

# AHL Foundation

## Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Choong Sup Lim
- Interviewer: Juyoung Yoo
- June 7, 2016 / Choong Sup Lim's studio in Greenwich village, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Juyoung Yoo (AKAA Research Fellow 2015-2016)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Juyoung Yoo (JY): Can you briefly describe your artworks?

Choong Sup Lim (CSL): My works are about subjectivity, not objectivity. This is important. My works are 'subjectivity.'

JY: I see Korean sentiment in your works.

CSL: I have eaten about 40,000 hamburgers since arriving to the United States, but you can smell Korean doenjang (Korean soybean paste) in me. Even though I don't consciously search for something Korean, or a true me, if I try to find something Korean, that will be symbolism and mannerism, so it cannot be truly mine.

JY: Where do you get your materials like thread?

CSL: These threads are made by old Korean ladies in Wando, Gyeongsangnam-do Province in Korea. They sell this small skein. I have it right there. Young students tell me, "why don't you make them colorful and use them in your work," but these are very colorful. The color of the skein represents Korean skin colors. The common people draw their deep agony in this skein.

JY: Humor is an inevitable part of your work.

CSL: The world is keenly divided into two these days. I am standing in between nature and civilization, and I am practicing what they call Hae-Hak (humor and satire) in literature. So, I am visualizing the humor. It is a kind of realization. In my 2-dimensional works, you can read the word "jool-im(줄임)" a lot, and in English, it can be translated as monochromatic or minimalist. I think all the works are jool-im. People say that Leonardo Da Vinci painted everything in his Last Supper, but I think that painting too is jool-im work. I like the Korean word jool-im more than any other English word like monochromatic or minimalist, or the Chinese word "Dan-saek hwa."

JY: The word "jool-im" is very interesting.

CSL: My canvas works are all jool-im works, and I try not to draw nature realistically but to naturally untie my longing for nature. Most Asian paintings have a giant waterfall and a noble scholar sitting in the painting. Usually, the noble scholar in the painting symbolizes the artist of the painting. The artist is meditating and owning nature. The reason I jool-im (minimize) is to have and own the traditional Korean painters' spirit.

JY: So, in a sense, you are meditating rather than making?

CSL: Yes, it is more like meditation than art. This is called the 'Talkative Tree,' one hundred and two hundred year old trees in the city have a sense of humor in them. So,

I wanted to visualize each tree's sense of humor. I showed them in the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.

JY: I will take photos of these works.

CSL: Take it from the side. You should include the shadows. From top to bottom. Take the photo as it is the artwork. When I went to Tibet, I heard them chanting. I asked what their chanting was, and it was 'Ah Ooh Eum' in Korean. They are singing life. 'Ah' is when a baby screams when he's born, 'Ooh' is our agony and meditation in life, and 'Eum' is death. This work shows the 'Ah' of a baby at birth, running horizontally during life, and death. This is also a jool-im work and in English, it is a monochromatic activity.

JY: Then, is the concept of 'jool-im' the most important factor in your works?

CSL: It is a little abstract, but the umbrella concept is 'Napanegie (나파내기: Digging myself)' in Korean, and I try to dig myself diligently. I try not to think that I should do 'Korean style work.' In short, I have subjectivity and diligence.

JY: Can you tell me about the making process?

CSL: I can't explain all of it in words, but I try to start with an event that may be important and try to spread outward. If I have a subject of interest, I just keep that in mind without any visual action, but I soon find myself visualizing it with some motive. I don't make by looking at a model, but I make the model, then I paint it. That is part of my making process.

JY: I read that you were also a teacher?

CSL: About 10 years ago, I taught graduate students at Seoul National University, where I graduated. However, the teaching methods were still very teacher-centered. Students' drawings were almost identical to each other, and they seemed to have no identity. So, I tried to teach the way I was taught in New York. I told my students to make artworks as how they were used, to bring an object that served as a catalyst for their processes. Then, I asked them to perform in between their canvases and the objects. The Students' work changed drastically from then on and were very interesting.

JY: I also heard that your life in New York was very challenging in the beginning.

CSL: Yes, I literally did everything. To put it lightly, I cleaned dishes and toilets and I even did manual labor and was fired. I rented a small room under the train in Brooklyn, and it was 50 dollars a month. You can't find anything that cheap now. But the ceiling sounded like it would collapse every 5 minutes because the D train that goes to Coney Island ran next to it. I lived there for a year or two. Even if I worked in factories during

the day, I kept on drawing at night. I didn't throw them away. After several years, on a snowy day, I went to OK Harris gallery, and I was wearing my sneakers. I couldn't go into the fancy gallery, which showed major artists' works. But when I did go inside, an American came up to me and asked what I was holding. When I told him that they were my drawings, he asked if he could see them. He said my works were amazing and told me to come inside Ivan Karp's room. Ivan told me that he liked my work, wanted to give me a solo show that May, and asked me to sign a contract. So, I did and had my solo exhibition in May.

JY: What motivates you to continue the work?

CSL: Practicing art is so noble. The path that I can go right and makes me happy is this path.

JY: Did you receive more opportunities after the OK Harris show?

CSL: I applied for the Queens Museum's annual call for emerging artists before OK Harris. I was one of thirteen candidates among the 800 applicants. So, as one of the finalists, the jurors told me that they would visit my studio. My studio was very small at the time, and I had a lot of drawings on Hanji (Korean paper). The jury included a professor from Queens College and a curator from the Queens Museum. After looking at my drawings, they included me among the eight final artists for the group show.

JY: Would you say that those times were the most challenging in your career?

CSL: Yes, but it is the same now. I have good dreams and nightmares. Most of them are nightmares, but I try to change them into good dreams through my art practice. I think that is what art is. It is to beautify, and that is happiness. There are too many art schools and too many artists. People just forget about their own merits. If you make art, there should be some people who dance with you, but there are too many artists. So, you should cherish yourself and should be happy with what you are doing. Then, you should decide to participate in the art market. You should love your art, respect yourself, make something that you love, and should be confident about your art. I think an artist should have confidence. It is ironic to fight solitude, but an artist should be confident, love himself, and should not be too obsessed with selling his artworks.

JY: What are you currently working on?

CSL: I am going back to 2-dimensional works. But, it is different from my past work, I have lots to do, and I am happy. This canvas work is one of the recent works. I have gone to many art museums, but I have never seen an oval-shaped canvas. I stretched it myself, and it felt as if I was released from a prison of rectangular-shaped canvases. I also made an easel with wheels. This is another work. So, my recent transition is from

object-based installations to flat canvas work. My agonies and concerns regarding my artworks.

JY: So, that is also one of your jool-im works?

CSL: Shaped canvas works that move away from the rectangle. I am happy to go back to my canvas works and I feel them deeply.

JY: I can see evidence of your hard work and exploration everywhere in your studio.

CSL: To love myself, I have to constantly examine and critique myself. I should constantly make art, reflect, and educate myself whether I know what it will become or not. Unfortunately I went to Seoul Arts high school and Seoul National University, where I gained un-necessities.

JY: Any final words?

CSL: I am not a perfect artist, but I am an artist that endures agony. Gradual elimination, the fact that I can eliminate is the spirit of Asian painters. I think that spirit supports my artworks too. My monochromatic works have been freed from the prison of rectangular canvases. I am now moving onto the shaped canvas format.