

## Zainichi Korean Artist Fung Sok Ro and Questions of Homeland

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For generations, Koreans in Japan, known as *Zainichis*, have faced perpetually ambivalent identities, and questions of homeland. They are torn between the nation states of Japan and Korea, between the two halves of the Korean peninsula, and between the ideals of the older Korea-born generation and the reality of younger generations born in Japan and experiencing contemporary Japanese life without much genuine interaction with North or South Korea. Koreans have lived in Japan for over a century, yet the prevailing image of Japan has been that of a racially homogenous nation. Zainichis have been subjected to and have had to respond to diverse forms of discrimination. Invisible to most, they are rendered almost irrelevant to the persistent and dominant Western business of constructing minorities such as Jewish people and African Americans in the United States, and Commonwealth immigrants in the UK. This status of irrelevance is argued by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih as “minor transnationalism.”<sup>1</sup> The authors consider the dominant discourse that minority subjects rightfully see themselves in opposition to, and encourage them to study each other and their relationships among other minority groups that often end up being overlooked.

Inspired by Lionnet and Shih’s work that seeks to simultaneously enlarge and redirect our critical purview, my study centres on the artist and activist Fung Sok Ro who is part of the first generation of Japanese born in the outlying community of Tokyo.<sup>2</sup> Ro grew up during the volatile period dominated by the

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1 Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., “Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationality,” in *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 10.

2 I am enormously grateful to have first met Ro in-person in Japan during this time. For this essay, I relied on our email exchanges for more detailed information. I am indebted to Ro for his many hours responding in English using Google translate to answer my numerous

Cold War: post-colonial, post-WWII, and post the Korean War. His career reflects his quest to understand and portray his hybridized personhood by rallying against the forces of essentialization and invisibility.

I first met Ro in 2001 while conducting research in Japan for *THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora*, an exhibition and symposium for the 4<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale in 2002. This project centred around five transnational cities – Almaty (Kazakhstan), Los Angeles (US), Osaka (Japan), São Paulo (Brazil), and Yanji (China) – selected for their historic, cultural, and geographic diversity and significance, and the opportunity to specifically look for the socio-political as well as the cultural and historical particularities embodied or imbricated in the selected artworks. Due to the scarcity of published research at the time on these communities, and my having less than a year to conduct research, I formed a group that was made up of myself, Soo Young Chin, a cultural anthropologist, ethnographic filmmaker Yoon Kyung Cho, and general assistant Myoung Lee, to expedite the research by first consuming any and all information we could find, then traveling to these sites to meet artists and community members.

Prior to our travels, we had accepted an invitation from the artist's organization Areum who we visited in Osaka, Nara, Kyoto, and Tokyo, cities with a high concentration of Koreans as well as Areum members. This trip resulted in invaluable encounters with Areum members, including Fung Sok Ro who is a principal Areum member based in Tokyo. These encounters led us to select eight members from Japan to be in *THERE*:<sup>3</sup> five were affiliated with Areum organization and three others were from Japan at large.

While our visits each held memorable and singular experiences, my visit to Japan was especially poignant for me personally. We got to meet individuals who in talking about their conflicted lives in Japan often got teary eyed or started crying relating how they yearn for their troubled homelands in Korea. Perhaps because these curatorial trips took place only two months after my father's funeral (1918–2002), their sad stories reminded me of him. My father

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questions. I am also thankful to Ro for providing professionally shot images from his portfolio that includes the six sculptures I discuss shortly.

3 The five artists members of Areum were: Jun Chae, Sung Min Kim, Yong Suk Kim, Il Nam Park, and Fung Sok Ro. While in Tokyo, I also met other artists who were unaffiliated with Areum including Yoshiko Shimada, who collaborated with a Zainichi Korean activist Hwangbo Kangja—particularly for the Pachinko series of wall works. Pachinko is an arcade game mainly used for gambling is associated with Zainichi Koreans. Hee Chang Yoon, the eighth included artist, was Zainichi Korean but unaffiliated with Areum.

had also studied in Tokyo, at Waseda University from 1941–1945 during the last four years of Japan’s colonization of Korea. In the domestic arena that centred around Korean kinship and homeland, my father was known by his Korean name “Min Tae Yong” but in the public sphere he had to function by his Japanese name “Shibayama Tai Ei.”<sup>4</sup>

I had a chance to visit Waseda and tried to imagine the experience of learning linguistics as a colonial subject in a foreign land. After his return to Seoul, his ability to speak English enabled him to work as a translator and proved to be my father’s primary source of income to support himself and his family in Korea from 1945 to 1950—the five-year period when Korea was largely occupied by the US military. When the Korean War started in 1950, he worked as a Korean-to-English translator for the US military. After the main combat ended, convinced that his prospects would improve in the US compared to trying to find work in war-torn Korea, Min immigrated to America in February 1953, several months before I was born, and six months before the Korean War officially ended. He obtained another degree in linguistics and ironically ended up with a job teaching Korean to soldiers at the Defense Language Institute in California until his retirement. Although he kept in touch with Korea by reading Korean dailies, watching the news on TV, and daily trips to Koreatown, my father went back to Korea only once, while my mother returned several times. Living in the US, my father appeared to us to be the traditional Korean (he intimately knew the Chinese language like others of his generation who were well educated in Korea), but while visiting Korea, it was readily apparent that he had changed – much of his body language was different from the local Koreans. With an established sense of financial stability secured and his immediate family settled in California, my father never questioned his home. His multifaceted diasporic experience provides an interesting contrast to Ro’s relationship vis-a-vis Japan.

## 1 The Past Remains Present

A ferry route was established in 1922 connecting Osaka, the second largest city in Japan, with Jeju, the largest island in the Koreas off the southern tip of Korean peninsula. This led to a significant influx of people from Jeju who were

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4 Surnames are used before first names in Korean and Japanese cultures. In this Spotlight, and across this issue, we have used the Western order of naming first names first, followed by the surname.

particularly hit hard by colonial rule. Over generations, Osaka grew to have the heaviest concentration of Koreans in Japan, with over 24,000 Koreans by 2015.<sup>5</sup> During World War II, Japanese military conscripted Koreans to fight in the war and to work in the munitions factory. When Japan ceded defeat in the Pacific part of World War II, 1.4 million Koreans returned to Korea, though roughly 650,000 remained in Japan.<sup>6</sup> While Koreans were considered Japanese citizens during the late colonial period, in 1947 the Japanese government passed the Alien Registration Law, which declared that Koreans and Taiwanese were now to be considered foreigners and as such, they were required to carry identification papers.

As of 1952, neither the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or commonly known as North Korea) nor the Republic of Korea (ROK or commonly known as South Korea) was officially recognized by Japan. Former colonial subjects were rendered completely stateless. By 1955, two civic groups were officially established in Japan to support these stateless communities: "Mindan," supporting South Korea, and "Chongryun," supporting North Korea. In 1965, Japan and ROK normalized relations, and South Korean nationality became an official national identification under Japanese law and whoever opted for this nationality gained permanent residence in Japan. Those who supported North Korea however remained effectively stateless.

By the putative end of the Cold War in Europe in the early 1990s, numerous changes had taken place in Japan that had a positive impact on the lives of Zainichi Koreans. Protests waged by them led to the abolition of fingerprinting in 1992.<sup>7</sup> Demographically, the Japan-born generation such as Fung Sok Ro became the majority. By 1997, nearly 10,000 Zainichi Koreans became naturalized, while marriages between Korean and Japanese jumped to over

5 Eric Johnston, "A Legacy of WWII, Korean Residents Test Nationals Ability to Accommodate Non-Japanese," *Japan Times*, 10 August, 2015, accessed 13 March, 2020, <https://www.japan-times.co.jp/news/2015/08/10/national/history/legacy-wwii-korean-residents-test-nations-ability-accommodate-non-japanese/#.XmvuKdVKH-Y>.

6 Johnston, "A Legacy of WWII." "The U.S.-led Allied Occupation offered them the chance to return to their homeland and about 1.4 million did. The roughly 650,000 who remained did so for a variety of reasons. Some had worked in Japan before 1940, had children born in Japan, and felt more Japanese than Korean. Some had prospered, or believed their economic prospects would be better if they remained in Japan. And some simply were too poor to return to Korea."

7 This was the first case of a mass movement that introduced foreigners about the plight of the Korean residents in Japan. In 1991, I joined a protest in front of the Japanese consulate office in New York City when I was introduced to Yuri Kochiyama, the prominent Asian American activist who first came to wide renown for being by Malcolm X's side at his death.

80 percent.<sup>8</sup> Continuous large flows of South Koreans as migrant workers, overseas students, and immigrants settled in Japan after 1988, when ROK lifted regulations on overseas travel and they have come to be known as “newcomers.” Shin Okubo JR station in Tokyo has become the new symbolic centre of this diverse Korean community with a visible concentration of bustling Korean businesses. These newcomers sought out opportunities in Japan, chasing a Japanese Dream that, much like the American Dream, meant something beyond the rhetorical.

## 2 Chongryun: Homeland and Affiliations

The Chongryun civic group and Fung Sok Ro shared the same history of beginnings: they were both born in 1955. In 1939, Ro’s grandparents moved from Gyeongnam, a province in the area of what is now known as South Korea, to Japan. At that time, Ro’s father was a young child of 10 years old. In Japan, the family lived in a southwestern section of Tokyo called Meguro Ward, a suburban town. Ro’s grandfather busied himself founding Chongryun Korean language instruction schools, with Ro’s father organizing these schools, while holding down his main job of managing a Japanese newspaper dealer. Ro, initially, also attended Chongryun schools in Tokyo. However, before his graduation from the Chongryun equivalent of junior high school, Ro rebelled against what he viewed as its autocratic nature and ended up attending a Japanese high school. Following graduation, Ro taught for over thirty-two years, up until 2015, at Chongryun organized schools including elementary schools and at the Korean University.

Chongryun organizations experienced the strongest membership during the 1960s and the 70s, much more than Mindan. Chongryuns believed that Korea will be unified and looked forwards to being repatriated. They felt that North Korean Kim Il Sung was authentic whereas South Korean leaders were all considered US stooges. Chongryun’s focus was on reunifying their ancestral homeland and they were not anti-Japanese. They remained indifferent to Japanese politics, emphasizing that they would steer clear of meddling in Japanese affairs and abide by Japanese laws. In this regard, Chongryun is not an anti-Japanese organization; in fact they are consistently indifferent to Japanese politics.

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8 Sonia Ryang, “Introduction: Resident Korean in Japan,” in *Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin* (UK: Routledge, 2000), 6.

In 1959, the North Korean Government, with the full cooperation of the Japanese, launched an effort to draw Koreans from Japan by promising them the rewards of a “socialist paradise.” By 1984, Chongryun was able to solicit over 90,000 Koreans in Japan to “repatriate” to North Korea. Around 1965, Ro’s grandparents went to North Korea through this program called “Homecoming” and lived the rest of their lives there, while Ro’s father and uncle occasionally went to see their elders. Like other first-generation Korean residents, Ro’s grandparents and parents had immigrated to Japan when Korea was a unified country, albeit it was a unified county under Japanese colonial rule. They regarded North Korea as the sole and authentic homeland for Koreans and as North Korea espoused reunification, the “Homecoming” program presented a viable way to be in Korea.

Chongryun continues to organize trips by members to North Korea, usually to visit relatives, as well as educational visits for students of Korean schools. From 1992 to 2006, they operated *Mangyongbong-92*, a passenger and cargo ferry that linked Niigata in Japan to Wonsan in North Korea, which served as the only direct link between the two countries, and is a subject of much controversy. These days, with the fading reality of North Korea’s rhetoric of socialist paradise, the daily lives of those who are part of Chongryun involve a negotiation between Japan and North Korea, between real homes and impossible homelands. A paradox of double homelessness is created: a real home being Japan, with cultural marginalization and second-class citizenship saddled with ambivalent and contradictory identities, and the imaginary one that is North Korea, utopic and impossible to achieve.

Beleaguered with an extreme minority status, Chongryun-affiliated Koreans recently re-entered the media as the central focus of blame for the shocking news that in September 2002, Kim Jong-il, then the Supreme Leader of North Korea, for the first time, admitted and apologized to Japan for the abduction they had carried over the years, at the summit meeting with then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. North Korean secret agents were discovered to have penetrated Japan’s coastal prefectures and to have kidnapped thirteen Japanese citizens during the 1970s and the 80s. They were used for various tasks including tutoring Korean spies in Japanese. As a result, Koreans in Japan who had been rendered invisible became even more vulnerable, especially those associated with Chongryun, as they suddenly became hypervisible to the Japanese.<sup>9</sup> This ongoing issue, along with growing concerns over North Korean

9 See Sonia Ryang “Visible and Vulnerable,” in *Diaspora Without Homeland: Being Korean in Japan*, edited by Sonia Ryang and John Lie (Oakland: University of California Press, 2009), 64.

military postures continue to spur the Japanese extreme right fringe who parade daily with their anti-Korean messages of hate.

### 3 Diasporic Expressions and Reality

Near the end of the 29 March–29 June 2002 *THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora* 4<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale<sup>10</sup> and before a day-long symposium related to it would take place, I conducted a walk-through of the exhibition that included the Areum room where Ro discussed his work *The Gate* (fig. 1). That visit was Ro's very first journey to South Korea. A special negotiation between Gwangju Biennale's Secretariat and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea required a small group of Areum artists to be allowed to enter the country. When they arrived in South Korea, they had to report to the consular office where the officers had them promise not to make political remarks in Korea. They were then given a one-time passport that had only "Korean" written in the nationality column. Ro felt that his long-held negative attitude toward South Korea was challenged by this trip, recalling that when he visited South Korea, the nation was led by a leftist president, Kim Dae Jung, to whom he attributed a positive policy shift directed towards Koreans residing in Japan. A year later in 2003, Ro was issued an official Republic of Korea passport without having to join Mindan. In a recent conversation with Ro, he related how excited he was in 2017 when South Korea gave its overseas diasporic people, including Zainichi Koreans, the right to vote in South Korean elections.

Playing a significant activist role in Ro's artistic practice that would last close to a decade, Areum was active midstream during participation in the Gwangju Biennale. Founded in 1997, the group was officially called Areum Art Network, the name conceptualized by Ro to mean "beautiful" as well as "bountiful." Original members were graduates of Korea University in Tokyo, where Ro taught, but Areum became receptive to Korean artists who believed in exploring identities as Zainichi Koreans, independent of ideological allegiances to South or North Korea. The first significant and historic exhibition on this subject was held with a symposium at the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art in 1999. In preparation for this exhibition, they made great efforts to reach out and find

10 See Kwangju Biennale and Wan Kyung Sung, *THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora*, 4<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale, 29 March–29 June 2002, exhibition catalogue (Gwangju, Korea: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2002).



FIGURE 1 Fung Sok Ro, *The Gate*, 1993, clay, 160 × 90 × 50 cm.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



Zainichi Korean artists who were active but were “hidden” because they self-identified only by their Japanese names. Among the work exhibited by this Zainichi Korean group of artists were historic works borrowed from various collectors and museums. With about seventy artists involved, Areum members considered it a Zainichi exhibition. While there were five artists who were part of the Gwangju Biennale in 2002, the second exhibition in Kyoto was an even larger exhibition with over a hundred participating artists. Following the Biennale, various exhibitions were held in Osaka, Kobe, and Tokyo, all in 2004, including a concluding comprehensive exhibition at the Kyoto Museum.

In 2005, funding was received from Japan Foundation enabling Areum to present transnational exhibitions, first in New York City in March, then with several shows including a last tour exhibition in Seoul in December. In 2005, *Neo Vessel*, a magazine that has elements resembling a catalogue, documented Areum’s exhibitions in New York and in South Korea (fig. 2). The magazine issue included new information and images from the huge Kyoto exhibition that had not been covered in the previous issue, along with articles about diasporic art that included signature images of Shirin Neshat and Yinka Shinobare’s work, indicating Areum’s outreach and awareness of the transnational art world. Also in this issue, the writers revisited the exhibition in Kyoto by discussing the work of two adopted Korean artists and other diasporic artists who live in different parts of the world including Denmark, France, Canada, and Okinawa.<sup>11</sup> An offbeat, yet smart image of a roll of toilet paper printed in red with a ROK (Republic of Korea) passport graced the magazine’s front cover, and the back cover had a toilet roll with a DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea) printed passport (fig. 3). In Kim Ae Sun’s installation, these images filled a room full of rolls of passports printed on toilet paper from an Areum exhibition in Seoul, to make an incisive critique of the dire necessity to decide which nation to affiliate with as their reliance on the passport depends on this decision. Sun’s installation suggests that this paper might be scatological and cheap, but its necessity is unquestionable.

Ro operated Areum with ten members who served as secretariats with the charge of deciding on policy and detailed procedures. The Areum archives consist of a series of catalogues from 1999 and 2002, four volumes of their magazine from 2004 to 2005, as well as a website that Ro created. In 2006, Ro decided to terminate the network in part due to conflicts within Areum; as Ro explains, “the gap between people who like borderless activities like me and

11 Areum Art Network, *Neo Vessel*, vol. 4 (1 August 2005): 1–161.



FIGURE 2 Last page of the final publication of the magazine, *Neo Vessel*, with Fung Sok Ro in the top image.

those who don't like it, [had] deepened"<sup>12</sup> and had become unresolvable. While he considers Areum more as a movement than as an organization, Ro deems it

12 Fung Sok Ro email to the author 27 November 2019.



FIGURE 3 Kim Ae Sun, *Passports*, 2005, room installation (detail), Museum of Hongik University, Seoul, Korea.

IMAGE COURTESY OF FUNG SOK RO.

to have been a successful operation, hoping it may generate new movements in the future.

Over his thirty-year career, Ro has become known for his thoughtful and dignified sculptures that confront his Korean diasporic history. Some look to similarities found in works loosely labelled as Social Realism, in which artists are essentially realists whose work, in a variety of styles, are focused on the human figure and socio-political conditions to critique power structures. Ro's works also call to mind that of Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), whose early work, from the 1930–40s captured the figure with underlying abstract qualities.

Created in 1993, Ro's *The Gate* is a dominating ceramic tower, which uses its portal as a metaphor for explaining five key moments in the history of Korea. At the very top, the narrative starts with a female figure wearing *hanbok*. This figure represents Korea when it was a unified peninsula. In the next section, a female figure with a child bound to her back standing in front of a shut gate gestures at the Japanese colonial period. In front of a shut door in the third

section, a male figure sitting with his head on his knees in the corner alludes to the emasculation experienced by males during the colonization in Korean patriarchal culture. Next to the man, an *onggi* (large ceramic pot) lays knocked over on its side, suggesting the upsetting of order during the Korean War. A sealed gate takes up the largest section of the bottom half of the sculpture, symbolizing the divided country. At the very bottom, a figure stands inside the widely opened doors. In spite of the indelible weight of the past, Ro suggests that the present represents hope, metaphorically and literally, and an openness for the future.

After making his first trip to South Korea in 2002 and after his involvement in the Gwangju Biennale, Ro began creating new ceramic artworks in 2003 reflecting these major new experiences, which had a deep impact on him. Rather than fixating on Korean history, Ro instead began looking at issues concerning his life in Japan. He was especially interested in how the contemporary environment at the turn-of-the-millennium affected labour and subjectivities in Japan. Towards the end of the twentieth century in Japan, Ro saw large numbers of buildings being reconstructed or renovated into contemporary buildings which he was highly critical of, saying that such buildings are like a “box of lights” in that although they may appear current and beautiful they are inhabited by residents to whom it is difficult to disclose to or understand.

Created in 2003, the first of Ro's two major ceramic works made that year, *Infinite Desire under a Pale Light* is an eight-feet tall box. Through a narrow opening, an altitudinous, concrete structure flutters near the top with endless window-like openings revealing packed crowds of figures. The following year, Ro created a work representing the daily life of workers trying to keep up with the production, which he named *Everyday (Being Pressed By Work)* (fig 4). A large opening of a square box shows a stylized traditional factory with tall chimneys. There are figures standing in line to slowly climb up the slope to reach the remote entrance of the factory. Both of these works by Ro exhibit a radically different colour scheme than his previous works from the 1990s through their illumination by a pale light inside the plastic boxes. Instead of the natural or dark hues characterizing Ro's earlier clay works, Ro began to use various tones of primary colours. The semi-translucent plastic boxes lend a sense of artificiality and lightness that is unprecedented in his work.

Ro's work concludes with *Torrent* (fig. 5), which he finished in 2016. This is an interactive work whereby patrons can sit in the palm of a hand-shaped structure and become a part of it. It is a notably distinctive structure being completely constructed out of pine lumber. It blends the familiarity and the



FIGURE 4A Fung Sok Roh, installation view of *Infinite Desire Under a Pale Light*, 2003, clay, plastic box, 110 × 60 × 80 cm.; and *Everyday (Being Pressed by Work) Under a Pale Light*, 2004, clay, plastic box, 65 × 50 × 50 cm.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

functional ease of a welcoming chair doubling as an open hand referencing the open and receptive hand of Buddha.

The five fingers that make up the back of the hand chair feature a landscape engraved with letters that are the five precepts of the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang. The sculpture alludes to Ro's first encounter with Korean dynastic era antiquities when he was on a trip to visit Nara when he was eighteen. This experience inspired him to become a sculptor and in *Torrent*, he recalls these early influences on the chair's backrest by depicting a regal Korean landscape of mountains and rivers, which he drew with a hot iron and rubbed with colours. As if to suggest an underlying force of nature, Ro subtly carved a curve that starts in the middle of the seat extending out as myriads of data flowing



FIGURE 4B  
Fung Sok Roh, detail of  
*Infinite Desire Under a Pale  
Light*, 2003, clay, plastic box,  
110 × 60 × 80 cm.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE  
ARTIST

outward in several languages. Among the words that accompany the numbers and other concepts related to Yin and Yang engraved on the seat include the English words sympathy, religion, philosophy, law, imagination, passion, and curiosity. In his attempt to “comprehensively grasp the human world”<sup>13</sup> Ro

<sup>13</sup> Fung Sok Ro email to the author 27 November 2019.





FIGURE 4C Fung Sok Roh, detail of *Everyday (Being Pressed by Work) Under a Pale Light*, 2004, clay, plastic box, 65 × 50 × 50 cm.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

views humans as elements in a multitude of small flows that eventually merge to become the torrent in which we live in.

Ro is conscious of negotiating the quotidian experience of living between his Korean and his Japanese identities, which are as Lionnet and Shih state, “always already mixed, hybrid and relational.”<sup>14</sup> Ro’s hyperawareness of difference in his interactions in New York or Seoul is not dissimilar to the intersection of the Japanese body politic and his subjectivity.

While Ro’s forebears never doubted that they had a homeland in Korea that was left behind in their coming to Japan, and that in terms of political and social-cultural considerations, North Korea represented a homeland for them. For Ro, however, the subject of homeland remains an open question. Considering the last work, *Torrent*, the title alone suggests a raging confluence of various currents of ideas. Yet the sculpture is interactive as a seat that invites one to sit at any point and perhaps feel at rest, or as at rest as one can feel. It is perhaps in these moment-to-moment situations that one can imagine what a home might be or has become for a diasporic subject.

14 Lionnet and Shih, “Introduction,” 10.



FIGURE 5 Fung Sok Roh, *Torrent*, 2016, pine, 165 × 130 × 115 cm.  
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

### *Yong Soon Min*

is an artist, activist, and curator, who considers herself a Cold War baby. Not only was she born the same year as the signing of the armistice that ended the Korean War, but the conflicts of the superpowers have also shaped her socio-political foundation. Her work *We Did Not Cross the Border, It Crossed Us, Twice* was installed at Davidson College, North Carolina, October-December 2019 and her work is featured in the group



exhibition *What is Feminist Art?* at the Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, November 2019 through November 2020.

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