

An abstract geometric artwork featuring a complex arrangement of blue and white rectangular blocks and planes, creating a sense of depth and perspective. A single, bright red cube is positioned on one of the blue blocks, serving as a focal point. The overall composition is dynamic and architectural.

# CONSTRUCTS

INSTALLATIONS BY  
ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN  
WOMEN ARTISTS

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# YONG SOON ~~MIN~~ MIN

It is nearly impossible to categorize the work of Yong Soon Min, who has produced an extensive and diverse body of art in various media over the course of four decades.

Her aesthetic, modes of production, and themes are constantly shifting, refining and defining. Photographs, video, installations and performance art are all part of her vast *oeuvre*.

In the 1980s, Min lived in New York City, where she was involved with the multicultural arts movement. She was an early participant in the activist Asian American art group Godzilla. Formed in 1990, Godzilla's "membership" was loosely defined by who chose to show up to a meeting. They were fundamental in challenging art institutions and the exclusion of Asian American artists in exhibitions. Many of Godzilla's participants, such as Margo Machida, Karin Higa and Ken Chu, have been notable professors, art critics, curators and artists who, like Min, have made a substantial impact on the development of art produced by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the discourse surrounding it.

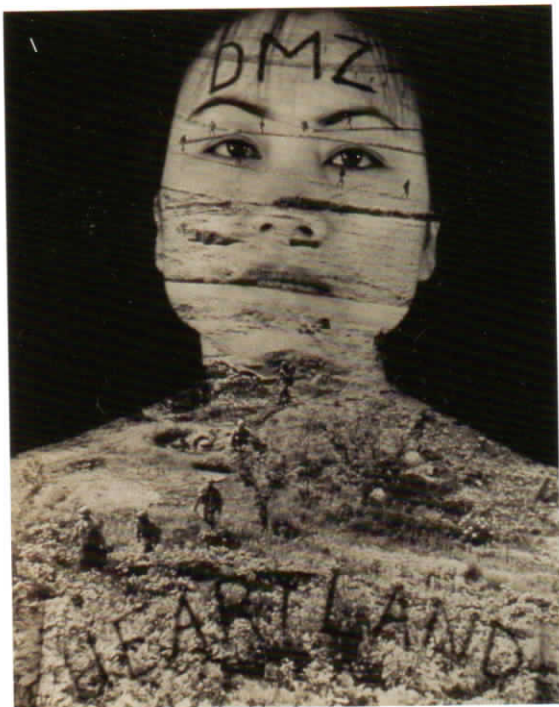
Identity, gender and cultural history consistently serve as the basis of exploration in Min's provocative work. She was born near Seoul, Korea in 1953 — the year the Korean War ended — and relocated to the United States with her mother and brother at the age of seven. Her personal history and memories inform much of her work, which often incorporates family photos, text from family interviews, and self-representations. Much of her art interrogates the formation of subjectivity in relationship to the aftermath of war and colonialism; social, political, economic oppression; and the condition of diaspora.

A number of Min's artworks juxtapose and combine images and text from both personal and mass media sources. In the *Defining Moments* series, 1992, photographs of Min are fused with significant dates in U.S. and Korean history. The human body is already marked with a number of signifiers including gender and ethnicity. But in this series,



\ *Defining Moments,*  
detail, 1992.

Photo courtesy of  
Yong Soon Min



Min's body is further covered with metaphoric wounds. On her self-representation, she superimposes photographs of historically traumatic events and words, which appear written onto her skin like brands or tattoos that permanently leave their painful traces of historical and personal tragedies. "DMZ" (demilitarized zone) is emblazoned on her forehead in bold, hand lettering, referring to the demarcation between North and South Korea. This cleaving wound in the country caused many to flee the North as refugees, ripping apart families newly separated by physical and ideological barriers that bifurcated the nation. Min's body is the figurative and literal site where her former and adopted countries intersect, delineating the foundations of her own constructed subjectivity. On Min's chest, the word "homeland" points to the internal struggle to negotiate these two worlds, a common experience for many Korean immigrants. Min considers herself part of the "1.5 generation"— a term for Korean Americans born in Korea but raised in the United States.



\ *Defining Moments*,  
1992.

Photos courtesy of  
Yong Soon Min

The effect, as argued by cultural theorist Margo Machida, speaks to how:

**The consciousness of Asians who came to the United States as a result of the Cold War is tempered and continually re-formed in a dynamic interplay between several sites of identification. With a mindset that can never be wholly anchored in a single national and cultural context, they perpetually move back and forth between allegiances and nostalgia for their countries of origin, their presence and place in the diaspora, and a sense of having been suborned by the larger political and economic developments that brought Asians of very different backgrounds together in this country.<sup>13</sup>**

Min's works not only relate to Korean and Korean American experience, but are also situated among the broader experience of diaspora, displacement and trauma in the global sphere. Reference to a demilitarized zone recurs in the 1994 piece *DMZ XING*, a traveling installation that addressed the effects of war in Southeast Asia and the resulting mass exodus of refugees. As in Korea when the split between North and South was solidified, families in Southeast Asia were uprooted and divided, and the loss of kin, country and culture is still wrestled with today.

The 2011 video installation *OVERSEAS/at sea* indicates a notable shift in Min's art, but demonstrates the continued undercurrent related to pain and wounds. While in Seoul on a Fulbright residency, Min suffered a cerebral hemorrhage affecting the left hemisphere of the brain where language formation and memories reside. Produced soon after this life-altering trauma, the installation contends with the gravity of facing mortality and the lingering results of her medical condition. Min delved inwardly during this tumultuous period in her life that also coincided with the end of a marriage. Her self-reflective work functions as a forum through which to visually explore emotions that she was vetting. The coalescing of these two major episodes caused her to reevaluate her life and art. Min stated that these moments "drove home the realization that life is precious and that I need to do what matters most. For me, this effort to do what matters most translated into pursuing work that I haven't completely articulated, or understand in all its facets but still holds some meaning for me."<sup>14</sup>

Comprised of Korean video clips, texts and voice recordings in English and Korean, *OVERSEAS/at sea* is not intended to be a clearly resolved expression of Min's

emotional state following her unexpected health emergency. Rather, the installation embodies the process of trying to come to terms with memory and language loss, illustrated by email exchanges projected on the floor amongst the undulating motion of the sea. Over the last several years, Min has turned her attention to Korean dramas and how "they address affect or sentiment in their constructed stories" and the way in which "these stories of extended families and their constructions of romance and sexuality reflect aspects of difference stemming from their histories."<sup>15</sup> The video clips represent her "search for a kind of comforting symmetry as well as happiness that are ultimately found to be elusive." For Min, the installation was a means to explore sentimental issues that continued to carry meaning for her "in the struggle to find ways to represent affect." This theme continues in the Wing Luke Museum exhibition.

The installation *LIGHT / AS / IF* advances Min's investigation of pain and trauma, but in expressly personal terms. Comprised of three main sculptural elements formed from African mahogany wood, the conceptual work broaches new terrain within Min's body of work. Although her 1992 piece *Home Becoming* incorporated wood, the vast majority of prior works were not formed out of natural elements. Interestingly, the moment that her art transitions toward explorations of personal emotions and feelings, a symbolic surging toward mother earth occurs and nature becomes an extension and trope for the body. Each wood piece contains distinct carvings. On the first sculpture is a text translated into Braille that ponders visible and invisible wounds.



The translated text reads:

**“The wound is the place where the Light enters you.” — Rumi**

**Invisible wounds are the hardest to heal. They throb with buried memories, telling me that the past is real and that I’ve survived. Of the visible scars, some are unbelievably seductive, as if turning a blind eye to the pain that was the source.**

The use of Braille, a language unintelligible to the artist and to most people, is metaphoric. Min states, “I find that I am like a blind person trying to find my way through these feelings — like taking a walk in new, alien territory. It is possible to learn to read Braille but as it stands now, Braille remains illegible like a foreign language.”<sup>18</sup> The allusion to the loss of sight illuminates the dialectic between what is hidden and masked versus that which is visible, and what is understandable as opposed to what remains incomprehensible.

The second square wood sculpture has a bowl shape carved into its center to fit an actual porcelain bowl. At the commencement of the exhibition, the bowl is filled with water that remains untouched for the duration of the show. The lengthy process involved in the evaporation of water reflects



On Sep 28, 2010, at 6:30 AM, K wrote:  
Dear C, I spoke with YS shortly before noon this morning. Not a sentence was out of order at the beginning. But then, as you said, she began to lose the words although only one or two in my conversation today. Also, towards the end of our 30-40 minute conversation, she either wouldn't or couldn't follow through my question when I asked her "Do you know what happened to you, why you went to the hospital?" She seemed to not fully comprehend that question at that moment. She kept saying she is "better now," "okay," "feel good about it."

By the way, I love Seoul. It is the most beautiful and wonderful city for me! Over the years, YS has been in Seoul/Korea often enough, and often for long-enough stretches of time to have developed genuine affection for the city as I did in the last ten years of being here. I believe she is familiar enough—physically and culturally—with the city/country to genuinely enjoy it. (Like YS, I was born in Seoul, left here early in life and came back as an adult. We both traveled around the world, although YS did so much more extensively than I did.) Many Koreans don't much like or appreciate Seoul or the same reason that I do. And YS might just see what I see in this city. Of course that is no reason for her to insist on staying here just now. Having said all these, your analysis of the possible internal and external dynamics of the mind and the connect/disconnect experience is still fascinating!

#### **Where YS interred her mother's ashes**

A couple of years ago, YS brought a small package of her mother's ashes. She asked me to find a place to inter them. YS was so typically low-key about what could have been an emotional matter for her. She and I, with another friend of mine, set out to find a place. None of us made much ado about it. I had general ideas about where we wanted to go, but none of us knew where we would end up exactly. To a complete surprise for all of us, the place we ended up was the back hill of her old neighborhood, along the old city wall. It was night time when we were done with our mission. The night was clear, and from where we were standing we could see the city below us, Seoul glowing like thousand lights in the darkness. The next day when she came back, we talked about taking walks around Seoul and going hiking in the Bukhan Mountain, the national park right in the middle of the city.

It just occurred to me that I should take her there soon. If we can't find the tree, the tree might have to find us.

K

the effects and passage of time. It “can allude to a body of accumulated tears” and “to the adage that time will lessen or heal the pain or wounds. You can say that as the water evaporates, so has the lessened pain with the span of time.”<sup>19</sup> Carved on the third piece of wood is a depiction of a tree “wound,” the area where scar tissue forms when a branch has been chopped off.

*LIGHT / AS / IF* is not an illustration of closure or clarity, but part of the artist's own journey to articulate what cannot be put into words. Scars upon the flesh are constant reminders of the physical wounds that are endured. It is, however, the invisible trauma, which ruptures the soul from within that one is left to negotiate long after the body has healed. These open wounds that cut deep and leave indelible internal scars with lasting psychological and emotional ramifications are often the most problematic from which to recover.

Earlier works included images of the artist and her family, where the personal was actually framed in the realm of the political and calculatedly placed within larger historical, cultural and social contexts. Ironically, this installation that is void of self-images and overt implications of the artist exists as one of the most intensely personal. Min is acutely aware of the vanishing presence of the artist. The carvings in the wood are produced by a digital router that copies the original mold of a tree wound, about which she states, “So in some respects this technology has removed my hand from the work and can be considered a distancing measure.”<sup>20</sup> Despite this erasure of physical crafting of the piece, the installation can be considered as the most intimate within Min's body of work to date.

*Yong Soon Min is a Professor of Art at the University of California, Irvine teaching installation and intermedia art. She wears many hats as an activist and accomplished author and curator. She received an M.F.A. degree from the University of California, Berkeley and completed post-graduate work at the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally including in Cuba, Germany and South Korea. Among her numerous awards and fellowships, she is the recipient of the prestigious Visual Artists Fellowship grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, a Fulbright scholarship, and an Anonymous Was a Woman Award. Min has also been awarded various commissions, grants and residencies including The Institute for Contemporary Art (PS1) National Studio Program residency, Blue Mountain Center, Blue Mountain Lake, New York residency, Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center residency in Italy, and the Ssamzie Space residency in Seoul, Korea.*