

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Ran Hwang
- Interviewer: Richard Vine
- April 14, 2017 / Ran Hwang's studio in New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Jeong-A Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2017-2018)
- Re-edited by Alyssa Choi (Ran Hwang Studio) on Oct 23, 2023
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Jeong-A Kim (JK): How do you know each other? How long have you known each other?

Richard Vine (RV): We've known each other since 2004, when I wrote a catalog essay for a group exhibition at the Korean Cultural Service. [Ed note: Richard Vine, "Seeing The Light," *Green Light: Twenty Young Korean Artists in New York*, November 11 – December 17, 2004.] It was a twenty-person show. She was one of the stars.

Ran Hwang (RW): You're kidding, right? I submitted a big Buddha head. It was a wall installation [Note: *Beyond Language II-1*, dimensions variable, buttons, pins, 2004]. From early 2002, I was pinning directly to the wall.

RV: The work had real presence. Well, I had to rely on the work, because at that time, it was very difficult to converse with Ran in English. One of the fascinating things about her career is the way that it has developed over time, picking up different references along the way. At that first meeting, I was struck by the discrepancy between a seemingly spiritual work and the very fashionable persona of the artist.

RH: It's true. I've always been interested in fashion from childhood. That's why I use fashion materials. Before that show, I was working at a fashion embroidery company in the Garment District. I was interested in fashion materials – buttons, pins, threads, beads and fabric. I was a designer.

RV: When I made a studio visit, I discovered she made boxes that had two layers and cut outs.

RH: They were collages.

RV: Yes, collages of the female figure, and references to buttons and threads and fashion. But even then, there was an awareness of the other side of the fashion business, which is very exploitive, one part of the industry is lives a glamorous life but the products are made in obscure places by people who are paid very little for doing repetitive labor. One of the links she found was in that repetitiveness, which could also have a spiritual element.

JK: Was it the dark side of fashion that interested you?

RH: Yes, sure. But it's more from when I was young. I was a very lonely girl. When I was about ten years old, I wasn't a very bright girl and I was very introverted. I needed friends, but I couldn't talk to make friends. I liked drawing though, so I made paper dolls.

When I drew at school, a lot of girls would surround me to watch. That shocked me. I would make friends that way. My interest in fashion grew out of that time. When I used to work in an embroidery company, I worked with low-waged workers. I opened my eyes to the dark side of the fashion industry when I realized they are the ones who make those dazzling fashion products. When I was five years old, I went to a Buddhist temple with my family. I saw a lot of Buddhas then. Now I'm making a lot of Buddhas with fashion materials. I still do.

RV: Wasn't there also that time in your life when you were living in a temple?

RH: I was in an emotionally difficult situation at that time. It was the most difficult time in my life. It was before I came to New York. I went to the temple with the intention of saying good-bye to everything in my life. But actually, in living the temple life, I believe the bamboo stick that struck me awakened me.

RV: How long were you there?

RH: One month. I would get woken by a nun every 110

night during my sleep at 1 am, 4 am, 7 am. Over one hundred women slept in the same room, the prayer room. The nun would bring a bamboo stick to hit us on our shoulders, saying, "It's time to pray, it's time to pray," to wake us up to do a chant. You could say I was hit enough by that stick during my stay to 'wake up.' It's unbelievable we did it every night.

RV: And was it after that when you decided to move to New York?

RH: No, that's when I decided to move to Seoul. I grew up and was living in Busan. The temple was called Gu-in Sa, in Danyang. It's a historic place located halfway between Busan and Seoul. I went to Seoul, and I worked every day at making art. A few years after I graduated school in Seoul, I moved to New York. I was 31 years old.

RV: Was that a dramatic decision – did you come with the intention of emigrating or was it more of a see-how-it-works situation?

RH: Well, before I moved to New York, I was a realist painter. I had held several solo exhibitions in Seoul, but I had already decided I didn't want to paint anymore. I wanted to pursue different contemporary art. I wanted to start a new chapter of my life holding my head up. That's why I decided to come to New York.

RV: When did you actually start working with buttons and pins and such?

RH: In 1997, when I arrived here, I was studying English at an English school and attended the School of Visual Arts, a well-known art school in New York. I needed to earn money after school to put bread on my table and so I got that job in the Fashion District. See, I found fashion again. I was drawing designs for the company. The store is still around in Manhattan. The company sold all different kinds of fashion materials, such as zippers, buttons, pins, scissors.... At the time, I was collecting very old buttons. I was interested in buttons that were around a hundred years old. I would find them in flea markets. Buttons have holes, which kind of look like people's eyes. Like my glasses.

RV: At that point, were you making art exclusively by yourself?

RH: Yes. I'd find the buttons and bring them to my studio. I would practice. Can I have one of the buttons and pins there? [Gets some buttons and a pin]. See how this button is much too big for the pin? When I put the pin through, it falls through. [Pin drops to floor]. It falls out. So, I use beads or another smaller buttons to layer it under the larger button, and the pin stays. [Holds it upside down]. I practiced this a lot.

RV: At that point, it was really meditation.

RH: My work is always meditation. I got the idea from the temple. Always, everyday, the monks would play their *moktak* [Note: a round, hollow wooden instrument held in one hand and hit with a small stick in rhythm with Buddhist chants or prayer] and my hammering of the pins would make a similar sound. *Tok tok tok*. I enjoyed making my artwork because it reminded me of the sound of the moktak. It was the sound I lived with in the temple where I rediscovered myself.

JK: But now you have a studio with assistants.

RH: Well at first, I was making a lot of wall installations as practice. But I had to rethink it, because making a 10-square-meter wall installation of fish took one year. You have to hammer one pin down about thirty times. I realized that I needed assistants very quickly. The process of production is very time-consuming. For this reason, I have worked with many excellent assistants throughout my shows to this day.

RV: When did you start using the separate background support, rather hammering directly on the wall?

RH: I started using background support after 10 years of making wall installations. In the beginning, I didn't have the money to buy a panel. You know, New York artists are very, very poor because they need to work for a living pursuing their art career. Empty walls were great. I would think when I found a wall, 'Ah! This is my wall. My place!' Every gallery and every museum has a free wall. I could hammer away at all of them. I 111

could even include the ceiling. I believe the hardship I had at that time rather fueled me for imagination and motivation to overcome the limit of space. I am grateful for that. If I had money to buy canvases, I might not have come up with working on the walls or ceilings. I think my time in poverty gave me a resilient spirit.

RV: Can you sell a work like that? A work on the wall?

RH: Oh no. After the exhibition, my work would all disappear. I was practicing. For me, the experience made me have a very strong art practice. I feel thankful to the galleries, AHL NY in 2004, AAW in 2005 and the Queens Museum in 2006 for letting me use their walls. [Note: Everything All at Once, Queens International 2006, October 1, 2006 – January 14, 2007].

RV: There were many years of this.

RH: Yes. It had been mainly wall installations for about the first 10 years. I am also making small-sized works. My gallery was selling these. I was making mixed media works. Similar works to the boxes you saw in my studio at that time. It took a long time for me to see my works were selling, just a little bit at that time. I made some works on wooden panels where each panel worked with each other. But after making that work, I realized I wanted to see the backs of the work. Wood panels have no transparency. I wanted to see the buttons in the lower layers. The pins are very beautiful. They are very thin, and the best, most beautiful pins in the world, and I wanted to see them. I started looking at different materials, not wooden panels. I discovered transparent PVC sheets.

JK: Plexiglass?

RH: Not plexiglass. I didn't have that kind of money. At first, it was just PVC sheets. Then, I started drilling holes on plexiglass and then I started using a laser to make holes. This work behind us is made that way. I use glue, and then hammer in the pins. It's very, very strong, as you can see. The pins can't fall off. After many trials, I came down to use professional glue.

RV: At a certain point, you were deservedly fortunate to have a couple of dealers become very supportive of your work.

RH: I have very important galleries around me and they are supporting me in Europe, New York, Dubai and China – all over the world. I have very good friends in my life.

RV: There was a period when one or two of those people invested in your practice out of faith in your work. That really enabled you to develop, to take on assistants and start doing the work that everyone knows now.

RH: I am such a lucky artist to work with great dealers and exuberant assistants. After making plexiglass works, I started another search for materials. I wanted it to move. My work was always stable and static, but I wanted the work to move. I thought about video work. Around 2007, I made a video production. Now my works are plexiglass with video. In 2014, I had an exhibition in New York; I did it with video. [Note: 'The Snowfall of Spiders,' *Ran Hwang*, Leila Heller Gallery, February 20 – March 21, 2014]. Then I had an exhibition at Hermès, Singapore. [Note: *Becoming Again*, Hermès, Singapore, November 7, 2014 – January 31, 2015]. I exhibited at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore recently. [Note: *Joseon Korea: Court Treasures and City Life*, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, April 22 – July 23, 2017]. Also for [the upcoming 2019 exhibition in Brussels] the Palais des Beaux Arts show in Brussels. Every show since I have included video installations with my work.

RV: I remember one of the most effective ones – the video installation of water coming down to wash away bugs in your show at Hakgojae Gallery in Seoul. [Note: *Illusion & Reality*, Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul, June 9 – July 11, 2010].

RH: You went to my show in Seoul. I had chandeliers in plexiglass, and waterfalls.

RV: A couple of things have happened in your practice. One is that other motifs started to enter your work. For a long time, it was primarily Buddha. Then you started having birds, plum blossoms....¹¹²

RH: Not only birds. I made phoenixes. The phoenix represents the wish to live forever. That's everybody's hope. The meaning of plum blossoms is to represent how temporary our lives are. The meaning of these two motifs are opposite to each other.

RV: Different poles, actually.

RH: Yes. We hope to live forever, but our lives are temporary. I am matching those two facts together. In making my works, I always meditate on the meaning of 'life and death' and visibility and invisibility.

RV: Plum blossoms are temporary, but beautiful.

RH: I always pursue the beauty of our lives in their climax. The meaning of the plum blossoms is very serious, since it's about how our lives are going to end eventually. No one knows when, but we will die. As we recognize that there will be an end to one's life, we see the beauty of the fleeting moment.

RV: The other thing that happened, more or less simultaneously, is that in some instances the work started coming off the wall. You started making full-blown installations that people could enter and walk through.

RH: I enjoyed making those. The work can become very close to people when they walk around. My works at the Asian Civilisations Museum were like that. I like interactive artworks. Artwork breathes when with people. I want to share that.

RV: You were doing this when there was a certain critical fashion to disdain beauty, to make art very difficult, very obscure. And lots of art writing was unreadable. Through all that, you persisted with your practice, which was about the importance of making life beautiful, transient though it is, and engaging with the audience, drawing them into the experience of walking through the work.

RH: I like beautiful art. It makes me utterly happy to see something beautiful that I can't describe in words. I don't want to make grotesque art. The meaning can be grotesque, but what is visible should be beautiful. That's what's comfortable for me. Artists make work in the style they like. You can make visually beautiful art that has a difficult meaning. I think that what is visible and what is not is always different. In my work, I may show beauty outside, but the message I convey is not about beauty, it's about life, which can be hard and difficult. I don't have to show that in its naked form. RV: How did you get interested in the architectural references that are appearing now?

RV: How did you get interested in the architectural references that are appearing now?

RH: It's the image of the peaceful temple in my memory from childhood. I had a very important experience when I was young. I came to New York in 1997 and a few years later we had 9/11. At that time, I was so depressed – of course, everyone was affected by that. That suddenly reminded me of the time I had gone to the temple. When I

thought of the temple and of Buddha, it made me feel peaceful. I wanted to make artwork about my memories, which included the temple and Buddha. The temples and the five beautiful old royal palaces in Seoul have the same architecture. I wanted to give people a peaceful and healing place through my artwork. Similarly, my current show at Leila Heller Gallery is called '*Sacred Space*'. I wanted to share my sacred space with everybody. Everybody gets a lot of stress in life, right? I'm the same. I may be smiling on the outside right now, but inside, my mind is in such a difficult place. Life is so difficult but you have to live it. Everybody experiences that. It's the plum blossom and phoenix all the time. See, every day, there is some form of terrorist that strikes us in the world.

JK: Is terrorism something you think about more now?

RH: I think about it every day. The 9/11 events caused me big pain. I lived close to Wall Street at the time. My studio was nearby. I guess my current studio is still close to where it happened – it is just five blocks away. It is the reason why I felt so strongly about creating a sacred space.

RV: It seems to have affected you in less obvious visual ways. I know you did a missionary visit to Africa. When was that?¹¹³

RH: It was five years ago. I went to South Sudan in Africa for about ten days with my friends to support a Catholic mission. They were doctors but I was a volunteer for art education. You need to get five different shots to get there. The water there is terrible. You can't drink it or even shower with it. Despite that it was a peaceful experience for me because of the children. They are so pure. I taught installation, drawing, painting to children as young as three years old to even adults almost twenty-five years old. They don't go to school. South Sudan is still experiencing civil war, so it is very difficult for them. I had to take a UN airplane to get to the area. Many of them become refugees in Uganda. I was so moved by the refugee children who still had bright smiles despite the hardship they were going through. It was the time when such art as mine shines as it heals their wounds. Do you see the black and white photographs up there? They are portraits of the refugee children I met. My next project is my future funeral car [Note: bier] based on my bucket list.

JK: Is that your next art project?

RH: Yes. I've been thinking about this for a long time. I believe awareness of my death coming in the future will make me cherish my life now.

JK: This seems to be a rather large external step outside of your meditative practice.

RH: After I stayed at the temple in my thirties, I felt I had a new lease on life. I thought about life again after 9/11. I have a few different projects like this I have proposed. One is in Uganda and another one is in Greece. There are so many refugees in the world now. I also want to play my role as an artist who makes the world a better place.

RV: What is the funeral car? Is it for you?

RH: It's an installation for my next exhibition at the Palais des Beaux Arts. It's my own funeral car with a video installation. My concept is to represent the cycle of life and death. People die every day, but babies are born every day. My work is always about life. You know, American funeral cars are black, but Korean ones are very beautiful with a lot of flowers. I will make my funeral car with lots of plum blossoms, in hopes of a beautiful life after death.

RV: Do you think about your place in the art community? Do you refer to other artists in your work?

RH: I don't really think about external forces. I do respond to different environments, such as the temple and 9/11. I think I do get influenced by other artists, such as El Anatsui. He makes work using bottle lids, ennobling those everyday materials. I think my work is similar in that regard.

RV: How important is "Asian-ness" to you? Do you think of yourself as an Asian artist? National identity has become important again in the critical dialogue. Is it something you consciously think about? Or do you consider yourself a global citizen?

RH: I'm not sure. I'm Korean of course, but I'm living in New York. I don't think about whether something is Asian or Western, I'm just an artist. My philosophy is Asian, since I grew up in a Buddhist family, but I don't live by strict religious belief. I do respect religions whether it's Christian, Buddhism or others though. I go to temples in Korea because they make me feel peaceful. I follow my feelings.

RV: We associate Buddhism with acceptance and passivity but you yourself are very directed. You have made your way as an individual artist to achieve commercial success. It feels like a dichotomy, but perhaps that is because of the way your work is sometimes approached. In a similar vein, do you see your work as feminist in any way?

RH: I'm not confident to say that I have accomplished commercial success. It's true that I've been lucky to have a lot of opportunities to show my works worldwide but as an artist, I'm not in the comfort zone in reality. I enjoy it though. I don't think it's important for an work to be feminist. What I mean is, art is art. You can't start separating out artwork that is made by a male or female artist. It's all art. I just keep on my path of an artist doing what I'm good at and making something more like myself.