

Yong Soon Min at Home in Bronx Museum

Byron Kim

Several years ago Yong Soon Min made a drawing which portrays her family among a group of Korean men and women during the Korean War sitting in front of a typical Korean home with an American G. I. perched solidly among them. Stenciled at the bottom in huge block letters which span the width of this mixed-media drawing is its title, "AMERICAN FRIEND."

This work epitomizes some important aspects of her art. The friend in the picture is the commanding officer who fought alongside her father and who sponsored his immigration to America after the war. And while Min's family was split up during seven tough years after the war, this American friend arranged a job for her mother as a coffee girl at a U.S. Army base in Seoul.

The strength of this work lies in its layering of two coexistent yet utterly antithetical meanings. The dominant meaning is an ironic one. At the right of the drawing is a letter written on the wall of the house in Korean text. It starts off exclaiming, "Such a generous friend!" and details the ways in which this friend directly helped Min's family. But it goes on to use this friendship in implicating America's friendship with Korea: "Since our liberation from Japan, you influenced our political development by supporting the autocrat Syngman Rhee, and the military dicta-

torships of Park and Chun. You continue to share with us your economic and military might. You've even given us your valuable nuclear missiles! / You've given us far more than we bargained for! How could we ever reciprocate?"

Despite its sarcasm, the peripheral placement of this text allows an uncritical reading to persist. In some real sense this man is a friend to the Min family. This is the point of view of Min's parents, first-generation Korean Americans, who see their friend's generosity at its well-intentioned face value.

Yong Soon Min is what is known as a 1.5 generation Korean American. Having come to the United States at the age of seven, she is somewhere halfway between her parents' generation, who grew up in Korea, and those Korean Americans who were born and raised in America. The time depicted in "AMERICAN FRIEND" would be right around the artist's birth, and her absence in front of that home is con-

spicuous. The image of home is one that has puzzled Min throughout her career. A sense of being only half-home as an American and as a Korean pervades her work.

And this sense of not belonging, being without a true home, is what fuels her cultural activism; it's what identifies her with other people who are unable to feel entirely at home. In Min's artwork one doesn't often get the idea that relationships of any kind are uncomplicated, black-and-white affairs, especially the relationships in which one culture may impinge on the freedoms of another.

In recent years Min's art has come to encompass these global relationships. She makes mixed-media installations or environments which speak to the complexities of these relationships and the need for us all to pay them due attention. She has become a kind of nomad-artist, recently travelling to Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Israeli occupied territories, but she doesn't presume to speak for these disparate people. She doesn't even presume to speak for first or second generation Korean Americans. She simply would like to alter our perception for a time, have us see the world in an unfamiliar way. Michael Brenson of *The New York Times* wrote about Min's 1987 installation "Half Home": "In order to read the words and see the images, the paper has to be pressed down. Making our way over the work is therefore like groping over a personal Wailing Wall. The only trace of the artist's hand is red calligraphy on the tracing paper: the effect is not only to dramatize the artist's sense of anger, difference and displacement, but also to turn the tables on us by placing us in the position of being unable to understand."

Yong Soon Min's current exhibition, "deCOLONIZATION," will open at the Bronx Museum on June 11, 1991. It will comprise a full-room installation that was inspired in response to the United Nations declaration that the 1990's will be the decade of decolonization. This exhibition catches the artist at a time when she is at the top of her game. Over the years she has lost fluency in her native tongue, but has developed an eloquent visual language that is decidedly her own. The space that she has been given to use at the Bronx Museum is an awkward one. It is long, narrow and with a short ceiling, but for a time Yong Soon Min will transform it into a place where to question belonging will become an imperative. "deCOLONIZATION" will give us the opportunity to see that colonization has its personal as well as political implications, that the local is political and give us pause to wonder how complicated it is to reverse a process that has caused a lot of us to feel only halfway home. ☉



"Colorblind"
1990 mixed media photo

Byron Kim is a painter living in Brooklyn and was awarded a grant by the New York State Council on the Arts for his writing on art.