4-24-2011

jin soo kim Interview

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Recommended Citation
https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/34

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Interviewer: Jin Woo Kim
Artist: Jin Soo Kim
Site: in person interview Northwestern University
Date: April 24, 2011

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2011 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Artist Bio: Jin Soo Kim was born in 1950 in Seoul, during the Korean War. In 1974, after receiving her B.S. from Seoul National University, she left Korea. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, the severity of the culture shock was such that after eight months, she moved to a remote rural town Macomb Illinois, forty miles east of the Mississippi River. She began studying art in Western Illinois University while working at a hospital as a registered nurse.

In 1983, Kim went on to receive an MFA at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Since then, her work has been the subject of numerous one-person shows and she has participated in various exhibitions. Kim has been teaching at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago since 1990. Living in Evanston, Illinois, she has been making art.

Courtesy of the artist

Note: the following interview was not recorded. Jin Soo Kim’s answers to my questions are based on my notes, which were then proofed and edited by the artist.
**Jin Woo Kim:** Can you tell me briefly about yourself both in terms of your biography and as an artist? Also, what made you decide to switch from nursing in Korea to pursue a career as a professional artist in the United States?

**jin soo kim:** In the late fifties and sixties, growing up in post-war Korea, I felt I had to start thinking about my future from a young age. When I was about thirteen, I did not want to live a Korean woman’s life as expected by society, as I observed women living subordinated lives (lives of servitude). In Korean culture, the traditional position of girls in society was not equal to that of men. I wished to have a different life when I grew up.

In Korea, I studied nursing and all along, privately I also made art alone. After coming to the United States, I devoted myself to art while I continued my nursing practice for the next fifteen years. It was not that I suddenly switched my career from a nurse to an artist. Since adolescence, I had a deep interest in being an artist and tried to nurture to reach such a goal. Of course, I later studied art in a more formal setting, but that was a continuation of my earlier development, and wasn’t in any way a casual or capricious decision. Rather, it was a simultaneous evolution.

**JWK:** You came from Korea to the United States in 1974 when you were twenty-three years old. How has being bicultural affected your career and art?

**jsk:** Although I spent the first part of my life in Korea and the other in the United States, it seems difficult to note how the two manifested in my work, since one was my formative years and the other was my adulthood. In general, I think that growing up in one culture and spending my adulthood in another enabled me to have perspective on each. I was conscious of Korean culture and this led to the conceptual foundations for a few installations, incorporating objects or references based on my experience of the post-war period of Korea.

However, I did not always intentionally make art regarding these cultural issues. In this global time, there are cultural mixings on so many tiers of life, global migrations of labor, for example. Being familiar with the negotiation between cultures, and the nuances of specific cultural understandings and misunderstandings, situates one to better grasp with the trans-cultural conversations that are becoming more salient. These days we can take residence in foreign countries, and often collaborate with artists of other national/cultural origin. So having that kind of experience allows me to be more open to the information that constitutes our work, and collaboration, and to understand other cultural paradigms.

**JWK:** In the process of making your art, how does Korean culture influence your choice in subject matters, message or the meanings of your work? For example, in your installation *whencesover (An Exploration of Nature, Culture and Spirituality, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY, 1993)*, I noticed you used materials that are specifically found in Korea, such as *so-bok* (Korean summer clothes for commoners), *bojakee* (traditional Korean cloth), and *cho-bae* (the application of rice paper to the interior walls, as preparation for wallpaper).
jsk: While making this specific piece, *whencesover*, I intended to honor three women, who held their families and stood as important figures within their families: two Korean women and one American woman. I recalled the aspects of cultural oppression upon women in Korean society, through my mother and grandmother. I also juxtaposed one American woman who could have been my mother’s contemporary on a different continent, and her memory by joining the objects and references within the space of one room.

This installation incorporated traditional Korean materials and Western elements, which had special meanings to those three women. The kitchen table and two chairs belonged to a young American mother in the early sixties, which seemed dreamy and feminine to me, representing Western domesticity. On the other side of the installation, there lay the handmade *so-bok* and *bojakee*; my grandmother made the *so-bok* and *bojakee* for my mother’s wedding. On the *bojakee*, some parts were mended many times as it was used and worn, but it still appeared gentle, and evoked the passage of time.

Another element of this installation incorporated *cho-bae*, which reflected my early experience. I used to help my mother redo the walls with *cho-bae* in our house. All of this was adopted into the work with hand-labor. Adopting the handwork inherent to *cho-bae* and next to it the pre-manufactured Western furniture suggested the disparity during between the pre- and post-industrial realities of the West and the East.

I tried to encapsulate three women’s experience and their history and my art- arriving at a triangulation via this installation.

JWK: You have participated in two major group exhibitions with other Asian and Asian-American artists both in Korea and America, such as *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* (The Queens Museum of Art, NY; The Kumho Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea)- 1993-1994, and *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian-American Art* (The Asia Society, New York, NY; Tacoma Art Museum, WA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Honolulu Academy of Arts, HI; Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, CA; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, TX) 1994-1996. What were those experiences like for you?

jsk: It was interesting to me as these group shows dealt with such specificities regarding origin, status and their migrations... I appreciated meeting with artists, and such community engendered conversations and overlapping experiences that we all had, through their works, such rare contexts I appreciated very much.

*Across the Pacific* was all Koreans, half were artists who had left Korea like myself, and half were Korean citizens living in Korea. There was a shared context of being a Korean, but making art from different experiences and ideas. As I think about it, it was really fantastically interesting. Unlike myself, who emigrated in my twenties, those Korean-born living in the US mostly came to this country as young children with their families. Conversations at the opening, I recall, revolved around Korea. For me, to talk about Korea with a group of artists was very new! Because of living in Chicago, I rarely saw artists from Korea at that time; now there are a lot, it was twenty years ago. For me as a Korean, what I remembered was, oh...it’s hard to tell...what I
remembered was...Korea was the center of conversation. Being able to talk about Korea, and being able to ask questions about Korea to Korean artists, it was a new experience. And at that time, there were a lot of political changes taking place, so I was able to ask questions about people’s life taking place during those changes.

On the other hand, Asia/America was about the Diasporas of artists who were born in other Asian countries, but who lived in the US. Until then, I hadn’t met that congregation of artists, since at that time, many Asian communities and subsequently artists, were not centered in Chicago. Artists born in the Peoples Republic of China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, India and South East Asia were included. Again, artists talked about when and how they left their own countries, and how they started their art practice in the US, about their identities as foreigners and artists and about coming from somewhere. I felt a strong sense of community, at the time it all happened very quickly, and we all met at the opening, and then dispersed again.

These shows were about shared states of being. So there was an amazing commonality that was quite different from the theme-shows that often took place. It was indeed a rare situation.

**JWK:** I noticed you prefer installation art. What in installation attracts you and are there any installation artists that have inspired you?

**jsk:** One can get into installation in many different ways. For myself, making installation art, I feel that art is alive for a given time, and then it dies. That’s why I’m drawn to it. In other words, during the beginning of the process and making, I have tremendous freedom as I think, “what’s there to lose when it will cease to exist?” Besides this aspect, I appreciate the experimental, open side. There always seems to be an unimaginable, unanticipated surprise. I can kind of relate this to the process of exploring freely in response to my oppressive upbringing. When I made my first installation, I was the mother of a five year old; so taking risks was so complicated. But in art- it was as if my art wanted to take the risks that I was unable to take in my real life. But that’s what I could do with art, freely, there was nothing to lose.

Among many great artists, I really like Felix Gonzalez-Torres. His work is such a- you know he was a gay man, and his lover died of AIDS, and he talked about his lover, and his love for his lover, and he made a work about it, you know? The art world did not seem to invite work dealing with personal experience and feelings. His work contradicted the contemporary art world’s expectation. He made art out of his life, love and mournful experience. When the necessity and relevance of a certain body of work deals with personal emotions, it goes beyond the art world. His voice was innovative, inventive- so poignantly poetic, which became collective voice. I admire Felix Gonzalez-Torres and dealing with the depth of his life experience through his art.

**JWK:** According to the Chicago Cultural Center curator, Gregory Knight, your Dartmouth College installation *Tracks* [*Figure 1*] was inspired by an early experience you had in the plane while coming to the United States. Are most of your works inspired by your own memory and experience rather than objects or people?
Jin Soo Kim/Jin Woo Kim

**jsk:** While the plane was landing in Los Angeles from Korea, I had such unforgettable, overpowering memories. Memories of seeing endless, endless lights in the dark, looking down from the plane. It was almost like a sea of fire. I was absolutely scared; thinking ‘will I find my place here?’ and that memory of arrival was stuck in me.

1999 was the last year of the century, a century marked by people moving, being dislocated, refugees moving because of war, having to flee, having to locate themselves, either forcefully or by their own intentions. People started to move from country to country. There were migrations before, but the scale of them changed. During the war, post-war, US immigration laws- adding up all the history of the twentieth century... Many recognized individuals moved- Einstein, and as an artist Piet Mondrian, and somebody who was taken away from their home to a different place...For example, I remember reading Primo Levi’s experience of being in the train, being taken to a death camp. And such is the horror...The century marked by these moves of upheaval, and that ended up bringing a mix of cultures.

So it was a century of location and dislocation, or attempts to locate, and myself as a part of it, as someone who moved away to an unknown place and tried to locate myself to another country and find my place to function. Remembering that kind of traveling, not just the past. When I thought about entering a new country, this image of endless lights always came to me. So I decided to make a piece about it.

I was invited as an artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College in 1999. It was a serendipitous situation that New Hampshire happened to be re-railing the tracks, leaving railroad plates and spikes left in the vicinity. So I decided to connect light bulbs to the railroad tracks, linking my memory of arrival to the railroad plates and spikes, which represented travel for me, and became a metaphor for the travel of the twentieth century.

**JWK:** It seems that in your installations, the walls, cages and other spacious matter carry significant meaning within the work. Can you explain what these forms signify in your art?

**jsk:** To me, the walls and spacious environment could carry a sense of confinement, protection and division.

**JWK:** When you complete your installations, what do you most want viewers to focus on most, the process of making it or the symbolism/meaning of the complete work?

**jsk:** It is really hard to say what I prefer from viewers. Of course I want them to get into my work, but I also understand that that’s very difficult. So it’s always open-ended, it’s up to the viewer.

**JWK:** What are you in the process of working on right now in your studio?

**jsk:** The absurdity of recollecting and propelling oneself into an undefined/uncertain direction is always challenging. However as you get older, there is also this aspect of dealing with the accumulation of previous bodies of work, unrealized bodies of thought, concepts, residues... Before it was light bulbs coming out of railroad spikes and plates (Tracks, 1999); then it was a
sound piece dealing with the process of travel, coming out of the tunnel; and now light bulbs are coming out of casted water bottles. I don’t want to repeat making the same work that I have previously made. I want my art to take me to new realms through drawing, sculpture, and different mediums.

I am in the process of making two sculptures now, one in collaboration with a young ceramic artist, and the other in collaboration with a ceramic artist and a technology/new media artist. I will participate in a community exhibition “New Dialogue in Korean American Artists.”\(^1\) Especially with group/collaborative shows like this, I believe that it is important to facilitate conversations between artists, instead of distinguishing between the older and the younger or the established and un-established, within the artists community. Also, I am working on a project for a one-person show in September this year.

**JWK:** I’m an international student from South Korea and planning to start my career in this country as a professional artist. As you have already come through the similar path, would you like to give me any advice?

**jsk:** Think big, struggle, challenge yourself, and be independent. It is important to travel through various experiences because you will learn what it means to be an artist from the journey. Be yourself and ask yourself many, many questions. Work hard with discipline.

**END**

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\(^1\) “New Dialogue of Korean American Artists” curated by Sun Choi NEIU Gallery, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL June 17 - July 22, 2011
Figure 1 jin soo kim *Tracks*, 1999