

Korean Women and Korean Women Artists

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By looking at the works of some Korean women artists, this paper will explore a question: Why do many Korean women artists tend to reluctantly position themselves as a woman artist or feminist artist?

I have chosen three Korean women artists, YUN Suk Nam, KIM Soo Ja, and AHN Pil Yun, because their work deal with a political struggle that Asian women artists have in achieving success and recognition in the mainstream art world, which is still defined (overwhelmingly) as Western and white.¹ Since exhibiting their work abroad, these artists are aware of an effect of dislocation within their work. This dislocation intersects and overlaps the issue of nation, race and gender.

Another reason that I have chosen YUN Suk Nam, KIM Soo Ja, and AHN Pil Yun among Korean women artists is that they have exhibited their work in Australia. YUN Suk Nam was included in *the 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996 and *The 12th Biennale of Sydney*, 2000, Kim Soo Ja in *The 11th Biennale of Sydney*, 1998, while the AHN Pil Yun exhibited two of her solo show in Australia in 1996 and 2000.

YUN Suk Nam, KIM Soo Ja and AHN Pil Yun explore the questions of experience, body, gender and cultural identity through their use of traditional Korean references and materials such as *Hanbok* or traditional Korean costume (for example, slide 13: YUN Suk Nam, *Vendor*, 1993, slide 17, *Living with her Husband Parents*, 1992), *Pojagi* or traditional wrapping cloth (KIM Soo Ja, *Lying on the Nature*, 1994) and *Musok* or shamanistic rituals (for example, AHN Pil Yun, slide 15, *Kaleidoscope III*, Performance, Hamburg, 1999), as well as materials and activities associated with women such as cloth, housework and handicrafts.

These artists use the cultural and gender specific references and materials to interrogate stereotypes of Korean identity and women's social identity. They are representative of many Korean women artists who discover Korean customs and tradition as positive components of their cultural identity. Despite the cultural specificity of their materials and references, their work has successfully built a base that refuses to easily please the West's demand for the exotic Other. Opaque textuality of Korean references defies that the hybridity of their work within which one can sense a duality of Koreanness and modernity is a proof of the West's monopolistic claim to modernism.

It was not until the mid-1980s in Korea that women artists began to gain recognition. Throughout the history of Korean art, women artists have continuously contributed to Korean culture. But their contribution has hardly been credited. This recognition was brought about by *Minjoong* art movement, which was pivotal to the formation of the

first phase of the women's art movement in Korea. In short, *Minjoong* (*Minjoong* meaning 'people': KIM Jung Hon, *Dog*, 1980; HONG Sung Dam, *Hong 37*, 1980s; MIN Chung Ki, *Untitled*, 1980s; IM Ok Sang, *A History of Africa*, 1980s) art was a radical and political art movement. It emerged as a critique of modernist and internationalist art in Korea in the early 1980s, showing left and nationalist tendencies. We will return to *Minjoong* art later shortly.

It can be argued that it was the arrival of Postmodernism in the early 1980s in Korea that brought about the popularity of women's art in Korea. Since the early- 1990s there has been sudden mass media and public attention on women's art in Korea. This attention was brought about, for good or ill, by Korean art historians, critics, academics and writers who were interested in the postmodernist or postcolonialist issues of subjectivity, gender, identity and difference. However, in the mid- 1990s, the women's art movement had become quickly dispersed in Korea.

There are some Korean women artists who wasted no time to make use of this fashionable attention of recognising difference of the cultural production of historically marginalised groups in pursuing their professional career in a male dominant society. Although women artists have begun to receive more exposure and are visible these days, women artists still suffer from discrimination in the male dominant Korean contemporary art scene. For women artists, channels and opportunities for exhibiting and selling their work are still limited, controlled by the predominance of male-dominated professional networks.

In responding to the sudden special attention on women's art, many Korean women artists tend to reluctantly position themselves as a woman artist or feminist artist. This can be explained by a refusal to be a victim of female tokenism. In a society in which gender discrimination is widespread, women artists often feel that their female identity, when showing professionally, is not the sort of position that 'successful' artists should endorse, or is a threat which displaces them outside the mainstream of the wider art world.

"To be a feminist in Korea means 'isolation', says YUN Suk Nam, who dares to define herself as a feminist artist in Korea. YUN Suk Nam was deeply involved with *Minjoong* art movement, which inspired her to be concerned with the then current social and political realities of Korean society and the role of art and artist.

YUN Suk Nam is an unusual Korean women who began her career as a professional artist without formal institutional education in visual arts at the age of 40, an age at which Korean women would plan for retirement. Her work has evolved from a housewife's hobby to a political feminist art. It is still continuously evolving. In her recent site-specific installation work, *Small Boat* (2000), which creates a contemplative sanctuary, now extends itself to a poignant conceptual feminism.

When she realised the limits inherent in a political art movement, her work moved away from a political feminist art. Like *Minjoong* artist group, YUN Suk Nam questioned the status of purely aestheticised modernist art, which was the mainstream Korean art of 1980s, in which art was an intellectual play alienated from society. It is in this context and with a critical consciousness that her work aims to achieve the maxim communication. *Minjoong* art gained popularity in the early 1990s. However

its popularity was short lived, since *Minjoong* art often lacked in aesthetic quality while being strong in message. In reflecting her experience as a woman, housewife and Korean, YUN Suk Nam has developed a more refined critique of Korean society.

YUN Suk Nam deliberately uses the image of *Hanbok* or traditional Korean costume (YUN Suk Nam, *Genealogy*, 1993) steeped in traditional connotations. She is critical of that in its orientation to modernisation, Korea condemned its old cultural past as 'vernacular' and 'old-fashioned'.

Minjoong art questioned modern Korean history as being Westernised rather than modernised. This brought to Korean artists an increased interest in their native cultural heritage. Yet *Minjoong* art, in its extreme nationalism, romanticised unrealistically Korean tradition as a paradise untouched by Westernisation (for example, KIM Jung Hon, *Murungdownon* or *Paradise Lost*, 1982).² YUN Suk Nam seems to deal with the failure of *Minjoong* art to achieve a self-conscious synthesis between the particularity of 'Koreanness' as a resistant, identity-giving culture and the universality of 'human culture'.

Since YUN Suk Nam is conscious of the inescapable hybrid condition of contemporary Korean society, she successfully manages her work to be 'contemporary' and at the same time to return to traditional sources. The term 'contemporary' is used specifically rather than term 'modern'. When the term 'modern' is used, it has an effect caused by the very nature of translation. The present scene of Korean art appears to be merely a result of this translation of the Western notion of modernity, Modernism and Postmodernism, rather than an outcome of the Korean artists' successful assimilation of Western elements into their local context.

The familiarity of the typical image of Korean women in *Hanbok*, chairs and sofas, marbles, beads, shoes and the ornamentality of her work create a friendly gesture to share 'common' feelings with the ordinary Korean people and even dismissive male observers. In this respect, it can be argued that her work achieves maximum communication which *Minjoong* art failed to achieve. Having successfully drawn attention towards her work, she is then able to push the audience to the true intention of her work.

In *Pink Room* series (1996, 1998, 2000), YUN Suk Nam fabricated a living room of upper-middle class Koreans filled with chairs and sofas surrounded by thousands of brightly coloured marbles. Despite the prettiness of the upholstery pattern which reminds us of typical Oriental embroidery, the cosiness created by a room-size environment of work reminiscent of the domestic space, and the shining surface resembling the sleek surfaces of contemporary art, it evokes a disturbing aggressiveness. This aggressiveness is created by a collision of Korean tradition with the modern. The artist associates contradictions of her identity to those of Koreans who live in a country undergoing speedy industrial and economic development.

Her recent splendidly beautiful installation, *999* (1997) suggests that YUN Suk Nam who is in her early 60s has evolved beyond her earlier image of aggressive accusation of the brutality of patriarchy (for example, *Genealogy*, 1993) in order to create an unforced dialogue. YUN Suk Nam's crowded and poignantly silent *999* wooden poles containing a painted image of typical Korean woman in the bright and vivid colours

of *Hanbok* asserts an unspoken cultural history of women in Korean society. 999 wooden Korean women statues are the body of the Korean women, which can be retraced in its continuity as the here and now in the history of Korean art. With or without a written history, Korean women have continuously contributed to Korean culture throughout Korean history. This interpretation of Korean history questions her work, as merely being a 're-discovered woman's art'. It disputes an argument that Korean women were those who were marginalized victims of the established order.

This point becomes clearer in KIM Soo Ja's art. In contrast to YUN Suk Nam who adopts Western feminist political strategy, KIM Soo Ja has developed a feminine and a unique Korean strategy drawing from her own experience as a woman and Korean cultural tradition.

Since the early 1980s KIM Soo Ja has consistently worked with the concept of sewing and wrapping by using fabrics and cloths through which the artist experiences the bonding between materials and activity, and transforms her life into an aesthetic experience.

Soo-Ja Kim has persistently worked with *Bottari* which she has installed all over the world since 1992 (KIM Soo Ja, *Deductive Object*, 1996). She uses the colourful Korean bedcovers as wrapping clothes to make her *Bottari* or bundle (KIM Soo Ja, *A Laundry field*, 1997). Though mass-produced, the bedcovers reflect traditional Korean colour coordination or the typical shaman coordination. *Bottari* is a parcel or bundle wrapped up in *Pojagi*. *Pojagi* is a wrapping cloth, traditionally used by the Koreans.

Bottari, usually made from old fabrics and cloths consisting of traditional Korean dresses and colorful bedcovers, has provided KIM Soo Ja with the possibility of expressing the buried memories of women and her own experience. The bed throw is associated with the woman, realm of the night, privacy, colour and sexuality. For the artist, it is laden with full of memories, and with symbolic and hidden meanings.

Through piecing 'Pojagi' and other fabrics together, KIM Soo Ja's art has developed a way to connect her private experience with other people's experience, especially anonymous Korean women, the past with the present, and her life with art.

Her work deploys the robust color of *Pojagi* and bright and striking sensuous colours of traditional bedcovers in order to celebrate the existence of feminine qualities and difference. Perhaps this reminds us of the anonymous Korean women who have always found creative ways to breach their confined female realm by interweaving their female disposition into the male public sphere, even into the exclusive male realm of Confucianism. This female element is evident in all forms of Korean culture, literature, visual arts, music, architecture, garden design, etc. It can be said that the astonishingly colourfull *Pojagi* or Korean wrapping cloth and Korean women's *Hanbok* or traditional costume visually testify that Korean women have endured under the austerity of monochrome of Confucian formalism. Korean literature has often generalized Koreans as '*Pae-ui minjok*', meaning 'the people of the white'. In a male dominated Korean society, women have sought not to confront oppression, rather to regard it as a necessary protective outer layer in order to endure life.

It can be said that KIM Soo Ja's uniquely Korean and distinctly feminine appropriation of cloth and sewing has enabled her to arrest visually and physically the real of the 'here-and-now' of the silenced women in her artwork. This is clear in her *Bottari truck* of 1997 in which she worked with *Bottari* or the bundle and the notion of travel.

In the filmed performance *Bottari truck*, (Slide 1997) KIM Soo Ja sits piously on bundles loaded in the back of truck, traveling extensively across her country, Korea. In contrast to the traveller staying still, the landscape passed by. According to the artist, the *Bottari* or bundle represents a body and the human body, which is a moving bundle or the human body is the most complicated bundle.

In her earlier performance series of *Sewing into Walking*, KIM Soo Ja discovers her body as the needle with which she successfully synthesised her memory and experience of sewing bedcovers with her mother. According to the artist, using her body as needle is significant for her. It is interesting to note that the needle often represents the male organ according to Freudian analysis.

In her recent filmed performance, *the Cities on the Move* series, KIM Soo Ja was standing still in the middle of crowd, instead of moving herself. No one recognized or noticed her presence as a performance artist. KIM Soo Ja explained that she felt as if she were invisible. The artist related this to an idea that her body as the needle piecing together people passing by her body with continuously changing environment surrounded her body. This idea reminds us of unknown women and ordinary people who have continuously contributed to our human culture and civilization without recognition. Their contribution like the needle which sews the separate things, parts, and fabrics together, remains just a medium, yet not without any trace.

Like YUN Suk Nam and KIM Soo Ja, AHN Pil Yun draws the source of her strength from the image of Korean women, through which the artist experiences a spiritual reunion with her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and so on. Through this spiritual reunion, YUN Suk Nam, KIM Soo Ja and AHN Pil Yun, who are in a harsh, male dominant environment, regain their strength.

In traditional Korean society Korean women were defined as either a submissive daughter, loyal wife or nurturing mother. Yet Korean women constructed a contrasting image through their role as wife and mother. Korean women dominate the world of the Korean's unconscious, through her practical rituals of most elementary everyday life and through her shaman rituals performed in her home.

AHN Pil Yun adopts *Musok* or Shaman ritual in her performance art (for example, *Gambling*, 1994) in order to tell the stories of silenced Korean women, while exposing the violence of patriarchal ideology over Korean women. In Korea, traditionally the majority of shamans have been female and the succession in priesthood of *Musok* was from mother to daughter.

AHN Pil Yun has successfully built a complexity in her work through incorporating her local tradition with continuously updated technique and reference (for example, sensors and computer are used in *Gambling* 1994).

Though KIM Soo Ja and AHN Pil Yun use materials and activities associated with women such as cloth and mirror, housework and handicrafts, they are reluctant to define themselves as a feminist artist. The exception is YUN Suk Nam who sees herself as a feminist artist.

YUN Suk Nam, KIM Soo Ja and AHN Pil Yun felt intimidated by the minimalist asceticism and have chosen installation and performance art. In order to practice asceticism, Korean minimalists avoided images, their practice creating a void or emptying of the artist by rejecting any emotion, that is, by eliminating content or image (for example, PARK Seo Bo, *Ecriture*). The majority of Korean minimalists were male artists.

In pursuit of their search for self-identity, the personal experiences of YUN Suk-Nam, KIM Soo Ja and AHN Pil Yun are interwoven into their work which deals with the universal questions of human existence and relationships. Since this universal idea is not constructed through a highly abstracted form of art, but through their own bodily experience, many people are easily touched upon by their work (YUN Suk Nam, *Flower Shoes*, 1994, KIM Soo Ja, *Reductive Object*, 1991, AHN Pil Yun, *Kaleidoscope*, 1995).

Though their choices of the form of art, materials and references reflect very much of their female sensibility and feminist consciousness, why KIM Soo Ja and AHN Pil Yun hesitate to define themselves as a feminist artist? There are the three possible answers to this question.

First, as YUN Suk Nam pointed out, there has been a fear of isolation, which can be caused by female tokenism.

Second, there has been the lack of an informed and accessible way of discussing contemporary women's art, while life for many women artists in Korea is still difficult and often isolated. There was little theoretical discussion on the difference of women's art. For many women artists, the only feminist theory that they ever encountered was through the social and political feminist movement in Korea.

Third, it can be argued that Korean woman artists find that the Western feminist theory is largely irrelevant to their local context and experience. Though many Korean women agree that the social and political feminist movement in Korea has inspired Korean women to combat the patriarchal practices and system, they are less satisfied with the Western feminist political viewpoint flattening out the complicity of the culture they wished to repudiate. Many Korean women believe that it has been possible for Korean women to interweave their voice into the mainstream culture, literature, visual arts, which was almost the exclusive male realm. A recent study suggests that an archetypal heroine in literature written not only by Korean men, but by Korean women is often the filial daughter or chaste wife who is employed to embody the Confucian virtues of the official ideology and exemplify society's values and beliefs in a subtle way (Yim Ch'i-Kyun 1995: 1591-1609). Despite the Western feminist attempt to historicize them as a criticism of the repression and discrimination of women, they are often rather an affirmation of cultural values. It can be argued that this attempt often re-discovers the Korean women as a victim of Korean history and positions them as an absolute Other, which has never really existed.

In conclusion, it would be ideal that the notion of a women's art will be no longer necessary or useful to young Korean women artists who, one hopes, will have the power to reinvent both contemporary art and themselves.

Reference

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A List of Sides

1. YUN Suk-Nam, *Vendor*, 1993, Acrylic on wood, 35 x 18 x 15 centimetres
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3. Yun Suk Nam, *Mother*, 1993, Acrylic on wood, 35 x 120 x 4 centimetres
4. KIM Soo Ja, *Lying on the Nature*, 1994, used bedcovers & cloth
5. AHN Pil Yun, *Kaleidoscope III*, Performance, Hamburg, 1999
6. KIM Jung Hon, *Dog*, 1980, Oil on Newspaper
7. HONG Sung Dam, *Hong 37*, 1980s, Oil on canvas
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12. KIM Jung Hon, *Murungdownon (Paradise Lost)*, 1982, Oil on canvas, 134 x 100 centimetres
13. YUN Suk Nam, 1996 *Pink Room*, Acrylic on wood, chair, sofa and marbles, 450 x 350 x 300 centimetres
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15. KIM Soo Ja, *Deductive Object*, 1996, used clothes & Korean bed covers, Arken Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen
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19. AHN Pil Yun, *Gambling*, 1994, installation view, fluorescent light, acrylic box, vinyl plate. The first floor filled with 99 acrylic boxes (size varied between 100 and 250 centimetres tall) and covered with mirror-look-alike vinyl plate. In Mongolia, before the bride is taken to the groom's home, she is asked to sit on the mirror through which her 'inside' is seen. Light turns on by sensors activated by the viewer's movement. The computer generated music, synthesising mechanical sounds, such as drilling and hammering sounds
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21. Park Seo Bo, *Ecriture*, 1993, Mixed media with Hanchi (traditional Korean paper), 182 x 227.5 centimetres

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28. AHN Pil Yun, *Voyeurism*, 1997

¹ Korean names follow the order of the Korean name in which the family name or surname comes before the first name or the given name.

² The meaning of *Murungdownon*, the title of the painting by Kim Jung-Hon is perhaps equivalent to the biblical context of 'Paradise Lost'. By using the traditional theme of *Murungdownon*, the artist romanticises this Oriental pastoral landscape as a paradise untouched by Westernisation.

