

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

Interview

- Interviewee: Jin Yong Choi
- Interviewer: David Hanlon
- January 21, 2022 / Jin Yong Choi's studio, Dumbo, Brooklyn, NYC
- Recorded and transcribed by JooHee Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2021-2022)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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David Hanlon (DH): I'm David, a curator in New York City.

JooHee Kim (JHK): How did you two first meet?

Jin Yong Choi (JYC): We met a long time ago. And he created a show, and I was in that show.

DH: The time when I started studying curatorial studies was the moment when we started to work together outside of just being friends. I found his works really engaging and also a lot of things that you don't really see in contemporary art when speaking about the end of times and socioeconomic issues. So, I thought that he brought a lot to the table in terms of media content, the way it is. [His works] sort of lit up a room without trying to have everything naturally and almost effortlessly, knowing how much work really went into it.

JYC: Nowadays, I'm focusing on narrative and materiality.

DH: You mentioned narratives. Could you elaborate on that?

JYC: Oh yes. These days, I'm making a project named Digital Shaman. I create my own kind of novel. When I have time, I write some stories about the apocalyptic future. Based on that, I create my sculpture works—these projects start from my written novel. But I don't want to show my novel to the world. I'd just keep it by myself as a secret diary. I want to just explain my story and those written works through my sculptures. Each artwork has its individual story, its own background, or some function. I create a lot of stuff, and there are some details on them. It's all just about an apocalyptic future that I created. It's kind of a fantasy. These are the pieces that I'm making nowadays.

DH: That's really interesting about this Digital Shaman and sort of this manifesto that you've created. Are you saying that you're the Digital Shaman?

JYC: Oh, yes! Let me explain why I first started creating these works. I grew up in South Korea (Korea) and Korea is, well, it is really difficult to survive these days. For the young generation, I am not sure if we share a similar emotion on the fact that we don't have a bright future anymore. The young generation like us, people of the age of 20s or 30s, they don't think about the future; they just go to the Gucci store or whatever. Because Korean society is pretty strict, and its economy is screwed up.

Even though you work really hard, you cannot buy a house for your entire life in Korea. The house price keeps going up, and the minimum wage is like, only \$7. However, the price for buying groceries is even higher than in New York City in Korea, which is insane.

The young generation doesn't want to think about their future anymore. I was thinking



about this, and actually, I had a depressing feeling. Then I thought of how Korea is a homophobic and misogynistic country—so, at the end of such thoughts, I reached this idea of the country's gloomy future. So, I decided to create my own future—You know, my own world.

So, I was just stuck in my home like a Hikikomori to create new worlds in my mind, and I created an apocalyptic future where everybody would be screwed up, and everything would be destroyed. While some survivors will maintain their lives in the future, I have to be someone who will be regarded as an essential person and not a loser. I wanted to become a God or King in this apocalyptic future! So, in this world, people will need to follow me all the time.

DH: There's a lot of work that goes around within our generation on a stance of socioeconomics and where we're from. But something that I see within your work is a lot of different references, culturally. You know, whether it could be ideologies, backgrounds, and also materials and methods that you're using. Could you speak about the different pieces and what you've chosen for which ones? Because some seem really specific to the design you've chosen and what you're representing within the iconography.

JYC: Oh yeah. I was really interested in religion first. And then, I thought of a shaman who brings a God. For instance, a long time ago, they brought God to the inside of their body, and then they spread God's word to the people. At that time, people believed, "this is God speaking. We must follow those words." Then I thought, maybe I can use that power. In the future, perhaps I should become a shaman first, then pretend to have God inside me. Like, I would say "you have to follow me" to people. Therefore, my first idea of being a shaman was to pass some past knowledge to the future.

I think knowledge is the key point, because if the apocalyptic future really happens, even if we bring well-known rich people such as Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, they could not cultivate rice with their money in my apocalyptic future. They cannot grow wheat. They wouldn't know how to cultivate.

What I'm saying is that if I know all the information that needs to survive, for instance, making survivor kits or knowledge on how to create water from nothing, then people will follow me. With all historical knowledge, including political issues of the past, stored in my body, I will act as a medium for knowledge of the past, and approach the new people as a shaman, then they will not only follow me but also treat me as a God, or as a king.

As I already mentioned, I can't be a loser in my apocalyptic future. I downloaded a lot of PDF files about those kinds of topics, like how to cultivate grains, how to build a house--very primitive knowledge actually. After the end of the world happens, we must repeat those primitive techniques.

But then, I was thinking, "what if I have digital items at the same time we create primitive technology?" So that's why I mixed together technology and very primitive methods to make those kinds of objects. This is a sort of mixture of both the future and primitive past but in a timeline of the future. I download the PDF files on a smartphone, which is an iPhone six. You can see it over there [Figure 1]. Only my fingerprint can open that smartphone. If I want power, I only need my fingerprint. Even if I'm dead, someone has to open the smartphone again, right? So, I copied my fingerprint in silicone so it can work as a silicone key. Now it looks like a Silicon glove.

Someone could use that silicon glove and open the iPhone six after I'm dead.

One of your questions is whether the different pieces have different narratives. When I make water or fire or electricity, I should wear this mask, like a Water God mask, a Fire God mask, or a Wind God mask. As such, each piece has different elements. For example, this is a Water God mask. I have a file called "how to create water from nothing." So, when I'm wearing this mask and use my left hand, the water can be here (under the left hand). I will just pass the knowledge of how to make the water; however, a thousand years later people will be saying, "there was Jin, who created water." It is all sort of stupid idea or gimmick, but those are my own unique works in which I create everything. For example, this work is a bug zapper, so it has fire, water, and electricity [Figure 2]. The idea of electricity in this zapper is actually from Korean shamanism, which uses a jingle bell, which the shaman shakes to make a sound. Then God comes into the shaman. So, in this zapper, when I create electricity, I actually have a battery pack, and I use a solar panel, to get a considerable amount of electricity. When I create electrical power, I'm going to use these Shamanic items and then pretend God is in my body.

I tried to mix a lot of different cultures and religions simultaneously because, in this apocalyptic country, the world I create will actually be a multi-cultural society that I mix with what I learned from the past. And the next survivor or next generation will only learn from me about the past—Whatever this world may look like, Westernized or Orientalized world, the survivors in the future will not know what the world is.

They have to get this themselves (without having any knowledge regarding the object). For example, for this helmet, which is an actual crown from Christianity, a long time ago when important people died, they used a lot of jewels to decorate the skulls.

So, my idea is, when I'm dead, I will wear this Christian crown, and also things that are from different cultures, like Japanese or Korean culture. There are also different Western cultures, such as Middle Eastern, South American, and Tibet. So, I mix it all together, and I have so many different masks as well from Africa, Latin America, basically every continent. I use them as references, and then that mixed culture becomes my culture—only one culture. I will be the only God in the future.

DH: Only Jin! So, as I look around the room, there's a lot of technology, a lot of colors. And you're speaking about how there are these databases you've written to share knowledge and also files on these outdated modes of technology for the future. But as I'm looking at everything here, I'm also noticing parts of your work that are quite tactical and immersive as well as agriculturally required for continuing on. You have your diary, manifesto, databases, and PDFs, but it looks like you also have embedded the tools needed to create life again, Should the need occur. I was wondering if you could talk about that as well. I see some things in the hands.

JYC: Yeah. But before that, I just want to add more details about the hand in this work [FIGURE 3]. I've put some rice in these hands—when I grow rice at the farm, I will crack this hand and then get out the rice and then cultivate rice. These details all have different functions, like this security camera.

And about your other question—I actually love the word you used, “tactile.”

DH: It seems like not only have you given the information to continue, but you've also shown them the way.

JYC: I'm sort of Hikikomori—I always stay home, but I watch every exhibition. If someone asks, 'Hey, did you see the Whitney Biennial?' then I check it out on the internet. And then I answer, 'yeah, I saw that.' I never go out and see the gallery or a show. Then I realized, 'this is something we have to figure out in the future, because a lot of people nowadays are just using a smartphone, on a flat-screen to get all their information. Even for instinct, we depend on that flat-screen.'

ASMR or a satisfying video is very trendy everywhere. I think the reason for it being popular is because of the smartphone. When you are young, you actually touch the sand or slime. When we grow up, we can touch nature. Nowadays, we just watch smartphones, everything on flat screens. So, I think we need to smell, touch, and hear something. That's why I wanted to focus on a tangible object that would cause tactile or what I call “haptic desire.” People have a desire to touch things. If there is something that looks like jelly or something that looks like weird skin, people desire to touch it. That's why I use a lot of resin, silicone, and a lot of jewelry, tiny things that people would want to poke.

My intention was to bring the public to the gallery and have them see the real objects. When you see something on a screen, you cannot see tiny details. You have to come to

real space and see them with your own eye. But, of course, even though you are here at the gallery, you cannot touch it. It's like a kind of game playing against myself. I want to use a lot of different colors as well. Like this pink color and the green color, you can see here in my work, actually, if you take a picture of them, the colors look different on the screen—so they have different looks on digital images. You need to see it in person to see its real color.

Particularly for some people in the young generation, I don't think they use a lot of their instinct in real, physical space. So, I thought—what if I use those kinds of things that might arouse curiosity about the texture, the feel, the smell, and the real color in my artwork? Which would make people want to touch my artwork: “Oh! I want to touch it!” And which will bring them to the gallery to watch in person.

DH: You made your point about the necessity of being in the moment in this space. You've spoken about how you want it to be an influence, and how are you really creating that? And I was wondering what sort of influences you draw from.

JYC: I use a lot of references, like different cultures in different stories. So I read a lot of novels and watch a lot of animation.

JHK: Which novels and animation do you like to read or watch?

JYC: When I grew up in Japan, they felt the apocalyptic future already, because when they got bombarded with an atomic bomb in Hiroshima, they thought, ‘this is the end of the world.’ Then the bubble economy came, which soon began to decline. Japanese people's idea of the end of the world got deeper, which led them to create a lot of animations about an apocalyptic future. Like Akira and Evangelion, those are the animations I watched while growing up. But back then, the economy in Korea was doing fine—actually, the economy was on the rise —however, nowadays, suddenly, as what happened to Japan, Korea's economy and birth rate are going down. There is a Korean book titled Ji Young Kim, born in 1982, which became a bestseller in Korea right after its publication. The book is about women's stories in Korea. I read books about how difficult it is to survive in this country nowadays, especially for women. I think the reason why a book with such a topic can become a bestseller is that people share this emotion of struggling to survive in this country.

Because women's rights are pretty bad in Korea, women are never able to have a baby. For instance, in Korea, if you are pregnant, you can get fired, or the work environment will make it hard. Therefore, the young generation often thinks, "I'm not going to make a baby," because they don't have enough money and opportunity to sustain that life of having a family.

It is highly unlikely for a young couple to buy a house, and therefore there are no families. For instance, a lot of schools, including universities, will need to be closed in 10 years. There will be no newborn children in Korea, which means this country, 30 years later, with no babies. Even though we didn't get bombarded by a nuclear bomb, it looks like we are getting an economic bomb.

DH: Looking at your work, I noticed there's such realism in it when it comes to the structures, the fleshiness of these sculptures, and it's paired with these colors that you would not assimilate with the subject matters necessarily, but somehow, you've created such a nice balance. That's so unique. Since we're talking about influences, I was curious where these colors came from?

JYC: I'm really interested in rituals like shamanism. I wanted to talk about violence. I was a violent person.

And then I read one book, actually. I'm deep in the old sacrificing ritual because people actually killed people and then displayed it in the village! So, I wondered— "why I'm so violent and why were these all people in the past like me the same?"

So, I dug into the sacrificing ritual. And then, at one point, I realized that people thought, if you kill some animals, you can release your stress. Even though you watch them die, you can release your stress. So, I thought, oh, this is interesting. And then nowadays people play games, sports like soccer to release stress.

We actually have tools to release our desire to express violence or decompress our stress. But I don't play games at all. I don't play soccer or anything, which means I don't have anything to release my violence. And, of course, I cannot kill sheep as people in the past did.

Then I had to do something to release my violence and my stress. So, I created a lot of kinds of flesh colors that would look like skin, with a lot of fleshiness. In sum, I had to release my stress somewhere at some point.

Also, this is a Shamanic item. In the old days, they used real animals to get their skin, flesh, and even blood. So, I wanted to just recreate such a ritual without really killing animals (like people using fake fur these days).

DH: You take many forms and cultivate inside of us in so many different ways. And as a Shaman, you not only have to do the work yourself but then show everyone else basically how it's done. I think that's great.

There seems to be such a body of knowledge within your work, especially within the references, but also within the physical objects themselves. With that knowledge, I was wondering if you have anything to share with us.

JYC: I am adding up new projects, too. I created these, the Digital Shaman objects that I can wear. For example, this crown helmet mask I can wear with this suit. However, this one is, actually, a statue, which is kind of a guardian to protect my village.

This might be a paranoid idea, but because I'm the God, I'm the king, and I'm the only one in my imaginary apocalyptic world, there is a high possibility that people will want to kill me. Or maybe people who have a bunker, you know, they would create something inside the bunker, and then maybe they would try to attack us. I was thinking maybe I have to make some guardians like people a long time ago did, too.

Primitive people, like indigenous people in Korea, even made totem statues. I took the references of indigenous people's totems like in Korea, France, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

I call this guardian who has a human figure [FIGURE 4]. This is a security camera with a solar panel. Security cameras will always be connected to my smartphone. This helmet has a smartphone actually installed here—so that I will know who comes to my village. This records every scene, and I can watch it anytime online. Also, this belly is sort of a map—which I got this idea when I went to Korea at the Incheon Airport. The airport has AI machines that walk like humans and show their maps on their bellies. Actually, I started my next work.

DH: Yeah, what's next?

JYC: After this crazy pandemic world, I just wanted to make artworks for fun. Making art is a kind of therapy for me. As I said, I need to release my stress and desire to express violence. I want to create really what I want.

My other new projects will be bloody flesh, with a bit of queerness, also involving human genitals. I want to put every desire into these sculptural works. That's what I'm currently working on.

JHK: In terms of apocalyptic narrative, how did the COVID outbreak affect your work? It appears your work relates to this current pandemic event.

JYC: I played a lot with masks even before the pandemic—I had like 10 masks. When the pandemic happened, I was a student, and my professor (actually, back then, we didn't think COVID was a severe disease) said, "whoa, look at you. You can be popular because you are already making masks." And then I was like, yeah, maybe, I'm so lucky. So I applied to a lot of exhibitions during the pandemic, and actually, curators selected me because I was talking about the apocalyptic future, and this pandemic event connected to this gloomy future. You know, like global warming. By seeing this very primitive mask with technologies like LED, people would have thought like, "oh, maybe in the future, particularly this apocalyptic future, like in a movie, maybe we have to wear a mask or helmet like an astronaut all the time."

A lot of curators selected me because of this pandemic situation. However, it felt bad because even though I was making and dreaming about the apocalyptic feature myself, I didn't want this really to happen in the real world. I created this because I wanted people to think — "if we don't care about any of the situations on earth, then we have to follow this stupid artist in the future, and maybe we have to be slaves to him." In the real world, I don't want that kind of world. I just want to pass the emotion like that, but I don't really want this apocalyptic future to happen.

So actually, to me, when this pandemic happened, I felt sorry. You know, even though several curators selected me, however, at the same time, I didn't want what was happening to be real.

JHK: It seems you think the technology is sort of a God, for example like a security camera which can see everything everywhere whenever.

JYC: No. I call it Digital Shaman. Even though we have all the new technologies, we still have shamanism in Korea everywhere. I think that believing ghosts or God is like human nature or something, but the technology actually is just helping them. Korean shamans used natural objects a long time ago. But nowadays, they use a lot of new technologies as well—Sometimes, they use apps (applications). So actually, technology is kind of just a medium to persuade people to believe them.

So to me, the power is knowledge. The power is the PDF file. It makes me God because even though intelligent people can survive, they won't know how to cultivate rice. Even if they are good at some subject, let's say math, still, they wouldn't know how to grow the grains.

Because a long time ago, people in, for example, the Renaissance, could do every genre, music, art, science, medical; but nowadays every genre has become too specific. Therefore, even though smart people can survive, they wouldn't know how to create necessary things, like a house.

I think knowledge is power. That's why I downloaded the knowledge as a PDF file, but the new technology helped me to do that. So, I just adapted technology to survive.

JHK: You mentioned that you can actually wear your sculptures. Do you, by any chance, plan to wear them in the form of a performance?

JYC: I applied for the residency program on Governor's Island, and this island, to me, looks like an apocalyptic future world because of a lot of abandoned houses there. Some time ago, this island was a military base; nowadays, although several artists use this site, some areas are still empty and shabby. If I pass that interview for the residency program, I'll go there and take a video of the performances.

So, yes, I really want to wear them and do some performances as real shamans do. I'm a good performer, I think. I have some performance artwork, too.

DH: Oh, right, yeah.

JYC: You've seen that performance. But that performance involved nudity which also relates to shamanism.

That performance is about Byungshin dance (병신 춤). There was a Byungshin dance that mimics royal people. Because royal people, like a king and upper-class people, always made a baby between close family members, their babies were disabled. So, the poor people mimicked the retarded royal people and then made some performances based on it. There was, of course, a political issue involved, but at the same time, some countries, including Korea, thought that retarded people were God or angels from the sky because they not only acted weird but also were really smart or genius, as well as innocent. So, people in the past thought Byungshin was an angel from God or from the sky. So I mimicked that function in my performance to become a God, become an angel.

And at the same time, I wanted to talk about human rights as well because mimicking the disabled nowadays means insulting them. But a long time ago, those Byungshins had power while staying inside castles, while the people outside lived poorly. These days, they [Byungshins] are underprivileged (and its definition and surrounding society changed), so it changed the hierarchy (and now mimicking them means insulting) as well.

JHK: I really want to watch it.

JYC: You know, Gong Ok-jin (performer, choreographer, 1931–2012), she passed away a few years ago, and I saw the news, and that was the moment when I thought, "I have to do this." I feel really inspired by her work. And there are other performers like Ahn Eun Me (performer, choreographer, 1963–), who follows Gong Ok-jin's works. I watched her performance in Paris and found many people watching that show, including Rick Owens (fashion designer, 1962–).

In the end, Ahn Eun Me invited every Parisian to come to the stage and danced the Byungshin dance. I was so surprised, like why do Parisians like dancing like the retarded? And then actually they become like real babies, like innocent people. So, to me, it looks like this is heaven; these people are angels.

But at the same time, some people were irritated by the fact that this performance mimicked the handicapped people.

DH: That's something we came upon when I was curating, having spoken to Jin about the meaning behind his works and the evolution of the meaning behind the behavior. Some viewers did express concern. Because they were aware of what was represented but did not necessarily know how connotations changed with time.

Something to be noted that links his work with his Digital Shaman and performance art is how unapologetic he is about sharing knowledge. There is a lot to say when it comes to the background. You're in a place where your surroundings don't know and with a lot of different ways to say that.

So, the performance work that he's done based on these subjects, I think is really, really strong. But also, it should be taken with caution. As you can see, Jin's works speak quite clearly and have fun.

Images



Figure 1 *Yeom-la Daewang suit-2*, tablet, battery pack, solar panel, LED light, print on paper, smartphone hanger, resin, silicone, epoxy clay, acrylic paint, paper box, found object, 35"x10"x8", 2022



Figure 2 *Sib-Seong and Sib-O-Seong Bang-ul*, bug zapper, brooch, jingle bell, found object, epoxy clay, 19"x12"x4", 18.5"x12"x2, 2021



Figure 3 *Yeom-la Daewang suit-2*, tablet, battery pack, solar panel, LED light, print on paper, smartphone hanger, resin, silicone, epoxy clay, acrylic paint, paper box, found object, 35"x10"x8", 2022



Figure 4 *King of Gwangmok*, tablet, security camera, speaker, LED light, coyote bone, resin, epoxy clay, silicone, computer part, wire, plaster, artificial teeth, found object, 38"x 28"x23", 2021