plus hours a day if I could have. That's why after all the children left home to go to college, I said when I arrived in New York, I will do whatever I want, but it wasn't easy to live by myself. I thought about doing a lot of things, but look, this is what I am. I'm an artist.

JYL: Please can you tell us more about that work – *City Awakens*, 2001?

YHP: That's my memory of 9/11. I wasn't here at the time, I was renting a studio that was in Chelsea, on West 26th street, on top of the building on the 13th floor that had the Martha Stewart offices. That's when 9/11 happened. I thought so much about those who had died, their souls, and there were candlelight processions. I could see it from my studio – the city that never sleeps, you know, that's New York, it moves all night. Those candlelight processions, the city that never sleeps, that is what I drew. The fish are always representing the souls ascending, the geometric boxes are what the fish come out of. The box represents our reality, how we always box ourselves in, in houses and buildings that are boxes, and even our thinking is boxed in. Our reality is really a box. The souls are coming out of that box, that's what I drew. I really worked on this one. Possibly for over a year. I exhibited it several times. It is a relief it ended up in a museum.

JYL: Where do you find the energy to continue your work?

YHP: I started drawing in high school, and I have drawn a lifetime, and art is still my lover, my ever-faithful love. I want to make art every day. If I take a break, I always wonder, 'when do I go back to my studio, when do I make art?' Every day I draw, every day I meet my never exhausted love.

JYL: When you were talking about your mother, it seems that while you could withdraw from art because of harsh life experiences, you choose to sublimate them in art.

YHP: Does it appear so? Art is something you want because life is hard. If you're next to art, it comforts you. When you make it, you forget about the world's troubles. You just forget. I didn't have a hard life, all things considered. I have been very fortunate. For the remainder of my life, I plan on just doing a bit more work, teaching some children.... Nowadays, I think about my life, and it seems I aimed for my art and my children to turn out well. It's embarrassing to say, but if I think about it, I spent 70 years focusing on myself. I do something different these days. I teach about 12 to 14 disabled children once a week in my studio. I host music recitals. I invite young artists (who receive scholarships) for exhibitions. Twice a year, I host a recital for young musicians out of school who have no other venue, together with established musicians. And you know nowadays there is no place for young artists to go after they finish their post-graduate degree, so I hold an open studio for them to exhibit their work. I do little things like that. Luckily, even with all that, I still have time to make my work, but now my energy is flagging. I don't think I can make ceiling works any more. Once those things are wet, they are heavy like carpet and you have to be able to shake them.

JYL: When one sees the video of you working on those, it looks quite strenuous.

YHP: You have a belt around your waist and do this....[gestures]... I don't think I can do that now. The roller is too heavy. The path of human life is already set, so I can't become younger and healthier by myself. Nowadays I am working on accepting this limit. I have to accept it so that I can organize my life in preparation for death. The problem is, there are so many works I didn't like that I stored away. I am worried that someone's going to see them, and I have to fix them before I die. About half of them I don't like. I can't throw them away, I need to fix them, but I don't have the strength anymore.

JYL: Action paintings involve your body, but the works about nature....

Paik: Asians tend to accept nature when they do things. Water is allowed to simply flow, and you use that. It's something like that. Even when we draw space, Asian imaginations show humans as tiny and space as large. Think about landscapes, where a small old man is shown by himself walking against a huge mountain. We think that is

beautiful. Western thinking on the other hand draws a beautiful woman, a glamorous woman front and center, and then there is a tiny bit of landscape in the background. It's a difference of thought in approaching what is big and what takes priority.