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Above: Yong Soon Min does some detail work on her new permanent sculpture that is to be in the lobby of Luther Bonney Hall. Below: Yong Soon Min talks about her new piece and its ambitious size.

Photo By Deb Valenti



Visiting artist mapping identity

By Todd Avery
Free Press Staff

Visiting Artist-in-Residence Yong Soon Min appears in her doorway standing before a plaster reproduction of a Greek statue. Min is smiling. The statue is wearing a green plastic derby, residue of St. Patrick's Day.

Behind her the wall is littered with maps of Native North American tribes and information about the Columbus quincennial, as well as flyers detailing atrocities committed by Columbus and the Spanish in his wake.

"Is it time already?" Min exclaims, and immediately launches into an explanation of a project that is nearing completion, and will be unveiled on April 29 in the Luther Bonney Hall lobby. Every spring the USM Art Department invites an artist to a three-month tenure as Artist-in-Residence. Besides teaching one mini-course, the artist is required to complete a work for the University.

Min's project coincides with the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of the "New World." She is "reexamining the Columbus historical narrative," she says, and is using the anniversary "to discuss alternate histories." She says "It's a great teaching moment, I can bring in a lot of other issues."

The finished work will be a "tribute to Native Americans" and will invite, even demand viewer participation. The waist-high half-oval table constructed of curly maple, a domestic wood, will be covered by three layers consisting of mirrors, a world map, and a map of the continental United States inscribed with the names of all the native tribes circa 1492.

"In order to capture the cornerstone of Native American philosophy," Min includes a saying from the Lake Michigan-area Winnebago tribe: "Holy Mother Earth The Trees and All Nature are Witnesses of Your Thoughts and Deeds."

"I wanted to do a piece," Min says, "that really foregrounds Native Americans, that links them with the contemporary reality of multicultural America."

Min is eminently qualified to speak from a multicultural perspective. Born in South Korea in 1953, the year the Korean War ended, her father soon thereafter emigrated to the United States and along with her mother, sister, and brother, Min followed seven years later. She has since lived in California, where she attended the Universities of California/Berkeley, Ohio, and New York City.

Although her art now is "relentlessly political and multicultural," as an undergraduate student she was concerned mostly with "formal issues." And "In my graduate years I drew from broad sources of aesthetic theory: film theory and feminist and Marxist theory."

However, "It wasn't until I moved to New York," Min says, "that I really explored my personal identity. Before that, my identity as an artist was sufficient."

"New York," she says, "is great because it has many different communities. [There] I began to explore my own heritage."

One of her works, "Back of the Bus," from the late '80s, refers to her Korean heritage, her mother's situation, and, as the title suggests, the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

"There's a growing development of various art movements on the periphery of the mainstream," says Min, "that link the personal to the political, individuals and institutions."

She has also done work on the highly charged rainforest issue, and her photographs have graced the cover of *The Portable East Side*, a progressive New York publication. An essay of hers, as well as her photos, appear in the 1990 Special Issue.

Considering her visibility as a writer, it is not surprising that texts are prominent in Min's visual art, blurring the boundaries between the two. "There's no reason to shy away from words," she says. "I've always gotten so much out of literature, and for the kind of art I want to do, I'm not limited by a purely visual restraint. There's a certain element of the works that is purely informational."

And along with other members of the USM Art and Education departments, Min will present a screening of "You Got to Move," a documentary film that chronicles the activities of Tennessee's Highlander Folk School, an important center for social change. The screening time will be on Saturday, April 25 at 7 p.m., 165 Science Bldg.

Min's donation to the USM community will be unveiled in two short weeks, and she's immersed in the work. The confidence she exudes amid her rigorous schedule supports the motto pinned to the wall, a line from poet and performance artist Meredith Striker: "The more a thing is torn, the more places it can connect."