

# Blending politics with art

by Mary Akamine

"During the last ten years Koreans have rediscovered their lost history. They are uncovering the recent past, frozen hard for one generation under the sudden attack and ghastly destruction of the Korean War."

Historian Bruce Cumings, Hankyoreh newspaper, June 26, 1988

Korean American artist Yong Soon Min sees a clear connection between her personal life and the context of world events.

"I was born in 1953, the year the Korean War ended," says Min. "It was because of the Cold War that my family immigrated to the United States."

Min grew up in the U.S. and is frank about her lack of knowledge of Korean.

"When I go into Korean stores and they find out that I'm Korean," says the 37-year-old New York-based artist, "they're really astounded that I can't speak Korean. They're always admonishing me to, 'well, learn!'"

Min says this with some laughter, but truly regrets the loss of her mother tongue. The Korean language is an integral part of the Korean identity, she says, something which has united the Korean people despite countless invasions, occupations and 40 years of Japanese colonial rule.

Min, the recipient of a 1990 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, was in Seattle last month to create a window installation entitled "Over There/Here/Out There." The work was commissioned as part of the Goodwill Games' art festival, and is on display through this week at the Windhorse Gallery downtown.



Yong Soon Min — Dean Wong photo

Seattle photographer Irene Kuniyuki, who worked with Min on the "Over There/Here/Out There" project, was impressed by Min's artistic integrity and describes Min's art as "low-tech," with a "really hard-line, high impact."

### Political art with historical roots

Min's works are, in a word, 'political.' Using a variety of media ranging from calligraphed paper wall hangings to steel sculptures, she has confronted many of the major problems seen in the world today. This year, her work has been part of shows dealing with apartheid and the Palestinian Intifada. She was also a participant in Cuba's recent "Havana Bienal," a major collection of Third World art.

Much of her politicization stems from a re-learning of history, a movement away from Eurocentric ideals. It stems, in part, from a mid-life rediscovery of Korean history. "Becoming aware of Korean history and the alternative history—history from the vantage point of those people who were defeated or oppressed—was really important in this whole formation of becoming more aware of myself as an Asian American and as a Korean American," she says.

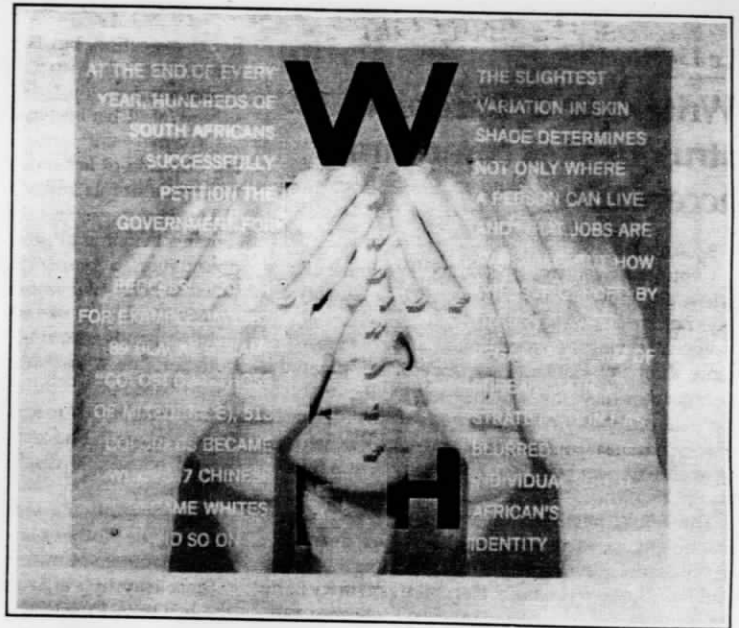
### Ties to Korea

Min began learning about Korea on her own, through study groups and the analysis of news reports. Her views on Korea and politics in general, she says, are "polar opposite" those of her father. He was born under Japanese colonial rule and immigrated to this country to teach Korean at the U.S. Army's prestigious foreign language institute in Monterey. His decision to move the family to the U.S. was aided by an American G.I., whom Min portrayed several years ago in her painting, "American Friend."

For seven years the family lived apart. Min spent her early childhood in the village of Pugok, where her grandparents lived, while her mother eked out a living as a coffee girl at a U.S. Army base in Seoul.

She began school in Seoul after moving back to be with her mother, but hated her classes. After coming to the U.S., she says, school began to interest her and she became known as a model student. Pursuing an early interest in art, she eventually studied art in college and went on to receive a Master's and a Master's of Fine Arts from the University of California at Berkeley.

It wasn't until around 1984, when



"Colorblind," by Yong Soon Min, part of an Art Against Apartheid show in New York this year. The work's main text reads "Whitewash." The sub-text is about bureaucratic racial definitions.

Min moved to New York City after a three-year teaching stint at the University of Ohio, that the history and politics of Korea began to fascinate her. Working as administrative coordinator for the Asian American Arts Alliance, she became involved with Young Koreans United (YKU), a Korean American activist group known for its progressive stand on Korean political issues.

Her work as a newsletter writer for the group is an example of how Min tries "to keep one foot in the community and one in the studio." She is known to be highly disciplined, getting by on four to five hours of sleep. She works on artwork during the weekdays, spends weekends as a proofreader for a New York law firm, and spends the rest of her time volunteering with various organizations in the city. Her most recent volunteer work has been with a group mediating tensions between Korean greengrocers and New York's Jamaican community.

### 1.5 Generation Korean

Min spent one-and-a-half years volunteering with YKU. During that time, she says, she learned about the differences between Korean Americans who have grown up in Korea, and those who have been raised in the U.S. Min struggled to fit in. There were a lot of language barriers since the group conducted its activities in Korean, along with some cultural ones as simple as whether to eat brown or white rice.

"To them," Min says, "I was in many respects an anomaly...I was what they call a 1.5 generation Korean—someone between first and second generations."

"Half Home," a six-panel installation

exhibited in New York in late 1986, came directly out of that experience and was Min's first attempt to deal with her personal ties to Korea. The work touched on the Korean experience of Japanese colonialization and the division between north and south. Its main theme, however, was "the notion of being between cultures, of being a hybrid—feeling that you were half-home both as an American and as a Korean."

### Discovery of Min Joong Art

Min says her work with YKU was painful in many ways, but exposed her to the political art of South Korea—the so-called Min Joong (people's) art movement.

Min met some of the Min Joong movement's leading artists during a trip to Seoul last year. In the near future, she plans to move to Seoul for intensive Korean language study and, while there, hopes to collaborate with some of those artists.

Her desire to work with Min Joong artists, she explains, stems from the solidarity she finds as a minority artist in their struggle as Third World artists. "Our position is necessarily oppositional, one that seeks to change the order of things," she wrote in a recent essay on the Asian American cultural identity.

It's a clear statement of Min's political stance, an expression of her fight against cultural domination by the 'powers that be.' It also reveals how the implications of Min's Korean American identity have grown beyond a search for individual and family roots. She's now redefining what it means to be part of the international community.

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