

Yong Soon Min: *AVM: After Venus (Mal)formation*

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7 January 2017.

Artist Yong Soon Min offered two room-sized meditations on loss and rediscovery in a two-person exhibition at the Commonwealth & Council gallery in Los Angeles' Koreatown. In *Last Notes and Sketches, Min Tae Yong (1918–2001)* (2016) Min used a traditional *byung* screen to trace her paternal family history and her father's interests in the structure of the universe (fig. 1). A linguist who studied in Japan during the colonial period, Min Tae Yong served as a translator in the US Army during the Korean War and taught Korean to US Army personnel. After he passed in 2001, Min discovered boxes of her father's handwritten notes evincing his passion for physics and string theory. He drew diagrams and computations about the “space-time continuum” and “highly advanced tech societies” on pages of business and children's stationery. Min embedded these documents in pivoting glass windows mounted in the screen's ten panels. Within the screen—an object of division, privacy, and transformation—the



FIGURE 1 Yong Soon Min, *Last Notes and Sketches, Min Tae Yong (1918–2001)*, 2016, folded panel with original notes and sketches by Min Tae Yong, 72 × 130 × 75 inches (183 × 330 × 190.5cm).

RUBEN DIAZ, PHOTOGRAPHER. IMAGE PROVIDED BY COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

notes revealed her father's active quest to know more about systems beyond Earth during his last days.

On one side of the panels were graphics that presented her father's enlarged drawings and texts, marked places of familial importance in Korea, and traced multiple generations of the men in Min's family. Written in Chinese characters and Korean, the directional orientations of the writings created a dynamic sense of relational possibilities. The varied hues of the panels highlighted both the diversity of their information and the viewers' need to shift their perceptions in order to read them.

Min editorialized this personal history with quotations from poems by Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson, including this excerpt from Poe's "Sonnet—To Science" (1829): "Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering / To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies." Here, science personified calls for human engagement to explore what may exist in the cosmos. The text offered a lyrical validation of Min's father's curiosity about scientific perspectives on the galaxy, and described the temptation of the heavens' unknown beauty. She also referenced Dickinson's "The Brain—is Wider than the Sky" (c.1862) to convey the mind's capacity to function beyond what can be measured. Beside her father's calculations and illustrations of the Min family tree, these words inspired viewers to reflect on their own knowledge about the world, and become like-minded with Min's father.

In a second gallery, Min's installation *AVM: After Venus (Mal)formation* (2016) addressed her experience with an arteriovenous malformation (AVM) and her remembrances of the recovery (fig. 2). During a 2010 Fulbright residency in South Korea, Min got a severe headache brought on by the stress of taking a Korean language proficiency exam. The pain was caused by a cerebral hemorrhage—the result of an undiagnosed AVM that likely developed in the womb. Flooding the left side of her brain, the hemorrhage impacted her speech and memory. The homophonic title of her installation conveys the kind of word play that became part of Min's life after the rupture. The pronunciation of *After Venus (Mal)formation* sounds similar to arteriovenous malformation, however, the phrase's references to time and mythology is both nonsensical and playful.

Min shared her trauma through an artwork that allowed viewers to imagine what it is like to be part of her daily cognitive functions. In the center of the room was a large, decagon-shaped table evenly sliced into five pairs of baby blue, lavender, lime green and soft pink pastel triangles. Each half of the colour-coded pairs displayed laser-cut words that Min would often confuse: diaspora/diarrhea, happiness/penis, pyramid/pizza, womb/tomb, spank/thank. Ten crystal balls rested in the grooves of the words framed by a vein-like



FIGURE 2 Yong Soon Min, AVM: After Venus (Mal)formation (installation view), 2016, wall and floor vinyl, CNC-cut medium-density fibreboard table and benches, glass balls, $10 \times 28 \times 29$ feet ($3 \times 8.5 \times 8.8$ metres).

RUBEN DIAZ, PHOTOGRAPHER. IMAGE PROVIDED BY COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL GALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

network of lines. The table's multiple components and colours suggested the pie-shaped wedges of the board game Trivial Pursuit, and visualized Min's process of retraining herself to recognize words and remember phrases.

Visible through the words were enlarged photographs of Min's bookshelves that lined the floor like carpet. Seeing which books she collected and how she organized them offered an intimacy usually reserved for a visit into someone's home. The unexpected floor display emphasized the sense of disorientation and unexpected insights that Min must have felt during her recovery.

Five benches set around the table were incised with slightly modified quotations such as "I speak to you with feelings / You look at me with words" from Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 film *Pierrot le Fou*; "My body lies over the ocean" inspired by the lyrics for the folk song *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*; and the Korean adage "inheritance: 남남 북녀" which loosely translates into English as "Southern men like North Korean women as North Korean women are beautiful." These are some of the phrases that Min used in earlier art works that still reverberate for their ambiguous and open-ended meanings.

In two corners of the gallery were small, silhouetted figures inspired by cartoons in *The New Yorker*. In one corner, two figures displayed the Vulcan

greeting from *Star Trek*. One figure stood upright and the other was turned upside down, suggesting an anti-gravitational counterpart in an alternate world. In the adjacent corner was the Ouroboros icon of a snake eating its own tail (or a Mobius strip) flanked by two figures using their fingers to make the gesture of air quotes. The vinyl images suggested the process of semiotics—reading signs and symbols to understand conventions of language in everyday communication. In combination with the photographs of hundreds of books, the game table, and the benches of familiar phrases, the cartoons provided another example of the complexity of communication and the multifaceted ways we read to understand the world and our place within it.

Through reflection on her father's explorations of the universe and the trauma of her brain hemorrhage, Min selflessly and generously opened up her private life to viewers. Both installations visualized personal journeys that tested the limits of the brain and articulated paths to rediscovery. Together they served as a homage to her father and attested to the profound connection between father and daughter in life and death.

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