

Korean Women Mine Personal Lives for Art

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"I didn't know anything about America but Coca Cola," admits Sunny Soe, a painter who came to the United States from Korea in the mid-eighties at the age of 33. "All I knew was that this country is much bigger than my country, and I was anxious to get to a big place where I could feel space." Already an exhibiting avant garde artist and an art school graduate, Soe left Seoul for further study at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco, and New York's City College of Pratt Institute.

Born with the name Hyun Sook (she began using Sunny when she moved to America), Soe grew up surrounded by artists: her mother was a well-known traditional folksinger, and family friends included poets, performers, singers and art collectors. In that circle, it was taken for granted that art was a worthwhile pursuit. But while art holds a place in Korean history, artists themselves were often viewed with suspicion by society at large. "I was constantly oppressed by other children because [of] my mom...They'd tease me and say, 'Oh your mother is a singer,' which was like 'you are dirt.'" Apparently, even her father's reputation as a respected businessman did little to shield Soe from the other children's taunts.

Uncomfortable with other kids, Soe found herself spending much of her playtime alone, quietly observing the world around her. She also began to develop a deep spiritual longing, which led, at a very young age, to her becoming the first Christian in her family.

These childhood experiences of art and religion merge in Soe's work to produce highly evocative images that cross cultural boundaries. "A lot of my concepts are influenced by Christianity," Soe explains, "but also shamanism and Buddhism. My [maternal] grandma was a shaman. She was a medicine person." Her grandmother's face appears as a phototransfer in one of Soe's painted figures.

In opposition to the type of minimalist work she did in Korea, Soe's painting is now filled with visual references, colors, textures and layers of meaning. She came to her current style after a self-imposed, two-year moratorium on artmaking brought on by a combination of aesthetic burnout, physical exhaustion and spiritual confusion. She had

become disillusioned with the western-dominated genres imported into Korea during the 70's: conceptualism, minimalism, performance and electronic media. "I was sick of those," she admits, "the more Western culture invaded my country, the more traditional thought and concepts began to disappear." Her own painting had become so pared down that her last show in Seoul was only "a piece of Plexiglass, that's it. I stopped because I couldn't make any image, and I couldn't make any colors—nothing—because it meant nothing to me," Soe says. She had also worked herself too hard: "I sacrificed everything. My nickname was

'studio ghost.' I ate there, slept there. A lot of times I forgot about washing and eating."

She spent months travelling, visiting friends, meditating and praying before she was able to think about art again. But it wasn't until she arrived in New York, and sat in front of Monet's Water Lilies at the Museum of Modern Art, that she began to understand the direction in which she wanted to take her painting. Up until that point, Soe had never been aware of impressionism and meditative qualities. "This is what I want to make," she thought, "I want to make my art as contemplative objects."

"Everybody can look at my work in a different way," Soe hopes. Her painted figures are lifelike and easy to identify with, but

mysteriously unidentifiable. Some can look vaguely Asian while, at the same time, appearing to be medieval representations of Christian saints. Made of plexiglass, wood, paint and found objects, they are intriguing combinations of modern materials and traditional forms. Her repeated use of a noose-like shape is recognizable in both Korean

and American cultures as related to death. However, it's inscription on the surface of the Plexiglass, which enables it both to catch light and throw shadows—and color on a white background is drawn from a Buddhist concept of life after death. "Sometimes it's very embarrassing to show my work because it's very

much personal. Some people might deal with political issues but I don't want to..."

On the other hand, Yong Soon Min, another Korean-born artist, wants to deal with both personal and political issues. Like Sunny Soe, Min also immigrated to the United States, but at the young age of seven. Her primary language is English and she has, at times, found her art better understood by non-Asians.

Being part of the same generation of artists, Min's undergraduate and graduate study at Berkeley bears similarity to Soe's in that it was severely circumscribed by the faculty's insularity and modernistic approach to artmaking. "I was getting very alienated from the limited range of views expressed by the teachers...in the art department. [They] were,

for the most part, holdovers from the Abstract Expressionists...At the end of the first quarter in grad school, I just stopped painting." She "floundered for the next year or so" while she worked her way through a variety of media, and encountered another dead-end when her work became reductivist and systems-oriented. When she realized that she had become more interested in what was going on in the rest of the university—films, and feminist and psychoanalytic theory—than in the art department, she did an about-face and began adding words, pictures and objects to her artwork, whatever she needed to get her ideas across.

Although California has the largest Korean community in the United States, it was after Min moved to New York in 1984 that she began incorporating her ethnic background into her images. As administrative coordinator for the Asian American Arts Alliance, she became aware of her Korean history and her artwork began to reflect her new consciousness.

Photos, the keepsakes and related stories from her parents' life in Korea often find their way into Min's artworks. In her recent installation at the Bronx Museum called deColonization, Min uses her mother's employment at the U. S. Army base in Korea as the basis for a "fictional/factual" narrative about the political and personal implications of the American presence in that country.

Although her folks have given her permission to use the family photos, Min is unsure of their reaction to the results—especially since she and her father disagree politically. For one piece called "An American Friend, A Drawing," for example, she used a photograph of her father sitting next to a U. S. officer, for whom he had been a translator. The ironic text that accompanies the image includes statements like, "You've given us too much: you've given us your puppet dictator, your nuclear weapons."

She didn't show it to her father but one of her relatives did. "She said that he looked at it for a long time, but didn't say anything! And he never brought it up with me, so I don't know how he feels..."

Whereas Sunny Soe uses ambiguity to elicit a variety of responses from individual viewers, Yong Soon Min wants her audience

(continued on page 17)



From YONG SOON MIN'S "Make Me" Photo Installation, 1989

Korean Artists

(continued from page 16)

to think about specific concerns. Although ideally she would like as broad a viewership as possible, she worries that some aspects of her work might be indecipherable to those without art-school training. But since she began doing pieces in public spaces—such as City Hall Park in New York and a storefront in downtown Seattle—she has had to become more attentive to tailoring her work to the general public.

Min hopes that the Bronx Museum installation, with its combination of words, photos, postcards and found objects will allow viewers to discover the different bits of information that are there, but not blatantly spelled out. "I know that not everyone's going to have the back-

ground to pick up on every reference...I think it's a fallacy for artists, or for anybody, to think you can communicate to everyone. It's just not possible. There are very different audiences. We don't all speak a common language and we don't all have common shared experiences. I think part of what multiculturalism is about is saying, yes, there are these differences and there should be more variety and a broader scope of experiences shared."

Sunny Soe and Yong Soon Min are two such artists struggling to make their "yes" heard. ▲

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