

# Min Joong

## Yong Soon Min

Art activism is alive and well...actually, flourishing, in south Korea.\*

Where? Yup, in that small country known to most Americans through the reruns of *MASH* or to New Yorkers through their ubiquitous green groceries. Koreans are the lesser known (compared to the Japanese or the Chinese) "orientals" who are only now beginning to emerge into American consumer consciousness due to what is touted as south Korea's economic miracle of the past decade. So, this home of Nam Jun Paik and kimchee that we all thought was too busy cranking out Samsung VCRs and Hyundai compacts really has been busy being born. Again. Artists are working hand-in-hand with other activists to ensure that this newborn will come through this long, hard labor whole, healthy and vital: in other words, a new Korea that is reunified, self-determined and democratic.

This article is based for the most part on interviews conducted recently with two prominent artists of the south Korean cultural movement who are visiting the United States. Bongjun Kim and Yongtai Kim (not related) were two of the five artists included in a travelling exhibition entitled, "Min Joong: A New Movement of Political Art From Korea," held in January at the A Space Gallery in Toronto, Canada and in March/April at the Minor Injury Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. This was the first time that works from this movement have been shown outside of south Korea, out of which they had to be smuggled.

A discussion of contemporary art and culture in south Korea that overlooks some understanding of its sociopolitical history is irrelevant. The tragic fact of a divided country in which one half of the country still remains in oblivion, aside from a cursory red label of communist, not only for Westerners but for a new generation of south Koreans themselves, underscores any attempt to understand the people and their concerns. As one might expect of a homogenous race of people who, despite a long history of national sovereignty, have in the past century been trampled upon by the foreign powers of Japan, the U.S.S.R., and the U.S., even those Koreans who are most accommodating of foreign influences are instilled with a fiercely nationalistic pride. During and after the Korean War and the official division of the country, south Korea was first ruled by a U.S. puppet autocrat who was overthrown by a popular uprising in 1960 and, like Marcos of the Philippines, exiled to Hawaii. A military coup by Park Chung-lee replaced

the short-lived and ineffectual democratic government which followed the uprising. Park was assassinated by the Korean CIA in 1979, ending his oppressive eighteen-year rule, only to be followed by a carbon copy in the person of the current ruler Chun.

Opposition to Chun's rise to power through the military and his imposition of martial law enroute to his takeover of the government in 1980 led to a mass uprising in a large southern city of Kwang Ju. This uprising was the watershed for the Min Joong cultural movement as it was for all oppositional struggle. Artists along with all concerned Koreans were radicalized in the aftermath of the Kwang Ju Massacre, as this event came to be known. Over 2,000 civilians were brutally murdered by Chun's elite military forces whose assignment was officially sanctioned by General Wickham, the former U.S. forces general command who was also the operational commander in chief of the south Korean armed forces. This event, as well as a long past and current U.S. history of political and economic intervention in Korea, has led to a rise in anti-United States sentiment among Koreans. For many Koreans, the Kwang Ju Massacre, like the Soweto Uprising for South Africans, serves to symbolize the domestic and foreign oppression against which the people's liberation movement struggles.

The post Kwang Ju Uprising period has witnessed the growth and maturation of the Min Joong movement along with other sectors of the oppositional struggle. It took a couple of years for the wounds to heal enough to rise up again. But this period of recovery offered a necessary time to reflect, assess and reevaluate Korea's state of affairs.

In the artworld, works emerged during this gestation period which were notable for their social and political content. The mainstream of contemporary art in the early Eighties continued the domination of Western-influenced modernist modes. However, while the early Min Joong art stylistically resembles many of the trends in the mainstream of the times, these new works began to reveal a somewhat critical stance toward foreign cultural influences, both Western and Japanese.

Also, these works were characterized by an evocative and suggestive treatment of subject matter rather than an overt and specific statement more readily seen in much of the current Min Joong art. A sense of detached irony and vague existential foreboding permeates these early Min Joong works.

More recently, Korean visual artists have been forming their own activist associations. Since its inception in 1980, a pioneering Min Joong art organization called "Reality and Utterance" has produced many theme-oriented group shows such as the one named



"Pluck the Star," 1985, a banner painting by Bongjun Kim

"The Korean War." In March of this year, another much publicized group show called "Torture" was organized by an affiliated larger association, the Korean People's Art Association. This show, held at one of few galleries in the capital city which have not blacklisted Min Joong art, was a response to the police torture death of a Korean student activist named Jong Chul Park. Unfortunately, this is by no means an isolated case of death resulting from state instituted torture. However, the significance of the Park death lies in the fact that, for the first time, the Chun government, which holds well over 1,500 political prisoners, admitted responsibility for the torture death.

Organizations such as the Korean People's Art Association have become increasingly active and better coordinated with other sectors of the Min Joong cultural movement. It's important to emphasize here that this movement is broadly cultural and truly multidisciplinary, encompassing literature (precursor to the visual arts), music, dance, media and folk rituals. A writers' collective called "Freedom In Practice Writers'

Association," the oldest among the various cultural organizations, predates all the visual artist collectives. Among the larger of the numerous artists collectives of varying sizes, regional and national, is the Association of Min Joong Cultural Movement. Many of these groups who take a more militant stance and regard their work as agitprop "weapons" are forced to operate underground as the government imposes severe penalties for those it considers radicals.

Another important collective, which has been active since 1983, is the Durung Art Collective led by one of the visiting artists, Bongjun Kim. The orientation of this collective reflects the general development of the student sector of the oppositional movement. Political growth and the realization of the need for a more broadly based mass organizing brought student activists into the factories and the fields to begin to better understand and organize the working class. Unlike the earlier artist groups which functioned more in academia or among middle class venues, Durung aligns itself closely with the working class. Their group art projects reflect a conscious effort to represent these common people and their lives in an honest yet affectionate manner. In the words of Bongjun, the art of Durung is "...of, by and for the people...an outcome of a historical necessity to express the desires of the people." In an effort to make the artwork accessible to these working people, Durung like other similar groups display their easily portable mural-size banner paintings at all kinds of events and gatherings. Unlimited editions of prints, particularly the more direct technique of woodblock print, is an understandably popular medium among the movement artists. In spite of harsh government crackdowns and scrutiny of dissident materials, there is a surprisingly well developed production and dissemination of these materials.

In addition to developing alternative modes of protection and distribution, many artists are also reevaluating and formulating alternative Min Joong aesthetics and ethos rooted in political theory and praxis. The attempt to locate and define a culture for the underclass has led to the revival of the communal peasant culture and lifestyle. The effort to retrieve and foster a long and rich folk cultural heritage stunted by foreign intervention and influence continues to be a valiant struggle in these times of government policies that require an 80% quota for American films among foreign film imports, giving economic sanction to foreign cultural neocolonialization of south Korea. Nevertheless, the emphasis on communal identity lies at the heart of Min Joong cultural activities.

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\*When used to designate the country, 'south' is not capitalized throughout this article out of respect for the Koreans who oppose the imposed division of their country.

# ...Min Joong

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It's interesting to compare the difference in cultural orientation and perhaps as well a difference in the stage of development between art activism here and in south Korea. During April, Bongjun Kim and Yongtai Kim attended the "Voices of Dissent" conference in Philadelphia as well as the march in Washington, D.C., for peace with justice in Central America and southern Africa. Although they were impressed to see evidence of art activism and dissent in the States, they were surprised at the peaceful and rather routine character of these events as compared to the volatile and often life threatening potential of most mass assemblies in south Korea.

Aside from these obvious differences, Western art activists and their Korean counterparts also diverge in their core assumptions about their purpose. To illustrate this point, I will quote now from an article, "What Next," by Jerry Kearns and Lucy Lippard from the fall 1986 issue of *Upfront*: "At heart, artmaking is about self-transformation. And remaking the self is a prerequisite for remaking society, a transformative enterprise that begins at home but can't stay there." For south Korean art activists, social transformation supercedes self-transformation. In their view, self-growth and -development are derived from the collective. Group participation and empowerment is encouraged to counter the encroachment of consumerism and alienation.

Increasingly, this ideological orientation is reflected in current Min Joong art. In contrast to the earlier examples, these works provide not only observations and critiques of the way things are, but also instill an alternative vision of the future. There is a notable

absence of the aforementioned sense of detachment and irony in these newer works.

Similarities are bound to exist among the various people's art movements within third world countries. Like the familiar propaganda posters of the Chinese cultural revolution, south Korean people's art extols the virtues of the underclass and the communal way of life. Much of the Min Joong art also reveals a wholesale rejection of Modernist vocabulary. Min Joong art is not as rigorously proscribed aesthetically as the Chinese version, however, and even among the most mass-based of Min Joong artists there is evidence in their work of more experimentation, less stylization and a detailed, grittier depiction of the way things are. The fact that the Chinese cultural revolution occurred after the establishment of a socialist state, while south Korean cultural change is taking place in the midst of a troubled capitalist state, is the source of some of the differences between these two people's art movements. It's interesting to note that the Chinese people's art utilizes the conventional Renaissance pictorial perspective while many Korean Min Joong artists consciously experiment with multiperspective modes in a rejection of the ideological underpinning of this Western perspective system.

Although Min Joong art has evolved since its appearance in the early Eighties, the movement and its aesthetics have by no means settled into place. While this article may have given the erroneous impression of consensus or uniformity where it does not in fact exist, all Min Joong artists do stand united in their struggle against the oppressive Chun regime. Where there exists a lively variety of aesthetic voices, there also exists a

singular voice of political dissent.

Ironically, the prolific vitality of Min Joong art can be attributed to the unremitting oppressiveness of the Chun regime, which instills in these committed artists a sense of urgency about their work and their life. From now until the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics promises to be a hot period for south Korea. Many fear that this extravagant and costly event is being manipulated by the Chun Government to lend legitimacy to its unpopular and undemocratic rule. Although it remains to be seen how the cultural move-

ment functions during this period, the formation of strong coordinated cultural organizations indicates that the artists are mobilized and ready to act. ■

*Yong Soon Min is a Korean art activist.*

*The original interview on which this article is based was translated into English from Korean by Yekyoung Kil and Mo Bahc.*

## ...Greenberg

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Fry's "Post-Impressionism," Robert Coates' "Abstract Expressionism" or Lawrence Alloway's "Pop Art") but most are forgotten long before they are dead.

Greenberg as a major player in the artworld has been largely forgotten, though his ideas have lived on. A new crop of writers with a bent toward neo-Freudian, neo-Marxist, French structuralist or the many other eclectic brands of art criticism take on Clement Greenberg before their first painting. It is a tribute to the power of his ideas and connoisseurship, though it has left him feeling bitter, isolated and with a siege mentality.

"My ideas are simplified and distorted," he said. "People discuss my ideas not with a concern for truth, but just to set out a position in opposition. A lot of good it did me praising Pollock. Pollock now is a culture hero and, whenever my name is mentioned,

it's almost always like an epithet."

*Daniel Grant is a writer in the arts.* ■

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