

## Art in America November 2009

### **Korea/Bellwether: Peninsula View : A current exhibition generously samples a dozen South Korean-born artists whose work crosses formal and thematic boundaries**

By Sarah Valdez

"YOUR BRIGHT FUTURE: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea" gathers some often quite wry and funny work by mid-career artists, most of whom have led peripatetic lives outside of their native country. Although the title suggests a propagandistic or didactic national theme, this is a top-notch and surprisingly cohesive exhibition that in fact calls attention to both the flimsiness and the inescapable impact of nationality. It is co-organized by Lynn Zelevansky, curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (where the exhibition originated, and where I saw it); Christine Starkman, curator of Asian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Kim Sunjung, director of the curatorial organization Samuso in Seoul. All 12 artists were born between 1957 and 1972, experiencing firsthand South Korea's transformation into a major economic force, as well as its emergence onto the global cultural stage following the transition from military dictatorship to democracy in 1987 and the international exposure provided by the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. Only one has spent his entire life in the country: the pop artist Choi Jeong-Hwa, who enjoys proclaiming that he was "made in Korea." Choi, whose work is an esthetic anomaly in the show, presents the aptly named *HappyHappy* (2008-09), a merry, Jessica Stockholder-esque installation of brightly colored plastic containers dangling in columns from scaffolding (at LACMA, this installation was popular among children), and *Welcome* (2009), with gigantic, primary-colored banners that crisscrossed columns on two of LACMA's facades, causing at least one visitor to inquire aloud who had TP'ed the museum.

The exhibition, which opens this month in Houston, includes some internationally acclaimed artists, such as Do Ho Suh, who shows a large, elaborate, scaled-down replica of his childhood home crashing into a replica of his New York City apartment building, with debris lying on the floor below from the "impact." Among the lesser-known participants is Jeon Joonho, who contributes a pointed, simple, wall-projected computer animation, *The White House* (2005-06), in which a tiny handyman paints over the windows of the White House on a gigantic \$20 bill, transforming the monument, in the space of a half hour, into the sequestered hideout it was for its chief inhabitant at the time of the piece's creation.

The exhibition takes its ambiguously chipper name from a spare, elegant installation by Bahc Yiso, one of several artists who made me wish to see a solo exhibition (although, at LACMA, each artist was provided with ample space in which to show a variety of work). Bahc earned an MFA at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in 1985, founded Minor Injury gallery in the borough shortly thereafter, returned to Seoul disenchanting with the U.S. in 1994 and died in Korea in 2004 at the age of 47. *Your Bright Future* (2002/09) consists of a group of 10 klieg lights beaming at a blank white wall. This poetic if bleak display makes you wonder: What future? (One that's apparently hit a slab of Sheetrock.) Spotlights? (Trained on nothing special.) The point? (Fleeting,

perhaps illusory, fame and power; in L.A. the piece took on particular resonance.) Bahc's *Wide World Wide* (2003) is a swath of canvas painted ocean blue and hosting names of places so obscure they seem fictitious-Araraquara, Nunachuak, Fakfak, Bobo Dioulasso and Quetzaltenango, among others-printed neatly on white paper tags attached by straight pins, with their phonetic equivalents in Korean painted on the canvas below, raising questions about the limitations of translation, particularly in regard to place names.

Also addressing the absurdities of translation, and perhaps even its impossibility, is Jooyeon Park, who showed *MONOLOGUE monologue* (2006), a video of three Korean students lip-synching to an audio of three Irish teachers of English who reside in Seoul, and who are describing the Irish countryside in their distinctive native accents. The effect of native-born Koreans sounding like nostalgic Dubliners is alternately humorous and touching. While the disconnect may seem funny on the surface, the implication that immigration can entail loss of home and connections with loved ones as well as language undermines the hilarity-as does the sense that laughing might seem racist.

Haegue Yang, Korea's representative at this year's Venice Biennale, shows her clever *Storage Piece* (2003/09), in which crated artworks by the artist are gradually unpacked over the duration of the exhibition. Here the albatross of many an artist-the stored work that might never be sold (though this work was)-becomes precisely the point. And Yang, unlike most artists, doesn't provide instructions for installing the unpacked elements, presenting a classic conundrum regarding authorship: Is she still the artist if someone else decides how the work will be displayed?

Making up stories altogether, Gimhongsok pairs elaborate, handwritten wall texts with sculptures, video and drawings reminiscent of Raymond Pettibon. Gim also presents a video with English subtitles that have no relationship with the utterances of the paid actors on screen (as you learn from a wall label). This, in turn, makes the subtitles in *The Wild Korea* (2005)-and, by implication, all subtitles--suspect. This darkly comical video shows a man, whose face turns red, then blue (the colors in the flags of both Koreas), being interviewed about his wild experiences from September to November of 1997, when, he imagines, guns were legalized in South Korea (privately owned firearms are strictly prohibited in the country). There are reenactments of some of his adventures: he obtains a Beretta, no hassle; behaves like a character in a TV cop show; and then gets shot and nearly dies. Upon recovering, he is kidnapped by his high-school girlfriend, whom he hasn't seen in years, following a campy shootout in a restaurant. Extensive wall text accompanies the video, providing a (fake) historical context.

Further testing the limits of the plausible is Gim's *Bunny's Sofa* (2008). In this installation, what appears to be an actual person in a white rabbit costume reclines on a pink divan beneath the following handwritten wall text:

The person performing in the rabbit costume is Lee Mahn-Gil, a North-born laborer. Despite his status as an illegal immigrant, he will be paid five dollars per hour and perform eight hours a day. I would like to give a round of applause to this foreigner who is temporarily employed for the exhibition. To ensure his successful performance, please refrain from touching him and any behavior that may impede his performance.

Applauding a North Korean worker yet paying him a pathetic salary compared to what is earned in the South, and for something as useless as lying perfectly still in an art museum, calls into question both the relative value of different people's labor and the relationship between art and commerce. As the kind of artwork whose success lies, in part, in its maker's ability to provide audiences with a convincing illusion, the piece works brilliantly. Convinced they'd seen the "bunny" twitch, several visitors surrounded the creature, spending a few rapt minutes monitoring it for movement (though the "person" in the costume was only a mannequin).

By comparison, Kimsooja's potent (and much exhibited) six-channel video projection, lengthily titled *A Needle Woman, Patan (Nepal), Havana (Cuba), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), N'Djamena (Chad), San'a (Yemen), Jerusalem (Israel), 2005*, actually depends on a person—the artist herself—remaining stock still as the camera rolls. Kim stands completely stationary (she reports in a catalogue interview that she had to breathe from her stomach to prevent her shoulders from moving), her back to the camera, in city streets. In Yemen, women float by wearing black abayas, their eyes visible only through rectangular slits. You wonder whether Kim may be in some danger, a foreign female with her head uncovered, who has inserted herself in the street in a manner that might be construed as confrontational—or, at least, passively resistant. By contrast, many in tropical Cuba wear not much at all. In Chad, people carry loads on top of their heads, whereas in Nepal, they transport goods in bundles dangling from shoulder-borne sticks. Everywhere Kim goes, group behavior tends to be contagious. Either people stop to stare, encouraged by others who do the same, or they move fluidly along, not visibly noticing her presence at all. Playing on a nearly 11-minute loop, the projection crackles with the energy of the various cities, which Kim chose for their poverty and violence, and for their histories of colonialism, civil war and religious conflicts. Yet what emerges here, and throughout the exhibition—and what escapes seeming platitudinous—is a profound sense of shared humanity.