

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Byron Kim
- Interviewer: Joo Yun Lee
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- Recorded and transcribed 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): It seems literature is an important inspiration for your work. For instance, in *Synecdoche* (1991–), the title itself has profound meaning, and your recent solo exhibition titled *Mud Root Ochre Leaf Star* showed a series of new paintings inspired from a Carl Phillips poem. Also, you studied literature at college before you started to paint and study fine art. What made your interest move from literature to visual art, while maintaining literature and text as an important inspiration and element of your body of work?

Byron Kim (BK): I originally wanted to be a poet. I went to Yale University, a really competitive college, and studied English. I felt quite insecure about taking up writing as my career because I looked at the other writers who were going to school with me, and they seemed so far ahead of me. So, I barely started writing and quit pretty much immediately, but I continued to read poetry. During my senior year, I took an art history course called “Art of the Seventies.” It was the winter and spring of 1983, so the course was about contemporary art. I didn’t know anything about art then, although I had taken some studio art classes. I don’t think I know very much art history still, now. But I knew very little back then, just as much as a typical liberal art student knew about Monet, and I started to see artists such as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. So, the class was really eye opening. We were introduced to artists such as Robert Barry, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson and Eleanor Antin. The Conceptual Art and Process Art that I learned from that course really got me interested in becoming an artist. I think I very naively thought that I could do something even more poetic by using visual art terms than I could do by writing poetry.

JYL: When did you start to become interested in being a career artist?

BK: I think it was 1986, just a few years later when I graduated from college and went to Skowhegan’s summer art program [Ed. note: Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture]. That was when I realized that I really wanted to try to be an artist, really seriously. In a strange way, that lasted for twenty years - trying to be an artist. After twenty years, I realized that that’s my chosen career and that there is nothing else that I want to do or can do.

JYL: Did you have an important mentor or a decisive moment or experience that directed you specifically to painting?

BK: My art education, even though it was very small part of my art career, was somewhat conservative. I didn’t go to a school like CalArts. Even though I was really turned on by the class that exposed me to Conceptual Art, I was surrounded by pretty conservative contexts so my character is somehow conservative aesthetically. I don’t think I am politically conservative, though. I did have a really great art teacher at college and he taught painting. He took painting very seriously and I tried to learn how to paint. To me, painting is really quite difficult. It has been difficult for the last twenty, almost

thirty years. I tried other things but I realized two things: one, that painting is difficult enough and, two, I can get as much as I need out of painting. I would love to also be a video artist, sculptor, or installation artist, and sometimes I've ventured out into those areas a little bit, but there is no way I could do that. One reason is that I would not be able to compete very well if I spread myself that thin, to do my best, personally.

JYL: That's really interesting and a very candid answer. I see that your paintings seem quite abstract but they are not Abstract Paintings.

BK: In some ways, I am more of a realist painter. Although, I think of myself as an abstract painter. My subject matter is often very specific and my work is often very directly representational. Despite the fact that we just said I remain in one category, it's hard to pin down that category and that is why I said that painting is enough. I haven't really explored that many different aspects of painting yet, and it's still quite challenging. I realized a while ago that there are enough problems in painting to last longer than I have time for.

JYL: You have constantly worked on a series of abstract paintings that are very conceptual, in a way, which talk to the history of Abstract Painting or attack it, while addressing important social messages at the same time. Can you tell us more about that aspect?

BK: The subject matter that I am trying to present and painting's problems that I tackle are often both very simple and very complex. Sometimes, I'm even aware of how simple and complex they are. It's important that they go both ways, in my mind. I don't often consciously try to make them that way, but they are both simple and complex. It's constantly in my mind, that it's not like the current President, President Trump, for whom everything is just simple, and we know that the world isn't like that.

JYL: We could talk more about the dynamics of being both simple and complex regarding your work, with the example of *Belly Painting* that in part prefigures your *Synecdoche* (1991–) project, which is arguably or admittedly one of your most well-known pieces.

BK: *Belly Painting* directly led to "skin painting." I made those paintings very much thinking of 1970s' Process Art and I wanted to simply make a painting with too much paint on it. I wasn't thinking about the human body at all at first, but everybody who came to my studio and saw the work said, "That's "belly painting," which was really annoying to me. One thing that I learned quickly from that experience was to put aside my stubbornness and annoyance. If one person says that, and they are a little weird, that's one thing, but if everyone who comes in says the work is this, even though I thought of it as that, then I have to stop and wonder why they are all saying that. So because I was wondering that and taking it seriously, I ended up deciding to make a

painting of a friend's skin color, just to see what that would be. I made a dozen of them, and then a couple of hundred of them, and it went on and on like that, developing into Synecdoche. It is a really good example of what is seemingly simple. I didn't have an extremely complicated subject in my mind when I started to make those paintings. I wasn't thinking about a political statement but that came to the work, somehow. Just like what I said about the belly painting gaining meaning through people's responses, Synecdoche did so, but in more subtle and complex ways.

JYL: Synecdoche is seemingly a series of abstract paintings that consists of hundreds of monochrome panels that represent different human skin tones, but addresses a critical social message about ethnicity. It seems this piece was derived from your response to the 1990's social and cultural issues. In that sense, the inclusion and exhibition of Synecdoche in the 1993 Whitney Biennial was very important for your artistic oeuvre. The 1993 Whitney Biennial is often considered a watershed in the biennale's history since it dealt with critical issues of the 1990s and made special effort to include works by a diverse range of artists.

BK: About the 1990s, I don't quite understand it actually. I mean, I see what happened but I don't understand exactly why it happened. The reason why I am saying that I'm confused about it is that I think we are going through a moment now that is related to the 1990s. But it seems quite different now. It feels the same but also really different. What I am trying to say is, I am not sure why it happened, but both times—the 1990s and now—were and are very serious times and probably that's why we are going through this again. People want to affect change and people want things to get better. Some people think that art can help with that. I don't know if it's possible. It is possible, but it's very difficult. It's not an easy solution. When I look back on being included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial and look at my work, it seems very naive. It seems really simplistic. It is very complex, like I said before, but I wasn't thinking it through completely. I don't know how that happened. That is, it's very simple: I looked at somebody's skin color and tried to copy it as closely as possible, made a small painting and put it on the wall next to all the other ones that I made. Something else happened once they were all together like that and I didn't think about that in advance of doing it. I never saw the whole thing in my studio. Once it went on the wall, it became some other thing and people responded to it in different ways. One could say it's very powerful but another person could think it's even more naive than I think it is. It was a very simple idea that happened to be about this country's obsession. That work has some point of tangency with this country's obsession, which is its strength and weakness. Honestly, I wasn't thinking about all that when I made it. It's just there somehow. It's so simple but also all encompassing in a strange way.

JYL: Do you think people sometimes take Synecdoche too politically?

BK: Yes and no. My gut reaction is to say yes, but that is not a very honest answer,



because if they didn't take it politically, that work would be almost nothing. That dimension is important. I always demand that my work be meaningful in some way. It doesn't have to be exactly this way or that way. In that case, the work is meaningful in a certain way, in a way not so much that I didn't intend but didn't anticipate. That's actually the best situation, if you make something. There was a long time during my career where I kind of got a little allergic to Synecdoche. It's still the case that I am known so well for that work. I kind of downplayed it for a long time, but I started to realize pretty recently how useful that painting can be. It's such a great way of starting a discussion. I don't even know what the end result of the discussion is. I think many people would think that my point is about the wonderful diversity of the colors of our skin, which is true. But the thing that I realized while painting that work, is that people categorize each other so instantaneously. If you look at somebody, you put that person in certain categories in less than a second. Skin color is part of it, but there are lots of other parts. The category you put somebody in according to her/his skin color often actually has very little to do with their skin color. Skin colors change so much from one part to the next and according to the different seasons. You can make a large painting of color panels like mine with just one person's skin color. It doesn't make a very simple statement. That work is not as clean as it appears to be. It's full of all sorts of contradictions, including the artist's inability to paint very precisely.

JYL: To make Synecdoche, which consists of hundreds of color panels, the work process seems important. To depict human skin tones for each version, you work with participants or "sitters"—including strangers, family, neighbors and your fellow artists—and it seems an on-going process to compose the color panels.

BK: The process is important maybe because I educated myself with 1970s' art. 70's art is open-ended like that, so it doesn't seem unusual to me that a work could be on-going that way and never really finished. I like that it is unfinished.

JYL: Another important aspect of your painting since Synecdoche is "referencing the whole by representing a single part." What made you make a representation of the whole that consists of individual parts?

BK: In relation to my answer to the previous question, both the part and the whole are both simple and complex. I find that the more I study everything. Nothing is really easy. That's why, in my mind, everything takes so long.

JYL: In that respect, in a similar way to Synecdoche, another important project, Sunday Paintings (2001–), also consists of small parts and each individual part comprises the whole. Over a long period of time, you painted the sky on each small canvas every Sunday and inscribed your personal notes on top of it. It seems a more temporal application of the relations between the parts and the whole.

BK: Synecdoche and Sunday Paintings are my two biggest projects by far. In some ways, Sunday Paintings is one piece. While Synecdoche is one piece but is serial just like 70s' art. It is serial but broken into pieces and it can be seen in many different ways, as the term "synecdoche" actually means a part representing the whole. In some ways, it's simply a way of tricking myself into making a big, complex work, because any individual element of either of those projects is almost nothing in itself. Sunday Paintings are different from skin paintings because they are so personal. In order to do one every week, the process has to be very easy. It hardly takes more than a couple of hours to make, and that's the way I could make over 800 of them, otherwise it's not possible. Obviously, Sunday Paintings are influenced by On Kawara.

JYL: It is interesting the ways in which Sunday Paintings embrace the elements of landscape, abstract painting as well as personal notes from your life.

BK: Sunday Paintings are not abstract paintings because they describe the sky and clouds, but they look like abstract paintings if someone looks at them without a reference. And the texts I wrote on the paintings are about what happened that day, like my kid's soccer game, or something like that. It's like note-taking about what happened. Often it was about the weather. Very rarely am I trying to write something to make a statement. Usually that's not interesting. 'Interesting' is beside the point in a way, because this project is about one very insignificant life in relation to everything else. In a way, it is an analogy to my whole practice. I don't need to be famous, wealthy, or competitive. I think I used to want that when I was younger but now I hardly want to have any of that. I just want to come to my studio and make a good painting.

JYL: Even before I heard what you just said, I got the impression that living your life is more important than being a successful artist. Although you are already well-known and successful.

BK: Painting is really hard, but living is harder. Living well is really hard. Not many people do live well. It's not about how many airplanes you have.

JYL: Maybe that's why you included traces of your life in your paintings, like your family, children, and childhood memories. Your catalogue, *Byron Kim: Threshold 1990-2004*, published in 2004, includes paintings of your children's hair and a turtleneck you wore many days because your elementary school teacher complimented it.

BK: During the time period that the catalogue covers, my work was more personal. I think my work was always somewhat personal, but it was more personal back then. In some ways, it was my little joke about how Modern Art looks so cold and impersonal. I love Agnes Martin's work. I don't particularly like Robert Ryman's work that much, although I appreciate it and I agree that he is a great artist. Exactly for that reason because it's very cool. While Agnes Martin's work is really hot, warm. But if you try to

explain it to my mother, she wouldn't get it at all. They are just white paintings and there is nothing on them. It's like a game we all understand, to different degrees.

JYL: Going through that catalogue, I also found another interesting project where you painted celadon.

BK: That one seems very simple to me. My father found a celadon at a garage sale and I still keep it. I have another celadon which I painted, but I dropped it while I was painting it and my friend glued it back together for me. What I found interesting was that the signature of this cultural product is its color. [Ed. note: Goryeo Celadon, celadon from Goryeo period in Korea]. I was thinking about New York School painting like Rothko, and its first-generation artists and how their subject matter was always something too big for words. Like the sublime or some other very philosophical subject matter which, "you needed to paint because you couldn't say it." My subject matter tended to be kind of the opposite in a way, like the shirt that I was wearing that my teacher liked. But I thought that this color, it is not one color, there are so many different colors from one pot to the next, which is such a beautiful and very deep subject matter. It's a very narrow greyish-green. I thought it was a really good subject for painting.

JYL: That says color is important to you.

BK: Yes, color is the most important thing to me. It's funny that I just realized that recently. I went through my whole life, thinking about color. I think it's good that it took so long to realize that I am interested in those two things in Synecdoche: the relationship between the part and the whole, and color. If I were eighteen years old and someone assigned that to me, I would have made a mechanical kind of work. But I didn't know that was what I was making until now, or that was what I was really interested in. So I am now turning to studying color methodically. I guess it's a good thing, better late than never.

JYL: You have consistently worked on long term projects, but you haven't developed a large quantity of them. Some people might wonder how you have sustained a career as an artist with so few projects.

BK: For some weird reason, I like to give people the impression that I don't make much work. But there are 800 Sunday Paintings and I make fifty-two of those paintings every year. And there are a series of black paintings I am working on. I made about 80 paintings for an exhibition in San Diego, with the same technique and material but a different subject matter – it was about ceramicist Maria Martinez. There is another series about the night sky in the city and I made lots of paintings about that subject matter. I am working in my studio by myself without any help or assistants. If I had assistants, they could make better work but better doesn't mean skilled. I am not very skilled at anything. I mean I don't have such a great hand for drawing.

JYL: We talked about this earlier and I also found that it showed your delving into painting's "materiality," reminding me of Eva Hesse's Post-Minimal work. In some ways, regarding materiality, I see a connection between Belly Painting and your "stain painting" series, exhibited in your most recent solo exhibition. Those new paintings have the texture and feeling of skin and bruising, showing your exploration of the materiality of painting in a different way.

BK: Yes, in some ways I lost the concern for the material that I had when I was very young and a little bit lost and not knowing how to make things. In the middle of my career, I still didn't know how to make things but I had to just respond to the pressures of being an artist and just make things, and then the sensitivity to material got lost a little. Back then, I just started to make things with art materials, I without thinking about it that much, without questioning it enough, maybe. After 25 years, I've started to question it, materiality, just as much as I did when I made Belly Painting and maybe more. Because I am older and had time to reflect.

JYL: Then, as aforementioned, your "stain paintings," exhibited at the Mud Root Ochre Leaf Star exhibition, are inspired by a Carl Phillips's poem. Your abstract paintings this time are very subtly powerful with tones, traces, and textures reminding us of bruised skin. Some people said they felt trauma from those paintings. What did you want to communicate to the viewers through your paintings in this exhibition?

BK: Mostly, the colors are inside the fabric, because it's dyed in, not applied on top. It's a different process to get colors. The colors turned out differently according to the different fabrics, like silk or linen. I didn't think about the trauma so much when I made those paintings. When I read Carl Phillips' poem, I felt that it's such a beautiful poem with very complicated imagery. The poet is thinking of his lover waking next to him in the really bright autumn light, his lover is still sleeping and he notices a bruise on her body. He has to close his good eye, so he's using his bad eye and looks out the window as the leaves are falling in order to imagine the color of the bruise that will change as the leaves will in time. I thought that the subject of the bruise is a perfect subject for me. I was going to make a painting that was within the bruise, without the context of skin actually, but it didn't really work. There came to be the context of skin, and then it became related to my old work, then the whole bruise thing became read in the context of today as in the Black Lives Matter movement, Trump being so mean and everybody read it in a completely different way.

JYL: Yes, as you said, there seem to be similarities and also differences between this new series and your previous paintings.

BK: There is the intersection of being about the human body, but I think this series is a little bit more sophisticated because I am thinking about material in a more sophisticated

way. As I said earlier, I kind of lost track of the material, because it was at the part of my career where I did worry about producing something significant. I think I have produced a few things that are significant. But those things don't come because I am thinking about the need to do something really great. It doesn't work that way. Those pieces came out of some process that was really strange and complicated.

JYL: So, you began to get the colors by dyeing fabrics, exploring the material of the painting.

BK: I made those paintings ("stain paintings") out of so many natural materials: fabrics dyed with sandalwood, indigo, gardenia and buckthorn. (Showing the beautifully dyed fabrics hung in his studio) These fabrics are for a piece that I made for a show in Anyang that Eungie Joo curated [Ed. note: Enshrinement (after Kim Chung Up) (2016) at the Anyang Public Art Project (APAP), Korea]. Anyang had one of the oldest temples in Korea, and they had re-discovered the old site underneath this building which had been designed by a famous Korean modernist architect who had been an apprentice of Le Corbusier. [Ed. note: the Kim Chung Up Museum in Anyang was built on the lost site of a thousand year-old Buddhist temple called Anyang-sa. The museum building was originally the Yuyu Pharmaceutical factory designed by Kim Chung Up]. Actually, when they were demolishing the buildings, they found the site of the temple underneath. I wanted to make a project that emphasized the temple had been there. I found that there is a Buddhist ceremony called bulbokjang [Ed. note: bulbokjang, or sacred deposit ceremony, marks the enshrinement of a Buddha statue and subsequent inauguration of the temple] which initiates a temple and makes the main Buddha statue 'come alive'. One aspect of the ceremony was that five pieces of cloth have to be dyed in five cardinal colors: white, black, yellow, red and blue. And each one has to be dyed with only one material, without using different materials to gain one color. So I made five different colors of fabrics dyed with only one material for each. I was thinking of the small building of the Kim Chung Up museum as the idol of the Buddha and then the painting made of these fabrics, placed inside of the building.. So, I found a small room—ten square meters wide—in the basement of the museum and put the paintings there. And in another building, I put many cushions and made a meditation room, not particularly Buddhist meditation, but about how to sit and be calm. Regarding your question about the material of the stain paintings, I also dyed fabrics in a similar way to how I made the colors of the fabrics for the APAP project.

JYL: You are one of a few Korean American artists or Asian American artists who have been constantly and actively working since the 1990s. Do you think your ethnic identity shaped or influenced your work and do you want to have your voice as a Korean American artist or an Asian American artist known in the larger art community?

BK: That's really a complicated question which I've never known how to answer. I feel two opposing ways about that. When I was in college, an Asian American student came

to me and asked me to join their group and I didn't want to join them at all. I think that I was overly concerned with assimilating at that time, although I didn't think of it in those terms. I didn't want to join that small group then, I wanted to be part of a bigger group, which was kind of small-minded thinking. I did go back and forth about that question all the time, since I was 20, because I didn't think about it before then. But I wasn't in a context that forced me to think about it. I grew up mostly in a community of white people, but in a very strong, Korean nuclear family. When I went to a college and saw those Asian students – there weren't that many at Yale at the time, unlike now. I am being completely honest - I thought they were weak and needed to be together in order to be stronger, and I didn't need to do that. I feel a little sorry for having had that kind of attitude of condescension, because I think people have to stick together to survive sometimes, so what they were doing was necessary. I shouldn't have looked upon that negatively. I haven't been very strongly for or against this kind of issue in my actions or my statements. I've participated in group shows of all Asian Americans or all Asians. Mostly I've participated. Sometimes, I've avoided them for particular, not arbitrary, reasons. I feel strongly about it but I don't feel strongly all the way in one way, or all the way in the other way. I can tell you one thing for sure, that I don't want to be considered as a Korean-American artist in the big picture, because that's not how I started off. When I wanted to be a poet, I didn't think that I would be the best Korean-American poet there is. If I was going to categorize myself in such a way, that I couldn't be in relation to all of poetry or all of art, then why bother? I don't want to be the best painter who is under 6' tall, or the best male painter with black hair. What's the point?

JYL: Then, Synecdoche didn't originate from your concern for your own identity as a Korean American or Asian American?

BK: I don't think so. It came from my wanting to give a specific content to Modernist Painting. It definitely didn't come from being a minority artist or wanting to make the kind of work that a minority artist would make.

JYL: I found that you were involved with the Godzilla Asian American Arts Network, which was a New York-based Asian American arts collective established in 1990. Can you tell us more about that?

BK: I was involved with Godzilla probably just as much as most of the people who were at the beginning, but I didn't think of it as an activist organization as much as others did. Mostly because I wasn't very politically involved. There were probably people who were involved more as activists back then and now as well, and I admire those people very much. I think I am more political now.

JYL: Godzilla sent a letter to the director of the Whitney Museum, protesting the fact that the Whitney Biennial included a very limited number of Asian American artists.

BK: I remember that there was a biennial and we noticed that artists of color were underrepresented, especially artists of Asian descent, and we brought it to the attention of the Whitney. David Ross, the director of the Whitney at that time, surprisingly invited us to the museum and had a meeting. I remember that meeting and Eugenie Tsai got hired at the Whitney as the direct result of it. There was another group of younger generation Asian American artists when Godzilla was disbanding.

JYL: Like any other occupation or job, maintaining the same career for ten years, twenty years or more is not an easy thing to do. What makes you continue to work as an artist?

BK: Being an artist is the best thing because you get to do whatever you want to do, and it's the worst thing because you get to do whatever you want to do. What I mean by that is that it is really important to come and always do exactly what I want to do. That's partly the reason I don't have any assistants. Compared with my friends, artists who I came up with, my whole situation is more modest, while their situations are a lot bigger. Part of the reason why I tried for that is I wouldn't always be able to do something exactly the way I want to do it. But the downside of that is that I come to my studio and I have to be responsible for everything. Sometimes it's nice to be told what to do. For example, I belong to a food co-op and I love going to work there because I just do a given job for two hours and forty-five minutes.

JYL: You also have been teaching while making your work. What do you think is important when you teach?

BK: I have taught for about 25 years and I really enjoy teaching. To focus on the right things is important, like not being distracted by having an art career. It's really hard now. There are many artists who get into the field for that reason, although most artists realize it's not a good thing to do if they want to make a living. There are some artists that really want to make a good living out of it. That's just a small part of it. Just to take them seriously and to convey that it's a really serious undertaking to be an artist. I don't worry about encouraging them. I consciously chose to be an artist, whereas for so many of my friends, they had no choice: that's all they ever wanted to do. It's not bad to discourage students, because the ones who really need to be an artist will be an artist, no matter what. It's like having a disease.

AHL Foundation: The way you are describing it, an artist's career is something that doesn't have to be acknowledged by the critics and art history in the long term, nor commercially successful. But after the 1993 Whitney Biennale, you became a well known artist.. If you hadn't become a successful artist after that momentum, what would be different?

BK: That is a really good question, and a tough question and really hard to answer honestly. I would like to think that nothing would have changed. I am thinking that there is a good possibility that I would've gone to medical school and wouldn't be talking to



you now. It's really not an easy life to be an artist. I don't care about financial success, but at least communicating to people is important, because all arts are about communicating. If it was an in-between situation, I would still be an artist I guess, but if no one ever got to see my work, then I would have quit a long time ago. That's just the honest answer, not the answer I would like to give.

JYL: Do you have any other projects that you are working on currently?

BK: I am making a new work for a project Sunjung Kim is curating. There is the DMZ, or demilitarized zone, crossing the middle of the Korean peninsula and one of the military checkpoints is in a county called Cheorwon. What I am making is going to be installed in one of the Japanese colonial buildings, which is a square building without a roof because it was destroyed. It's a square building about the size of my studio, not a rectangular shape. The building was used to keep ice by the restaurant owner. It was an ice storage building. Now it's just a ruin, but it still has four walls with lots of holes in them from the war. I am putting a flag with the color of the sky on a 10-meter high flagpole. To make the flag, I am going to use Korean ramie cloth [Ed. note: in Korean, moshi, 모시] which is vegetable fiber because that particular fabric makes a beautiful sky-blue color. But what I want to do is to grow the indigo plant on site or in a very small village nearby called Yangji-ri [Ed. note: Yangji-ri (양지리) is on the north of the Civilian Control Line in Cheorwon county]. I want to have a color like sky-blue so I have to cultivate the leaves and I've never done that before.

JYL: Thanks Byron for your thoughtful and candid answers.