

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Hyong Nam Ahn
- Interviewer: Robert C. Morgan
- March 4, 2020 / Hyong Nam Ahn's Studio in Passaic, New Jersey
- Recorded and Transcribed by Soojung Hyun (AKAA Research Fellow 2019-2020)
- 1 Video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Robert C. Morgan (RCM): My name is Robert C. Morgan. I am known as a critic, an artist and curator, and I'm trained as an art historian. I am very happy and proud to be sitting next to a Korean artist by the name of Hyong Nam Ahn. Hyong Nam Ahn has been living and working in this studio for three years now. I am sitting among his works, his various sculpture and neon works, and various kinetic works and drawings. It's very nice to be with you. Hyong Nam, I know that you get this question on many occasions -- I'm very interested in the fact that you are working with a kind of abstract sculpture, but there's something that has a hint of representation, but I think ultimately, it's abstract. What is your attraction to abstraction?

Hyong Nam Ahn (HNA): I can draw anything if you tell me, but abstraction takes a little more time to do. Like a still life or the human figure or anything, I can do it like a piece of cake. But abstraction is a little bit more of a challenge, more interesting, so I've been sticking with abstract all my life. Perhaps my interest came from calligraphy or Oriental philosophy, Indian philosophy. As an artist, there is a lot more to say through abstraction, unknown things.

RCM: I agree with everything you said. As you know, I told you during lunch that I studied with a calligrapher. That was very important for me and that led me to hard edge abstraction, believe it or not. I think a lot of Western people don't understand that, but within calligraphy I think there is this kind of abstract sensibility that is very important.

HNA: Yes, of course.

RCM: And I feel very comfortable that we share this idea. Now, I saw a piece of yours in a photograph very recently from 1996 that involves wire and stainless steel or stone, and I was very interested in this because I saw it as the beginning of a tendency which I think you're still working with, and what about that idea of abstraction?

HNA: Yeah, you mentioned wire. Like in calligraphy, my abstraction always has something to do with line or wiring. Where there is something to do with connectivity, I end up with wire or end up with calligraphy or end up with a line. Something that goes from here to there. Something from me to you.

RCM: It seems to me that your concern for space within that nexus of lines is very important for you.

HNA: That's very important, that's very important. Yes.

RCM: Often, I've heard art historians say both from East Asia and the West that there is a kind of cultural identity connected with space. Do you believe that?

HNA: Yes, I do. In Buddhist space everything is empty but full of connections. Really as

you see more emptiness you are more connected to something else. So that's why I found that in abstraction, the physical being is not all you are looking for, all you are after, it is a lot more than that.

RCM: It is this sort of energy, which I believe is very important to you. I was going to say that this series of works with the linear elements that we're talking about, I think is very much about energy. When I talk about energy I'm talking about the source of energy coming from nature, is that accurate?

HNA: Coming from nature, but also coming from you. If we are non-existent, I guess you don't have to talk about it. But if we exist, the energy either comes from you or from me or in between us. There is a connection between us, of trying to find some kind of imagery that we can perpetuate.

RCM: Which is what you're doing in your work essentially.

HNA: That's exactly what I'm trying to do, sometimes with light, sometimes with sound, sometimes with movement. It's exciting!

RCM: You know, speaking of light, another aspect of your work deals with neon light in relation to surface and paint. I'm looking at a work right now that has those elements. The surface is generally large, maybe as large as a Pollock painting or something like that. Obviously, you're using different mediums, and I say mediums because nowadays when you say media you're referring to something that's electronic, and of course light is electronic, but not in the same sense that you see it in a painting.

HNA: The medium is a material.

RCM: That's right, yeah. What about the use of light in these works?

HNA: Yeah. I mentioned Alexander Calder is my hero, during his entire artist life, he has shown enough, and so as many other contemporary artists have shown enough throughout his or her practice but still there are a lot more to be shown by the next generation. So, when I add my interest of light to that kind of flow-the surfaces. There is another space I can see, that third color, third ambient. So, using that neon light. I still don't like LED light or the others, I still like neon light. I think that's because the ingredient is a natural material rather than artificial. But anyway, having that second lighting in front of the color, creates a third color that I really never thought about. It still confounds me like, "Wow, there's still a lot to explore," with light on top of color.

RCM: Very interesting point.

HNA: Yeah, I'm still going with it.



RCM: Because as you were talking I was thinking of the Impressionist painter, Seurat, he used color to get at light. I think that you are doing both: you're using color to get at light, but you're also using light to get at color, and I think that this is perhaps a more modern approach. I hesitate to say postmodern because I don't think you think on those terms, but it's certainly within a high degree of modernism, if that's true.

HNA: I think so just because to me, to my knowledge, nobody explored that section, so I thought this is a modern movement, seeing something that you haven't seen before. That's very interesting.

RCM: You mentioned this before, and I think that this is something that any significant artist tries to do, to explore things that you haven't seen and that you don't even know what they are when you begin working on them. I think that's what you're getting at.

HNA: That's what I'm trying to say.

RCM: And it just evolves in the process. Another work that I became aware of during our lunch is the straight neon as opposed to the curved, which you have over here, and I think that this becomes more within the context of real space. Well, it's all real space in a certain way, but in other words you're really getting into a three dimensional idea, and the straight lines give a different kind of rhythmic feeling to that space.

HNA: Yes. Just like in music. I love music. I almost wanted to be a musician at one time, but I did not and I could never be. But curvature and straight lines exist in music. So there are rhythms... Let's say if you had lines in all the right places, there would be nothing other than lines. Just lines. In this section, there would be nothing but a curve. Even if it's the same color, same size, same material, it would make a totally different image. I always try to combine those lines to see if they can create a rhythm like a musician would do. Not with the pitch, but with the beat. Line, curvature, line, curvature.

RCM: You mentioned the word expression, and I agree with that, however, I would say that it's not Expressionism in the Western sense. I think it really holds on to something that is very much evolving from an Eastern sensibility.

HNA: I must say that because I was born in Korea, I was taught Korean, it's my mother tongue, and my sensitivities and everything are Eastern sensibilities. But then I wanted to shut that down for a while and I just kind of lived through teenage life and adult life in the Western culture. But I'm closing now and going back to, of course, Eastern thought and philosophy.

RCM: That makes sense to me. Speaking of which, we haven't really talked about your evolution in terms of where you were trained. Where did you go to school as an artist?

HNA: I went to Seoul Art High School. Then, my last year in high school my father made me follow my brother and sister who were already in the United States. He came to Chicago to study in the 1960's, my sister as well. "You're going to join them." "Oh, yeah? I like that."

RCM: And so, you became part of it?

HNA: Yeah. I became part of it at that time, that being The Art Institute of Chicago.

RCM: It's a very good school.

HNA: But it was chaos. To my knowledge, they were smoking marijuana everywhere.

RCM: That's right, in the 60's. Yeah.

HNA: Yeah. I stayed there through my master's degree.

RCM: You got an MFA there?

HNA: Yeah, I got both my MFA and BFA. I owe so much to my teacher during this period. I studied with him, I was his graduate assistant and was teaching there as soon as I became a student. His name is Mr. Steve Waldeck and he taught me about electronics and kinetics. I didn't know anything about that until I met him.

RCM: You learned a lot from him? You're still using those materials.

HNA: Yeah. I studied with him for more or less five years. When I was a freshman I went to his class and felt, "Oh this is my class." So, I just sat there. I could have studied with him all my life.

RCM: You know, there's something very moving about that because first of all, from a Western point of view, particularly a European point of view, more than the United States, but this is what artists used to do 200 years ago. They would find the person that they wanted to study with. And I've always found that very important in a way because I think that it gives you the ground by which you can evolve and by which you can...well, that's it. I mean, you had to find your own position, but you found it in relation to something else that also had an impact on you.

HNA: This teacher had knowledge of computers at that time already. The computer was so big.

RCM: That's amazing. Yeah.

HNA: He had knowledge in electronics. He had knowledge of mechanics. Yes, he was a genius.

RCM: Well, initially when I asked you about school, you said it was very chaotic and that people were smoking marijuana and so forth, but apparently there was the other side to it as well. Through the chaos, you were able to find-

HNA: Yeah, who cares, you know?

RCM: Right. In other words, let these people do what they're doing, I'm going to do what I'm going to do. It relates to your Korean upbringing, which is very positive. I think that it saved you in a way, whereas many of these students, I don't think found the ground that you had in order to evolve. What year was it that you came to Chicago?

HNA: 1973.

RCM: 1973, okay. And how did you get from Chicago to New York?

HNA: I finished my masters and I got a job because I had to make a living. I got a job at the University of Minnesota, I taught and teaching was not my thing. And living a comfortable life was not my thing. "Oh, maybe I should just go to New York." That's how I went to New York. From Seattle, I packed up and I got a trailer and I got my tools and sound system. I just came here with nothing, just for fun.

RCM: And when was that?

HNA: 13 years ago.

RCM: Fairly recent. And then you mentioned you got a studio here, right?

HNA: Mm-hmm (affirmative). First studio is in Passaic and I'm still here.

RCM: How do you feel about the cultural life in New York today? I mean, do you think that it's interesting or do you think that museums could do more in terms of diversity, or what is your feeling?

HNA: In general, I don't have any remorse or regret or anything like that. I like it. I mean, this is the best place. But compared to the last 20, 30, 40 years ago...

RCM: Were more categorial.

HNA: More categorial.

RCM: Yeah. Different categories.

HNA: Yeah, so that's getting thicker and deeper.

RCM: That's part of the commercialism, I think, that's going on.

HNA: Besides that, I love New York. This is the place for an artist. I mean, whether you want to be rich and famous. I think this is a really great, great place.

RCM: I enjoy hearing that. Was the exhibition you had in Seoul in an ecclesiastical building, a church? You thought that was quite unusual, but on the other hand, apparently some of that work was, I don't know if they purchased it or what, but anyway, it was both inside the church and outside and these are permanent installations as I understand?

HNA: Yes. Going to be permanent. But, they didn't purchase it. They paid for it through the material and my expenses. I was kind of honored because I don't have to do anything to preserve my work. They're going to keep it forever. It is a large-scale painting that measures 25 feet outdoor sculpture and 50 feet long drawing.

RCM: As long as the church is there, it'll be there. Some artists make work that focus on a spiritual or religious dimension. Have you ever felt that way about your work or do you think you're working completely on a secular level?

HNA: Completely on a secular level. I mean, I'm a Christian, I was born with Christianity. My father was a pastor and he also was a writer. But my focus has nothing to do with God, because we are all under God anyway. I mean, we don't have anything to say.

RCM: I've noticed that you have some very large works and smaller works and I'm looking at two pieces now that are small, with the neon, and they're quite interesting. The work behind me, I don't know this work's title and maybe the title isn't so important, but I do find the emphasis on diverse materials important because it is creating a sensibility in space with metal and with neon light and you're using these supports in which the neon is breaking through the metal you have painted. Now, one of the more interesting aspects of this- really the whole piece is important and you can't take something and divorce it from something else - but I'm very intrigued by what is happening behind the apertures of these small little openings and what's happening in terms of the paint around basically two thirds of the surface and then you have the configuration of neon light in the center. And so, there are basically three ways that color and light are being used in terms of the paint. The color is coming from the outside to the surface. Then we're getting the inside coming out and then we're seeing the projection of these forms being transformed into a

kind of a relief. In other words, something that's coming off the surface, out of the surface in this case, through the aperture. It's a very active piece. You can't look at this piece and see it as static. It's something that is moving in terms of your optical relationship to it, and I say optical rather than visual because the optical is what you feel as a sensibility, I think. That is something more than just what you see and I'm interested in looking at this work from the point of view of a sensibility. That's what I feel is important about it. I think that your sensitivity is very particular. I don't see you as belonging to a particular school or a particular group. I don't think you're trying to be trendy or postmodern, as I mentioned earlier. I think you're doing what you want to do. Is that true?

HNA: Exactly. Yeah.

RCM: Okay. And could you say what is it that you want to do or that you have done and continue to want to do?

Hyong Nam Ahn: I don't want to be too serious, but you mentioned bipolar disorder. I like both sides. Socrates mentioned that true knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing. On the other hand, Tolstoy says ignorant illiteracy is a crime. I'm going back and forth.

RCM: Between Tolstoy and Socrates.

HNA: Yeah.

RCM: Apparently, this gives you inspiration and a provocation to continue.

HNA: Endless inspiration.

RCM: I can see it. So where are you going at this point in your career? Is there anything specifically you're working on?

HNA: I'm just trying to come to a close. I think I have to... I've always been an investor. I think I have to close it now. How am I going to close my thing now? I will close my statement, my life, you know? So, I lived 16 years in Chicago, 16 years in Seattle, and 16 years in New York. I don't know how that happened. How am I going to have closure in my work and space and things? That's my last thing.

RCM: You seem very active and very involved in what you're doing.

HNA: That's how I make myself active. When you have everything ready, then just go for it. If you don't have any point, then you don't know what to do.



RCM: That's right.

HNA: Once you get all set up then you can go bungee jumping or whatever.

RCM: Organization is important in order to do what you're doing.

HNA: Yes, I was an investor all my life.

RCM: Yeah. It's really been a pleasure talking to you and hopefully we have some good information in this interview. I feel that we do. And again, I enjoyed coming here to your studio and meeting you and having this opportunity.

HNA: Thank you so much.

