

# IN THE EYE OF THE HURRICANE OF CHANGE: KOREAN CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE NEW MILLENIUM

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## Introduction

It is very difficult, if not impossible, fully to describe or highlight the art scene of any period, let alone the current period, in such a short paper, even for a small area such as the Republic of Korea (hereafter Korea). The aim of this paper is rather to provide a snapshot of the Korean contemporary art scene, in relationship to the current rapid changes that are being felt by the whole of Korean society, as seen by an art professional who has had the opportunity to live through some of the changes, as well as being allowed to be an observer to the most recent events.

## Korea and Korean art in the 20th century

The half-century that followed the Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945, a brief period of liberty, then division of the peninsula and the Korean War of 1950–53, was marked first by stuttering economic growth,

then by a period of military dictatorship from 1963 to 1987. Authoritarian rule brought with it political stability, rapid economic growth and social changes, but also a stifling political climate and censorship. The first democratically elected president assumed office in 1988, and the Korean public was slowly introduced to the kinds of rights that are normally taken for granted in a Western democracy—freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of travel. Since then, Korea has gone through an eventful period. If the socio-economic changes under the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, rapid and substantial as they were, could be seen as planned and expected (as much as they could be planned), during the last 15 years Korea can be said to have experienced a hurricane of change, almost chaotic and unplanned. The vibrant economy, via gross mismanagement, went through a period of control imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), during which management style and methods had to change. It is said that Korea came out of IMF control in a record time. The freedom of travel granted to the general public in 1988 brought about a diaspora of people to Europe, the Americas, basically everywhere. The forcing of free market ideology on to an unprepared population during the IMF years allowed foreign companies and investors to gain a strong foothold in what was a sealed Korean economy. An increase in the number of young graduates, in combination with slowing economic growth, resulted in a high unemployment rate among young people, as well as a steady lowering of the ‘retirement’ age (the official retirement age remained the same, but company policies became such as to create an unfavourable attitude towards workers from their mid-forties upwards). The divorce rate increased dramatically, especially amongst those in their twenties and thirties, recently breaking the 50 per cent mark. The continuous change in the educational system brought about a mistrust of public education, resulting in the mass migration of teenagers to other countries, as well as the rapid growth of, and dependence on, extra-curricular tutorial schools. This period also saw increasing instability and corruption in the political system, which culminated in an attempt in 2004 to impeach Roh Moo-Hyun, a past lawyer and human rights activist, who when elected in 2003 was hailed as the ‘people’s president’.

The development of the art and cultural scene in Korea in the 20th century broadly reflected the country’s history. Basically split into two main schools, art was divided between Eastern art forms, seen as more traditional, and Western art forms originally brought into Korea during the Japanese occupation period by Japanese practitioners. Western art in Korea was thus originally mediated by the Japanese. Artists such as Soo-Gun Park, KyungJa Chun, Joong-Sun Lee and Hwan-Ki Kim are recognised as the earliest practitioners of Western art in Korea. Limitations on travel, as well as geopolitical positioning, meant that the artist community, as well as the art market itself, mirrored the society of the Hermit Kingdom. Only a few artists were able to work outside Korea. The Academic School art tradition, heavily

influenced by Confucian and Buddhist philosophy and controlled by the government, was prevalent, and art was strongly self-referential in terms of visual language and topics. Furthermore, art and culture were basically seen to be limited activities for the enjoyment of the elite and the intelligentsia.

All this changed in the 1990s. The freedom of travel permitted to the general public allowed artists to travel to Europe and the United States. Since their return, they have exerted expanding influence on the Korean art scene, as well as increasing the influence of foreign art itself. Growing national affluence has resulted in a larger art market, which in turn has been able to support more artists. There has been a wider acceptance of underground art, e.g. *minjung* (People's) art, by academic and public institutions, and greater exposure of Korean art to the world in general (witness the first Korean Pavilion at the 1995 Venice Biennale). As a technophile people, Korean artists have embraced state-of-the-art technological tools and non-traditional media for creation of their work.

However, in contrast to the tools and medium they may use, the trend is emerging of subject-matter that appears to be drifting away from science and technological issues. Rather, it is moving towards the mundane, the self-referential, almost as a reaction to the technological development and rapid social changes going on around artists. Subject-matter is striving to create anchors in the whirlwind of change where nothing seems to last, seeking an area of calm, refuge, escape, dream, and to be the eye of the hurricane of change.

### **Art of the new millennium**

The expectation of finding 'Koreanness', that is, of finding what makes Korean contemporary art Korean, comes really from an Orientalist view, in which one defines Oriental culture as something that is not of Western culture, or vice versa. Such a viewpoint, however, does not stand up when looking at the works of contemporary Korean artists. They now work beyond such scope and confront the fast changing present condition as witnesses. Their work cannot be said to hold a unique Koreanness, but still holds their own unique identity, in a global community, in the still moment of a chaotic inner circle. If anything can be said to be 'Korean' in their work, it is their obsession to find a message in it, a kind of obsession which can be found amongst Korean people in general. Some critics say that this is because of the demands of the global art establishment, which prides itself on a desire to see the third world or Asia in all of its quivering splendour-squalor. Of course, some artists deny this trend, once they have become more critical in their point of view.

Generally, one can see two current trends among artists. Firstly, they are attempting conceptually to develop traditional aesthetic values. Secondly, they are attempting to produce works that reflect reality as objectively as possible.

**Table 1: Social phenomena seen in contemporary Korean society and artists' responses to them**

Social phenomenon	Response by Korean contemporary artists
Loss of self-identity in a world of rapid technical and social changes	New place, new identity-making
Breakdown of traditional moral values and ethics	New value-making
Increasing breakdown and corruption of religion	Questioning and satirising religion
Increasing dependency on new technology	Increasing focus on handicrafts and 'making'
Social taboo against freedom of expression	Taboo-breaking
Increasing dependency on 'scientific' proof	Critical response to scientific proof
Breakdown of traditional women's role	New feminism

Table 1 lists some of the social phenomena seen in current Korean society and artists' responses to them. It should be noted that this list is by no means complete nor does it represent the responses of artists alone. Each item, moreover, deserves a detailed academic study on its own. More study would be required to make this list more accurate and extensive.

In the following discussion of some of the works which illustrate the responses in the right-hand column, it should, of course, be noted that most of them cannot be categorised into one section alone, as these divisions are not necessarily independent of or separate from each other.

### *New place, new identity-making*

Nearly all modern Koreans are aware of a loss of a feeling of home, a sense of a place where they come from. In some instances, such loss is literally the case as the village or houses which they were born and raised in are physically not there any more. In other cases, this is the outcome of rapid changes that have resulted in a change of place and self to such a degree that home is not a home anymore.

Do-Ho Suh is one of the better known Korean artists in the international art



Fig. 1. Do-Ho Suh: *The Perfect House*



(a)

(b)

Fig. 2. Do-Ho Suh: (a) *High School Uniform*; (b) *Someone*

scene. In 2003 he had a solo exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London. In his work he deals with issues such as loss of identity and loss of home. *The Perfect House*, shown in fig. 1, is the life-size replica of Suh's studio in New York and is an elegiac rumination on a contemporary home. Hand-sewn from delicate, translucent fabric, this home appears as a luminescent box of colour and light. Every detail has been very carefully fabricated and then stitched into the weightless scrim of wall and floor. Rather than expressing a longing for a secure place, Suh's definition of the home is a perfect non-place which you can find anywhere.

His work in fig. 2 touches on the mass-identity culture of Korean society. Figs 2(a), made of now discontinued high school uniforms, and 2(b), an armour made of army dog tags, show how the social system leads to homogenisation of individual identity, hinting at the empty nature of the mass hero. This problem of man's identity in our globalised society in an age of technology and information is at the origin of our sympathy for such a passionate work.

### *Dream-making*

A graduate of Goldsmith College and a recent entrant to the Kwangju Biennale, Yon-Du Jeong playfully attempts to create works where he acts like a film director. Merging artistic creativity and the dreams of people whom he meets, he creates a faux-version of the dream. His works show how the values of individual dreams have changed. Such dreams are not of making money or becoming a social somebody, but take, rather, a more individualistic focus. For instance, as shown in fig. 3, the dream of a girl in an icecream shop is to visit the North Pole, and the waiter's dream is to become a country singer. The artist almost becomes a film director, almost a wish-fulfilling god figure, preparing the sets and directing the person towards his dream.

### *Questioning and satirising religion*

Atta Kim's work satirises religion as well as dismantling the framework of social stereotypes to seize the world of true liberty at the moment the body and the world come in contact with each other. In a transparent box, he has various people serving as relics in a museum: a newly wedded couple, young men and women, children, old



Fig. 3. Yon-Du Jeong: (a) *North Pole Travel*; (b) *Country Singer*

(a)



(b)

people, injured people from the Vietnam War, prostitutes and a Buddhist monk. In most cases, these models stand naked or with their hair shaven, looking straight to the camera, crouched, or sitting in the pose of Zen contemplation. These scenes, strong and provocative to the eye, linger long in our memory. Some of his religion-related photos almost seem obscene. He has always raised questions concerning the meaning of human existence. The transparent box signifies stereotypical social convention, norms and systems, material civilisation and the dominant ideology, as well as the boundary between the internal and external, the visible and invisible.

### *Increasing emphasis on handicrafts and ‘making’*

The title *Buyuhada* implies a dual meaning: drifting and wealth. The core of this work deals with the obsession with money and the absence of human value in the age of post-

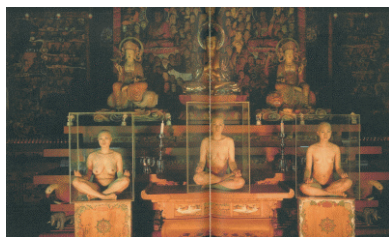


Fig. 4. Atta Kim: *Museum Projects*

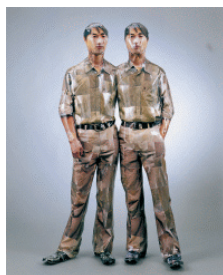


Fig. 5. JoonHo Jeon: *Buyuhada* (Drift and Wealth)

(a) (b)  
Fig. 6. Oh-Sang Kwon: (a) *Twins*; (b) *Death*

capitalist society. The artist projects himself in the image of Korean heritage-imbedded currency, wandering around inside the money. It is very paradoxical to find human beings who are trapped within the frame of the money, aspiring to an ideal world in the form of art. Here one assumes the work to be highly dependent on high technology, but the main part is mostly done by hand, with individual images hand-drawn and stored in a computer. Many artists seem to depend on this handcrafted, ‘making’-orientated procedure, and although this seems to be a bit backward, one can see this as a reaction to the increasing dependency on technology in the everyday life of Korean society.

Oh-Sang Kwon’s work also shows a seeming dependency on technology for its making. However, composed completely of photographs, his products are basically complex, three-dimensional origami composed of hundreds of photographs, heavily dependent on handicraft and ‘making’. His works not only break down the division between the genres of sculpture and photograph, but also of science and art, as he ‘clones’ his friends over and over again, using copies of photographs.

### *Taboo breaking*

Freedom of expression, freedom of speech: although in political rhetoric and social theory they were easy to say, in actual practice, going against mass culture, social prejudice and peer pressure turned out to be more difficult than was originally thought. People confronting this wall basically conformed, or left the country, or



Fig. 7. Inhwan Oh: *Where a Man Meets a Man in Seoul*

became social pariahs by breaking these taboos. *Where a man meets a man in Seoul* is an installation work by Inhwan Oh, who attempts to project his own integrity whilst commenting on the nature of homosexual relationships. The words appearing closely together on the ground are written in powdered incense, and the incense is slowly burning. Negatively predisposed as Korean society is toward homosexuality, by featuring the gay community he projects into the work a hitherto hidden confidence, in effect ‘coming out’ through its presentation. As the incense burns, the names associated with the closed-off, hidden-away and negatively viewed gay arena go up in smoke, blurring the walls of social prejudice. Neither part of a larger discourse nor just a personal tale, this work has more value than something absolute and prevailing or generalised. Rather it draws attention to the value of a contrasting minority, regardless of what one may think of it, in the context of one of today’s social phenomena, disparity.

Works by Jun Kim can be seen in a similar light. Tattoos are still not accepted in Korean culture as a whole and those with tattoos, although not officially, are refused by the armed forces’ selectors. Once it is remembered that people who have not served in the army are seen as social pariahs with reduced job and business opportunities, it is easy to see what a strong refusal this is. Jun Kim’s work is based on his own tattoos, emphasising the social refusal of people who by having tattoos are seen as sub-people.



Fig. 8: Cho Duck-Hyun: ‘Entering the Yseokuk’ project excavation scene



Fig. 9: Bul Lee





### *Questioning and satirising scientific proof and mass media*

One of the interesting aspects of the Korean mass media is that one finds a high density, almost an overuse, of words such as ‘ultra-scientific’, ‘technological’ and ‘ultra-state-of-the-art’. It is almost as if use of these words will validate the related product or process, hinting at the ‘gullibility’ of the Korean public towards so-called ‘scientific methodology’. There seems, too, to be an almost unbreakable trust in the media, especially the news programmes, amongst the general public.

Duck-Hyun Cho’s projects, which it has been possible to see in the international scene since the 1990s, collaborate with experts and specialists in various fields to create fictional historical scenarios, and enact archeological digging scenes. His sculptures, which in this case are of dogs, are buried in a selected area, and these are then ‘re-discovered’ by an actual archeological team going through an accepted process to find a new dig. The whole process is photographed and filmed as a performance. His works thus question and criticise the historical truth based on archeological evidence, as well as the scientific research methodology related to such evidence.

Kim Beom pokes gentle and less serious but effective fun at the mass media. His ‘News’ video shows news broadcasters from the 9pm news programme, well-dressed, manicured and not a hair out of place, saying something that is curiously out of place, such as:

There are many surprising things in this world. I am sure that even now such things are happening. However, people should not speak about it, or act surprised, or shout. If you remain calm, it will be time for a meal, then time for sleep, and after a nice rest, it will be another day

What is interesting about this work is that it is a composite of hundreds of clips from the actual news programme. Although the words spoken seem humorous, it is actually the way the general Korean public looks at the world, and Kim Beom is satirising not only the mass media, but also the thought-processes of the public.

### *New feminism*

Traditional Korean women held an almost matriarchal position in the household, but their reach was limited to that. The current outpouring of women into the ‘outside’ world has basically broken the traditional mould for women and is giving rise to the kind of feminism which is changed and moulded to Korean circumstances.

It is interesting to note that it is women artists who are better known in the international art field, such as Bul Lee and SuJa Kim, and this fact in itself has suggested a whole new paradigm in the art scene. Bul Lee boldly uses her body as part of her work. By making herself into a multi-limbed monster (fig. 9), she puts forward a critical view of the past male-orientated military government which led

to suppression and packaging of women to fulfill men's desires and purposes. Her work also comments on the nature of birth, and on the nation's obsession with biotechnology.

## Conclusion

As discussed above, the current social, political and cultural changes experienced by Korean society are having a profound effect on the work of artists who by their very nature attempt to face up to and understand reality as they see it. Artists who have attempted to escape the modernist trend prevalent in 1980s and 1990s have now established their place in the Korean art scene. The use of various and unusual media, some technology based, has now become widely accepted.

The word 'Korean' as denoting a national identity is not seen as a topic of interest to these artists. Rather, in a world globalised by information, technology and rapid communication, the word 'Korean' signifies a 'reality' inferred in context to such a condition. This may be the reason for many artists leaving Korea to study and/or work in the United States or Europe.

One interesting arena in which artists are striving to reach towards the public is the mobile community (i.e. mobile telephone arena). The mobile industry in Korea is one of the most saturated, competitive and advanced in the world, and many artists have adapted their work or changed their working practice in order to utilise the medium available in mobile phones. In 2003, the Nabi Centre, an institution set up in order to facilitate new media art, organised an exhibition which allowed the public to view artworks via their mobile phones. Participating artists, some of whom had concentrated on traditional canvas media, produced flash-works and media-clips in order to adapt to such a medium. This new direction points to a new area in which artists can work, as well as allowing the artists to adapt and use new technological tools.

These Korean artists who have placed themselves in the centre of the hurricane of change have striven to adapt a viewpoint that is calm and objective. In contrast to artists in the 1990s, when heavy-handed *minjung misul* (People's art, based on realism and a serious social message) or ideology-focused works formed a main trend, the current batch of artists use humorous, ironic visual language to deal with the serious issues of the day. These issues are not limited to Korea. Rather, they can be seen and felt in most of the developed countries. Maybe because of this, Korean art is now coming out of its limited arena and becoming more and more acceptable to the international art scene.

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