

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Eunhyung Kim
- Interviewer: Suzy Taekyung Kim
- August 2019 / Artist's studio in Seoul, South Korea
- Recorded and transcribed by Suzy Taekyung Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2018-2019)
- Edited by Suzy Taekyung Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2018-2019)
- 1 Video file, 3 Audio files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Suzy Taekyung Kim (STK): Can you start by introducing your earlier works? What was your inspiration for narrative drawings?

Eunhyung Kim (EK): Starting with "Designing Egos," my early works were the traces of my unconscious mind. I recorded all the processes of subconscious associations and thoughts, as if I was taking out my brain and exposing it through this series. Everything from my dreams and imaginations to fantasies were expressed in my narrative drawings without any filters. This particular series is an accumulation of my pure drawings as a result of automatism, which is the avoidance of conscious intention in producing works of art.

STK: How did you start folding the drawings into these brain-like shapes?

EK: My usual practice starts from a series of unconscious drawings. When I was in Chicago, I studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. I was contemplating how I would translate my drawings into one solid work in my drawing class with Professor Candida Alvarez. At that time, the professor suggested that I sweep out all thoughts from my brain. I expressed everything that came into my mind and it was as if I spread my brain onto the paper. I crumpled the paper and each crease defined the stream of thoughts and gave an isolated/confined area to store different thoughts. As a result, the crumpled paper was tangled with stories and fragments of my subconscious mind. The shape of the ridge produced on the paper resembled the brain. This brain-like shape is made entirely with one piece of paper, without cutting or gluing several pieces together. After many trials, I found the perfect paper weight that didn't unfold the creases.

STK: Can you tell us about the project you worked on after you returned to Korea?

EK: During my time in New York, I was able to watch a lot of operas at the Metropolitan Opera House. To me, opera was the source of establishing and reflecting my own identity as an outsider to this new city. After graduating from art school in Chicago, I lived everyday as if I was a bohemian character in one of the operas I watched. I was especially touched by the artist's stories in "La Boheme." The Lincoln Center became my favorite and most adored place in New York. It is the Lincoln Center that made me realize how affectionate this city would be to me. In my opinion, opera is the culmination of the highest form of art. Therefore, it was the opera that enabled me to experience music, dance, performance, and costume all at once. This indirect experience of multiculturalism and various historical backgrounds gave me an opportunity to be immersed into specific situations or even to become particular characters. It struck me as these parallel experiences of my identity, trying to survive in New York City where all the nationalities are mixed together, as if the characters in the operas were re-telling my experiences as an alien who is trying to fit-in.

After I returned to Seoul, I had my first come-back show related to classical music and opera. The show "Moussorgsky, Pictures at Exhibition" was focused on Modest Moussorgsky's famous piano composition that has 10 pieces featuring different themes. I attempted to re-interpret each theme. Moussorgsky composed "Pictures at Exhibition," where he showcased these 10 pieces of music in remembrance of Viktor Hartmann, Moussorgsky's dear friend and an artist. Particularly, Mourssorgsky's selection resembled the curatorial process (curating) in contemporary art. I focused on re-telling the ten pieces, accentuating what was remembered from the original and what was inserted through the process of my own re-interpretation. This free-flow re-telling was captured in a monochromatic scheme. Through this absence of colors, the spectators were invited to read my visual interpretations and drawings freely. While I used various colors in my earlier works, in this specific show, I paid attention to the process of virtual automatism.

For instance, No. 4 "Bydlo" is a Polish word that means "a cart with enormous wheels drawn by a cow" and represents "oppressed people like animals" which directly connotes suffering from tyranny. However, Hartmann did not portray oxen itself but drew the oppressed individuals. As I was re-interpreting the imagery from this musical piece, I decided to include the imagery of oxen. I thought of "White Ox" by Lee Jung Seop who is a prolific Korean artist who portrayed the turmoil during the period of Japanese Occupation and Independence of Korea. The oppressed in Poland reminded me of the oppressed in Korea. The symbolic use of oxen was the representation of both countries' suffering and the tragedy of each nation. Ironically, during the time I lived in New York, the ox symbolized the rising stock market and trading, which also exemplified the optimism and confidence of Wall Street. I inserted iconic images such as Gargamel in "The Smurfs," associating with socialism and a tyranny and Statue of Liberty as capitalism.

STK: For many years you have been focusing on opera inspired themes. How did you start getting into the world of opera?

EK: I frequented all kinds of operas during my stay in New York. The Met was the best internationally and I was mesmerized by the world of opera. I dissected every performance and act and became addicted to every single piece. Among all the operas, I was deeply touched by Puccini's "Turandot" at the Met; it is the most exemplary form of high art and cannot be compared with art exhibitions or any other kinds of performance. The current trend in opera is not so much about European classics but "Turandot" is a rich integration of the classics. Altogether, I have watched over 50 operas and musicals while in New York and it became natural to me to use them as inspiration in my artwork. Time to time you can find inexpensive tickets as well so listening to music became a habit. It was only natural for me to create artwork based on classical music and opera. Among them, "The Ring Cycle", "Der Ring des Nibelungen" are four operas linked together by German composer, Richard Wagner. I watched it at

the Metropolitan Opera. I created the artworks based on the musical inspirations and translated them into visual form. I had the privilege of showing my works as one of 10 winners of the Joong Ang Fine Arts Prize. For this show, I made mural installations and 2D reliefs while re-interpreting each chapter of the opera. The size of each drawing was similar to the size of a comic strip, so that they are more readable at a glance.

STK: Do you have a specific reason why you showcase mural installations?

EK: I usually include mural pieces along with the smaller works to emphasize certain moments. I use the projector to have baselines and then casually go over the lines with a big brush to accentuate the free strokes. I intentionally leave the drips and splashes. These marks create the ambiance that the viewers are inside of my brain. As they walk around the big brain of the exhibition space, they will notice more details and continue with the narratives. I started incorporating murals during the Skowhegan Artist Residency Program. I took a fresco class and I realized Asian ink art could be extended and translated into fresco as well. I wanted to accentuate the feeling of being in a sketchbook. The drawings you see in the artworks are copied directly onto the wall by using a projector. It is hard to bring out intricate hand gestures with large scale murals over 4 meters so I prefer using a projector.

STK: What is the reason behind your desire to study abroad?

EK: It became a trend to study abroad after advanced studies in Korea. During the time I was finishing my bachelor's degree and master's degree, I had vague ideas that I would study outside of Korea. When I was younger, I watched a lot of MTV music videos and I was a big fan of Transformers. I think I had a fantasy around American culture due to this childhood exposure. An interesting thing about the international student population in Korea these days is there are a lot of students from Europe and China.

STK: Can you tell us about your work before your time in the US and after you came back from your studies there?

EK: Before I studied abroad, I was making fabric drawings. Utilizing fabric pieces, I made works by stretching and crumpling as if I painted with fabric. At this time, I used a lot of color schemes as well. I majored in Asian Art and my focus was to reinterpret the tradition instead of delivering personal narratives. The turning point for me, and the reason I came back to Korea, was being offered a teaching position at an art college in Seoul. While I was teaching, I was able to obtain a doctoral degree from 2013 to 2015. It took me another 3 years to complete my doctoral thesis. My time in New York was an experimental period based on the drawing method. After I came back to Korea, I translated the past drawings into ink paintings. In the series "Cerebral Planet," I used the method of scribbling and inserted my analysis of the opera. For instance, in the

work I produced based on the opera “L'elisir d'amore,” I often made comparisons with Josun Dynasty (Korea) paintings and Goong Joong Hwa which showcases full compositions unlike the stereotype of Asian painting which leave the empty space as a “breathing space.”

Stemming from the Tang Dynasty (China), “Il-Pum-Hwa-Poong,” highlights the creative spirit, revealing each artist’s individuality without tying too much of it to tradition. I purposely exemplified this individualistic approach in Asian art. Both Eastern and Western cultures embrace studying the masterpiece by making replicas. I started by studying the traditional works and reinterpreted them with my own gestures. This method of reinterpreting traditional art is called “Bangjak.” I heavily utilized such traditional methods, which encompass a variety of themes.

STK: What is your finishing process like?

EK: The installation reliefs and the pencil drawings are finished with acrylic finishing spray, which prevents the work from yellowing and smearing.

STK: Do you experience artistic slumps? How do you overcome it?

EK: It doesn't manifest specifically as a “slump” but it comes and goes as I practice art, and the fact that there is no specific future for an artist is the source of my slump.

STK: What are your plans for the future?

EK: I want to take time to look back on what I have created and work on new projects with animation and colors.