

# AHL Foundation

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

- Interviewee: Daru Jung Hyang Kim
- Interviewer: Stephen L. Thompson
- July 16, 2020 / Daru Jung Hyang Kim's studio in Clermont, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Soojung Hyun (AKAA Research Fellow 2019-2020)
- 6 video files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Stephen L. Thompson (SLT): I had some questions about how you approach what you've called the series in nature. I'm always struck by your painting, how it captures something that feels sort of mysterious. I'm wondering if you could tell us about your thinking there and how you approach the work that you make.

Daru Jung Hyang Kim (DJHK): I get inspired by nature a lot, but not all the time. When I was young, I was very inspired by Kandinsky, who talked a lot about the spirituality of art, and I tried to stay in that line. In a way, nature is very mysterious even though we think we know it, so I start there and then try to capture the spirituality and mystery of nature and our view of that. I tried to translate that in my own language of abstraction. When somebody wants to look at my work, especially large paintings, I want them to think of it as a sort of mysterious landscape that combines patterns and some kind of reminiscence of natural images. A lot of times I use floral images, but that is more patternized. As you can see in the large painting in the back, I start the painting as if it's an abstract color field painting. This part is really fun because it's sort of blank and I think at the same time, 'This is easy.' But as soon as I paint layers then it's, 'Oh, this is work!'

SLT: Interesting that you mentioned spirituality, because I thought there is something abstract, yet kind of lively and vivid in the work. One of the recurring images and figures is a painting of circles, and I wonder if that's part of that you have these sorts of organic figures.

DJHK: Right, I started using them a lot when I was doing diptychs, I think in 1989. At that time, I was very interested in this kind of duality of things. I was more interested in, 'How do I express myself as an Asian female artist in New York?' Before that, I always pursued a kind of purist abstract painting. But then I started thinking how, in a way, society kind of forced me to think about it. Society makes you think about who you are, the color of your skin. It's like that. So, then I started thinking that, well, I could be like Kandinsky or Monet, but they're looking at me as an Asian, Korean, female artist, and I was thinking, 'How do I solve that problem?'

I started physically dividing the two panels as a way of duality. At the time, the circles started coming up because they seem to have a pure geometry versus nature, nurture or culture. But within that, I was thinking abstract and organic. And in my interpretation of it at that time, the geometry and abstract seemed to work with these circles, and it was sort of fun. Circles float on my canvas and then they hold different dialogues because circles are from nature -- It's there. The Moon is a circle, Earth is a circle, and everything is a circle. And then later, I started using a lot of dots, dotted circles. I didn't know it at the time, but a professor of Asian history said that in Chinese, dotted circles represent stars.

SLT: It was the kind of exploring that you do. You described the color field as sort of a

play with the color, you even used the word "fun" How does that figure in it? Do you have the images? Do the images come to you as you're playing with the color? Is there something subconscious there or does it just emerge from how you feel?

DJHK: Sometimes it does emerge. Let's say this painting right here. I was doing some kind of snow-covered walk in the forest, that kind of feeling. And then you see this underneath, you know that there's life underneath, and it's like regrowth and rebirth. I was trying to convey that feeling, those memories, sensations. It's okay when somebody looks at the painting and they get it. It's okay if they think it's something else, that's fine, too. In the beginning, I didn't give any titles for the paintings, but now I give paintings titles because it shows my intention or willingness to communicate with viewers. Because if I give the title, they seem less intimidated. Instead of, when it used to be like abstract number 35, 110. But now, I think that people look at it and just kind of feel more comfortable, 'Oh, well that was the title.' And then they would say something else. They'd say, "To me, it's like fireworks." And I said, "Yeah, that works."

SLT: And yet, your titles are also very open in some ways, like *Mystical Journey*, right?

DJHK: Yeah. It's open. Sometimes I use a very specific poem, a poetry title. This one from Neruda's Book of the Winter. I forgot that, but it's about winter and snow-covered land. I made a series after I read a Japanese writer's novel about spring snow, and spring snow seems so poetic and so heartbreaking. You see all this blossom and little bloom coming up, and then there was snow and it killed everything. It's like...That's really heartbreaking, but how do I make that into some kind of poetic painting translated into my own language?

SLT: Is that partly why you are not doing diptychs anymore?

DJHK: Yeah, I did the diptychs for 10 years, and then I thought the diptych came from my head, right up here, and I wanted to do something from here (points to heart). That is closer. Because to me, diptychs were my response to what people were expecting of me. Instead of being spiritual, it's more intellectual, a kind of response to the painting. And I, after 10 years doing it, wanted to do something very personal. Okay, I don't have to prove that I'm a Korean-American female artist anymore. So, that was a turning point. I wanted to go inward. I mean this painting does hold the combination of that diptych in one piece. There is a floating circle still there and there are flowers and organic forms in there, but it's more like an abstract form.

You asked about the color. To me color is very important because it expresses certain emotions, evokes certain moods. So that's why some paintings are very cheerful and some paintings are more muted. And when I have this kind of muted painting, it's like a walk in the early morning fog. Then when you go close to the little plants, there are these dewdrops and dew-covered flowers blossoming. And I tried to capture that in my

own way and then express it into a language of abstraction.

SLT: Like what you're describing now, the early morning dew is covering everything. I thought of the blurred image of a photograph. That way you can't resolve it entirely, but it makes the subject sort of stand out. It sounds like you have some sense of the abstractness and the mystery and you find things.

DJHK: I think that in my process, I start with this color field, this fun part. And then I add some elements, like circles and patterns and layers, and then I wash it off with the turpentine. And then a lot of times I wash it off with sandpaper. And I think it's like, sometimes when you renovate the house, you look at the wallpaper and you scrape the wallpaper and then there's another [layer of] wallpaper, there's another [coat of] paint, and then there's more wallpaper. It's like traces of life that have been there. And to me, my work is like that kind of process of erasing and painting. But there are traces of it. I put more paint on it, and then I wash it down and then put more paint on it. You can see layers and layers of things, even though I erase it and sand it. My paint is very thin, but you see, I try to create this kind of three-dimensional and spatial depth, as if, when you look at it, there's something there. Not just on the surface, but there's something underneath oozing out of the traces and memories. So that's how I work.

SLT: I was a little surprised that you sand it off because it is very physical, right? You're painting and then you're moving or softening. And it's true when you see your work, you're thinking, 'Oh, I feel I can push my hand into the painting.' But you really do have lots of washing, painting, washing, and painting.

DJHK: Yeah, which is not good, it's toxic. So, I do that kind of work when the weather is nice, I take the painting outside when I have to pour a lot of turpentine. It has to be slightly wet to be able to sand it, so the particles don't flow back into your lungs. But you know, I'm not that precise. When I get inspired, I am sanding dry paint inside.

SLT: Are you sanding by hand?

DJHK: Mm-hmm, by hand, yeah.

SLT: You're feeling with not just the hand?

DJHK: Yeah. Sometimes it does go overboard. Then I say, "Oops. That was nice, but I erased it." But I think that that's sort of the surprise element of working, and I enjoy that very much. Spontaneity, you know?

SLT: Could you say a little more about the way you choose a color? You used the word fireworks a little while ago. I don't know if that's your word or if that's someone else's word, but it's vivid, right? Explosive. How do you start with a color? How do you think

about it? Is it just very spontaneous? Do you have an idea?

DJHK: I have certain ideas. Oh, this painting is going to be orange, but then it doesn't go orange. And then as I start adding, it's like, 'Oh my God, it's not orange. It's brown. What happened? What happened to my orange idea?' But a lot of times I feel I am more successful in my finished product when I don't start with an extremely specific idea. I know that some artists make a drawing and they copy that, but for me, because I'm very process-oriented, it does not work like that. Most of the time, I have a very difficult time following that step by step, and almost reproducing things. I just can't do that. It is practically impossible. And this painting -- I wanted to do a white painting, but I didn't start with white. It started with gray, black, and green. Bright colors. And then I slowly built it up and made it into a sort of white painting. And this one, I worked forever on this purple painting. I wanted to do a blue painting but it was not blue. And then it became too purple. And then I put red and it became too red. So, some paintings actually, to be honest, take up to three years because I don't like them. And those are the things where, as I said before, I have a more difficult time following the original idea.

SLT: So how do you resolve that? Do you sort of walk away from it? Do you have a little sketch space where you explore it?

DJHK: No, I don't do sketches.

SLT: Not at all?

DJHK: No, not at all. As you know, I do separate works on paper. It is much easier for me to do a separate body of work on paper. Then I do the paintings.

SLT: One thing that seemed very dramatic in your work is public art. You've had several large-scale commissions. I've seen some of them, like the subway works in New York and works in Korea. I wonder how you think about a piece that you know is going to be in a public space. People are busily moving, they're late for work, and there's your space where you want to show or communicate something. How do you approach that?

DJHK: Yeah, that's a very good question because when I approach public art, first of all, I never thought my work fits public art, and there was a time when I was still doing diptychs and I just moved away from that. And then Ken (her husband) brought this little paper from the MTA, a call for artists, and they said this particular one will be an outdoor piece and will be done in faceted glass. And I thought, hmm, faceted glass is like stained glass, and I thought it could work for my piece. So, I put together a portfolio and sent them the diptych work, a very specific diptych. And I got called as one of the five finalists for the L train station. The five finalists were invited to the station and they talked about the space of the station and the neighbors around there. I learned I should do research about the location, what kind of people live there, and the history of it to

make a public artwork.

Usually, you have to actually finish the whole project with the written proposal. So, I did the whole proposal. All five artist finalists did the whole proposal. And then they picked the artist.. I didn't get it. They picked an artist who treated people figuratively. It wasn't judged exclusively by the MTA. It was also judged by the local community leaders and people like that, and they picked the actual figurative artist.

While I was doing that, I also applied to the J train. And amazingly, I got called as a finalist again. This is pretty impressive for the first time ever. I should be able to nail this. I did some research. And what was most important about that neighborhood was, it was a mostly Hispanic neighborhood, and it was also an above-ground station. I tried to make it as bright and fun as possible. Mostly the community was comprised of Jamaicans and Puerto Ricans. When you see the work, it has the patterns and images that are the basis of my work, but I actually over-exaggerated the colors. Finally, my proposal was commissioned at the Crescent Street Station in Brooklyn for New York City's MTA Arts in 2006. And then same with the NYU medical centerpieces. They were very specific. They didn't want the color red because they think red makes people anxious in a hospital. There were some restrictions with colors, so I did extensive research about color. Actually, I was competing for the restoration of this cathedral in the South of France in 2019. The German fabricator invited me to develop a proposal together and I worked on that project. And this is [technically] a public space, but it is a cathedral. And I was actually tormented by it a little bit. I don't believe in religion. I was thinking as a non-Christian or a non-Catholic, 'Am I allowed to even submit a proposal?' I did some extensive research. Matisse was not a believer. Of course, Chagall was a very ardent believer. And certain German artists were not believers and they did a lot of public artworks (?). And the Germans are very open-minded. I wasn't sure about the French, and not being Catholic. However, I did extensive color research, the different colors symbolize different meanings in Christianity. It was also very interesting to learn how different flowers symbolize various meanings.

In my work I transform flower images into patterns; the flowers do not have any direct symbolic value. However, lilies have a highly definitive built-in meaning. I try to avoid using symbolic meaning in my work. But here I was like, maybe I should make lily patterns. In the end, it was very interesting. I worked on it for two months, because you have to give them at least the whole final three panels. But I didn't get very far with it. It was a very interesting experience for me. And I think that since then, I'm a little more interested in color combinations and I have a book of color combinations. It's actually a book for graphic designers, but it's very helpful.

SLT: It sounds like that is because it's more prominent in some of the public works or maybe works in a cathedral, where people bring more meaning to it or have an emotional response. It's the opposite of free play.

DJHK: My paintings and my own work are personal, so I can do whatever. But for public



art, I want people to feel happy. I installed the piece in the subway station and was doing some little final thingy. This guy came up to me and asked, "Are you the artist?" He said he was from Puerto Rico and said, "Oh, how great America is. This artist made this beautiful piece." And he thanked me. That's the thing about public art and the same with the piece in the NYU hospital. When we were finally finished and sat around in an outdoor cafe, it felt very rewarding. I really considered how this public art work would affect that particular space. It's not about my ego, I tried to set aside my ego because as artists we are very egotistical people.

SLT: The subway at the Crescent Street station. Did you etch in glass or is it stained glass?

DJHK: It's a little different.

SLT: Yes, but you can see through the color.

DJHK: Yeah. It's both sides because it's a platform. Seven panels in a standing platform. You can see both sides and this is a more difficult technique. The fabricator I picked was actually very artistic. He studied and majored in Stained Glass for his master's degree. It's very difficult when a fabricator and an artist don't get along. But he and I agreed on very specific colors and it was really funny. There was lots of rejected glass in his workshop, the color on one side was light and the other side was dark and stuff. But we loved that and took the whole box of those rejects. He also felt the same way about artwork, that it is more beautiful when it has some kind of flaw or imperfection. It just gives a little breathing room. If you have a perfect circle, it's beautiful. But then if you have 100 perfect circles, that's not really beautiful necessarily. I look at it like that.

SLT: So even there -- and I appreciate that you have room to invent a little bit -- you get to collaborate to make it.

DJHK: Yeah. I collaborated with him. Public art is about different kinds of problem-solving. It's about technical problems. Sometimes we do have technical problems and then you have to respect the expert because I'm really not an expert. I designed it and I have a vision but we have to execute that in the most successful way.

SLT: You almost do become like a designer in a way.

DJHK: More like a designer than an artist.

SLT: Can I ask you specifically about this work or that work?

DJHK: Yes. Absolutely.





SLT: Keeping it a little bit general. The three pieces I made special notes about for myself, one is you say *ABACADA*—is that how you pronounce it? A collage work. I remember when I saw it, I thought of cellophane. Some kind of translucent material. One of the reviewers talked about it and used much more abstract terms for its stain, shade, and so on. I wonder if you can say something about how you approached that work. And I specifically had this comment in mind, you can do whatever you want with it, but the same reviewer said that it was an incubator and he thought all your work flowed from it.

DJHK: He was very correct and very perceptive about that. That particular series I titled *ABACADA* and it actually comes from musical terms. It's almost like improvisation or some of it is like jazz improvisation. I titled it later after I'd done the work because I was thinking...It's actually very small pieces and I put four pieces together. Or sometimes I put three pieces together. And to me, there's those little pieces that show different images. And I improvised that, it's like an incubator. Even though my finished product, this painting, like that, is different from those. It gives me a lot of fun and freedom to look at it. And I do it when I feel a little bit stressed or stuck. It's very relaxing because it's like playing, improvising certain things and it really doesn't have any restrictions, so I can just play with it.

Some of them, I glue sandpaper that has traces of paint in it and then I cut it and glue it. Actually, the ones that you said, about the cellophane, I poured glue on them. What is great about glue is that it dries clear. Even when I pour it and it looks foggy, it dries clear. In my early, early days, I used to try more experimental ideas. I would pour polyurethane, different kinds of polyurethane, and coffee. I poured a whole coffee on it and then stained it on the paper. And tea. I think that in my small pieces or those collages, it allows me to go back to that time when I feel like, "Oh, this is fun." When I watch TV, I do little cutouts and glue them into a little piece. It's very, very relaxing, and then some of them develop into something better. But sometimes it just ends there as my incubator. Fun, relaxing pieces. I still do them.

SLT: I thought this idea is a quick study.

DJHK: Yeah. Quick study.

SLT: Yeah. Without it being so serious. Also, you're probably learning about how, like you said, things you pour, they look opaque but they'll clear up if they're dried. So, it's a little bit of figuring out what's going to happen. I had mentioned this little journey earlier and there you were doing different things. First off, you work on paper. Could you talk a little bit about your process of making that series? And as you say things about it, one quick thing, I noticed that you often have these series, you mentioned the title with the number and so on. So maybe the first question is regarding the mystical journey. How do you see all of those related to each other? How did that play out for you? Is there



some kind of a system you have in mind, or maybe it's sketchy?

DJHK: I think it's more sketchy and playful. I think when I made the *Mystical Journey* series, I was still doing large works on paper. And in that, I was imagining you walk through a forest and you encounter some kind of waterfall. It's suddenly raining, and you're standing in the waterfall. You're hearing the water...one time it was really pouring. And then you're standing outside and you hear the sound. And then you say, 'Oh, is that the earth sucking up the water?' That's all made up. I make up stuff. Kind of like the memories and sensations and that's really very special. If I finish my painting and somebody looks at it and says, 'Oh, I feel that water drop. I feel that kind of energy.' And if somebody says, 'Oh, that painting's very pretty.' It doesn't offend me. A lot of people feel very self-conscious. 'Can I say it's pretty?' And I say, 'Absolutely, because I'm happy it gave you something.' If you feel something, whether it's pretty, or whether it's sad, or whether it's something, it evokes something in you in a certain way.

SLT: It's funny, you mentioned pretty. I thought that some of the numbers in that series were very sort of dark and full of power, not power in a bad way. Whereas some of the other work you've done, I don't remember the name of this work--

DJHK: *Invisible Shine*,

SLT: Which is very sort of soft and inviting?

DJHK: Moody, bright colors. I like to fluctuate since I'm a little ADD, from moody to happy. Do you know?

SLT: Sure.

DJHK: So I go like, 'Oh, I want to do this ... ' and then I did a blue series, where I was kind of like, 'Oh, I want to create the whole series, like everything blue.' But to me, when I kind of limit myself, it's sort of challenging as an artist, instead of just going all over the place. So the blue series, I limit my color scheme to blue. Everything is blue, and then you try to work with that color, but there are limitations within that color, and I am trying to use my visual language in that. A lot of people said, 'Oh, I see. I feel like I'm underwater.' I wasn't particularly thinking underwater, but people said, 'Oh, I feel like it's underwater.' I go, 'That's good.' Then some people said it looks like a galaxy. And it's very helpful for me to limit that as an artist.

SLT: It gives you a way to put a little bit of a boundary around you. You can explore different sides a little bit. There's something about that too, which is people will imagine something, and they're looking at your work. And they almost see what they brought to themselves and maybe they can't sort all of that out.

DJHK: Yeah. Because to me, art is about communication. Some artists do political work, some artists do conceptual work, and some artists do figurative work. But in the end, we don't make these paintings to just keep them in our studios. We do it to share with people. And it's a very important part of ... the result. You have to share it. And sometimes maybe it inspires some people, maybe it makes them happy. And that's enough.

SLT: What is interesting too, is that going back to the diptych, I didn't see too many of those. I saw a couple. But they felt to me like you were telling me something, you wanted me to notice something on the A side and the B side. Something maybe geometric and something more organic, I suppose. Whereas the sort of larger paintings that you've been doing for the last while, feel like you're giving me room to respond and feel more open somehow.

DJHK: Yeah. It's an open-ended result. Because the diptych, as you said, was very definite. This is this and that's the other side of that. This is like the duality of femininity and masculinity, that kind of thing. At that time, I thought that I wanted to express that. But now I feel I don't need that, even though I still make diptychs, it's only in an improvisational kind of fun way. Oh, I did this painting, and I got that little drawing. And this and that looks fun, to get a surprise kind of meeting of the two elements, but not like that. I want you to know what I'm thinking.

SLT: Do you feel like part of what has changed is your own sense of yourself as an artist and what you're doing, and maybe you don't need to do this anymore? You don't want to do that other thing anymore. This is basically somebody else.

DJHK: Yes, absolutely. I think so.

SLT: Young artists want to know what you have learned from all of your experiences as an artist? I wonder what it is that you might like them to take away. What kind of advice perhaps you might give a young artist today?

DJHK: Well, when I first came to New York to study at Pratt in 1977, there were not many Korean students or a Korean community, and I graduated in 1980. There, I felt very lost because there was no role model. There was nobody who was a Korean artist who was even showing in New York. So you feel like, 'Oh, wow. How do I go back?' I think that the educational system of fine arts has changed. And the graduate program at Pratt Institute, where we are coming from, at that time and before, was very art for art's sake and art is great. We are the philosophers of the world. That kind of thing. So they never really taught us how to go back in the real world and show the work, and become a real artist, a full time artist. When I came out, I was like, 'Oh, my God.' It was very funny. You try to apply to shows, but my career has nothing. No lines on my resume. I just went to school. In the beginning, I wished my resume would be one full page. So

then I was applying to this show and that show, and all kinds of group shows. And then some cultural council in Long Island had a call for artists. They didn't ask for an application fee or anything, so I said, 'Hey, this is good, so I'm going to apply.' So I got in, but then it's like, 'But I don't have a car. How am I going to deliver this artwork?' Those kinds of things all became a problem, so now you have to know somebody who has a car and can take you there, and drop you off. And then you're thinking, 'Oh, I don't think I can come to the opening.' I built it one by one, and then my resume was like three pages. I never gave up because I was like once it's one page, well, you thought that you wanted just one page, but no, you don't. And then you see other artists in a show they have like eight-page resumes. So I said, 'Wow, I want eight pages.' But I think that at the time, what's amazing is you ran into other artists who studied at California art schools, and they were ahead of their time. They taught the fine art students how to put together their portfolios and how to hustle. But we never learned that. But actually, as clueless as we were, for today's young artists, I think it's more challenging in a way. Because somebody looks at some other artists' work and they copy it, and then they put it on a website or, they don't even have a website, but they put it on the internet, like what's it called?

SLT: Instagram.

DJHK: Yeah, Instagram and Facebook. It's almost like sometimes I stop using Facebook, that's so annoying for me. I think that it's good that young artists -- aside from those artists not really claiming to be artists and posting a lot -- they're very shrewd about posting. The whole art scene has changed so much. When I applied to a show to have more opportunities, I had to send 20 slides out. That was before the digital age. I hired a photographer to make 20 copies of slides with entire sheets of 20. It was really physical work, literally labeling everything and typewriting the corrections on your resume. And now I think for the young artist, everything is about who you know, and what kind of artist residencies in different places you go, and then there you make other connections and stuff like that. But I think there's a limitation to that. And I would like to say to young artists, just do your work, be diligent. If you must hustle, I guess hustling does help, but it doesn't last unless you know the top person. So, at the end, you're left with the work and also then you have to decide what kind of work you're doing. I hear a lot of artists tell me, 'I don't sell my work. I don't support myself.' Does your work look like somebody's going to buy it? I think that they have to kind of make that decision, but it's not really that... I think that when you look at the history of great artists, Monet was a great salesman and he sold a lot of work and Chagall was also great.

All these artists looked like they were not great salesmen, but they were. And I think that sometimes the danger is, you cannot be stuck in this myth of the artist. A lot of times we suffer through Van Gogh syndrome. He cut his ear off and at the end he shot and killed himself. But Van Gogh was supported by his brother. Don't forget, who's going to support you? Do you have somebody who will support you? These are practical things,



a lot of artists went to art school and they gave up because they had to have a full-time job. I also had a full-time job after I graduated from Pratt for three years. And that was, to me, a precious learning curve that taught me, never again. I'm going to sell my work. But there was a transition. I made the decision to work only part time. And I needed to adjust a lot to having three different part time jobs. But I think that, in the end, you have to pursue your dream, you know? And then persevere. And that's my advice to young people: Keep the dream alive and persevere. And don't listen to people and don't listen to the myth or whatever other people tell you, because only you know what you want. And that's the key.

SLT: Oh good.