

KOREAN AMERICAN ARTISTS  
AND THE 1992 SOCIAL UPHEAVAL IN LOS ANGELES

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The mural entitled *Traditional Koreans' Farmer's Dance* (1993) (Figure 1) was the primary landmark of Koreatown in Los Angeles, California in 1993.<sup>1</sup> Covering the entire south side of a multistory building located on the corner of Western Avenue and Olympic Boulevard, the size of the mural is monumental. On a sky-blue background, a single figure with all the traditional accoutrements of the farmer's dance is depicted in mid-air dancing with the right leg in a forty-five degree angle while the left leg appears straight as if the dancer has just leaped off the ground. The right arm is lifted above the figure's head and the left arm is outstretched in the opposite direction. The figure's arms are depicted with white cloth extensions that appear to be billowing by the movement of the dance. The sleeves and pants are of white cloth, whereas the jacket, belt and ties on the pants consists of bright colors, characteristic of traditional Korean costumes such as primary reds, blues, and yellows that are used in shamanistic folkloric performances (Figure 1A). The figure is wearing a red mask adorned with painted decorative elements. The eyes are prominently delineated with white paint, with a dark hallowed out center for the dancer to be able to see. A stone pagoda is depicted on the right corner which adds depth to the spatial plane. The dynamic composition and bright

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<sup>1</sup> The mural was designed by Dong In Park in 1993 in Nova Color Acrylic. The sponsor for the mural was the Korea Community Association. The building that the mural is on is the Korean Federation Building. Available from <http://www.lamurals.org/MuralFiles/MidCity/KoreanFarmersDance.html>; Internet; accessed on 1 October 2005. Although the symbolic beginning of contemporary Koreatown in Los Angeles was the opening of the Olympic Market in 1971, Koreatown was officially designated by the City of Los Angeles in 1980. Nancy Abelmann, and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 101-102.

colors of the mural dominates one's field of vision, in the crowded intersection of Western Avenue and Olympic Boulevard.

Amidst Korean store-signs illegible to most, this gigantic mural can serve as a sign that one is in Koreatown, hence creating a visual boundary. As Heidegger states, "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presenting."<sup>2</sup> To a non-Korean person, unfamiliar with the knowledge of cultural politics in Korea, the mural serves as a sign of traditional Korean ethnicity. Concordantly, its position in the landscape of Los Angeles can symbolize the Korean culture as part of the multi-ethnic character of the city. Hence, to one unfamiliar with Korean politics and society, it can serve as a symbol of the connection between the Korean community and the various communities around them as part of the characteristic of a multicultural America.<sup>3</sup>

A deeper reading of the mural, utilizing historical specificity combined with Homi Bhabha's model of describing the present as marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, presents an interpretation that suggests that it can also symbolize the connection as well as the disconnection of the Korean community from other ethnicities that make up a multicultural America. Bhabha describes the present as a moment of transit in which space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity; situations in which past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Building, dwelling, thinking", in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 152-153.

<sup>3</sup> I am using the word, "multicultural" as meaning "consisting of many cultures." The usage here is separate from "multiculturalism," which locates cultures in a kind of *musée imaginaire* wherein the urge to universalize and historicize readily acknowledges the social and historical diversity of cultures but at the same time transcends them and renders them transparent.

exclusion collide.<sup>4</sup> The mural is an example of the juxtaposition of these multifaceted elements that infuses its imagery to arouse dichotomous and conflicting reactions. For Koreans, it evokes the geopolitical power relationship<sup>5</sup> as such traditional forms have been used in demonstrations against the political, economic and cultural imperialism of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Some goes so far as to proclaim “with its dynamic energy and forceful movements, this dance played an important role in the democratization of Korea.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is an image that reminds them of the struggle for democracy for Koreans in Korea and beyond its borders. Therefore given the specific historical and political origin of such imagery, the mural in this intersection can be interpreted as the Korean American community’s desire for equal representation in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore this cultural resignification of the subject in this mural within the context of

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<sup>4</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). 1-19, 139-198, 212-256. Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). 1-8, 291-323.

<sup>5</sup> Koreans and the US culture are interlocked since the Korean War, and therefore Koreans are exposed to the hegemonic US culture before their immigration. For further information see, Kye Young Park, “A Cultivation of Korean Immigrants on American Soil: The Discourse on Cultural Construction,” (paper presented at the Institute for Corean-American Studies, Inc., Blue Pell, PA, 13 August 1999), The ICAS Lectures No. 99-0614-KYP.

<sup>6</sup>It is of note that I am not presenting this relationship as a simple center-periphery when it comes to cultural politics. Rather, it is an appropriation and adaptation for the survival of cultures. Economic and political imperialism is more pragmatic and easier to identify, such as sanctions and foreign policies that govern the relationship among nations. It is of note that cultural imperialism is quite a different matter. There are many scholars who argue that there is no such thing as cultural imperialism because assimilation and appropriation of foreign cultural elements are the ways in which cultures survive. The reception of the foreign cultural elements are not passive but dynamically engaged in the selection, appropriation and adaptation of those elements. For further information regarding the appropriation and adaptation of living cultures see, Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Seong-Kon Kim, “On Native Grounds: Revolution and Renaissance in Art and Culture.” In Chong-Sik Lee, ed., *Korea Briefing*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990). 97-117.

<sup>8</sup> An essay that elaborates on this desire for equal representation is Elaine H. Kim “Home Is Where the Han is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals,” in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Uprising*. (New York: Routledge, 1993). 215-235. This essay features reactionary letters from *Newsweek* readers about an article that Elaine H. Kim wrote illustrating that “the America of our dreams and the America of our experience” is painfully different. She explores various reasons, historical and otherwise, why Korean Americans have not received equal representation in the United States and uses the reactions to her article in *Newsweek* as evidence of this bifurcation between the two Americas.

Koreatown in Los Angeles, California can be interpreted to be a symbol of protest rather than a mere marker of traditional Korean culture.

Following the L.A. riots of 1992 traditional performances, such as the farmer's dance depicted on the mural, were part of "the tactical deployment of cultural practices" that reinscribed place and identity.<sup>9</sup> As Timothy Tangherlini explains, "in the aftermath of the L.A. riots, a landscape that had been defined by the spatial practices of people, posed an implicit challenge to the identities associated with those places embodied in that destruction."<sup>10</sup> The streets of Koreatown became the primary sites of these folkloric performances, and folkloric traditions were utilized by Korean Americans to reassert control of the contested space of Koreatown. In a march for solidarity through Koreatown on May 2, 1992, Korean Americans enacted such culturally informed practices in the peace rally at Ardmore Park. According to the most conservative estimates, more than 10,000 people attended the rally.<sup>11</sup> The route of the march was west on Olympic Boulevard to Western Avenue passing the location of the mural, north

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy R. Tangherlini, "Remapping Koreatown: Folklore, Narrative and the Los Angeles Riots," *Western Folklore* (Spring 1999): 59-93.

<sup>10</sup> Tangherlini, 59-93. "Spatial practices" is in reference to what Edward Soja defines as "the new topography" of race, class, income and ethnicity that has produced an incendiary urban geography that can not be depicted or explained by reading a map of the city. This new topography describes culturally charged places such as Koreatown in Los Angeles inhabited by various ethnicities, the majority of which are Koreans Americans, Latinos and African Americans all living and working in close proximity to one another that create "a landscape filled with violent edges, colliding turfs, unstable boundaries, peculiarly juxtaposed lifespaces and enclaves of outrages wealth and despair." Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden: MA Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 448.

<sup>11</sup> This is the most conservative estimate that was noted in Timothy R. Tangherlini, "Remapping Koreatown: Folklore, Narrative and the Los Angeles Riots," *Western Folklore* (Spring 1999): 59-93. Several other sources claim that it was attended by more than 30,000 people. These sources include, Elaine H. Kim "Home Is Where the Han is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Uprising*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 215-235. K.W. Lee "It's That Awful Déjà Vu Time Again," *KoreAm Journal* 1, no.4 (April 2005): 88-89.



to Third Street and east to Vermont Avenue.<sup>12</sup> The marchers made use of the farmer's band music called *p'ungmul*, and linked the march to the *Min Joong* movement and the tradition of protest in South Korea. *Min Joong* literally means "the people," and is used to designate the disenfranchised masses, who have been historically subjected by the ruling elites.<sup>13</sup> In the 1980s in South Korea, an anti-Occidental and anti-Capitalist political avant-garde movement called *Min Joong* Art (Peoples Art) was founded by a group of artists. These *Min Joong* artists and art critics related art directly to the streams of cultural politics. They aimed at mobilizing farmers and factory workers by exposing the social and economic inequities they suffered as innocent victims of exploitation by the rich and powerful.<sup>14</sup>

In Korea, *p'ungmul* music groups often perform during demonstrations as the music is considered to be a sonic and visual representation of the culture of the *Min Joong*. The presence of *p'ungmul* in the demonstrations following the L.A. Riots marked the duality of the spatial organization of Koreatown.<sup>15</sup> As noted by Tangherlini, "they were essentially mapping the borders of Koreatown with their music."<sup>16</sup> These performances like that of the mural have a multilayered message that significantly

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<sup>12</sup> Tangherlini, 59-93.

<sup>13</sup> Folk culture in particular is the source of pride and inspiration for the populist *Min Joong* artists who have consciously identified the core of the nation with the history of the common people (or the masses). For more information on the *Min Joong* art movement see, Frank Hoffman, "Images of Dissent: Transformations in Korean Min joong art," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 44-49.

<sup>14</sup> Yongho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, eds., *From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, vol. 2, *Sources of Korean Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 371-373.

<sup>15</sup> Tangherlini, 59-93.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

contributes to the reinscription of the Korean American identity onto the landscape damaged by the riots.

Similar to the insertion of the *Traditional Koreans' Farmer's Dance* mural on the landscape of Los Angeles and the symbolic associations of *p'unngmul* and folk dance of the protest marches, the Korean American artists in this paper, Yong Soon Min and Sung Ho Choi, use the tactic of situational consciousness and national allegory in their art production. Situational consciousness in terms of the L.A. riots and the formation of national allegory as a building block of cultural identity are central themes of the artwork to be discussed "where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity of self."<sup>17</sup> Through contextualizing issues of identity formation as influenced by the L.A. riots, this paper explores how social, historical, and cultural ideas as influenced by this event are formulated in the works of Sung Ho Choi and Yong Soon Min. The focus of the paper is on understanding how these artists use visual art to articulate their conception of self and cultural identification as Korean Americans living in the United States.

Rather than imposing any overarching theoretical template on this material, the ways in which people locate themselves in the world within differing cultural contexts and processes will be the approach of this study. The artists produce works that articulate their sense of the shared Korean American experience as seen in social outlook, struggle and history. This focus gives their work broader political implication.

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<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third World literature in the era of multinational capitalism," *Social Text* (Fall 1986): 65-88.

The narratives, themes, and ideas of these artists that are focused on the Korean American experience can provide social, political, and psychic realities within their societies. Therefore, I will take a case study approach in examining the work of Sung Ho Choi and Yong Soon Min. The first study will focus on the sociological scope of Choi's work and how it reflects the immigrant experience. The second will consider the work of Yong Soon Min and how the broad historical and geographical context of the Korean American society figures into her artistic expression.

There were three primary considerations that fed into the selection process: first, the ethnicity of the artist must be Korean; second, they must be living in the United States; and third, their works must address issues of identity incorporating the 1992 social upheaval in Los Angeles. For these artists, art making is a means of bringing to consciousness, reflecting on, and communicating a complex sense of positionality by clarifying the nature of their lived experience and social circumstances as Koreans in this nation. Therefore, the historical and social elements of the Korean American experience will be an integral part to the interpretation of their artworks.

Even though interest in Korean American art has gained momentum over the last decade, as evidenced by an increasing number of exhibitions focused on or incorporating art by Korean American artists, as well as the growth in regional arts scholarship, relatively little art historical research and scholarship currently exists. Most of the scholarship on Korean American art comes from the disciplines of Ethnic Studies, Cultural Studies and Asian American Studies. These disciplines, however, have significant methodological differences, such as the lack of stylistic analysis and

iconographical approaches. This results in their analyses lacking certain nuances that the field of art history and visual studies contains, such as opening up the specific issues embedded in the artwork. On the other hand, strictly artistic critiques often fail to include the depth of the sociological nuances that are evident in the works of the more socially oriented disciplines. Therefore, this paper will contribute to this growing field by utilizing an art historical approach. Among the many possible ways to approach the study of Korean American art, I have chosen a limited focus, one that seeks to relate the artists' lives, ideas and work to the 1992 social upheaval in Los Angeles.

There has been some significant scholarly analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles upheaval including anthologies such as *Reading Rodney King and Reading Upheaval* that feature such notable scholars as Cornell West, Elaine H. Kim and Judith Butler.<sup>18</sup> Another anthology is *Los Angeles Struggles Towards a Multiethnic Community* edited by Edward T. Chang and Russell C. Leong.<sup>19</sup> These anthologies focus on the political, social, and cultural causes of the violence with little exploration of the historical aspects in regards to the connection between South Korea and the US in relation to the Korean American riot responses. There have also been several notable books about the L.A. riots which include *Black-Korean Encounter: Towards Understanding and Alliance* edited by Eui-Young Yu and *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond* by Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades which focus on the tensions between the Korean American community and their surrounding

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Edward T. Chang and Russell C. Leong, eds., *Los Angeles-Struggles toward Multiethnic Community*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994).

communities including Latinos and the African American community.<sup>20</sup> The most complete consideration of Korean Americans in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots is provided by Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, in their book entitled, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*.<sup>21</sup> Their approach fuses a historical and sociological evaluation of Koreans in America and southern California with an ethnographic exploration of the effects of the riots on Korean Americans. Their analysis is drawn from a broad generational and class spectrum in the greater Los Angeles area.

Compared to the sociological and cultural studies there is a relative dearth of scholarship that ties together the Korean American immigrant experience with art and the L.A. riots. This thesis will address this paucity and provide an analysis of how Korean American art reflects the artists' and the community's ability to negotiate this traumatic event. By pursuing a detailed presentation of the artworks, new insights about the L.A. riots are offered that have not been evident in the published works from other fields of study. Most important among these insights is the role visual culture played in defining the Korean American community of Los Angeles and throughout the U.S. after the riots and how they responded to the challenges of reasserting their place in the American social landscape.

Studying the Los Angeles riots as the only defining moment of Korean American identity belies the complex historical and representational processes that also

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<sup>20</sup>Eui Young Yu, ed., *Black-Korean Encounter: Towards Understanding and Alliance*. (Los Angeles: Institute for Asian American and Pacific Asian Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1994). Edward T. Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup>Nancy Abelmann, and John Lie. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

contribute to the *zeitgeist* of the Korean American diaspora. My approach will be to consider how the single event helped Korean Americans articulate their complex histories and cultural affiliation with South Korea. Any adequate account of Korean American art needs to take seriously the persistence of the memory of South Korea because these Korean American artists inescapably bring the experiences of their homeland to the United States. Additionally, limiting the analysis to an American frame of reference would seriously distort the understanding of the diverse values, beliefs and actions of these artists. Therefore, framing the Los Angeles social upheaval along with the artworks is a transpacific venture. Korean American culture, because of its hybrid nature, will require a framework that can analyze the complexities of the Korean community's experience in the specific urban context of Los Angeles. This framework inevitably forces us to deal with the causes and consequences of the L.A. riots, the history and structure of the Korean diaspora in the United States, and the "black-Korean conflict." The artworks selected for this paper comments on one or more of these vectors of analysis.

The first part of the thesis will be an iconographical analysis of two pieces by Sung Ho Choi. *Korean Roulette* (1992) (Figure 2 and 3) is a mixed media mobile sculpture in which an electric fan has been transformed to look like a roulette wheel. *Choi's Market* (1993) (Figure 4) is an installation that is a replica of a burnt-out storefront. A sociological interpretation of the L.A. riots will be utilized to connect the works to a larger historical narrative based on an iconographical analysis. The second part of the thesis contains a thematic analysis of the Korean diaspora engaged by the

photography series entitled *Defining Moments* (1992) (Figure 5) by Yong Soon Min. The ways in which historical imagination is used to express concerns about race and cultural representation through the process of symbolic interaction will be discussed. The L.A. riots while providing a context will be placed within the larger story of the Korean diaspora, and will serve as one of the defining moments in identity formation.

In my conclusion I will synthesize the analysis presented in the two chapters in order to position the artworks along with the Korean American riots responses which include the political and social ramifications of their place within the body politic. According to Eungie Joo, the LA Riots “took an already broken record and smashed it into shards, so that more facets were unwittingly exposed to view.”<sup>22</sup> The artistic responses expose these shards which will be identified and interpreted in the two chapters and synthesized in the conclusionary chapter to reveal the transitional and heterogeneous context.

The sociological demarcations of immigrants in Asian American Studies have included such terms as acculturation, assimilation and transculturation. Therefore, it is easy for visual theorists to adopt this lexicon to describe the artworks produced. However useful these demarcations might be for sociology and cultural studies, art production is much more personal, even when it is dealing with global issues. In addition, such intellectual automations create binary relationships that fall short of the confluence of the sources of identity. This will be demonstrated through the presentation

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<sup>22</sup> Elaine Kim, “Interstitial Subjects: Asian American Visual Art as a Site for New Cultural Conversations,” *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, ed. Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida, and Sharon Mizota (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 1-50.

of historical specificity and the connection between the collective imagination and the private memories of these artists that is embedded in the artworks.



## CHAPTER 1

### SUNG HO CHOI

In a mixed media mobile sculpture by Sung Ho Choi entitled *Korean Roulette* (1992 and 1993) (Figures 2 and 3), an electric ceiling fan is transformed to look like a roulette wheel. There are four arms on the ceiling fan. White gloves with a thin dark blue trim are fitted at the ends of each arm. Red paint has been loosely applied on the tips of each glove. A collage that consists of columns from the classifieds of a newspaper is placed behind the fan.<sup>23</sup> The objects on the wheel consist mostly of plastic fruits and vegetables. Placed in between a series of two to three fruits and/or vegetables are: a utility knife, a gun, a box of cigarettes<sup>24</sup>, a bottle of *soju* (a potent Korean liquor), a calculator, and a crucifix. When the wheel turns, the gloved hands shuffle from side to side.

In a game of roulette, one spins a wheel and the possible outcomes are represented around the wheel. Choi's roulette wheel can be interpreted as including the following possible outcomes: products that are difficult to sell due to a bad harvest, an armed robbery, a financial crisis due to a Korean credit system, and the health problems

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<sup>23</sup> This information has yet to be verified. The yellow pages can be from a Korean American phone book or other Korean American periodical.

<sup>24</sup> There are two versions of *Korean Roulette*. The photo of the sculpture that can be found at <http://www.uwrf.edu/~rw66/minority/minam/asi/choiK.jpg>, Internet, accessed on September 29, 2005 is different from the one that can be found in the exhibition catalog for *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*. (New York: The Queens Museum of Art, 1993), 18. The box of cigarettes appears in the one from the exhibition between the cucumber and the apple as seen on figure 2. The year of completion on this version is 1992. The one that was found online has four lottery balls in place of the cigarettes between the cucumber and the apple as seen on figure 3. The year of completion on this version is 1993.

exacerbated by smoking and drinking. Since the meanings behind visual art objects often remain opaque to the viewer, especially when encountering works by artists from a different society or heritage, I will utilize historical, cultural and social interpretations to provide access to the sensibilities and intentions of the artist. By analyzing specific objects in *Korean Roulette* and extending my readings to an installation entitled *Choi's Market* (1993) (Figure 4), I will interpret the particularities and unique configurations of Choi's experiences and subjectivity as expressed in these works to extract what they say about reconstructing and redefining his self identity as evoked by contemporaneous events.

In *Korean Roulette*, Choi utilizes a circular motif which in this context, can be interpreted as a representation of a Korean grocer's life as a state in which he or she is limited to going around in circles.<sup>25</sup> The circular motif is often used by Choi for a visual continuity of composition and repetition, but also as an overall conceptual integration within his work. Choi is known for site-specific sculptures that explore issues of identity in multi-ethnic societies. In one of his most famous pieces, for example, entitled *American Pie* (1996) (See Figures 6 and 7), Choi incorporates collage techniques utilizing newspapers, text, and paint to configure a target motif. Through various news articles and their overall integration within his work, he examines cultural relationships that run in cyclical patterns, hence the circular motif.<sup>26</sup> Choi uses the circular motif again in *Korean Roulette* in a similar way, in order to coalesce the

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<sup>25</sup>Elaine Kim. "A Different Dream: Eleven Korean North American Artists," *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, exh.cat., (New York: The Queens Museum of Art, 1993), 18-19.

<sup>26</sup> Thalia Vrachopoulos, "The Crossroad that Points Both Back and Forwards," *NY Arts Magazine*, March/April 2004, Vol. 9: 3-4.

conceptual ideas about the objects that he has placed around the circle or the roulette wheel. What are the conceptual ideas behind the specific objects in this sculpture? How are these objects relevant to the sociological elements of Korean American identity formation?

The crucifix, positioned between a plum and an ear of corn, might appear to signify a type of spirituality and faith or a good luck charm; be that as it may, a further sociological and historical interpretation clarifies the meaning behind this object. Since the beginning of Korean immigration to the United States in 1903, the Christian church has been an integral factor in favor of U.S. immigration.<sup>27</sup> According to Peter Park,

The role of the Christian church in promoting the flow of immigration; the U. S. immigration policy which makes it easier for ministers to immigrate; the ministry as a career channel for Korean immigrants; and the material support given by American churches to affiliated Korean congregations played a large part in Korean immigration.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to this infrastructure, the first wave of Korean immigration from 1903-1905 had the economic pull from the United States which was the need for foreign laborers in the sugar plantations of Hawaii that was buttressed by the church, as missionaries encouraged them to leave Korea for the United States so that they could live in a “Christian” nation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For details on this link see, Mary Paik Lee, *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*. Edited by SuCheng Chan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994). 138-167.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Park, “Review of *Korean Immigrants in America* by Won Moo Huh and Kwang Chung Kim.” *Amerasia Journal* Vol. 9 No. 2 (Fall/Winter 1982): 140-145.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Women in America*, 139-143.

By the late 1980s there were about five hundred Korean American Christian churches in Los Angeles,<sup>30</sup> gradually asserting their ethnic presence and also establishing a base of solidarity. The reasons for such a large number of Korean immigrant churches are not just historical or evangelical, as previously described. For Korean Americans, there are also sociological and economic reasons for the incorporation of Korean immigrant churches in their lives. Korean immigrant churches serve as important community centers. They are gathering places where immigrants can feel comfortable, socialize with other Koreans and form *kye* associations.<sup>31</sup> *Kye* is a rotating credit system from which many Korean immigrants get the capital to start a small business, such as a grocery store.<sup>32</sup> In a *kye*, there is no formalized structure of insurance. *Kye* is a gamble because it involves large sums of money and relies solely on the honesty and character of the people involved.

The only direct signifier in this sculpture that can be associated with Korean ethnicity, other than its title, is the bottle of *soju* which is a potent Korean rice liquor. I will extend the interpretation of the bottle of *soju* along with the box of cigarettes incorporating some statistical realities of these items in relation to the Korean<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Abelman and Lie, 68-71.

<sup>31</sup> In a *kye* an agreed upon group of individuals pledge a monthly amount, and the participants receive a stipulated sum of the collected monies that they can ultimately withdraw once during the rotation. Most Koreans are involved in this system or know of this system. Since it is based on good faith and there is no enforcement of good faith, the person involved in the *kye* is vulnerable to one or more of the members within their *kye* taking a sum out of turn.

<sup>32</sup> For additional information on *kye* and the way it is used to finance property ownership see David Listokin and Barbara Listokin, "Asian American for Equality: A Case Study of Strategies for Expanding Immigrant Homeownership," *Housing Policy Debate*. Vol. 12, Issue 1 (2001), 53-55.

<sup>33</sup> Here by "Koreans", I mean the ethnicity of South Koreans in general including Korean Americans and South Koreans. North Korea does not allow immigration to any country, therefore they are not included in the usage of the word in relation to the interpretation of this particular sculpture.

community. Smoking and drinking (particularly *soju*) is extremely high amongst Koreans. 75.4% of Korean males and 7.6% of Korean females smoke<sup>34</sup> and a Korean drinks, on average, 70 bottles of *soju* a year; in addition, one in five Koreans can be defined as an alcoholic.<sup>35</sup> Excessive drinking and smoking, in addition to the stress from the pressures of running a business, can be a major factor in one's health. The health problems associated with drinking and smoking are a reality that Koreans face either within themselves or in someone that they know. Therefore, the placement of these items can be part of a commentary by the artist on the epidemic caliber of the health problems associated with these items.

Elaine H. Kim interprets *Korean Roulette* as a representation of the grocer's life as a game of chance.<sup>36</sup> The harsh and violent aspect of this life is evoked by the red paint on the gloves signifying blood from physical injuries that may be accidental, as from a utility knife, or deliberate, as from an armed robbery. The gun positioned between the banana and tomato represents the possibility that an armed robbery is a part of the daily and violent realities of Korean American shopkeepers. In 1993, nineteen Korean merchants were murdered by non-Koreans in Los Angeles.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, one of the most publicized incidents of this kind was in October 1991, when a Korean-born

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<sup>34</sup> This statistic is from the National Statistical Office as cited in, Andrei Lankov, "Where There's Smoke," *The Korea Times*, (June 26, 2005); available from hankooki.com, <http://times.hankooki.com/service/print/Print.php?ph=times.hankooki.com/lpage>; Internet, accessed on 15 October 2005.

<sup>35</sup> This statistic is from a study by Seoul National University as cited in, "Drunk on debt, liquor maker a mirror for S Korea's ills," *Daily Times*, (August 22, 2004), available from, [http://dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story\\_22-8-2004\\_pg5\\_29](http://dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_22-8-2004_pg5_29); Internet; accessed on 15 October 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Kim, "A Different Dream: Eleven Korean North American Artists," 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Teahan Chang and Eui-Young Yu, "Chronology," *Black-Korean Encounter*. (Los Angeles, CA: Institute for Asian American and Pacific Asian Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1994), xiii-xvi.

grocer Soon Ja Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter in the shooting death of black teenager Latasha Harlins.<sup>38</sup> The shooting death of Latasha Harlins only exacerbated longstanding tensions between Korean American shopkeepers and African Americans in Los Angeles. In the aftermath of Soon Ja Du's sentencing, Korean-owned stores were boycotted and several stores were firebombed.<sup>39</sup> Only one week after the killing of Latasha Harlins, a nine-year-old daughter of a Korean American minimarket owner was shot in the chest during an early morning holdup.<sup>40</sup> According to an *LA Times* article, Korean American shopkeepers did not blame the African American community for this shooting, but cited the incident as an example of the danger they face every day.<sup>41</sup> It is also of note that a few months prior to these events, the video of the Rodney King incident was occupying the minds of many African Americans.<sup>42</sup>

According to Darrell Y. Hamamoto, "in popular culture, the tension-fraught relationship between the Korean store clerk Sonny (Steve Park) and his Black clientele in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) is emblematic of the Black-Korean

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that the Dus have been robbed three times and burglarized forty times during the two years they have owned Empire Liquor Market. Tim Rutten, "Politics and the Du Verdict," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 Nov. 1991, Orange County ed., E6. This is ironic to the previous statement, because the other murders of Korean shop owners were not publicized. The only publicized incident is one in which a Korean shop owner shoots a black customer.

<sup>39</sup> Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 233.

<sup>40</sup> According to the police report, the girl had been watching TV in a room at the rear of the store when a black man armed with a handgun jumped over the counter and took no more than \$500 from the cash register and then shot the child without provocation. Jesse Katz, "Anguished Merchant Returns to Work after His Daughter, 9, Is Shot by Robber," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Oct. 1991, Orange County ed., A25.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> On March 3, 1991 a nearby resident video taped the incident of a prolonged beating of African American, Rodney King which aired widely on local television. On March 16, 1991 the confrontation between Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du was captured on a security camera tape which also aired widely on local television.

conflict.”<sup>43</sup> That film’s climatic scene which takes place in Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York, prefigured the much greater conflation that was later to engulf large sections of Los Angeles, except that in the film, Sonny managed to prevent his store from being set on fire. L.A.’s Koreatown was especially hard hit by firebomb attacks and looting, three days and nights of terror that were interpreted by the news media as the almost inevitable result of the conflict between blacks and Korean Americans. The destruction of several hundred Korean-owned businesses worth an estimated \$300 million<sup>44</sup> illustrates the risks assumed by merchants who do business in urban areas deemed too risky and unprofitable by corporate chains.

The events of the 1992 social upheaval in Los Angeles compelled Sung Ho Choi to create the installation entitled *Choi’s Market* (1993) (Figure 4), which is a replica of a burnt-out storefront. The architectural elements, composed of distressed wood, consist of a door with a window, two windowpanes on each side of the door and shelves below each set of windowpanes. Various types of live plants and one watering can are positioned on the shelves on each side. On the window of the door, the artist affixed a

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<sup>43</sup>This tension-fraught relationship between Koreans Americans and African Americans is evident in other mediums of popular culture. Rap artist Ice Cube voiced the anti-Asian hostility of many African Americans in his forty-seven-second diatribe “Black Korea” on Ice Cube, *Death Certificate*, Priority Records, November 12, 1991. The cut expressed the common sentiment among many black customers of Korean-owned businesses that they have been treated with suspicion and disrespect. The narrator even goes so far as to threaten a Korean shopkeeper with burning down his store unless more respect is shown to Black patrons. Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV*, 234-235. A Korean popular culture example includes the commentaries by Margaret Cho such as the animated short entitled “The Grocery Store,” from the *Notorious C.H.O* Tour DVD in 2002. The animated short describes the sources of some of the misunderstandings that results from cultural differences between the two groups.

<sup>44</sup> This estimate is from Hamamoto, *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV*, 234-235. Other sources note that the damages were estimated at over one billion such as Daniel B. Wood, “L.A.’s darkest days,” *Christian Monitor*, from the April 29, 2002 edition; available from, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0429/p01s07-ussc.htm>; Internet; accessed on 6 October 2005; and Matt Smith, “Los Angeles riot still echoes a decade later,” *CNN.com*, April 29, 2002; available from, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/04/28/la.riot.anniversary/>; Internet; accessed on 6 October 2005.

collage that consists of a black and white photograph of two adults, each holding a child, that is layered on top of a wall of lottery tickets. The letters “MERIC” are faintly visible above the figures in the photograph.<sup>45</sup> The photograph is a portrait of the artists’ family wearing tailored clothing. The positioning of the photograph gives the illusion that the figures depicted on the collage are inside this fabricated edifice. The green, yellow, and red colors of the plants contrast with the drabness of the rest of the installation, which consists of the muted colors of the distressed wood and the black and white collage. The fabricated damage to the awning partially obscures the numbers 429 that are situated on the left side, which might indicate the store’s address. Next to the numbers 429, the words *Choi’s Market* are prominently positioned in the center. The way in which the wood has been distressed with black paint and the fabricated erosion on the awning are elements that suggests fire damage to the storefront. Specific elements in this installation, illustrates how Choi utilizes situational consciousness of the L.A. riots and relates them to the narration of the Korean American experience. These elements can explain identity formation through artistic practices.

The awning is an important part of any storefront because it contains information defining the type of business and the exact location of address in relation to other buildings. The positioning of 429, on the left side of the awning, signifies the store’s address, which can also be interpreted as locating it in the context of a seminal event in the history of Korean Americans. In Korean political history, integer-chains mark significant uprisings, demonstrations and political turns. The demonstration on

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<sup>45</sup> The photograph is placed in front of one of his earlier works which has the words “American Dream” spelled out which incorporate the numbered boxes of 300 lottery tickets.



March 1, 1919 against Japanese colonial rule is known as *sam-il-undong*, which translates to 3-1 demonstration. The Korean War which began on June 25, 1950, is referred to as *yuk-i-o* which translates to 6-2-5. The Student Revolution of April 19, 1960, is referred to as *sa-il-gu*, which translates to 4-1-9. The L.A. riots signifies the same level of importance to Koreans as the event is commonly referred to as *sa-i-gu* which translates to 4-2-9, marking April 29, 1992 as the first day of the L.A. riots. Choi utilizes this tradition to place the L.A. riots as a defining moment in the political history of Korean Americans. As Homi Bhabha explains, for the immigrant, tradition bestows a partial form of identification.<sup>46</sup> In restaging the past by utilizing the tradition of the integer-chains marking this event, the significance of the event is reinforced as a moment of historical transformation and identity construction of Korean Americans. Therefore in this context, 429 evokes a transformation of “the present into an expanded and ex-centric experience and empowerment.”<sup>47</sup> 429 is not an actual address, nor is “Choi’s Market” an actual place, but in this installation, it locates the event in the political history for Korean Americans. It refers to the event of April 29, 1992 that happened in Koreatown, an area that became more clearly delineated through the event. Concurrently, Korean American identity became more clearly defined as a result.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1-18.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed deconstruction of the ways in which the identity of Korean American’s relationship with Koreatown was affected by the L.A. riots see, Tangherlini, “Remapping Koreatown: Folklore, Narrative and the Los Angeles Riots,” 59-93, where he notes that during the riots, the places that the police did not respond to were that of Koreatown which delineated not only the lowered priority of property owned by Korea Americans but also delineated the cultural enclave. Hence the text of the city, in a deCerteau sense, had been forcibly rewritten by the destruction. In regards to reading the city as text see, Michel deCerteau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), ix-xi, 43-45, 91-111, 115-131.

Interpretations by Jane Farver and Eleanor Heartney of *Choi's Market* include the relationship between the two children in the photograph of Choi's family and the plants on the shelves.<sup>49</sup> Although the information has yet to be verified, Farver and Heartney suggest that the plants could be young fruit and/or vegetable plants. Farver extends this interpretation by connecting the plants with the children depicted in the photograph suggesting that the plants and the children signify Choi's hopes that the new seeds he has planted in the United States will yield a fruitful harvest, both for the economy and the people.<sup>50</sup> In Suk-Man Kim's interpretation of *American Dream* (1988-1992) (Figure 9), which is another installation by Choi, he notes the Korean proverb which states, "in death tigers leave their skins, and people leave their name. All people, not just Koreans, leave their names behind when they die. To leave a name means to leave a memory. Victims of natural catastrophe, when asked what they would salvage in a moment of crisis, often say that they would take their photo albums."<sup>51</sup> This stems from a belief that when the material base of life is destroyed, new life can be built on memories of the past. The synthesis of these interpretations illustrate the relationship with the artist's lived experience and how it intersects with the process identity formation made visible in *Choi's Market*. The visual context of these ideas are presented by building the relationship between his family name on the awning to that of

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<sup>49</sup> Farver, *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, 49; and Heartney, "Hybrid identities – Korean art, various artists, Queens Museum, New York, New York." *Art in America*. (September 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Farver, *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, 49.

<sup>51</sup> Suk-Man Kim. "Sung Ho Choi: Suitcase of Memories," *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, ed. Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida, and Sharon Mizota (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 91-93.

his children on the photograph and the hopes for the future that they signify, along with the live plants in the installation of the burnt-out storefront.

A broader view of Choi's artistic practice incorporating his lived experience utilizing information gathered from published artist's statements and interviews can illustrate how and why *Korean Roulette* and *Choi's Market* deviate from other works in his oeuvre. Sung Ho Choi was born in Seoul, Korea in 1954, one year after the end of the Korean War.<sup>52</sup> He received his BFA in 1980 at the Hongik University in Seoul, Korea, then, in 1981 he immigrated to the United States to study at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>53</sup> By the time he received his MFA in 1984 from Pratt, he was already getting the attention of galleries and buyers for his minimalist geometric sculptures.<sup>54</sup> While he was a graduate student at Pratt, he worked part-time for a greengrocer in Brooklyn.<sup>55</sup> In 1989, he was jolted by a photograph from an old *Newsweek* magazine showing a white man in Boston stabbing a black man with a flagpole from which flew an American flag.<sup>56</sup> Choi was deeply affected by this visual experience and realized that he could never return to his minimalist sculptures.<sup>57</sup> It is

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<sup>52</sup> Kim, "A Different Dream: Eleven Korean North American Artists," 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Farver, *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> Kim, "A Different Dream: Eleven Korean North American Artists," 18-19.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

also of note that by the 1990s, the political and social contestations about race and representation were occupying the vision of many artists in the United States.<sup>58</sup>

Since 1990, Choi's art production has focused on his lived experience as a Korean American and his idea of the American dream.<sup>59</sup> The greater body of Choi's oeuvre deals with the broader issues of identity formation within a multicultural metropolis. For example, *American Pie* (1996) (Figures 6 and 7), *My America* (1996) (Figure 8), and *American Dream* (1988-1992) (Figure 9) are about "the theme of contrasting identities in a society that is becoming more multicultural."<sup>60</sup> Like many Korean American artists, he also works within the gap of the American dream and the grim realities they often find in the United States.<sup>61</sup> His experience working as a greengrocer is evident in his artwork. Even though this aspect of his art production is autobiographical, the stereotypes and the realities of the greengrocer are ubiquitous,

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<sup>58</sup> Sharon F. Patton. "The Agenda in the Eighties: Socially Conscious Art," *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. (Harlem, NY: The Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum, 1990), 78-79.

<sup>59</sup> Sung Ho Choi, "Artist Statement," Department of Cultural Affairs. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/pnyc/choi.shtml>; Internet; accessed on September 27, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> For details on the Korean American artists' response to the gap between the dream and reality of immigration to the United States, see exhibition catalog *Dreams and Reality: Korean American Contemporary Art*. (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institution, 2003). One of the best examples of the ways in which Choi deconstructs this idea is an installation entitled, *American Dream* (Figure 5). Hanging on the wall, the American flag has been reshaped into a target, symbolizing America as a desired goal or destination. That it is a flag rather than a map, for example, points to that idea that it is the ideological promise of America rather than the reality that is "targeted" by the immigrant. Korean-language newspaper stories of immigrant struggles in the United States "interrupt" the surface of the flag-target, implying that all is not as promised in the country of destination. On the floor below this ambivalent flag-target lies a large open suitcase. This is the suitcase that Choi arrived with when he first came to the United States, but rather than being filled with memories or artifacts from his homeland, it is filled to overflowing with kimchi jars that have been stuffed with clippings from the *New York Times*. For more information on this piece see, Sharon Mizota, "Interchanges," *Fresh Talk Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 93.

from Hollywood movies to the media coverage of a robbery.<sup>62</sup> As Eleanor Heartney notes in a review of an exhibition that included *Choi's Market*: “The most vivid image of Koreans for many Americans has been shaped by the well-publicized travails of the Korean merchants in the L.A. riots and the boycotted grocery in Brooklyn. Thus an ancient and venerable culture is reduced, in the American imagination, to a nation of vegetable sellers.”<sup>63</sup> In addition, the distance between the ideal and reality was made greater by the dominant media framing of the “Black-Korean conflict.”<sup>64</sup> The mass media accounts of the interethnic conflict reified the essentialized views of the two ethnic groups which exacerbated these stereotypes even further.

The interpretation of the items included in *Korean Roulette* conveys the complexity of the social, historical, economic aspects behind the objects that he chose to include in this sculpture. By incorporating objects referencing the grocer to a mixed media mobile sculpture, Choi is taking mundane objects and transforming them into a narration of cultural identity.<sup>65</sup> As Homi Bhabha suggests, by doing this, these scraps, patches and rags of daily life are turned into the signs of a coherent culture.<sup>66</sup> For Choi,

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<sup>62</sup> The ways in which Sung Ho Choi uses the relationship between one's cultural identity and the media are explored further in such art pieces like *American Pie* (1996) and *My America* (1996) both located in the Intermediate School 5 at 50-40 Jacobus Street in Queens New York. For further information on this public art works project see <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/choi.shtml>.

<sup>63</sup> Heartney, Eleanor. “Hybrid identities – Korean art, various artists, Queens Museum, New York, New York.” *Art in America*. (September 1994) [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_mi1248/is\\_n9\\_v82/ai\\_15828108/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_mi1248/is_n9_v82/ai_15828108/print); Internet; accessed on November 11, 2004. This was a review for an exhibition entitled *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* which was organized by the Queens Museum in New York.

<sup>64</sup> For more information about this subject see Eui Young Yu, *Black-Korean Encounter: Towards Understanding and Alliance*. (Los Angeles, CA: Institute for Asian American and Pacific Asian Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1994).

<sup>65</sup> Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation,” *Nation and Narration*. (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1990, 291-322.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

“art making is a process of collecting, signifying and formulating systems...to observe the way different cultures clash, conflict, destroy, and heal each other that form certain patterns.”<sup>67</sup> In *Korean Roulette*, he has narrowed down the search for his pattern to that of a greengrocer, which is presented as a cyclical pattern of a life that involves a number of gambles. Within all of those aspects, I have incorporated larger sociological and historical interpretations to enhance the meaning of the making of this sculpture at a time when the stereotype of the Korean American grocer was exacerbated by the media. *Choi's Market*, a burnt replica of a storefront, is a direct visual reference to the events of the L.A. riots. Here, he has broken away from his circular motif to create a personalization of the events of the L.A. riots directly in relation to himself, his family and the Korean American community by the unprecedented act of including the image of himself and his family prominently at the center of his artwork. *Choi's Market* is not about formulating cyclical patterns of society, which deviate from the main focus of his prior works, but about the galvanization of the Korean American identity as a result of an event that affected this specific community of people within the United States. Therefore, both *Korean Roulette* and *Choi's Market* deviate from Choi's body of work because of their self-referentially that was inspired by specific contemporaneous events that were important moments for the identity formation of Korean Americans.

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<sup>67</sup> Artist's Statement, *At the Crossroads: Celebrating the Centennial of Korean Immigration to the U.S.: Twenty Contemporary New York Artists*, exh.cat., Gallery Korea, New York, sponsored by the Korean Cultural Service, 2003. 42.

## CHAPTER 2

### YONG SOON MIN

*Defining Moments* (1992) is a photography series composed of six black and white photographs by Yong Soon Min. The first image is of a female torso, omitting the face (Figure 2). This first photograph is presented as a negative so, that the roles of black and white have been reversed. Spiraling outward from the navel, curvilinear lines are drawn in between the following numbers, creating a circular pattern: “1953, 4/19/60, 5/19/80, and 4/29/92.” “Heartland” is written across her chest, between her breasts and collarbones. The word “Occupied” is written on her left arm and the word “Territory” is written on her right arm. The words “My Body Lies” appear to have been superimposed onto the photograph, as these words are typed, whereas the rest of the words appear to have been hand written. Below the spiral, the following words are superimposed in the same fashion: “Over the ocean/My body lies over the sea/My body lies over the DMZ/Oh bring back my body to me/Bring back bring back Oh bring back my body to me.”<sup>68</sup> This first photograph in the series serves as an index for photographs two through five, which consist of historic photographs that depict events that correspond to the dates on the spiral. On each of these photographs depicting historical events, the same image of the artist has been superimposed onto the image with the letters “DMZ” written across her forehead, and the word “Heartland” written

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<sup>68</sup> These words are similar to the chorus of a traditional camp song or nursery rhyme, “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean.” Its origins are believed to be from Scotland. Available from, <http://www.ucamusic.com/textdocs/Mother%20Goose.pdf>; Internet; accessed 6 October 2005.

across her chest (Figure 5). The sixth and final photograph is presented in a similar fashion, with the same portrait of the artist superimposed onto an image (Figure 10). However, this final photograph does not correspond to the dates on the first photograph, nor is it referencing an event. The image here is a landscape, consisting of a body of water and a mountain range. The following narrative is superimposed on top of this image:

No ordinary landscape/This one is recognized by most Koreans as/Mt. Beaktu and its heavenly lake/a landmark located near the Chinese border in/ North Korea/This seemingly innocuous landscape image is/politically charged in that the opposition/movement in South Korea has claimed this place to/symbolize its quest for reunification. /Notwithstanding official North Korean claims that/this is Kim Il Sung's birthplace, it is also the/legendary birthplace of the Korean People and/Nation. This origin myth attributes to this/landscape expansive notions of/a motherland and a fatherland/in short an imaginary homeland that is situated/over my heart.<sup>69</sup>

The same image of the artist is used in photographs two through six. This portrait of the artist is frontal, confronting the gaze of the viewer. Her mouth is closed and the expression on her face is ambiguous, as it can be interpreted as either confrontational or passive and emotionless.

The knowledge that these images are of the artist penetrates the viewer's experience and appreciation of the works. Beyond the photographs being self-portraits, the image, and by extension the artist herself, becomes the medium from which a deeper subject is made visible. What is the subject then, beyond that of the artist? I will present two sections of analysis: first, I will briefly describe the events that are presented in *Defining Moments* (1992) in order to illustrate the historical backdrop that

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<sup>69</sup> It is of note that North Koreans refer to Korea as the "fatherland" and South Koreans refer to Korea as the "motherland."



Min uses as signifiers to construct the narrative of the photographic series.<sup>70</sup> Second, I will present an interpretation that examines the collective history and personal narrative present in the photographs as constructs of a diasporic consciousness and as the central theme in the work. According to cultural anthropologist Kye Young Park,

Korean immigrant culture is based on the diaspora experience...Korean American culture is rooted in Korea however its parameters are set by the political economy of the US (i.e. the impact of the restructuring of the US economy on the immigrant community). Although the state plays the major role in resocializing and enculturating ethnic immigrants, people are not passive but rather dynamically engaged in the process of cultural construction.<sup>71</sup>

The events in the *Defining Moments* (1992) photography series are examples of the dialectic relationship between the process of cultural construction amidst (and at times opposing) the state's role in resocializing people and the synthesis created from this dynamic.

Yong Soon Min was born in a small village near Suwon called Bukuk in South Korea in 1953.<sup>72</sup> In the first photograph, it is this year that is written closest to the navel, where the spiral begins. The corresponding image is a historic photograph from

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<sup>70</sup> The historical events that will be presented are extremely complex therefore, given the space limitations of this thesis report, there will be a number of complex questions which I will be unable to elaborate sufficiently and others which I will be forced to bypass altogether.

<sup>71</sup> Kye Young Park, "A Cultivation of Korean Immigrants on American Soil: The Discourse on Cultural Construction," (paper presented at the Institute for Korean-American Studies, Inc., Blue Bell, PA, 13 August 1999), The ICAS Lectures No. 99-0614-KYP.

<sup>72</sup> H.Y. Choi Caruso, "Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-identity and Gender in the Work of Two Korean/Korean American Women Artists" (Ed.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004). 167.

the Korean War<sup>73</sup> in which an image of US troops in a rice paddy is overlaid with Yong Soon Min's portrait (Figure 11). As noted above, the same portrait with "DMZ" written on her forehead and "Heartland" written on her chest is superimposed on top of this historic photograph of the Korean War. In addition to the year that the artist was born, 1953 is also the year in which the Korean War ended, which resulted in the division of Korea through an armistice agreement establishing the demilitarized zone otherwise known as the DMZ.<sup>74</sup> This war devastated the Korean landscape, including people's homes as well as the infrastructure of a civilized society. For example, one-third of the nation's housing was destroyed and substantial proportions of the country's public buildings, roads, bridges, ports and the like also were reduced to ruins.<sup>75</sup> But the damage wrought by the Korean War cannot be measured in material terms alone. This is because the war forced the Korean people, who were long conscious of their ethnic unity,<sup>76</sup> to painfully face the tragic reality that their nation had been partitioned. The historic photograph of the Korean War along with the superimposition of the artist's

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<sup>73</sup> North Koreans refer to what is commonly known as the Korean War as The Fatherland Liberation War or the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War which they claim and almost believe that they won. South Koreans refer to the Korean War as *Han'guk Jeon Jaeng*, which translates to the Korean War, but also, South Koreans use the tradition of designating important historical and political dates using integer-chains, therefore it is also referred to as *yuk-i-o sa byeon* which refers to the date of June 25, 1950 as the beginning of the Korean War.

<sup>74</sup> The demilitarized zone in Korea is a strip of land running across the Korean Peninsula that serves as a buffer zone between North and South Korea. The DMZ cuts the Korean Peninsula roughly in half, crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel on an acute angle. The DMZ was the original boundary between US and Soviet occupied zones established at the end of World War II and became the border between North Korea and South Korea upon the formation of those two countries. When a cease fire was agreed upon in July 27, 1953, the DMZ was established along the stalemate line of the Korean War. Owing to the stalemate, large numbers of troops are still stationed along both sides of the line, each side guarding against potential aggression from the other side. Therefore, technically the war is not over rather it is still in stalemate.

<sup>75</sup> South Korean casualties in the fighting alone are estimated at 150,000 dead, 200,000 missing, and 250,000 injured, while more than 100,000 civilians were abducted to North Korea and the number of war refugees reached several million. Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 380-381.

<sup>76</sup> Korea was first united under the Silla Dynasty in 668. Therefore, Korea had been a united polity for 1285 years until it was divided in 1953. Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 387-394.

portrait signifies a divided homeland and the affect of this war on the succeeding generations of Koreans.<sup>77</sup>

In the midst of the national peril occasioned by the Korean War, a political crisis also began to take shape within South Korea. This was due to a gradually increasing drift towards authoritarian rule, ever since the US placed Syngman Rhee as president of South Korea in 1948. The social unrest spawned by Syngman Rhee's authoritarian rule reached a climax in the presidential elections of March 1960. Syngman Rhee and his party mobilized government employees and the police in particular to carry out remarkably blatant acts of election rigging. On April 19, 1960, which refers to the second date on Yong Soon Min's photography series, students from nearly all of Seoul's colleges and universities, as well as from many high schools, poured into the city's downtown streets shouting such slogans as "We demand new elections!" and "Defend democracy to the death!"<sup>78</sup> Here the overlaid image shows a crowded street rally in Seoul (Figure 12). This event, now known as the April Revolution, "was the first in the history of Korea wherein people armed with nothing but their bare fists succeed in overthrowing an oppressive government."<sup>79</sup> The power of the people, united in their

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<sup>77</sup>It is of note that there has been a growing number of scholarship in regards to the affect of the Korean War on the Korean American identity. For further information see, Grace Yoo, "The Not So Forgotten War," *Peace Review* 16 no. 2 (June 2004), 169-179. Ramsay Liem, "History, Trauma and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans," *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 3 (2003/2004), 111-129. This relationship is also evident in the artwork presented in an exhibition entitled *Still Present Pasts: Korean Americans and the Forgotten War* that opened at the Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center in Cambridge, MA in January 2005. Yong Soon Min's *Defining Moments* (1992) photography series is one of the pieces featured in this exhibition.

<sup>78</sup> At first, the students were met by a hail of police bullets, which roused the students to a frenzy as they watched their classmates dying before their eyes. This incited the students as well as the citizenry to set fire to a number of government structures. Eventually martial law troops refused to fire on the demonstrators, giving President Rhee no further hope of maintaining himself in power. Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 383-385.

<sup>79</sup> Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 385.

opposition to a dictatorial government, held bright prospects for the development of democracy in South Korea at the time.<sup>80</sup> The utilization of this historic photograph depicting the April Revolution in this section is used to reference the people's desire for democracy.

The third date in the series refers to the Kwangju uprising on May 19, 1980.<sup>81</sup> In the photograph corresponding to this date, Min utilizes a photograph of troops clearing the streets of Kwangju province from student demonstrations, which are visible on the lower right corner as well as the center of the photograph (Figure 13). The event began on May 13, 1980 as a peaceful and organized demonstration by university students against the authoritarianism and antidemocratic actions of the government.<sup>82</sup> Several events occurred that exacerbated the demonstration into a riot. May 18, 1980 is known as "Bloody Sunday," in which students were violently attacked by paratroopers, which incited the demonstration into a riot. May 19, 1980 marks the day in which citizens from all walks of life joined 16,000 students in a demonstration against the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> At times Kwangju is spelled with a "g," therefore in some texts, one may encounter the spelling as Gwangju.

<sup>82</sup> It is important to place the Kwangju uprising in the contemporary historical settings of South Korea. General Park Chung-hee, who grabbed power after a military coup in 1961, continued his one-man dictatorship for 18 years, suppressing any political dissent and often using violence through state machinery. He introduced Yushin or the "Revitalizing Reform" system, which legitimized the authoritarian-led development. People were fed up with the Yushin system and student demonstrators in 1979 intensified in the latter half of the year with labour and student demonstrations in the Pusan and Masan areas which was later called the "Pu-Ma Uprising." The Yushin system led to economic instability and unrest, which cumulated in Park's assassination in October 1979. Park's assassination led to calls by students and laborers for the abolition of the Yushin system and direct elections. Such hopes were dashed when at the end of 1979 when General Chun Do-hwan and Roh Tae-Woo seized power from the interim government through a *coup d'etat*. In the first few months of the 1980s, worsening economic conditions led to massive labour protests in South Korea. David I. Steinberg *The Republic of Korea: Economic Transformation and Social Change*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 59-68. Philip West, Steven I. Levine, and Jackie Hiltz, eds. *America's Wars in Asia: A Cultural Approach to History and Memory*. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 72-73.

government. Together, people fought back against riot police and paratroopers. On this day the people effectively wrested the city from government control, raiding government facilities and radio stations.<sup>83</sup> Therefore the historic photograph used in this section is a reference to the power of the people to affect their governance.

By positioning the events together, Min shows that these events, which include, the Korean War, the April Revolution, and the Kwangju uprising that happened in Korea are very much a part of the Korean American psyche, as evident in the incorporation of the next photograph which references the 1992 Los Angeles social upheaval. On April 29, 1992, twelve jurors in Sylmar, California rendered their verdicts in a controversial case involving the 1991 beating of Rodney King by four LAPD officers. Once the verdicts were broadcasted live, riots started to occur at various points throughout the city. For the next three days the violence and mayhem continued. It just so happens that April 29<sup>th</sup> is also Yong Soon Min's birthday, and it is of note that many scholars of Asian American Studies cite this date as the birth of the Korean American identity.<sup>84</sup>

Images of the aftermath of the L.A. riots, taken from Korean newspapers have been overlaid onto Min's portrait including a photograph from the May 2<sup>nd</sup> demonstration described in the introductory chapter (Figure 14). In a chapter entitled "Mapping the Korean Diaspora in Los Angeles," authors Abelmann and Lie state that "Koreatown, Los Angeles is a major symbolic destination of Korean immigration to the

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<sup>83</sup> Henry Scott Strokes, *The Kwangju Uprising: Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea's Tianamen*. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), 110.

<sup>84</sup> Scholars, activists and community leaders such as K.W. Lee and Angela Oh have often remarked that as Los Angeles burned, Korean America was born. For more information on this subject see, Edward Taehan Chang, "As Los Angeles Burned, Korean America was Born," *Amerasia Journal*, 30, no.1 (2004): xii-ix.

United States. The portable homelands that immigrants carry in their minds have been materially re-created near downtown Los Angeles.”<sup>85</sup> Much like the displacement and destruction caused by the Korean War, a new “homeland” or a “simulacrum of Seoul in Southern California”<sup>86</sup> suffered a similar affect in the Korean psyche during the L.A. riots. For example, a survey conducted in 1994 in *Asia Source* revealed that one out of three Korean-owned businesses in the area were never rebuilt, and many Koreans moved out of Los Angeles altogether.<sup>87</sup> This statistic is representative of the creation of a second wave of diaspora, specifically, displacement within the host country. In this case, the interpretation by Calvin Reid in describing Min’s work as “hybrid reconfigurations of individual life caught in forced cultural dispersion” is very apt.<sup>88</sup>

The sixth and final image in the *Defining Moments* (1992) series refers to the possible reunification of North and South Korea (Figure 15). This section features a photograph of Mt. Baektu, which is the site believed to be the mythic birthplace of the Korean people. Similar to the ways in which the historic photographs in the previous sections serve as signifiers of a divided Korea, the desire for democracy, the power of the people, and the displacement within the host country, respectively, symbolic utilization is employed again by Min as Mt. Baektu serves as a symbol for supporters of Korean unification, as expressed on the typed narrative that is superimposed on this

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<sup>85</sup> Abelmann and Lie, 85-118.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, “Special Report: The Impact of the Los Angeles Riots on the Korean American Community,” *Asia Source*, May 03, 2002; available from, [http://www.asiasource.org/news/at\\_mp\\_02.cfm?newsid=79441](http://www.asiasource.org/news/at_mp_02.cfm?newsid=79441); Internet; accessed on 21 October 2004.

<sup>88</sup> Calvin Reid, “Yong Soon Min at Art in General,” *Art in America*, January 1999; available from, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1248/is\\_1\\_87/ai\\_53560715/print](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_1_87/ai_53560715/print); Internet; accessed on 18 July 2005.

image. Like a bookend to the first photograph, the words on the last photograph in the series, evokes “an existential condition of which permanence” or a sense of home is not an actual place but a construct.<sup>89</sup> The decision to appropriate the Scottish children’s song in the first photograph was an instinctual one according to the artist and served to balance the conceptual framework for the text in the last photograph.<sup>90</sup>

The simple tune worked well with the transposition of words fitting easily. I also liked the phrase “bring back my body to me” the original which evoked the yearning to be reunited from a separated loved-one and in my transposition suggests a yearning in the diasporic subject or the Korean who endures the separation of peoples, and (*sic*) nation for what is lost in the separation – again the conflation of the personal and the political.<sup>91</sup>

Like photographs two through five, written across the artist’s forehead and chest are the words “DMZ” and “Heartland.” In this context, the words written on the artist signify both the political and symbolic separation and connection of the Korean people.<sup>92</sup> Heartland (evoking the idiom, “home is where the heart is”) is fractured because it lays somewhere between North and South Korea and Koreatown in Los Angeles, California.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 15-17.

<sup>90</sup> Yong Soon Min, e-mail messages, March 20, 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Gary Hesse, Allan DeSouza, Yong Soon Min, *AlterNatives*. exh.cat., (Syracuse, N.Y.: Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery, Syracuse University).

<sup>93</sup> Min has created numerous other pieces that deal with the issue of “home” as a construct rather than a physical space. *Half Home* (1991), for example, is an installation about the superficial aspect of getting back to one’s culture that can really be akin to being a tourist in your own culture. Min therefore has challenged and worked through the commonly held notions of “home” with her own contradictory relation to the idea of the “heartland.” Additional pieces that address this issue are: *Dwellings* a mixed media installation completed in 1993; *Talking Herstory*, lithography, 1990; *Kindred Distance*, photography, 1996; *Bridge of No Return*, mixed media installation, 1997; and *deColonization*, mixed media, 1991.

Calvin Reid interprets the *Defining Moments* (1992) photography series as a complex weave of Korean diasporic reflection and memorialization replayed for the viewer against a backdrop of geopolitical conflict and Cold War demystification.<sup>94</sup> Min utilized symbolically charged materials that poetically evoke Korean history while suturing Korean and Korean American identity. In the following section, I will take the historical and biographical interpretation further by synthesizing the various interpretations of *Defining Moments* (1992) by Luis Camnitzer, Sharon Mizota and H.Y. Choi Caruso in order to construct an interpretation based on the idea of a diasporic consciousness as a defining element of Korean American identity.

Min states that she seeks to juxtapose documented history with her own life in order to critique existing power relationships.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, interpretations about the works concerning the April Revolution and the Kwangju uprising will be discussed together, as they are both about democracy and the power of the people over that of the state. Between the reality of a divided Korea emphasized by the letters “DMZ” on her forehead and the idealization of the “Heartland” that is written on her chest, lies the force of the people to affect their own governance. These events are instances in which people were literally engaged in the process of cultural construction and political governance. On a personal level, Min states that the event of April 19, 1960, also known as *sa-il-gu* was an event that she witnessed as a child.<sup>96</sup> It is also the year in

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<sup>94</sup> Reid, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Yong Soon Min, “Artist Statement,” *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*, ed. Susan Cahan and Zoya Kocur. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996). 141.

<sup>96</sup> Caruso, “Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-identity and Gender in the Work of Two Korean/Korean American Women Artists,” 200.



which her family left Korea for the United States.<sup>97</sup> The Kwangju uprising that occurred on May 19, 1980 was a very important turning point in Korean history according to the artist.<sup>98</sup> In addition, learning about the event made her “more politically aware and interested in Korean history.”<sup>99</sup> In regards to the “power-relationship” between the United States and South Korea, it is important to note that the United State’s role in the Kwangju uprising has been a controversial subject.<sup>100</sup> Some contend that the uprising had important ramifications that are still being felt now, both inside Korea and beyond its borders.<sup>101</sup> According to Bruce Cumings, professor of history at the University of Chicago and a prominent expert on Korea, the US was supporting the military regime in South Korea, and was much more worried about stability in regards to the Cold War and North Korea than it was about democracy in South Korea.<sup>102</sup> In addition, other scholars of 20<sup>th</sup> century Korean history contend that

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> United States General John A. Wickham, Jr., had released South Korean troops from the South Korea-United States Combined Forces Command to end the rebellion; President Reagan had strongly endorsed General Chun's actions to seize control of South Korea through a *coup d'etat*. The US involvement in this incident goes even further back, such as when senior officials in the Carter administration approved South Korean plans to use military troops against pro-democracy demonstrations ten days before former General Chun Doo Hwan tried to seize control of the country in a May 17, 1980. U.S. officials also knew that the contingency plans included the deployment of Special Warfare Command troops to Seoul and Kwangju. In Kwangju, two brigades of Special Forces were later held responsible for killing hundreds of people in a massacre that drew worldwide attention. For further details see Tim Shorrock, “The U.S. Role in Korea in 1979 and 1980,” *Korea Web Weekly*, <http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/kwangju3.htm>; Internet; accessed on November 8, 2005. For a more detailed account of these events see, Scott-Stokes, Henry, ed. *The Kwangju Uprising: Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea's Tiananmen*. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000).

<sup>101</sup> Becky Brandford, “Ghost of Gwangju: Lingering Legacy of Korean Massacre,” *BBC* article cited in *The Seoul Times*; available from <http://theseoultimes.com/ST/?url=/ST/db/read.php?idx=1940>; Internet; accessed on November 8, 2005.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

the events in Kwangju in the 1980s poisoned relations with the US in the minds of Korean citizens.<sup>103</sup> These negative feelings resurfaced for many Koreans after the L.A. riots. Just as Min's family left for the United States shortly after the April 19, 1960 social upheaval, many Koreans left for the United States shortly after the May 19, 1980 uprising due to the civil unrest and the fear of war from the military dictatorships at the time.<sup>104</sup> Hence this photography series is very much about diaspora as these subtexts<sup>105</sup> depict events that caused the dispersal of Koreans in different waves of immigration.<sup>106</sup>

On the image of the artist, "DMZ" symbolizes the reality of a divided homeland and can also allude to the divided or broken source of her identity. The other side of the spectrum is the "Heartland" which is that of a dream or hope of a unified homeland and a unified source of her identity. This unattainable sense of "home" is illustrated and repeated in sections two through six by the use of the same image of the artist superimposed onto historic photographs which include South Korea, Koreatown in Los

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> The Korean War had such a powerful effect that many feared the possibility of war and didn't want to experience it again. The reason why the effect is so strong is because many Koreans' families were torn apart due to the war. Many Koreans today have family members that live in North Korea that they might never see again. In addition, the military dictatorship that created these uncertainties did not end until 1987 when student radicalism forced the Chun Doo-hwan government (1980-88) to hold "democratic" presidential and parliamentary elections in 1987 and 1988, respectively. Manwoo Lee, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 1, 54.

<sup>105</sup> By subtexts, I refer to the specific historical events that are used in the construction of the whole narrative by Min.

<sup>106</sup> The study of Korean immigration is very complex and I acknowledge that each wave of immigration has multiple factors, however I am merely interpreting the narrative strategies used in the *Defining Moments* series which delimits some important elements in Korean immigration. In addition, due to the length restrictions of the thesis report, I will not be able to elaborate on this subject. However, most scholars would agree that these events were a major factor in Korean immigration. For an overview of the Korean Diaspora synthesizing various scholars in the field, see Kim, Kichung. "Affliction and Opportunity: Korean Literature in Diaspora, a Brief Overview." *Korean Studies* 25, no. 2 (2001). 261-265. Much of his references on the history of immigration is from Segye hanminjok p'yongnam [A handbook of the Korean people in the world] (Seoul: Kungmin Saenghwal Ch'eyuk Hwoe'uihwoe, 1993).

Angeles, California, and North Korea, respectively. These two extremes in the spectrum of identity formation between reality and dream are repeated in the photographs that highlight various subtexts within that spectrum. These subtexts are events that caused the dispersal of Koreans throughout history and can also serve as symbols of this dispersal in the visual context that Min employs. The year 1953 locates the beginning of the division of her homeland that was realized when the demilitarized zone was established in July 27, 1953, as well as one of the major events within Korea that caused the dispersal of many Koreans. On a personal level, Min was in Korea during her formative years<sup>107</sup> and her first memories are that of a devastated Korea; a landscape desolated by war. According to Caruso, Min's private memories no doubt interact with this historical event, especially since her father was a translator for the United States Army.<sup>108</sup> On a collective level, the memories and effects of the Korean War resurfaced for many Korean Americans as the landscape after the L.A. riots resembled the demolished landscape of Seoul after the war. For example, a European American National Guardsman posted in Koreatown during the riots, reflected on his tour of duty in South Korea, and remarked how the streets of Los Angeles reminded him of Seoul after the Korean War.<sup>109</sup> Many of the Korean immigrant shop owners who were affected by the L.A. riots are in Min's generation; therefore memories of the devastation of a war-torn Korea were the first memories of many Korean Americans affected by the L.A. riots. The precarious involvement of the US in the Korean War, the

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<sup>107</sup> Min immigrated to the United States at the age of seven.

<sup>108</sup> Caruso, "Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-identity and Gender in the Work of Two Korean/Korean American Women Artists," 167-168.

<sup>109</sup> Abelmann and Lie, ix.

Kwangju uprising and the L.A. riots has a common link in terms of the callousness of the US in regards to the Korean people as opposed to the political and economic interests of the US.

As Camnitzer describes, the repeated use of her portrait provides the continuity and sanity amidst the external events...they are also part of a series of “defining moments” because they reaffirm the survival and integrity of Min’s image and that of the Korean American identity in a new landscape in the United States.<sup>110</sup> As described in detailing the historical events and the effect that these events had on the artist and the specific group of people that she embodies, this photography series involves the intersection of history and memory, as well as the politics of representation. The ways in which Yong Soon Min employs narrative strategies address issues of cross-cultural translation inherent in such works that place questions of positionality firmly on the foreground.

Each date in *Defining Moments* (1992) holds personal and historical significance, attesting to the intertwining of public and private experiences in identity formation. Collectively, these dates create a chain of “defining moments” that have shaped Min’s life as well as the Korean American identity. The analysis of this series as a whole shows that the meanings embedded in this series are very complex, and deal not only with positionality, but also narrative strategies that inform a diasporic consciousness. Emanating from her navel, the dates and corresponding events form a lifeline of sorts, or a link back through time, a way of remembering and

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<sup>110</sup> Luis Camnitzer, “Yong Soon Min: Defining Moments,” *Fresh Talk/Darning Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (with Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. 123-124.

commemorating the past. According to Mizota, Min positions her body as a landscape, labeling her chest “heartland” and her arms “occupied territory.”<sup>111</sup> This is evidenced by her choices of images used. For example, in the section on the Korean War, Min used an image of a landscape of a rice paddy which is an integral part of the historical development of Korean society, instead of images of the war casualties. For the section on the Kwangju Uprising and the April Revolution, she used a cityscape instead of the highly politicized images of wounded students. The image of the artist becomes a landscape. Here, body and landscape become an individualized unity, visually and conceptually.

The original landscape is located in memory and is incompletely accessible due to the division of Korea and the limitations of memory. The new landscape remains forever a borrowed one that consists of a mix of origins separated by an ocean and divided by the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The dispersal of Koreans within the host country of the US after the Los Angeles riots reinforces this intangible sense of home. Home has become a construct that she embodies rather than occupies. By establishing the relationship between landscape and body, she situates her body as a synecdoche for the body of the nation and the Korean American identity.

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<sup>111</sup> Sharon Mizota, “Interchanges,” *Fresh Talk/Darning Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (with Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003. 125.

## CONCLUSION

### NAVIGATING THROUGH THE LABYRINTH

Yong Soon Min's *Defining Moments* (1992) photography series shows that the gaze homeward is colored by ever-changing context and nostalgia, illustrating the heterogeneous relationship to the homeland, which shows that identities are constantly in flux. Even within the specificity of a presentation of a Korean greengrocer in *Korean Roulette* (1992/1993) and *Choi's Market* (1993) by Sung Ho Choi, the gaze inward reveals the internal dynamic of micro-macro sociology<sup>112</sup> while simultaneously revealing the "other" view<sup>113</sup> and the interstices within the personal and societal levels of identity formation. The presentation of the artwork by Sung Ho Choi and Yong Soon Min demonstrate that the binary logic through which identities of difference are often constructed is flawed. Twentieth-century Korean history constituted by colonialism, war, and their legacies including national division, military authoritarian political regimes and Christian evangelism is evident in one form or another in the artworks produced by the Korean American artists presented in this paper. Taken together they illustrate how history is the inextricable part in the structure and meaning of Korean

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<sup>112</sup> In sociology, there are two very board ways of dividing sociological knowledge: micro and macro. Micro sociology trends focus upon the action of individuals in groups, how the group affects us, our values, beliefs and behaviors. Macro sociology focus upon the scale and structure of society, relationship among groups and structures.

<sup>113</sup> By other view I'm referring to the spatial praxis revealed by Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, 313-314. He analyzes De Certeau against Lefebvre stating that De Certeau presents binaries of macro versus micro by presenting the city from within versus above to which Soja posits Lefebvre's insistence of *Il y a toujours l'Autre*.

American immigration. Shifts in South Korean ideologies and social structure including the meanings that are attached to the United States are changing the face and extent of immigration.<sup>114</sup> The analysis of the artwork in this paper illustrate that the L.A. riots response by Korean Americans must be understood in this crucible, stressing the relationship between the changes in South Korea and the ways in which those changes are manifested. Diasporic communities of Korean Americans take form and transform amid these changes. The analysis of the artworks shows that these changes affect the structure and meaning of these communities as well as their identity.

The two case studies presented in this paper proposes an argument that elements of cultural identity, self-identity and issues of race are in a complex way intertwined and deeply related as examined through the artist's lived experiences and visual art expression. The art making and meaning making process provide these two individuals with a way to reconstruct and redefine their self-identity evoked by the emotions of the L.A. riots. "The L.A. riots were in large part about place."<sup>115</sup> In the case of Koreatown, the riots impacted a space that had been transformed into a highly specified and culturally charged place. The artworks in this paper present the L.A. riots as part of the political history of Korean America; because many who witnessed it were products of the Korean War and the history of protest in South Korea, the images of the L.A. riots evoked those memories and have emotional resonance that strongly connect these events.

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<sup>114</sup> Park, "A Cultivation of Korean Immigrants on American Soil: The Discourse on Cultural Construction," The ICAS Lectures No. 99-0614-KYP.

<sup>115</sup> Tangherlini, 59-93.

In the analysis of interviews of Korean Americans about the L.A. riots by Timothy R. Tangherlini, he concludes that the importance of Koreatown as a touchstone of Korean American identity was confirmed by people with little experience with Koreatown itself.<sup>116</sup> He states that when Koreans encountered the images of Korean business burning on television, they felt that their identity as Korean Americans were under attack.<sup>117</sup> Yong Soon Min stated in an interview that she was in Maine at the time and saw it on TV and that the images affected her in a personal level.<sup>118</sup> These sentiments were intensified by the accounts regarding the Los Angeles Police Department, refusing to respond or deliberately blocking streets in order to funnel the progress of the riots to Koreatown.<sup>119</sup> This reaction led many Koreans to believe that hiding behind the model-minority myth of the silent obedient citizenry did not guarantee equal protection under the law.<sup>120</sup> Due to these sentiments, community activism in the Korean American community has been working to assert their presence all over the United States.<sup>121</sup> The impact of the L.A. riots on succeeding generations of Korean Americans is very significant. It was the English-speaking children of the riot

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Caruso, "Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-identity and Gender in the Work of Two Korean/Korean American Women Artists," 200.

<sup>119</sup> Kim, "Home Is Where the Han is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals," 215-235.

<sup>120</sup> Abelman and Lie, 186-187.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.



victims in their teens and 20s who, along with their voiceless immigrant parents, almost overnight organized the nation's largest Asian rally on May 2, 1992.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to the *p'ungmul* mentioned in the introductory chapter, other aspects of the march on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, made further reference to the tradition of protest in Korea, and thus furthered the role of the march as one designed to reclaim and rewrite the erased markers of Korean American identity.

Chants accompanied by rhythmic clapping and elaborate hand gestures, banners written in Korean and the use of the white headbands (traditionally associated with peasants' dress as well as the dangerous even sacrificial quests to protect communal integrity) were clear visual elements that made direct references to the *Min Joong* movement.<sup>123</sup> (Figure 16)

This element is represented in the fifth photograph of *Defining Moments* (1992) (Figure 14) in which Min appropriated images from this event in a collage of Korean newspaper photos. An image of an elderly woman wearing a white headband with all of its historical and political connotations is presented in the lower right. The photograph shows that she is in a position that suggests the Christian pose of praying, however she is wearing the headband of protest that also has the historical connotations previously mentioned that is associated with Korea's shamanistic history. The previous description of the protests in the introductory chapter presents examples that are derived from Korea's shamanistic roots, made visible by the analysis of the *Traditional Koreans' Farmer's Dance* (1993) mural. The layering of meanings of the image of this woman is an example of the ways in which reactions to the L.A. riots reveal the palimpsest nature of the Korean American identity and its connection to Koreatown. The role of

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<sup>122</sup> K.W. Lee "It's That Awful Déjà Vu Time Again," *KoreAm Journal* 1, no.4 (April 2005): 88-89.

<sup>123</sup> Tangherlini, 59-93.

Christianity in Korean American identity formation was presented in the first chapter explaining the reasons for Sung Ho Choi's inclusion of the crucifix in *Korean Roulette* (1992/1993). As a testament to its importance in Korean American identity formation, Christianity is resurfaced as one of the elements of the riot's reactions. As identity is threatened, various elements that are building blocks of that identity resurfaced to reassert the multifaceted identity as a whole.

Much like the Korean language signs that marked the L.A. cityscape prior to the riots, the visual signs such as the store fronts, the protest's sonic and visual elements, and the mural make a direct reference to the Korean heritage and Korean American identity, whose meanings are inaccessible to those who could neither understand Korean nor have any knowledge of Korean protests movements. The artworks presented in this paper possess the same kind of illegibility. This inaccessibility of meaning is not necessarily a deliberate or even a conscious gesture on the part of its participants, but rather symptomatic of the extraordinary cultural complexity of the riots and their aftermath. Through the deployment of cultural enactments of Korean heritage and Korean American identity including its Christian roots, the demonstrators performed culturally meaningful, spatially situated acts that began the process of reinscribing the erased legacy of the Korean language signs that once marked Koreatown as Korean American. Concordantly, these same elements are evident in the artworks produced by Sung Ho Choi and Yong Soon Min that attempt to present a cohesive identity by mapping the walls of its labyrinth. The analysis of the artwork navigates through this labyrinth that shows that the contradictory tension described by Bhabha can be

presented through art in a cohesive manner by these artists' attempts to make sense out of their own personal experience. "Like a scribe retracing the palimpsest of a hidden text, the cultural performances (explicit and implicit) during the protest march" and the elements echoed in the artworks presented in this paper demonstrates "the process of reproducing the environmental text of Koreatown."<sup>124</sup> Events such as the demonstration march on May 2<sup>nd</sup> further exhibited the close connection between identity and place.<sup>125</sup>

The making of Korean American culture in the US is complex, selective, contradictory and ambiguous, encompassing a broad spectrum of change. The analysis of the artworks presented in this paper illustrate various elements that make up the spectrum of Korean American identity formation. The section on Sung Ho Choi presents a sociological analysis and the section on Yong Soon Min presents a larger historical analysis; each analysis presents the visual evidence of the different ways in which the L.A. riots have played a part in the identity formation of Korean Americans. Each art piece merges the past and the present, here and there, and validate the Korean American identity by each artist's lived experience. For the works concerning the LA riots, they both incorporated an image of themselves which deviates from their oeuvres in the intensity of self-referentiality, making a powerful statement about the personal

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<sup>124</sup> Tangherlini, 59-93.

<sup>125</sup> As noted by Tangherlini, geographers and anthropologist alike have long commented on the connection between place and identity. He notes that geographers of Los Angeles have begun articulating a theory of postmodern geography that problematizes the notion of monolithic definitions of place and the idea of a singular connection between place and identity. In this postmodern geography, places defined by earlier groups are reinterpreted by recent arrivals. The transnational circulation of people contributes to a Los Angeles landscape in which different groups—defined both by ethnicity and class among other things—overlap thus providing multiple and at times conflicting interpretations of one and the same place. He cites Gupta and Ferguson and states that "in the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant, it has been reterritorialized in a way that does not confirm to the experience of space that characterized high modernity. Ibid.

nature of these works. These autobiographical elements reveal the complex nature of Korean American identity formation that was challenged and provoked by the L.A. riots.

The threatening of the place from which their identity found space within the body politic, compelled a reassertion that illuminated the various elements that make up the definition of Korean America conceptually and symbolically. This study sought to present the particularized and unique configurations of individual experience and subjectivity as expressed in specific works of art and at the same time, acknowledge the larger social, political and historical conditions in which individual's perspectives are inevitably intertwined. Even though the focus of the thesis is on the L.A. riots, the analysis of the artworks show that it is important to understand the building blocks of the Korean American identity which now include the L.A. riots as an inextricable part of their identity. The analysis of the artworks illuminates the confluence in the development of identity consciousness that is achieved through specific struggles in society that involves shifts within the political and ideological relationship between the home country and the host country, and how the idea of "placeness" affects identity formation.

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