

Korean American C

"Home Is Not A Birthplace..."

By In-young Choi

Staff Reporter

Finding one's identity is a never-ending journey. When one is caught between two cultures, it becomes a circular odyssey. The question of who we are is a recurring and universal theme to be found in any piece of artwork. How

one goes about this search is an integral part of the answer, because although we are all heading for the same destination, each of us will take an individual course.

Young-soon Min's transformation from a street urchin in a rural town in Korea to a mixed-media installation artist based in New York is a unique and universal story.

Min spent her formative years in a village south of Seoul, reared by her grandparents. At age seven, she moved to the city where her mother and brother were living, later immigrating to the United States, where her father had established residence.

Min recollected her first impression of the country, "We arrived at Christmas time and I was in awe of material wealth of the U.S; it was like putting a kid in a fun land."

With an utter abandonment that lasted through her adolescent years and into college, Min grasped at all that was new and different.

For her, creating an imaginary family out of blue-eyed, and blond models in a Spiegel catalog was one way of escaping from her home life that was in chaotic contrast with school life. It also helped her to deal with being new in the country.

"I went through an incredibly fast assimilation; I wanted so much to blend in, and to be like all other kids." Min, an immigrant child growing up in a resort town of Monterey, California, attributes this to a total lack of consciousness and lack of support for being different.

Fortunately, school was a gratifying experience

in the Whitney Museum's independent studies. The year-long program provided her with a fresh impetus.

Upon return to New York after a 3-year teaching experience in Athens, Ohio, she had the good fortune of stumbling into a job as an administrative coordinator for the Asian American Arts Alliance.

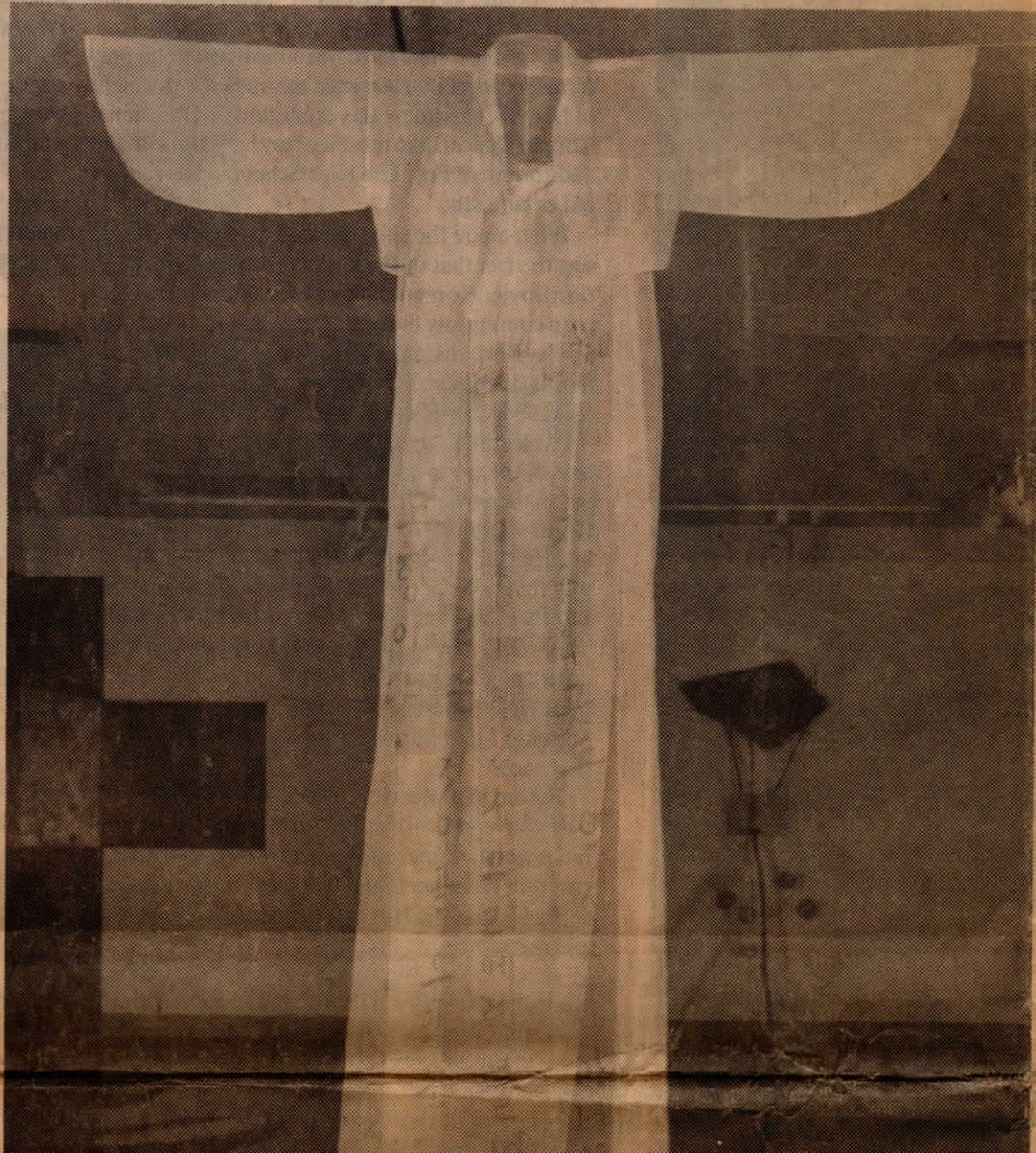
Min calls the years that ensued, her consciousness-raising period. Through her encounter with different arts organizations and prominent artists, she eventually met up with the Korean cultural group, "Binari" that introduced her to a cultural and historical roots and it was as if the floodgate had

completion of symmetrical cycles, finally going home to her birthplace and bringing Min into contact with Minjung(people's art) artists, to whom she felt most akin.

Accordingly, she strives to defy the Western concept of the artist being an inspired loner creating art that transcends everyday reality and everyday comprehension.

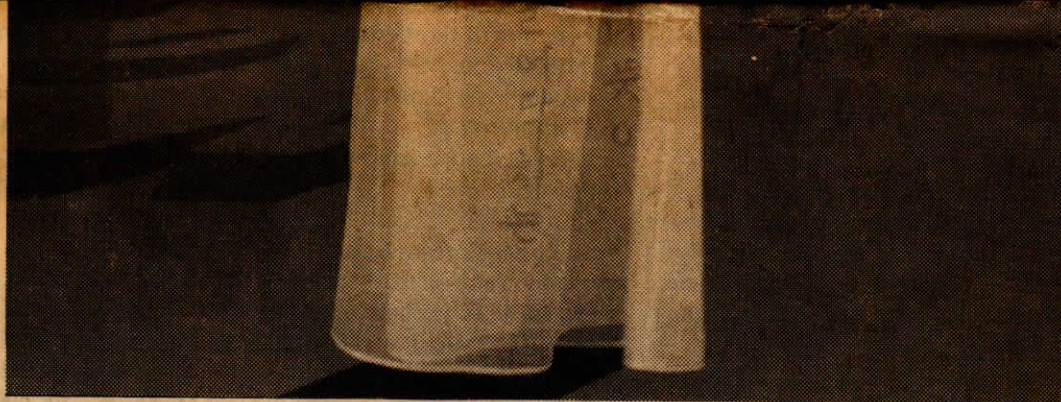
"To me, it is very important to communicate the link between the audience and myself. I am struggling to find ways to address and it isn't easy."

And if that means producing work difficult to grasp, Min feels the viewers have to do their share



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Min's mixed-media installation work.

The Korea Times New York - Karen Bel

and thanks to the influence of a grandmotherly teacher, Min became a good student, and as early as second or third grade, she developed an interest in art, finding fair amount of support from the teachers to pursue it.

Min went on to college with the serious notion of becoming an artist.

Studying art at the University of California at Berkeley, she began digging back to those early years.

However, although college was a learning process, and believing that self-immersion in art constituted enough of an identity, Min did not actively rebel against the romantic notion of being an artist. She recounted the period of her adoration of European artists and lamented she could never be a true artist, for her life was not exciting enough or sufficiently non-conventional.

"I chose Berkeley because I was interested in the potential of broader learning. In graduate school, I became interested in film theory, particularly the French New Wave as there were a lot of new disciplines outside of art."

At about this time Min met an influential classmate, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha who introduced her to doing narrative work which would also include one's personal life.

"I was such a formalist at that time for the most part, that this was really revolutionary for me.

In graduateschool Min produced the first of her narrative works; it involved reducing art to its

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basics, of pure form and color, and she "went through a short period of not doing anything, feeling lost and bereft."

Relying on chance operations and stream of consciousness strategies, Min attempted to find an artist's voice. She brought in random materials to the studio and pasting them up, she struggled to find a fresh start.

In 1981, Min moved to New York to participate

opened for her.

"The importance of history in formulating my own identity is undeniable. Once, I felt I had a grasp of alternative history, history of my Korean roots that was denied or suppressed, and that there had been a role model, it gave me an incredible strength. You realize that you have this connection and that you are part of this continuum."

For Min, identity is composed of more than a derivative of a mother tongue and loving Korean food; it requires an understanding of the history of one's roots and its relationship to the present.

That is why, in the current exhibition entitled, "deColonization," there's much reference to personal life and family history.

On an elongated piece of Hanbok (Korean costume), is a poetic version of identity, that it is not a fixed thing, but constantly mutable and changing, describing Min not only as a woman artist but also as Korean and Asian American.

In addition, Min notes the particulars of other cultures in which artists wear many different hats.

"In Latin America, you have artists and writers who are also statesmen; it is Western aesthetics that makes the distinction of dichotomy between arts and politics."

That is why, although her artwork is becoming more and more personal, it is an attempt for Min to place herself in the world. Art, Min believes, is so much more complicated than just creating beautiful objects. It is making a connection with the personal and political. Therefore, Min tries to foreground in her art the issues of race, culture and gender. And "...the most effective and closest way of doing that is to dig deep into myself."

So a constant inner dialogue takes place as she does her work, and Min frets over the poetic and didactic impulses that penetrate her work, because oftentimes, attacks come from both sides.

The artists, she says, think she is bastardizing the art form, whereas the activists think her work is too aesthetical."

It is a continuous struggle for Min to come to terms with diverse influences and involvements with the present (her life in the U.S.) and her Korean past.

Her most recent trip to Korea in 1989 was a

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to appreciate the artist's work as it relates to themselves. Because cultural awareness, says Min, is not a birthright, one has to constantly work at it.

"You have to make an effort to learn where you are coming from, and become engaged in the present, be aware that you are not stuck in the past, that the present is connected to the past. To me, it's been tremendously important that the knowledge has actually propelled me into action."

Art, Min concludes, has given her a greater sense of herself, in her journey home. □

The current exhibit of "24 Korean American Artists" at Haena-Kent Gallery in Soho, Manhattan features one of Young-soon Min's works. The show will last through September 27.