

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Sook Jin Jo
- Interviewer: Francesca Bolfo
- February 2018 / Sook Jin Jo's studio, NYC
- Recorded by Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
- 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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Francesca Bolfo (FB): I'm curious about your approach to found materials. Could you elaborate on the processes involved in the selection and arrangement of objects?

Sook Jin Jo (SJJ): During my graduate study in the early 1980s, I started using cheap materials, especially plywood, because I could not afford to buy canvas or other art supplies. I also wanted to use something different, what no one else was interested in. When I started experimenting with plywood, one of my professors, a leading contemporary artist in the *Dansaekhwa* movement, told me that it was not a good medium to work with. But when he said that I felt like I was onto something special. Instead of being discouraged by him, I was actually very encouraged, and I wanted to show that this material could be an excellent working medium for art. I got involved with it more seriously. At the same time, I was questioned about my bridging of painting and sculpture. At that time, the areas of painting and sculpture were divided. Even painting was divided between Oriental and Western styles. Within Western painting, it was divided into abstract and representational painting. When you chose to study one of these areas, you had to follow that direction. I thought that was kind of a stereotype and I wanted to break those boundaries. I really wanted to explore the relationship between painting, sculpture, and other art forms. I started painting on plywood, and then I realized I could make shapes too. I started painting, cutting, staining, and making forms, while also combining them. I really enjoyed that process and wanted to create my own language using these materials. As a result, my work became very intuitive; I looked at the mediums and tried to find their intrinsic character or nature, transforming them into something that can touch people's hearts. I try to bring the spirit out of the material. Spirituality is very important in my work. Society has become very materialistic and industrialized, so I think spirituality is crucial. I try to explore the relationship between materials and spirituality. This is why I started combining all these different kinds of materials and using all art-making processes to create my work.

FB: I find your anecdote about working with your painting teacher and his reaction to your use of plywood really fascinating. Did you feel as if you were reacting to the primacy of *Dansaekhwa* painting that existed in Korea from the 1960s onwards? Did you gravitate towards these materials as a response to the primacy of painting that existed at the time, and the hierarchies and divisions that you described within it?

SJJ: I didn't try to work against them. All my professors, including Park Seo-Bo, were of the *Dansaekhwa* period and I was influenced by their approach. If you look at my work, it looks minimalistic, but it's not—my work is very expressionistic. I try to accept whatever situation, condition, or environment I have, and I try to digest it all. Because I tried to create certain kinds of contemplative, meditative qualities in the work, I had to control color in all the elements. I keep the intrinsic nature of the found material, but I alter them however I want: painting, cutting, staining, and crafting forms. I try to achieve a certain aesthetic quality.

FB: Could you discuss your use of paint and stain? Do you find yourself gravitating towards stain because it preserves many of the intrinsic qualities of wood?

SJJ: I use both. I often draw on techniques used in Oriental painting, where the pigment is usually smeared into the paper. I use plywood which has a real grain to it. I use these processes, materials, and elements in many diverse ways, like making different foods with the same ingredients.

FB: How do you determine whether or not to alter the materials you find? In some instances, we see works that retain the majority of their inherent forms, and it is through assembly or composition that you alter their qualities. In others, as you were saying, you paint, you stain, you cut. How do you determine how to treat each piece?

SJJ: That really depends on my intuition. That is why I try to make my own language; I try to respect my feelings, my concept, and try to listen to my heart rather than voices from the outside. Obviously, I am always influenced by what is happening around me, but I try to always work from the heart and that way the work can touch peoples' hearts.

FB: Would you say it's a similar process of intuition that drives the selection of materials? How, when you're walking down the street, do you decide to grab something?

SJJ: I just look, and I know. I see something and I just grab it, all the time. Sometimes it takes time to develop the work, even five or ten years, but sometimes it comes out immediately. I always try to respect my intuition, as I said, but at the same time I have to create harmony and control among the elements, otherwise it's going to be a disaster. If you look at my work carefully, the elements look like found objects, but they're not.

FB: In your recent photography series, *Seoul Cross*, 2017, [Editor's note: the work captures the constellation of red, neon, crosses illuminating Seoul's night sky], you are jumping into a radically different medium, but I'm curious if you are drawing on a similar intuitive process when you select the crosses to photograph throughout Seoul.

SJJ: I've been taking pictures for the last fifteen years—maybe longer than that. I am very much interested in disappearing, abandoned, and discarded materials or environments, and I want to document them, otherwise they will disappear. But this is the cycle of life, anyway.

When I was in Korea in 2002, I was outside of Seoul sitting on a hill at night. I looked down and there were so many red crosses that looked like they were floating in the sky, I was shocked. I wanted to take pictures to document them in a series and maybe think about how we can approach the spiritual elements in our lives. That's why I started thinking about the crosses and began discussing the concept a few years ago. I was invited to show these at the Seoul Photo Festival in 2017.

FB: While we are discussing alternative mediums, can you talk a bit about your paintings and drawings on paper? I'm particularly drawn to your use of traditional Korean paper as the support for this work.

SJJ: This paper was once used to line the floors of traditional Korean houses, but has since been replaced by linoleum and other industrial materials. I thought it was very special paper and I started to collect it, and because it was oil paper, I used oils to paint [note: The thick mulberry paper she uses is called jangpan-ji, 장판지, which was traditionally used to cover the radiant heating flooring and was coated with oil and lacquer]. It's hard to find these days. I am very interested in disappearing things—something unique, something that people don't pay attention to or value—and I try to bring them to life.

FB: In a work like *Chairs*, 2009, that comprises materials collected and accumulated over nine years, how does an extended period of conception alter your process in general? How does that nine years of collecting invest itself into the work?

SJJ: Before *Chairs*, I had a couple of pieces in which I used chairs. If you go to a city, you will see abandoned empty wooden chairs. In them, I saw people's presence, their traces. The chairs are used by people and thrown away. And I felt—I don't know if it is sympathy—an emotion towards the chairs so I started to collect them. Over the years, I had collected fifty chairs and at that point I got the idea for the work. The work was actually created by bits and pieces of my experience and memories. When I arranged them, I made it irregular on the floor without their legs, facing towards the wall and looking into one direction as if indicating a passage of time and movement. I tried to bring an atmosphere of something contemplative that was theatrical and interactive so that people can imagine their own memories. And I controlled the lighting. Light is a very important element in installation art and I try to create a total harmony between the light and the composition. I am very much interested in theatrical space too. I've designed some theatrical spaces in my studio, and someday hope to work in a real space. I am also very much interested in architectural houses and buildings. It all relates. I use all my interests in one piece, one by one, and that is why I try to control all the elements: painting, sculpting, architecture, light. And I like to harmonize all these elements.

FB: It's remarkable that you are able to achieve a work that is simultaneously contemplative and theatrical; I couldn't think of better words to describe this piece. It's very evocative in this way. I'd like to hone in on one thing you mentioned in your conception of *Chairs* that seems to follow through all the different materials, mediums, and installations that you work through: the concept of time. I was hoping you could elaborate a bit more on the various notions of time that come into your work, whether you are photographing decaying buildings or graveyards, or conceiving a piece like *Witness*, 2017 (designed 1998), where you are meditating on trees as witnesses to the

horrors that humans inflict upon each other. How does time factor in your work?

SJJ: The materials I find are already laden with time and possess their own history. We have a circle of life, the passing of time may seem like change, but it is actually circling. I want to evoke this cycle of time and history, its repeating. I am interested in exploring life and death. But I'm not really talking about death; I try to talk about life. For example, I created a type of death performance in 1999 at the Socrates Sculpture Park that was part of an installation, *Color of Life* [note: *Color of Life*, 1999, was part of '7,840,800 cu ft,' May 16 – August 15, 1999, Socrates Sculpture Park. The performance directed by Sook Jin Jo was the opening performance of the dedication ceremony for Socrates Sculpture Park officially becoming part of the City of New York's Parks & Recreation on May 16, 1999. Jo was the Socrates Sculpture Park Artist Fellow]. When people actually face death, they look at the world differently. It is indirectly that I try to talk about the cycle of life and death. Things are abandoned and discarded, but they gain new lives as works of art, so there is a kind of repetition. Everything is temporary but we live in a materialistic world, and materials, money, and power seem important. But it's not really true; when we die, we cannot take anything with us. We forget this, and I try to remind people of these fundamental ideas in my work.

FB: You've often worked collaboratively, whether with local peoples, students, or with other artists. I'm interested to hear about your approach to collaboration, and how it changes your artistic process.

SJJ: I try to work with local people because I know that these kinds of projects can inspire them. I've had many experiences collaborating with a variety of people from different cultures and all walks of life. I try to use the creativity of other people, not simply their labor. That's boring for them, and I want to help them learn. I've worked with at-risk youth in New York City, voluntary doctors, retired lawyers, engineers, photographers—many different people who are all really inspired. I really enjoy the people I work with, and I respect them. An eye-opening experience I had was working with students in Brazil at a very poor school [note: In 2001 and 2007, Sook Jin Jo received the Sacatar Foundation Residency Fellowship in Itaparica, Brazil, where she created a mural in collaboration with students in 2001 and *Crossroads*, 2008. I went there for my residency, initially just for my own project that became *Crossroads*, but after being there I wanted to do something for the students I met in the town. I got the idea to make a mural working with abandoned materials we found. I received a letter from the principal after I came back from Brazil saying our collaboration did great things for the students' self-esteem. A successful collaboration and public art can bring positive energy to the local community and expand their horizons.

FB: It seems like you very much epitomize the term 'global artist' as someone who was born and educated in Korea, lives and works in New York, and travels extensively to create work in many different places with many different kinds of people. How do you



navigate the complexities inherent to creating work for such diverse audiences?

SJJ: I try to make my work original and timeless. I think it's good to give you an example. I'd like to talk about [Construction in Process](#), 2004, which is part of a series of construction installations I started making in 2004, the first of which was in Lodz, Poland [note: Jo created the piece as part of her participation in the 1st Lodz Biennale, October 2 – 31, 2004, Lodz, Poland]. At that time, I had a performance called *Peace Performance* integrated around this very large piece. About fifty people in the audience became part of the performance. I was working with the audience but didn't give any introduction or explicit instructions. There were many art critics who came from New York to the Lodz Biennale, and when I met one of the critics in New York, she said that this kind of audience-involved performance could not happen in New York. But I created a similar piece with a different theme and subject matter at the O. K. Harris gallery in SoHo, which unintentionally coincided with Hurricane Katrina. I had the performance as part of the closing exhibition, and about forty people were part of that performance. They were all very invested and emotional, and a few of them cried. I don't really think about specific places; I create for a global viewer. We are all human—we have a similar experience, and even if we live in different environments, we live in the same world.

FB: Do you actively try to touch upon universally accessible themes?

SJJ: Yes. Through some of the collaborative work, like at the University of Texas in El Paso, I approach the theme of wishes and dreams [note: '*Wishing Worlds/We are All in One*,' September 23 – November 11, 2004, Stanlee and Gerald Rubin Center for the Visual Arts, University of Texas, El Paso, Texas]. We all have wishes and dreams, so this is a universal theme. When I encourage people to talk about their wishes and dreams, everyone can relate.

FB: You mentioned previously that spirituality is a central feature of your conceptual process. I was hoping you could speak about *To the Unknown God*, 2007—it's one of the most visually arresting works of yours, the tensions you evoke between the forms and the space in between them—and if you could speak a little more about the creation of the work and its relation to spirituality that is most evident in the title but in the forms of the work itself.

SJJ: I have created about ten pieces around the concept of constructive installation that includes *To the Unknown God*, which was installed at the Arko Art Center in Seoul [note: '*Sook Jin Jo: A 20 Year Encounter with Abandoned Wood – Selected Artworks from New York*,' August 31 – September 30, 2007, Arko Art Center, Seoul]. The exhibition featured several of my pieces, and I put the installation in the middle of the space in a way that kind of connected all the works. It was devoted to the concept of the unknown god that originates in Greek mythology. In addition to their many specific deities, the Greeks worshiped an "unknown god" that was not tied to any particular idea.



That's why I used the title in the work. Before that, I used different forms but similar materials to create *My Brother's Keeper*, 2005, which was a memorial piece for my younger brother who passed away at that time. The works were related, both personally and spiritually. Using all these materials, I wanted to eventually create a work that moved people.

FB: You've been emphasizing the importance of spirituality in your work; was there a moment in which you realized that spirituality is a very important part or aspect of your life that you needed to express through your work? Was there an opportunity for you to realize that?

SJJ: I had a difficult time with my parents, who objected to what I was trying to do. Their strong objections really blocked me—they reduced their financial support, and that's largely why I looked to alternative materials. But I didn't want to be affected by these difficulties, so I tried to focus on spirituality and saved my life through positivity by reading spiritual, philosophical, and biographical books and exploring how other people conquered their difficulties. I think that was the start. Naturally, this was embedded into the work. But I didn't emphasize it; my work became more abstract because I wanted people to have their own imagination.

FB: And what about your use of natural forms like tree branches in relation to manufactured plywood or other industrially altered wooden materials in the construction series and in general?

SJJ: In Brazil in 2001, I saw mangrove trees for the first time. They grow out of the water: their roots grow like branches in order to survive where fresh and saltwater meet. I was so impressed by the form and space and the structural relationship. That was the beginning, the inspiration, to create the constructive installations that I started in 2004. It was from that moment that I made the drawings and wanted to use those elements in the work. In the work, there's a similar structural stability you see in the trees. In a way, it's not mathematical; it's just tree branches, but they convey the stability of natural forms.

FB: I'd like to hone in on this aspect of seriality or serial forms in your work; it seems like a point of intersection between your formal and conceptual processes. In a work like *Nobody*, 2014—or even one as far back as *Resurrection II*, 1996-97, with its multitude of drawers—do you think of yourself working with serial forms?

SJJ: At that time, I simply started to collect drawers and began working with drawers and chairs. I started collecting more and more, but I was always interested in using space and how I might construct it differently. In *Resurrection II*, I affixed drawers so that it looked as if they were coming out of the wall in order to present them differently from the way we normally see or experience them. I wanted to create something unexpected

and unfamiliar with the space. If you look at the *Construction* series, some or all of them possess similar materials, but they are all created differently in relation to the space around them.

FB: How do such spatial considerations feature in a work like *Nobody*, with its array of empty picture frames suspended from the ceiling?

SJJ: They are hanging in the middle of the space, where people can peer through them and can be 'framed' by the frames. They are floating, so people could also lay down on the floor and look up, and from that vantage point the work looks radically different. I wanted to create *Nobody* in a theatrical and interactive space. I am very much interested in empty space, void or non-being. Because of empty space or non-being, many things become valuable. For example, when we look at a cup, we make this cup with clay, or "being." But what we use is the vessel's emptiness—that is what we value, but we don't think of that. Make houses: we build the house with materials, but what we use is the empty space created within. Based on that kind of concept, I built the work, *Space Between; we work with being, but non-being is what we use*, 1998-99. If you look at my work from 1985, you see the space. In my assemblage work, you always see holes; I create a break. So, it actually came from the beginning. Now I use the ceiling, floor, all the spaces to use and create different perspectives.

FB: Can you elaborate on a work like *Below*, 2012-15, and how your interactions with space exist in that work?

SJJ: That work was very much inspired by my visit to Jaipur, India in 2006. There are buildings there that inspired me and remained in my psyche. In 2014, I was living in Shanghai for about six months, and it is a very complex, modern city [note: Jo was a resident at The Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai, China]. And I think these two combined experiences somehow influenced me to create *Below*. The work is made of cedar blocks that are architectural. Each one is different: I cut and stained them, then arranged them irregularly on the floor. If you look at the work, you peer down onto a landscape similar to a city or metropolis. I think I want people to have a different perspective looking into something like a small world, where they can imagine or feel differently from there.

FB: I want to go back to some of your earlier work, such as *Resurrection I* and, as we previously mentioned, discuss your relationship to assemblage and whether or not you consider yourself an assemblage artist. In creating works like *Resurrection I*, do you feel that you are engaging in the tradition of collage and assemblage that came to prominence in the United States in the 1950s and 60s?

SJJ: When I started this work, I didn't really know well about Western assemblage artists' work. We only knew of it through books. My practice started because of my

financial situation and the cost of traditional materials, and because of my questions regarding stereotyped ideas. Later, I found out about the Western artists' practices. I think my assemblage is different; there is a spirituality that many Western artists don't necessarily pursue.

FB: Do you think that this is specifically something that you have access to as someone of Korean heritage?

SJJ: It is possible, but even among my generation in Korea, not many people think about spirituality. It feels very traditional when you speak about spirituality or spiritual things. I really think we need more spirituality today. I think many people who are spiritually-minded have a certain kind of purpose in their lives. They often think about others more than themselves. I've been surprised that many art critics have caught on to the spirit in my work, despite not having mentioned it to them.

FB: I would also like to discuss the cultural conditions in which you are working. How might your inherent Koreanness inflect your work? Do you identify as a Korean artist, and if so, how does that position you within the New York art world? How do you draw on your own heritage and culture in the creation of your work, and how do you navigate this high-paced, commercial work of New York?

SJJ: I began working in Korea, and I felt this initial confidence in my work because it was really coming from me. When I came here, I immediately had a chance to show the works I made in Korea and I found that the art world here appreciated them, so I felt encouraged by that situation. Because, as you said, New York is fast and commercially-oriented, I feel I need to make more of this kind of work. I don't really care about commercialism; I just want to make the work I want to make. That's why these days I use such a range of mediums that play on my conceptual themes, whether LED lights, photography, or video. Whatever medium, I try to be true to those materials and try to achieve a similar result through these ranges of mediums.

FB: I am curious, more broadly speaking, if there are particular artistic precedents or artists or movements in either the Western tradition or in Korea, upon which you draw in your work.

SJJ: I'm sure over the years, I got some fragments from different artists, but I can explicitly mention two artists: Van Gogh and Cézanne—especially Cézanne. There are so many elements he was playing with in his work. His approach to perspective was revolutionary.

FB: And what about Van Gogh do you draw on?

SJJ: I think it is his life and his work. He tried to keep doing what he loved to do even if

he was in a very difficult situation, and his story inspired me to keep working. And his work is just lively, very expressive. Today, still, it touches people's hearts. I hope I can make something that, one hundred years later, does something similar. That's my goal.

I've been interested in public art since 1988. At that time, we had a kind of public art program, but the work standing in front of buildings had no relation to the spaces around them, which I began questioning. I started making models and drawings I've never shown. I've also studied the collaboration between art and architecture. In creating public art, I am more interested in creating work that many people can interact with, or work that is in harmony with the environment and that has the potential to lift people's spirits. Of course, I also want to create something that has a unique design and is aesthetically strong, but its interactive potential is my focus.

FB: Can you talk about *Wishing Bells/ To Protect and Serve*, 2009 [a permanent installation at the Los Angeles Metro Detention Center]?

SJJ: That work is based on Buddhism. I practice Christianity, but I am open to any religion. The Metro Detention Center is located in downtown LA, where the local community is predominantly Japanese. There was a conflict between the government and the residents, who didn't want a prison in their community, but they decided to build it anyway. Because I try my best to create public art that engages with its environment, my approach was to draw upon Japanese Buddhist traditions. I did a lot of research and drew on my own experiences when I visited Japan. Sometimes, you walk down the street and hear the sounds of little chimes, but don't necessarily see them. I researched chimes and bells and found that for the New Year, Buddhist temples ring bells 108 times to dispel desire and announce a new beginning. The main principle of Buddhism is that we as humans have 108 earthly desires that create human suffering. Accordingly, one bell chime disperses one desire. I thought that was beautiful. So, I hung 108 bells, using wood to construct the larger structure. I didn't really care about the fact that the jurors might have been suspicious of my use of wood since it's not usually used for most permanent outdoor art projects. But oriental temples still remain after several hundred years! People have to walk through or alongside the work to access the prison, so it becomes an interactive space. I remember Donald Kuspit mentioned that piece as a genuinely public-spirited art (Kuspit, *The Power of Meditation: Sook Jin Jo's Art*, 2004)—I really try to do my best to create a work that engages with its environment.

FB: Can you divulge what you are working on right now?

SJJ: Currently I am working on the book of *Seoul Crosses*, which is going to be published next year. I have a couple of projects. One is in Nicaragua that is privately commissioned. I'm planning on going there in February to see the site and am going to work with materials there.

Another has already been made, a standing work, and it is in the casting process right



now in Shanghai. It is a new project that involves casting in aluminum, and I am going to paint the aluminum just like wood to show at a sculpture exhibition in Shanghai in May 2018. I had the maquette for this work some ten years ago, but of course the final form is different in their site.

FB: Do you find it difficult to work with fabricators as opposed to working with the materials on your own?

SJJ: In the LA project, I had difficulty with the fabricators working in wood. This time, working in metal, I went there to check a couple of pieces they cast and it looked ok. It's not going to be easy; this is my first project of this kind and they have to cast over sixty pieces. It's very complicated work, so it's going to be difficult, but I have a good feeling about it.

FB: Do you have a message or advice for artists of Korean heritage as a person who has already experienced New York as a foreigner? Is there anything you want to remind them of?

SJJ: When we decide to become artists, we do so because we want to make something, and I want people to stick to those original ideas that pushed them to create art. The original ideas often change because of this commercial art world. Sometimes people become limited by this commercialism and money and power. I hope that people really listen to their hearts and make something that can really touch and inspire people's minds. And I think that's great work. This way an artist can enjoy creating, rather than become a slave to money. I try to be very pure when I am making my work. As an artist, I want to make work uninfluenced by those commercial things and material perspectives. That way I think artists can enjoy their work and create something wonderful and unexpected.