

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Seongmin Ahn
- Interviewer: Lilly Wei
- October 30, 2019 / Seongmin Ahn's Studio in Long Island City, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Soojung Hyun (AKAA Research Fellow 2019-2020)
- 9 video files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Lilly Wei (LW): We're here to talk about your work, your studio practice, and your philosophy on life. How long have you been here in New York? How and when did you come to this country?

Seongmin Ahn (SA): I have been here for a little over twenty years. I came to the US in 1998 to go to graduate school after I finished my MFA at Seoul National University in Korea. I earned my second MFA from MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art) in Baltimore and came to New York in 2001. I started to live in Queens in my early residence, and there was a little moving around, but my studio is still based in Long Island City, New York.

LW: What brought you here?

SA: When I became interested in coming to the USA, a lot of people asked me, "If you study Asian traditional art, why are you going to America, not China?" And my answer to that was I studied pretty much the same contents in Korea that I can learn in China. I might want to learn new things: that's why I chose to come to America. It is a bigger world and I always dreamed of something bigger than where I was. I'm from Seoul, which is still a local city. New York is another local city, but it's a bigger locality in the sense of it being like the center of the global world.

LW: How did your new life in the States impact you at the beginning and how did it affect your work and your thinking?

SA: It was really hard for me to process, even though I was really happy, ambitious, and excited to come here to study, live, and work. Sadly, I got sick, so I had chronic pain for a long time, almost ten years, right after I came. I had been sick throughout graduate school, and then the whole time in New York. I really struggled with pain. So that made me struggle more in my everyday activities and in developing my work. Some of my early works are definitely related to my pain and how I came to understand and overcome it.

LW: Can you talk about that a little more? How did you overcome your pain in the process of making art?

SA: Since I had started painting, I was seeking some metaphysical world that I can work on, a kind of spiritual world, something beyond this physicality or some reality I was dealing with. So, during that period, the subject of my work was "Beyond Weeping Pain." I was looking into what is possible beyond the reality that I was living in and living right now.

LW: How did you finally get beyond this physicality and beyond the pain you were experiencing?

SA: The chronic pain lasted for ten years. It was aggravating and moving from one spot to another. It would begin from the neck and back and move to the lower back and knees and all different joints. I was doing a lot of therapy and exercises at the time. Of course, I did many practical things to help with the condition. I also did meditation at one point, which I continued for one and a half years for an hour and a half every day. It was to have some awakening moment through Dharma talks that I attended in Korea. This combination helped me deal with the stress. From there, I gradually started feeling better, and soon after, I got pregnant. Following my pregnancy, my physical condition improved. I felt stronger as a mom.

LW: I wanted to discuss your early works. First of all, when you come to your studio in the morning, what do you usually do? How do you get started?

SA: I come to my studio early in the morning, usually between 6:00 and 8:00 a.m. Sometimes when I have a big show or a big project, I'll arrive at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. The studio is pretty dark at that time, especially in the winter. I love turning on the lights. My happiest moment is walking into my studio. I make tea, make myself calm down, and really try to separate myself from my real life. It's there that I feel innerconnected. I like having a serene moment where I can really focus on doing my work. That process is really important for me: it's a happy moment. This studio is my sanctuary.

LW: For an artist, their studio is their sacred space. Once you've done that, what do you do next?

SA: Each day is different. It's a long process. Sometimes it takes a few months to develop ideas from sketches.

LW: So do you start with a sketch?

SA: Well, the process, yes. Developing the sketch takes a month or two, then I have to prepare papers and prime them. There are a lot of different layers and colors, so each day is different according to where I am with each project.

LW: The sketch on which you are working—is that your working model? If I understand correctly, you will take the sketch and eventually transfer it and it will become the finished work.

SA: Yes, the sketch has to be fully developed, almost 95%.

LW: It's interesting: I find that many artists depend on sketches more than you would imagine and that some people make actual sketches to scale.

SA: My sketch is the same scale as the work because it's an under sketch: I have to trace it. The mulberry paper that I use is really fragile. It's hard to erase mistakes or cover them with different colors, so it has to begin with perfect lines.

LW: So, it's like the fresco in a way, the fresco in Western art where you can't really make any kind of changes once it's there. Do you usually use ink and pigments?

SA: Pigments and watercolor paint, but the application of watercolor is different from the Western idea of gouache: we have a different process for that, layers and layers are needed.

LW: Could you discuss further the way that you use your materials? How did you choose them?

SA: I went to a specialized arts high school and studied Asian traditional painting in Korea, so I was able to try every single different possible medium like oil painting, watercolor, and sculpture. In my high school, Asian traditional mediums spoke to me a lot. They did not have thick layers, but they could still create some deep senses. I was really fascinated with how the traditional brushes and ink painting work.

LW: Did you have any struggles with that? Did you want to make your work in the opposite mode?

SA: You mean a different medium? Early on, in graduate school and my early period in New York, I explored Korean art for several years by exploring the minimal concept of installations, and at one point I went back to tradition. At that moment, my body wasn't really able to make actual installations anymore. I was developing more conceptual work, and in terms of my physical condition, I had a lot of chronic pain. I wanted to develop something I could do at home while I was nurturing a baby. So, I began to use my own traditions to doodle and paint.

LW: I think that's an interesting note, because you always think of it more as a theoretical position that you can come to some kind of mental shift and conceptual thinking.

SA: Different things happen all together, it's sort of a force that drives me in different directions. As I was developing my early work, I saw a lot of similar work happening or work that someone had made already. I saw one artist and I can't remember his name, but he really did what I was envisioning. It was amazing. I could've continued in this vein if I had wished. But instead, I found myself interested in developing a new approach. However, at one point I lost interest in pursuing that idea, developing that same work.

LW: The abstract work?

SA: The installation. That work was really related to my pain and how I see the world and how I want to see the world, like seeking a metaphysical world that was related to my pain. But at the same time, I was getting better with the awakening moment and beginning to develop a new perspective. So the chronic pain didn't bother me anymore.

LW: So many women have shifted their practice after they have a child, just because of so many practical reasons. Some of them no longer have the space, they don't have the time, or they change the way that [they work], and it's not to their detriment, it's just a certain kind of adaptation. We need resilience, I think. You mentioned *Beyond*, and I thought we could talk a little bit about how you started off in installations and more sort of minimalist work. There were three works that I was looking at: *Beyond* (2001), *A Circle Is Not A Circle* (2003), and *White Square* (2008) that have a spiritual dimension. Would you talk about the trajectory of those three works?

SA: *Beyond* is from my graduate thesis show at MICA, and that was my most exciting moment. But at the same time, it was a really hard time for me to be in the U.S. with all the pain. I was seeking and looking beyond what I was in. But all those works, I was still using the same materials, so it's the same paper but a different concept: a more minimal, non-conventional way. I folded the paper repeatedly into one-inch squares. And then I sprayed light watercolor, so that it has a lot of repetitive application from light to dark—maybe sixty to seventy layers from light to darker shades, but not too dark. It's an accumulation, so the pigment can make it darker.

LW: Could you give us a quick description of *Beyond*?

SA: That work is an installation that I wrapped around the corner space of the gallery. As it approaches the corner, the pigment gets lighter. So from the images, it just looks like the light comes in from behind. But in actuality, it is the opposite. The corner is usually darker because it gets less light. In this work, I was trying to show what is happening beyond the physical world. I want my work to take my viewers beyond the limits of the physical world.

LW: That seems to be a need or a desire that just grabs your whole production. And then from that you go to *A Circle Is Not A Circle*, and I notice that you were mentioning the *Tao of Physics* quite a bit. Could you talk about that, it's relation to the work before and to this idea? It was a very popular book at the time.

SA: Yes, the circle of the work is not flat even though it is made by drawing on two dimensional paper. This is an installation piece on a corner spot, where two perpendicular walls meet between a wall and a floor. By looking around the work of two different dimensions, you may discover a singular point of view to see the perfect circle, which presents itself as if it were a black hole. I see *A Circle Is Not a Circle* as having a

strong connection to my previous work, *Beyond*. In both works I am trying to portray a different world from this dimension of reality. That is also related to a metaphysical spiritual world that I used as a scientific concept.

LW: You seem to be talking about reality on the subatomic level, which might also integrate with certain aspects of Eastern philosophy.

SA: The title *A Circle Is Not A Circle* is from the famous sentence “Particles are also waves,” which describes new findings in subatomic physics. So, when scientists [began to] break atoms into smaller units, which are subatomic particles, they realized that Newton’s theory didn’t work anymore, because they found [that] subatomic particles behave differently. So, in order to explain what they found, physicists created this paradoxical statement: particles are also waves.

LW: I didn’t know about the wave but in particle theory it seems to be that what we think is solid—I mean, theoretically we should be able to walk through that wall if the particles are resonating in the right way. Because nothing is that solid. Anyways, it is conceptually and metaphorically related.

SA: It’s very hard to explain the concept. Even though we seem to understand it, it’s really hard to explain. But somehow I found it’s really strongly related to Eastern philosophy.

LW: I thought one of the reasons we should talk about it... it is a basis for your work even if the expression of it has changed over the years. So, this is about 2008—from there I think you go into a more seemingly traditional style. And you make a shift into more presentational work. And you’ve already discussed a little bit the reasons why, but let’s talk about the work. It seems to me that once they come, these themes are recurring. These images are recurring. And a lot of them are domestic objects. Things that are associated with Asian culture, Asian art, Korean culture, Korean art. Things like rice bowls and other kinds of vessels and chopsticks, peonies. There’s a lot of chopsticks and rice. And noodles and transformations and also water, waterfalls. That’s a huge part of your work for quite a few years, right?

SA: Yes.

LW: Right, and they’re beautiful. They’re stunningly... It’s very magical. This transformation or very also whimsical and delightful transformations, like noodles transforming into something more.

SA: I totally understand why you think my work is more Eastern, and, on some level, I agree with you. I still use a lot of iconography coming from an Eastern perspective. I’m still in the process of developing my work. So, within this perspective, I began to

introduce Western motifs in subtle ways. In the beginning, I was looking around museums to find inspiration. For example, I tried to find tea cups from the Victorian period in England. However, I ended up finding a similar design at the flea market in my neighborhood. Teacups and other objects have a certain relationship to my life today. I also started to use the French Rococo chair that I saw in the Metropolitan Museum. And in the future, after this work, I plan to incorporate more of these everyday Western objects.

LW: Why the French Rococo chair?

SA: I am in search of connections. It doesn't matter whether it's American or French. The two different objects are from two different cultures and two different time periods. I wanted to have some kind of deeper connection with these objects insofar as my attraction to them in everyday life. So I am still in the process of trying to find these connections, which, in some indirect way, might help explain how I choose to live my life. Ultimately, it's about how I understand others, and how I understand cultural diversities in the East and West as being one world. As for the Victorian period, that's when imperialism was happening in tandem with the industrial revolution. This was an extremely important and interesting period in world history, a time when the two hemispheres were influencing one another.

LW: During the Victorian era, colonization was becoming a worldwide phenomenon. I recall you mentioned that your noodle paintings were related to Vietnamese pho and how you saw them as an emblem of colonization. Do you think your work might also have political content?

SA: I am aware of how history is and how the relationship moved between ethnic groups in different nations. This makes me think more about where I am, including why and what I should cook, and why and what I should eat. Even so, within the middle of my thinking I think I choose to become more Korean. On some level, I want to make my own traditions more meaningful and at the same time make the menu more global and international.

LW: I was interested in one of your citations, which was actually from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It was interesting how you see the parallels between certain Eastern philosophies and Western philosophies. But *The Chronicles* are specifically about Christianity. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a huge Christian epilogue. Even though I read it as a child, I thought it was fantastic, the idea that you could walk into a wardrobe and you're in another world.

SA: Well, I don't have any specific emotions of Christianity in there, but within all the philosophies and religions, there are various connections of how we see light as having spiritual content. So, I wanted to develop that idea. What I got from that book was how I

might find the moment when I could relate all things to one another. I was reading that book for the first time in English during the time I was raising my daughter. It gave me a new perspective on how I saw the people around me.

LW: You've been back to Korea on several occasions.

SA: I see my own history as Korean. And I'm not sure how this will reveal itself in my work in the future. It's a slow process, how these different experiences come back to me.

LW: So, some things have stayed pretty much the same for you in your work. This would include the materials and the ink color pigments you incorporate into your art. I am looking at work you did last year, for example, such as *Digital Delusion* (2019), *I Love You* (2019), and *Voyage* (2019). There are a couple of things in these works I wanted to discuss. They seem to deal much more with contemporary culture and we didn't discuss your change in scale. I know you have gone from relatively small to enormous.

SA: So, what was the first one?

LW: The first one relates to how you have changed your way of visualization. It appears more about contemporary culture. Your imagery has changed. Could we talk more about that?

SA: That's one of the things I have slowly introduced in my work. I am introducing Western objects into a Korean context. As I became aware of my daughter becoming addicted to electronics, I was thinking more about how this will affect our lives, and our future generations. How will this change our lives in both negative and positive ways? So, *Digital Delusion* has some negative notions. The word "Delusion" in the title does not suggest something positive. But it is a phenomenon that I see in the world where young people are getting manipulated to think in terms of social media. I'm not really judging whether it's good or bad. Rather I am observing what is happening in a way that will keep the question out there.

LW: And these are your current works?

SA: Yes, this relates to my current work.

LW: Another aspect of your work I find interesting are your references to architecture, which suggest both Eastern and Western concepts. You talked about how you reversed the concept of perspective from the Renaissance which affects the planning of the work. In some traditional Asian art, like Japanese, the perspective is either asymmetric or it

skews outwards or comes out into the room. I think you are bringing these two kinds of perspectives into your work. Is this true?

SA: Yes, most of the work employs linear perspective. And there are a few areas where I use the reverse perspective. So instead of putting the vanishing point in the back, I put it in front so it's getting smaller in front and larger in back. This would be the opposite of linear perspective as it was developed in the Renaissance. I want to introduce people to flexible and multiple perspectives. There's not one perspective for people to understand an idea in relation to another. This is also true with the French Rococo chair. There are multiple ways to look at it and interpret it. Different concepts and perspectives on the world can be all connected in a way.

LW: I see landscape elements in your point of view as well.

SA: Yes, I am interested in different thoughts and ideas. I want to bring different philosophies into my work.

LW: One of the most prevalent things I find in your work suggests a surrealism theme. Your work may hold a more whimsical temperature as well as a kind of spirituality. I would ask why you chose this position to work rather than realism.

SA: Well, I might be a dreamer. There are a lot of things that I want to explore and experiences I want to bring into my art. This takes me outside the realm of realism. Each work is an individual case that has its own philosophical narrative. Finally, I think all of this is related to my emotions and how I think at the moment in relation to looking at objects.