

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

Interview

- Interviewee: Sunhee Kim Jung
- Interviewer: Dr. Thalia Vrachopoulos
- August 17th, 2022 / Zoom Interview
- Recorded and Transcribed by JooHee Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2021- 2022)
- 1 Video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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JooHee Kim (JK): Today is August 17th, 2022. It is a great pleasure to introduce artist Sunhee Kim Jung and Dr. Thalia Vrachopoulos for the interview archive project at AHL Foundation. TV will interview Sunhee today.

Thalia Vrachopoulos holds a doctorate in the Philosophy of Art History from the City University of New York Graduate School. She has curated over one hundred national and international exhibitions and Biennials accompanied by scholarly catalogs. Thalia Vrachopoulos is a Professor of the visual arts at John Jay College of the City University of New York. She has written scholarly essays and reviews for NYArts, Visual Culture AD, Part, +-0, Public Art, Art in Culture, Art in Asia, Sculpture, Wolganmisool (월간미술), Art Asia Pacific and has been included in many international panels.

Thalia Vrachopoulos has co-authored a book on Hilla Rebay, the founder of the Guggenheim Museum, and has contributed chapters in such books as Simon Dinnerstein and Po Kim.

Artist Sunhee Kim Jung graduated from the MFA program at American University, Washington DC, after finishing her BFA from Corcoran College of Art & Design, Washington DC. Kim-Jung has been selected by numerous institutions as Artist for the Cuttyhunk Island Artist Residency Workshop in Massachusetts in June 2019, the Artist for the Tong Lau Space Artist Residency in Hong Kong in the summer of 2018, and also as Selected Artist from the US Department of State's Art in Embassy Program for the third time. Kim-Jung has been a Lecturer at Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, MD, since 2007. By AHL Foundation, she has been awarded the Andrew & Barbara Choi Family Grant in 2019, New York, and has been selected as a Runner-Up from the Media 8th Exhibit titled *What's Up?* In Annapolis, MD. She has enjoyed upwards of 15 Solo Exhibitions and 108 Group Exhibitions nationally and globally.

Dr. Thalia Vrachopoulos (TV): Ms. Kim this is some great record. Hello everyone. I have some questions for our artist Sunhee Kim. I'd like to start by asking her about some of the differences and pros and cons between the Korean and the American systems being that she has come from Korea and that she had studied in both places. Sunhee?

Sunhee Kim Jung (SJ): Korean is an infusion training style education and American training style is more of an immediate training style. Both are very important. You can build a skill and also improve critical thinking. The infusion training style can help to build skills and technique but is limited in its critical thinking. On the other hand, the

American training style is more diverse and helps in developing individual style. It's liberal but technically can be lacking in skill.

TV: This, of course, depends on diversity. It's also a little different in Korea because you learn more traditional methods. There's more emphasis on the methods of education and learning traditional methods of painting. In the United States of course, universities do teach technique.

SJ: Yes, of course.

TV: You attended a very good university. Corcoran is known for teaching drawing, particularly focuses on draughtsmanship.

SJ: I had long hours of drawing class, 6 hours of drawing classes per day.

TV: Do you think that your upbringing then contributed to how your work appears today and how this rearing is demonstrated in your work?

SJ: Yes, my mother was a calligraphy artist who wrote words everywhere in our house, including my bedroom. I think it's difficult not to be influenced when you are surrounded by something for so long, however, growing up I didn't dream of being an artist but when I was called an artist, I often thought back to when my mother created her work. I remember seeing her preparing, creating her work struggling sometimes, and sometimes starting over because she wasn't satisfied.

When I paint today, I am reminded of those times. After I got married, my mother visited me in the United States every year. I remember one time she was working on her



calligraphy, but found it lacking so she put it aside to discard it. But, coming across it, I could not throw it away because her visits were so rare. I would long to see her, and one day, as I was thinking about her, I had an idea to paint over her discarded painting. I felt like it was a way to honor her, but I really enjoyed making work with her piece. Later I produced a few more of these overlay paintings with her works.

My father was a very influential person as a well-known lawyer and social worker. He

established a middle school in an area that was in a very poor countryside. I grew up watching him serve the community. He served for his entire adult life, and he taught me to be a compassionate human being. This influence eventually led me to undertaking the project leading a team in creating a mural painting at an orphanage in Swaziland, Africa. Ironically these orphaned kids, while living in Swaziland, never had the opportunity to see the native animals depicted in the murals. Their resulting smiles and the joy of those kids just melted my heart. So, my next project again was a mural painting for an organization in Thailand for rescued children. This was a commitment made in 2019 for 2020. But this project is on hold due to Covid-19 and the conflict in the neighboring country Myanmar. I also received the Andrew Barbara Choi family grant from AHL foundation in 2019.

Living in the countryside produced unforgettable experiences and memories of playing out in nature with animals and insects and collecting leaves, and flowers. All of my paintings have plants. So I want to recreate my experiences and memories.

TV: That's quite a legacy you have with your father, the idea of justice, and your mom calligraphy which are really demonstrated in your work. These impressions are seen in the natural topographies you create.

SJ: Yes, they are.

TV: Your line has, as the Chinese philosopher Hsie He would say, “good bone” as does your mom's calligraphy. So, now I'd like to ask about any aspect of your experience that you can attribute to your tendency towards peace, love for humanity, and empathy for your fellow man. From what you've said in the past, I gathered that it was your personal life and rearing that gave rise to your social experience. Or, do you attribute it to something else entirely?

Sunhee: Well, my Christian faith is strong, and the core value of Christianity is love. But ironically my father was a strong Buddhist, that shares similar beliefs. He passed away

when I was ten years old, but I remember his teaching. He was good to others. So, I wanted to emulate him and be a good person which would hopefully bring peace not just to me but also to others. There is too much violence and ugliness in the world so I try to bring peace to my viewers through my works.

TV: Yes, your works demonstrate a respect for nature and a love for unity between all creation. These positive aspects are evidenced in your work, to the point that you at times even heroicize humanity. It is also obvious that these could have taken many other forms depending on stylistic choice. So why did you choose your particular method of representing nature in your painting?

Sunhee: When I was about 10 years old, my favorite TV shows were “Six Million Dollar Man”, “Bionic Woman” and “The Incredible Hulk.” They were heroes, but they didn't just become heroes of their own will. They got there through adversity, and it was adversity that made them heroes. All of us go through adversity and we all have the opportunity to become Heroes. I was dealing with this issue and believe that there is much good in humanity. Sometimes it's trapped, but we need to free it, and we have to try hard to make it free.

TV: Yes, indeed, there are many different kinds of heroes. Even delivery people today are heroes in this age of pandemics.

TV: So, you're primarily considered a painter, but you also do installations with *Hanji* paper. Which method, the spatial one or the 2-dimensional one speaks more to your inner need and why?

Sunhee: Yes, after my mom's first fall, she moved to the United States to live with me. You can say I'm very close to my mom. Yes, I'm a mama's girl. She told me to never leave her side. She wanted me to stay for her or care for her 24/7. It was understandable because if she couldn't care for herself, this made it very challenging for me to do well, or to paint, or teach. As I was caring for her, an idea dawned on me. My mother had a lot of Korean rice paper for her calligraphy paintings. I started twisting the paper as I stayed by her side. I twisted the paper to form long ropes depicting the long journey through life. In my work there are many different patterns resembling the different patterns of life. Everyone's lifestyle and lifetime cycle are different. Everyone goes through different hardships and struggles. When the time came to take care of my mom, I was reminded that life is so fragile, but at the same time, so resilient. We do what we can to survive. Whenever I struggle, I often think about my great-grandfather.

His life ended abruptly. He hung himself from a tree in protest against the Japanese government's occupation of Korea. He killed himself during the annexation of Korea by Japan. All it took was a simple rope. A rope around his neck took him from life to death instantly. The same rope that represents life's journey took his life. There is a thin line between life and death.

TV: Yes life is very fragile. What year was that?

Sunhee: So my grandfather passed away in 1910.

TV: The annexation?

Sunhee: Yes.

TV: Annexation of Korea by Japan.

SJ: Yes.

TV: So he was a hero. He really was a hero.

SJ: Yes.

TV: Your twisted paper works can represent life as well as the end of life. I know another artist by the name of Angiola Churchill who makes these twisted paper works as well as a kind of meditative practice. It is this repetitive action in these works that make them meditative because you can pass the hours as you did when you were looking after your mom.

SJ: Yes.

TV: How many lonely hours did you go through?

SJ: Yes it was sort of a healing moment too with lots of complicated emotions, but it was also kind of relaxing when I touched and twisted the paper for long hours at a time. I helped me to relax, and it was really good.

TV: Yes. Well, let's go a little bit away from this subject and return to that of your studies. During your studies what was the most relevant and important experience would you say, and at what school or teacher or what gave rise to it would you say?

SJ: Yes. It was during my second year at the Corcoran College of Art and Design when I saw Hans Hoffman's very colorful painting for the first time. I could feel my heart race as the strong and bright yet harmonious colors created a sense of mystery and novelty. Hence that time color also defined my paintings.

Another special moment was when at the Corcoran, I met Professor Tom Green who gave me the opportunity to have an exhibition at National Cathedral Hall in Washington D.C. on Earth Day. Moreover, during my French Embassy Exhibition in my senior year, he recognized my talent and was a great supporter. He inspired me to challenge myself and to keep developing my work. He was a true mentor. Since he passed away, I really miss him.

TV: Was his work about color as well?

SJ: Yes. And that of his pupils as well. He was an Abstract expressionism painter.

TV: And I imagine that he specialized in color theory, the relational color theories.

SJ: Yes.

TV: Your work is heavily based in nature featuring lots of plants and flowers, yet the human figure is not far behind. This anthropomorphic element is not common in Korean art as that was a philosophy espoused by Greek Antiquity and hence by the west in general. To what do you ascribe your use of the human figure as far as this goes?

SJ: Well, incorporating the human figure comes from my personal experience. I'm not a deep philosopher like you. I just started adding in human figures and bones after my hysterectomy in 2003. So, it was a way to deal with my loss. So, with my personal emotional feeling and with my pain, is how I invited those elements into my works.

TV: Yes, well, that's a very important reason why you would add the human figure, plus the idea of the love for humanity that you espouse. Your frieze format paintings offer a partial view of each scene, like a slice of life. Monet and his Lily panels use this device to create intimacy and offer the feeling of stepping into his work. But Monet was highly

influenced by Japanese screens that depicted scenes of a slice of nature with one corner compositions to create dynamism. Your forms are vertical and, in spirit, closer to the Greek freeze in their static aspects. But are your compositions inspired by Western or Eastern examples such as screens?



Sunhee Kim Jung, *Island 6*, 6 x 36 inches, oil on canvas, 2022

SJ: Well, there are two kinds. Actually, this *Island* series then now you see is influenced from the western style. The island series I made in the last two years. I had a feeling that I was isolated on a deserted island due to the pandemic of Covid-19. So, I have transom windows on the main entrance and living room so that is a motivation to make these shapes of the paintings. So, I can say it's more like a Western influence, but also, I made a screen painting that was influenced by Eastern influence. In fact, some of my older works are full-screen paintings. Yes, that was originally influenced by my familiarity with my Korean screen that I grew up with. The majority of Korean homes who could afford it have one or a few of these screens in their house, so absolutely I have an influence from both sides.

TV: Yes, I could see that. But Korean screens don't show real scenes as slices of life rather, they depict individual close-ups. I like The Chekhori screens, for example. Japanese screens show bird's eye views but your works are more like slices of life. As for the Greeks, I was referring to the format, which is called Freeze-like and was seen in the Parthenon freeze. This type is very much like your Island work; it unfurls horizontally like a ribbon.

SJ: Yes.

TV: Which you would have known from your studies at the Corcoran, of course.

SJ: Yes.

TV: So, it's very interesting. I like these works, and I want to see more of them in the future.

SJ: Yeah, I would agree with you.



Sunhee Kim Jung, *Born Heroes* series, exhibition view at Cade Gallery, 2008

TV: Your statement today as well as the title of your series *Born Heroes* implies that one has to fight to stay alive. Have you personally found life to be such a struggle, and which of your works do you think personifies this aspect?

SJ: Yes. Absolutely. The 21 paintings of a Born Heroes that you see are 20 works now because one work was already sold when I had the exhibition, so it was not here. Absolutely this work is depicting that it's not about staying alive it's about living, and having a life with purpose and joy. I'm no different than anyone else, so we all have a struggle in life and have to fight to live. So, in 2003, as I mentioned, I had a hysterectomy, and felt a big loss and loss of a part where life is created as a woman. So when I saw the post-operation x-ray, I saw the void and felt empty. I was shocked. I felt the need to feel the void again, and the *Born Hero* series was created.

TV: I see that in your Iron Baby.

SJ: Yes.

TV: The female form and the baby married to the floral scene here.

SJ: Yes.

TV: That's very sad.

SJ: Yes. So much, like when we are faced with adversity, we have to take action, which I did, so just staying alive isn't enough for me. So, we have to find a way to live, and we have what it takes inside of us to find the light. I just found it in me and brought it out to the surface.

TV : I see. So, my next question is a little bit more general. Do you feel that when looking at painting or when looking at art, there should be objective criteria, or are there objective criteria in your opinion, or is it all subjective, you think?

SJ: Well, that's a very good question. I can say the *Camouflage* series in my painting are objective paintings because I painted that series during the Afghanistan war. So, I wished to give soldiers peace and safety and to honor American soldiers. But it was not meant to be a political statement. Personally, I can say I just wanted to honor them. So, I can stay absolutely in the objective painting series in my work.

TV: Do you mean that about the subject?

SJ: No, I mean to paint those soldiers in the Afghanistan wars that is more objective.

TV: Yes, that was an objective as far as what was going on yes. I'm asking about the subjectivity or objectivity of art, which I guess I'm referring to the qualifications or the criteria for judging art. Do you think that they should be objective criteria?

SJ: Yes, there should be objective criteria. But other of my paintings are more subjective relatively. I think the emotions from what I get when I paint or when I view my work is very important. It's mixed with objective and subjective together criteria all the time.

TV: I see it makes sense you're thinking more as an artist with your feelings.

SJ: Yes.

TV: But I'm talking more like a critic, I guess when looking at a work of art a critic looks at it in order to see if it has a complex idea, to see if the work speaks to its time. So that would come into line with what you were saying about the soldiers in Afghanistan before. So then your work speaks to its own time that the work reaches the viewer and yes, because it contains objective subjects it speaks to its own time and to its audience. And then finally that the work be well made.

These criteria are kind of, as you said, subjective and objective depending on where you're coming from, the goal and what your education is, and what you're looking for. If you're talking about ancient China, you would go according to Hsie's rules of making calligraphy or making painting, right? If you go according to some of the schools of today, like the National Academy of Arts, you have to be more linear focusing on draftsmanship which would be more important than anything else. If you're talking about Joseph Albers, and Hans Hoffman, then color would be one of the most important criteria. So that's what I was referring to.

Finally, where are you headed with your work? Are you hoping to create more sculptural work from now on, or will you continue to produce paintings and drawings?

SJ: Well, at this time, I have no plans for any sculptural work. My current work is in painting.

TV: You did the sculptural installation?



Sunhee Kim Jung, (In progress) *Unseen Eyes*, each 30 x 30 inches & 24 x 48 inches, oil on canvas, 2022

SJ: Yes, before. The current painting is a series of *Unseen Eyes* displays images that cannot be usually captured by the naked eye. Sometimes photography shows beyond what the naked eye can see. So these series are unseen eyes and my depiction of a metaphysical image that can be seen with the help of a photograph.

So somehow, this summer was very hot and humid. I really liked the blue. So I invited the use of blue colors into my work, and I did a lot of blue paintings.

TV: Can you please explain the metaphysical aspects of the *Unseen Eyes*?

SJ: Yes. So when you look at my painting, there are black lines in the background. So those black line backgrounds do not give a traditional view from the natural naked eye. Only when you take a photography, or you can see those black lines. Within those black lines form can be produced, and there's a play with the line and forms that I play with. Those kinds of things I call metaphysical images.

TV: Do you mean like positive and negative space?

SJ: Yes, very similar. And, I'm preparing this Thailand mural painting also.

TV: Have you made a study of that?

SJ: You mean the European paintings?

TV: Have you made a study of the Thailand Murals?

SJ: Yeah, it's in my sketchbook. Wait a minute.

TV: That's great. I love looking at future projects. Yeah, this ought to be good.

SJ: This is the outside of the wall with soothing natural colors. Also, because many children live there, it shows wild-like images.

TV: Oh, that's great. Yes. Lovely.

SJ: Those types of wildlife.

TV: Lovely.

SJ: So, I'm going to paint these kinds of wild animals, wildlife with the lives of plants and waters. Those children can have a laugh and happiness.

TV: I think they will enjoy it very much.

SJ: Thank you.

TV: Thank you so much for being with us today, Sunhee.

SJ: Thank you.

TV: Hopefully, we will hear a lot of great things from you in the future.

SJ: Thank you.

JK: Thank you so much for this great interview. Let me finish the recording.