AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Ara Koh
- Interviewer: Jinyoung Koh
- April 6, 2023 via Zoom
- Recorded and transcribed by Jinyoung Koh (AKAA Senior Research Fellow 2022-2023)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

Use of Interview Transcript of Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

The Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) provides our interview transcripts for non-commercial purposes. The following interviews were conducted by various curators, artists, and scholars and were recorded and transcribed by AHL Foundation's Research Fellow. We ask readers to know that the written record is a transcription of the spoken word, which has been edited for continuity and clarity and reviewed by the interviewee and the interviewer.

Quotes must be cited as follows: Interview with _____, date of interview. Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA), AHL Foundation. The recordings associated with this interview may be made available upon request.

For commercial or reproduction use, including reproduction, quotation, publication, and broadcast in any medium, distribution, derivative works, public performance, and public display, prior written permission must be obtained from AHL Foundation.

Permission will comply with any agreements between the interviewee and the interviewer and may be withheld in the AHL Foundation's sole determination. Please direct any questions or inquiries for the AKAA to archive@ahlfoundation.org.

AHL FOUNDATION

Jinyoung Koh (JK): Thanks for your time for this interview. How did you develop your interest in working with clay as a medium for your artwork?

Ara Koh (AK): First of all, thanks for having me. I guess I went into undergrad in Korea and you have to declare a major before you get accepted in Korea. So, I just happened to say, I'll do ceramics. And then I did already like ceramics. At first, I didn't like clay. Whatever I did like cracked in the kiln. It took so long. I kind of lost my patience, and it was just too much for me. So, I decided that I would jump into our history and criticism and changed my major there. But then, in my sophomore year of undergrad. My professor in Korea, his name is Injin Lee, brought us to Alfred Summer school, which was later done by my grad school teachers. But I went there in the summer of 2015. I took a big clay building class with Walter McConnell, and I felt like, Wow! This is great like not thinking about firing, or like kind of liberating myself from the kiln properties. I really like Clay, and I think I saw the possibility of clay as an art medium rather than something that has done so much already like traditional pottery because I guess Korea has a very rich history and ceramics in terms of utilitarianism. I wanted to do clay, then I did my grad school there, and that's kind of how I got into clay as an art medium that could be used for really anything.

JK: How do you integrate the physical properties of clay into the conceptual framework of your artwork?

AK: I feel like it's for me. My interest was always in art rather than pottery or clay. It just happened to me that I studied ceramics in undergrad and in grad school as well but, I guess my sole focus, or what I really wanted to explore was creating a scene for the audience to walk into. I wanted my work to be remembered as an experience rather than an image. So I started thinking about that, and there were some really interesting properties of clay that really intrigued me like you talked about the physicality of clay. Is this a malleable thing that you could touch? Grab in your hands? It could be powder. It could be mixed with water. It could be slurry. It could be this really tactile thing. It smells, it has this earthy, literal earth. So, you could walk on it, you could walk past it and don't even notice. And I thought that was really poetic in a way, but you could always experience it but, you never really get to see it. I feel like bringing it inside is like a platform of art, or like bringing it into the realm of fine art is really interesting, because it's something that people just like in this regard, like attractiveness, comes from physicality, tactileness, and plasticity for me. I think the biggest thing was that people know it. People have seen it. People experienced it before, but they never thought of clay or earth in that way.

JK: That answer is great and interesting. How do you approach the process of translating invisible and amorphous ideas into visible and solid forms in your sculpture?

AK: I grew up bilingual. My mom wanted me to speak in English, so she started me out really young, I think. As soon as I started speaking Korean, my mom got me into English and when I was an undergrad I had part time jobs as a translator. I used to translate from Korean to English, and English to Korean, and things related to ceramics like the realm of art somewhere like that, and I've noticed that Korean language and English language derive from two very different cultures and there's always a gap in between

that I cannot translate. And I always wanted to know what is a universal language for all humans that we all experienced. And Clay was one of them. We all stand in clay, we are all filled with clay. We all live with clay and without that none of the living beings could live. So, I thought that was very interesting. That clay is universal to everyone, but they just don't recognize the importance of it. For me, discovering that polarity, or a contrast between how people, how clay, or earth is essential to living beings but not really recognizing it. It was pretty significant to me. I thought that was kind of a manifesto of understanding how this universe works, and because of that I wanted to explore contrasting polarities in my work, like light and dense, light and heavy, dense and loose, solid or amorphous, something like that. There is a sweet spot in between, but also you could have both at the same time. For example, my sculptures that are fired and made in clay. I could say that the ceramic process is very long. I build from the bottom up. Then, when you fire, you go through the drying process and firing process, and it goes through a lot. That clay goes through a lot of stuff to mature, and I thought that's also kind of like how humans grow out as well. So, I think it's really interesting that I explore polarities, and you play because clay is literally human for my fired works. For my unfired works, for example, like rock clay installations or paintings. I think of it in a very different way that I'm building like a snapshot of a moment. I feel like I'm building a snapshot of a phase of human experience. People live on earth and they just don't recognize it, and that's like the whole theme of my work but also giving them the spatial experience to just be with it and confronting it is pretty important. I want to show them what they're missing out on and when it's a very different or contrasting idea. They start to wonder like where is that thing? Is that in the sweet spot, or is it light or heavy? or What is it? And they start questioning it, because that's where I am coming from that language.

JK: That's interesting because we have different cultures and there are different nuances of the words and sentences, but you are trying to make a good spot to translate or deliver that nuance of situations.

AK: What's really interesting is when I show my work like images of my work to people, or even when they see it in person. Even if they're all American or Korean, or wherever they're coming from they see one image, or it's varying, but it almost always paints a similar picture to them. I think that's what Clay could do, because everyone has a similar experience with it.

JK: Yeah, that's an interesting point, or they have some shared opinions, but there are sorts of individual differences in the balances as well. I think it connects to your comments regarding the balance between the light and dense, light and heavy, dense and loose, solid or amorphous. How do you explore the concept of geologic time and metamorphosis through your work with clay?

AK: This is an ongoing problem for any type of ceramic artist that they would understand that whatever you do with clay cracks, it's bound to happen. If you're very advanced technically, then you could avoid cracks, but cracks are kind of inevitable. When I was in undergrad, it was a big stress to me that I wanted to make it look perfect and pristine. But after I had an experience at Alfred that cracks are fine, cracks are bound to happen, so why not let it be? So, I discovered that I need to shift my mind from

this pottery, perfect traditional moon jar thing, into something I could really do whatever I want with this. So I think that was like the first liberating thing. Tectonic shift of geology, thinking about science like Pangaea theory, geologic time that was densely embedded into earth or thinking about how cracks happen, how this wet clay that's mixed with water. Water evaporates over time, and then it leaves the mark of crack. I think those are just really interesting things to think about, and those are like the visual cues that clay could only give. No other material could embrace crack as is.

That's a very unique visual language that Clay has. I started to really embrace that because it's so beautiful, and not a lot of people could see it so often. The earth that we face every day is covered with Flora and Fauna, and it's not like an everyday experience where you get to experience dirt. So I think it's fun to just look at cracks, and that says a lot just like the color of the clay. I've been reading this book called Time of Clay or Time of Earth. It was written by a Japanese geologist. He was saying that the color of the clay has to do with thousands and thousands of years of weather and how it washed away, how it changed the climate, and they have bands of color within the landscape, and that's to do with those 7,000 years of time, and how weather or climate, or even like the mechanical human forces has changed it. I feel like I would nearly live like 100 years, if lucky could handle that different type of clay, and being able to look at it with colors is just like a really amazing thing. I think geologic cues mostly start from the visual thing when I start the work. But later on, when I finished my work and I looked at it, it embeds so much more than what I just thought of.

JK: Yes, that's wonderful. You mentioned the Moon Jar. The Korean traditional Moon Jar is very popular now since many people love the vulnerability and unbalanced shapes with very beautiful and humble aspects. I think ceramic has the sense of some vulnerability with the process itself. But you explored very diverse scientific aspects or historical aspects with that process.

AK: People think that ceramics are vulnerable, and it's very fragile that you have to like. Take care of it like a baby, but from an aspect of someone who studied ceramics as a material I'm like a big nerd about how materials operate and where they come from. Why that happened and fired ceramics is actually very durable. The cracks and the vulnerability happen from the mechanical aspect, not from the chemical aspect. If it's fired in a perfect world. Then it won't crack, and it could be as hard as a diamond, or even more. The pencil strength is really amazing about ceramics, and it's really cool how fire could just change that up. People also don't recognize it when you say durability. I could drop this plate, and it's going to shatter. But if you think about it. Ceramics are very durable in terms of fire, so like the outer shell of the space shuttle that's going outside out of this universe. They make the outer side with tiles, because they're the most durable in terms of heat resistance. So there's also so many interesting facts about ceramics that could really nerd me out, but also it embeds a lot of polarities within itself just because of nature, but mostly because of how people think about it.

JK: Yes, that's an interesting point. I see the different perspective to see the durability with the same material. And it connects to the dialogue between internal imagery and external landscapes in your sculpture in your artist statement. Could you describe the dialogue between internal imagery and external landscapes in your sculpture?

AK: Clay is a universal language for everyone. I think that sets a factual statement for me, but the personal experience that everyone has is different. The imagery that they would paint inside their head is very different. When I think of earth I think of it like a giant prairie or farmland. Someone from Colorado. When we say landscape, they would think about mountains and skiing, or something that has to do with it. Someone from Utah might think of it like the Grand Canyon, or something very vast. People from Hawaii might think of it like volcanic ash. So, I think landscape would paint a very different picture for everyone. Well, what it comes down to. It is when we look at an image together, for example, the piece that I would make and then present in front of them. They would think about landscape, and they would think about the landscape that is in their head. They're going to link that imagery into the landscape that I present in front of them that is made out of literal landscape. I think there's this circling back of their landscape into an imagery that I created that is made out of earth. So, instead of presenting a piece that's painted with oil or acrylics of mountains, I think it makes much more sense to just present something that's literally made out of earth.

JK: That's interesting. You mentioned landscapes like Colorado or the Grand Canyon. That's very huge and vast. When you see the Korean landscape, maybe it's more meditative, humble and soft. We can't generalize the different cultures, but it's often described in those ways. What do you see as those differences between different cultures or different methods of your work?

AK: I definitely agree that Korean people would think the landscape in Korea and in the United States is going to be very different. But I think it also has to do with very personal things as well. I grew up thinking that landscape is just buildings. I grew up in Seoul in South Korea all my life, so I thought that landscapes are supposed to be like little mountains in between buildings. After grad school, I kind of changed that mind, but growing up all my life in Seoul made me realize that landscapes are embedded within architecture. That's kind of how I thought of it. So, I think growing up in a very urban city really torques the idea of landscape, so that's like the embedded thing that I have in my head about landscape. The shapes of mountains, water, or anything like that I feel like there is no need for me to do that, because it's a literal like scoops of earth that I'm working with. But, in terms of sculptures, I think about it as an experience that most of my sculptures have to be viewed from 360, or you have to walk around it or in between it to see it. I think demanding the audience to move around is a big aspect of my work. It's not just about people walking up to your work and appreciating it. It's about people coming to see your work, and I, as an artist myself, would demand them to move around. I would demand them to experience it. I don't even have to stand right next to it and tell them like, hey, walk around because they just know by nature, they just know that they want to get close. They want to move around. I think that's just like a really interesting fact about it. So, I think sculpture was like an entry point for me to do that. And then I moved on to installation, because that makes people move around even more. But now I'm making painting pieces like two-dimensional pieces because now I have this micro macro lens of understanding how people move. Lately, I've been interested in things like if a surface is interesting enough, people would move around. It would be just like a little smaller in terms of moving around, they would have a smaller footprint. But either way I'm making them move. I thought that was pretty interesting.

So, now I'm making pieces that have a very evocative surface.

JK: I think that connects to the next question. How does your body act as a container for the spaces you inhabit, and how do you explore this idea in your artwork? Maybe it's a philosophical way. And how do you explore this idea in your artwork with that concept?

AK: I thought landscape lives inside of architecture. And then people live inside the landscape and architecture. When I went to Alfred, it was like out of nowhere. It has nothing. I have to drive half an hour to just go grocery shopping. It's just school and nothing else. For flying from Korea to Alfred, I landed in Rochester, New York, and then we drove 2 hours south to get to Alfred. It was very surreal. No ambulance sound, very quiet. You can hear a pin drop. It was pretty crazy, and every day that I would like to drive to grocery stores, or like to Lowe's to get hardware and stuff. I see the mountains and the absence of skyscrapers or architecture was really striking to me. I was driving, and I realized that oh, wow! This is a landscape. This idea that it was embedded in me, growing up was like a reversed order. Actually, landscape holds architecture and architecture holds humans, but I thought of it a different way, like the reversed order. I make people inhibit architecture and architecture inhibits landscape like the other ways. So, I thought of my body as a container containing landscape. And then I thought of the literal sense of eating. My body is a container for food, because I need to move around and use energy. Food is literally coming from earth. There is really no way that food could grow without earth. So, in a way, inhaling earth and exhaling earth at the same time. And in that sense I thought maybe I'm part of the earth.

JK: Since you came from a very big urban city in Korea, your physical presence in the new environment impacted and influenced your thinking process as well. How do you balance physicality and intellectualism in your artistic practice?

AK: That's a really hard question. I don't try to actively think about it. But when my piece tries to talk to me, I just let them talk to me. If it doesn't make sense in my head, most likely nobody would understand me. So, when my piece tells me, hey, Ara, I cracked. I would think about it from many different aspects. I would think about material-wise like you crack because you are clay. I would think about technical ways like maybe I turned the A/C on a little too much in the studio today. That's why you cracked. I also would think scientific wise like you what's your shrinkage rate. Why did you crack? But also, I would think about the meaningful art way like oh, well, so what does the crack mean? So, I would let that happen within, like my other reasoning or questioning you within the studio practice. I don't set aside time to think about things like okay, so, my work means about landscape. So, I don't think about it that much. But I just let it happen when it tries to talk to me.

JK: Yeah, that makes sense. You also talked about the intensity of the labor and the repetitions in your process, but at the same time there are variations and improvisations in your work. Could you describe the intensity of the labor and the repetitiveness in your process, and how it contributes to the understanding of the universe?

AK: I need to learn from my pieces. I let my piece teach me. I'm a visual learner, so I

have to see it happen, and because of that I have to do a lot of work. I have to see it in my eyes or otherwise. I won't learn. So, I try to have a lot of studio time, and I think because of that, my practice became very repetitive. Just the sheer amount of time I spend inside the studio. Also, it has to do with my personality. I just want to know why it happens. I want to know why things grow on earth. I want to know why I'm making this type of work, and I really want to know why I'm so intrigued by the earth. I have to see what better way to learn than actually making work. So that creates such a problem. I have so much work at my place. I have storage issues because I just have so many. But I think for me that's the best way to understand the material, and the material teaches me about what my work is, and where my interests lie. That interest on clay or Earth teaches me about the universe because Clays, I think, is a universe.

JK: Yes, I see that. How does your work reflect your identity as an artist, daughter, and human being? Can you speak to the relationship between your artistic practice and your personal identity?

AK: I think it's impossible to shift gears. For example, I'm teaching for like 3 hours right now. So, I'll be a teacher. I can't really do that. When I'm teaching, I'm also an artist. I'm also someone's daughter. I am also just a random human being who is really interested in earth. I think it all simultaneously happens. It's just that one of the identities is bigger at certain times, like when I'm teaching, I'm a teacher. When I'm at home with my family, I'm a daughter. So, I think that just like shifts in terms of what ways more and what ways less. In my practice, I think all of those identities come together and help me grow my work. When I'm teaching students, they might bring up a very interesting topic that they want to talk about. That's affecting their work and that affects me as well because I want to really engage in talking about it.

I want to learn from this person too. They're maybe a little younger than me, and I just happen to have the Master's degree, but they just don't yet. I'm pretty sure that they could be so much better artists than me. They have much more potential. So, I love to respect my students as just peers. When we talk about art, I just treat them like I'm talking to my grad school cohorts. That's a really lovely way of communicating with people that I don't disregard them like, oh, they're my student, and they don't know anything like that. I don't think that's a good use of my time as well.

When I'm a daughter, I think I get affected by my cultural side a lot like how my parents think about my everyday life, and their comments affect me a lot about my art making. It could be just like my dad saying, "I think you're painting too much lately." I wouldn't take it at face value, but I would just see it as like, "why does he think I'm painting so much." Does that mean that I have to change my practice? What do I feel about it? And that changes up a lot. Me being an artist and having a full-time career as a practicing artist makes me really devote my time and energy into art making. I think all of it connects to my work. In a way, I'm thinking about how my personal life like my romantic relationships or my friendships affect my timeline as an artist. There's only so many years I could live on this earth, and how much time do I have to balance my work, personal and art life, and I feel like it's kind of sad that everything for me is pointing towards my practice of art. We'll see how that figures out.

JK: That's an interesting point as well. When I read your statement, I saw the sentence about the palliative obsessiveness of your artistic practice. How do you balance the palliative obsessiveness of your artistic practice with the need for experimentation and exploration?

AK: I think I'm just an obsessive person in general. I think I am just me being curious about this material or this universe or me trying to understand this practice that I'm doing. I'm pretty hard working. I am pretty prolific. People could see that obsessiveness in my work that they would see like she did this many little things, or like she did this many pictures in one piece. I think that would kind of explain visually. But also, experimentation-wise, I would run like 100 to 200 clay tests, just to see what I want to see–maybe that's not enough. From my perspective, numbers don't really matter like me, running 200 tests or 1,000 tests for making like 10 series of paintings, it's fine. It's not really about that. What really matters is like am I satisfied? Is this good enough for me to understand and move on to the next question? That helps me move further. I think it also has to do with me being Korean that I was told to be hard working. I was told to never be late. That was just embedded in my head. And now I have a problem of not taking enough breaks. But I definitely think that the Korean inside of me really helps being prolific.

JK: You talked about your satisfaction with your artwork. There are maybe sequences of the process. Do you intuitively imagine that in your mind, then you try to match that imagery to create something for your satisfaction?

AK: I think I never really get satisfied with my work. Maybe I like certain pieces a little more than the others, but I think my whole art practice is about learning and just being curious and seeing like having a constant conversation with my work. I think half of my studio time I'm just sitting in front of my work, and just letting them talk to me. It's really about understanding what I did with the piece. So, when I start a piece, I always start from the previous pieces. So, I would just sit there and think about my next piece. I want to have people to converse a little bit more about, like cracking. Do I want it to be about cracking? Do I want it to be that color? What do I want to focus on? And then I would make the next piece. I wouldn't necessarily think about imagery or anything. I would sit with that piece once it's done, and say, like, okay, what did I learn from this piece and then move on to the next one.

JK: Some artists design and sketch, and they try to match the sketch to create a sculpture. In your description, I think that you experiment with the material and communicate with the process. Then you develop while you're creating and doing.

AK: Now I do sketch. It's very surprising for people, because people don't think that I sketch. I hate sketching. Number one. I've been trained to draw to go to a Korean Art School, so I hated drawing because of that. So, I hated sketches. Another thing is that when I sketch in detail, I stress myself out that oh, it doesn't look like a sketch because I did something wrong or I try to blame myself. And the biggest reason why I hate sketching is that it limits the work. It cannot grow outside of sketch, and I hate to limit myself with that initial idea. And if I have something else, something better than that idea, I would love to move on to that one. But the reason why I sketch is that I need a

realistic guideline for myself, because I'm also a human. Especially for fired pieces, I need to know how heavy it's going to be, how much clay I'm going to use, how I'm going to transport it to the kiln. I need to think about all that. So, without a sketch or without a plan, it's not really going to happen. It's not going to be very realistic. So, in order for me to communicate with my visual language to the audience, I had to have something solid. I got to have some pieces, so without that it's not really going to work.

The biggest reason why I sketch is to really plan out. It's more like a blueprint rather than like an actual physical look of it. So maybe I would sketch out like it's going to be this big, and when someone stands next to it it's going to look like that. I would like to put words next to it, onto a sketch like there's this wire sculpture that I created. It's about 200 feet wide, 12 feet tall, and hangs from the ceiling. I want to make a mist and I just wrote like I want to have a glimmering something, and it's hard to sketch, but I just write down the ideas. As I make it, I think, okay, yeah, this material will work. I'll sketch it out. And then, after halfway done, I do another sketch. I do another planning of like, okay, I think I got the sense of what I want. So now I could really say, like, okay, I need this many. I want this big and I'm going to treat it with this material. And then, in this space, it's going to look like that. I try to plan it out like that. So, sketch is used for realistic purposes, not fairly envisioning ideas.

JK: Yeah, that makes sense. Definitely, there are different styles of creating art. I think the sketch is kind of a starting point with your inspiration. Do you enjoy the improvisations and variations while you're creating art with the sketch? Maybe improvisation is more like an intuitive way to create art.

AK: Yeah, I am very careful about the word intuition or improvisation. I think maybe for other artists that might work. But for me I think it's a very irresponsible way or irresponsible behavior for an artist. It's okay to improvise and it's okay to change up your piece. That doesn't matter. I think, as long as you get the result that you want, or as long as it gets you somewhere. It's fine. But for me, I want to know why this happened. If I just say like, oh, it was just like an intuitive decision. I think that's just like me giving up researching, or kind of knowing what this piece really offers. So, I try to be very careful about that word because I just don't want to be lazy in terms of my practice. But the thing that I noticed is that it is kind of inevitable—even if I make sketches, even if I make plans. Things don't really go that way because of material, or because of something. Something's bound to happen, and something's bound to change–In that case I just alter my sketch. Once I altered my sketch, now I have another concrete plan, so I could just follow the guidelines. I don't know how other artists do it. But art is a very random concept. If you think about other jobs like engineers or like a news reporter or something like that, they're doing something very concrete. The job has a function. They have a purpose for their jobs, and they deliver something. They have a set goal of stuff they have to do. And every day from 9 to 5 they hit their remarks. They check it off the list and they're done. But for artists it's kind of like a loosey-goosey job that you could call yourself an artist without making any art piece. I want to have an active and professional practice. I want to have that checklist for myself. I want to make sure that I have a checklist of stuff that I need to make, or that I need to make it happen in order for my piece to be successful. So, I try to plan out a lot for my work and I always write it down somewhere so that I could really physically check it off with a pencil or a pen, and

I try to be more prolific.

JK: Architects design very carefully for the preparation and plan, and also traditional artisans tried to make perfect decorations. Fine art and contemporary art have more freedom to explore with their ways. How do you see your artwork contributing to conversations about contemporary art and sculpture?

AK: My initial transition from ceramics to clay is what I want to make a remark in this world that every artist is doing a very different practice. But I want my practice to be seen or understood as someone who tried to expand beyond what the material could do. I think there are a lot of current, contemporary artists who are working in that manner as well. So, I would love to be a part of that. Ceramics have been denigrated for a long period of time as a craft medium. It had not been highlighted in our history, but it had been used all throughout humankind. But people regard ceramics as like pottery, utilitarian, and something that has a use. And me trying to push clay outside of that boundary is important. This is another medium that people could use. Recently, there's been the emergence of artificial intelligence and a lot of new media happening. And I think because of that, it's also important to check back in with the most ancient media, too, because it's been around. It's going to be here for the longest time ever. Most likely it will outlive humans, too. So, I think what I'm really doing is just like making a remark like, hey, it's been here. It's going to be here, and we're part of this. So, it's not just like cups and mugs.

JK: Sounds interesting. Could you speak to the challenges and rewards of pursuing a career as an artist?

AK: Challenges are everyday life that are my art. My art always asked me questions, and I tried to answer, but I never really got to answer. I asked my piece questions, and they never really answered completely. So, I feel like I'll never be satisfied until the day I die. I guess that's the biggest challenge that I have to face. But the biggest reward is that I feel like I'm doing something that people are not recognizing. That makes me feel proud that I'm trying to understand something that I'm really curious about. And I'm really devoting my life to that. I think I'm really proud about that.

JK: When you think about your previous and current projects, how did you choose the themes and topics that inspire your artwork?

AK: The themes and subjects have not changed. It's in clay. It's going to be about Earth. It's going to be about me trying to understand how Earth operates is going to be my topic. The things that have changed are the visual cues like my previous piece always teaches me something to work on in my next piece, but that's kind of how I move on. So, what has changed, or what has progressed has always been like a lineage from a previous project. Maybe the transition might look very startling. Maybe there's like a big jump in between, but I think in terms of a maker's perspective. It has not been a big jump because I just constantly think about it, and I answer the questions and the piece asks me like, oh, yeah, Ara, for the next piece, you got to do something about this. So visually it might look different. But generally, the subject matter had been pretty much

the same.

JK: That's interesting. What are your long-term career aspirations?

AK: Clay or Earth has so much more. But I've been like, not even like licking the surface, all of it. So, I think there are so much more that I could definitely devote my whole life into. It's just going to look very different. But I do want to keep on continuing in this lineage and see what happens. One day I might wake up and think differently. But for now, that's how I think in terms of my personal life, I've been really enjoying teaching. My students have been teaching me a lot. I feel bad for being paid to be taught. Teaching students most likely not about teaching. The time that I communicate or talk to my students is the most valuable experience I got off of that. It also lessens the financial burden that I have to sell my art. So, teaching has been very helpful in terms of my practice. So, I do want to keep on going with that.

JK: I have just one more question to complete this interview. You finished your undergrad in Korea and came to the United States for your grad school. If you meet a new art student coming from Korea like you. What suggestions and advice would you like to share for the cross-cultural artist based on your experiences and challenges. Although there are very diverse situations and different artists and we can't generalize what they need to do, when Korean artists come into the United States, sometimes professors or critics ask questions like do you see some quality of Korean arts, Koreanness, or Korean philosophical approaches to deliver? Are you pressured with delivering Korean aspects or do you want to create more universal aspects in your work? I think sometimes that's beneficial as a Korean artist or sometimes that's a limitation as an artist.

AK: That's really interesting, because I never really think about me being Korean outside of eating. I never really think of myself as like a Korean artist. I'm just an artist. That's really all I could say about my bio. I think there is a Koreanness about me that I was educated in the Korean education system. I finished my undergrad there, so, all my life, I grew up in Korea. I grew up eating Korean food like I think I feel most Korean when I get sick, and I want to have Korean food. I think that's as Korean as I could get. I was never pressured to represent Korean culture. I think I really appreciate my grad school advisors because they wanted me to think about my culture, my background as a part of me rather than something that I need to really embark on.

The thing that I wanted to embark on was about Clay, not about Korea, Koreanness, or being Korean. So, I definitely never really thought about that. But I think, because art is such an encompassing subject, that part of me always melts in there. So, like me, being Korean, maybe, like my muted palettes in terms of color. Korean people are generally more used to muted tone down color. Maybe I'm generalizing, too, but something like that comes off. But it never really comes off as like. Oh, like because I'm a Korean artist. I want to make a remark on the Korean landscape. I don't really think about that. But like maybe I've been wanting to get some Korean clay and make work with that. I wanted to think about the distance between Korea and where I'm living in, and blend those two different types of clay together, the Korean clay, and this clay in Falls Church in Virginia, mix it together, and then make a work about that. I thought that would be very

interesting. My home ground and the ground from where I call this place a whole. So, I thought, that's as Korean as I could get. But I would tell if Korean students are coming to the United States, and they're going into the same course that I've been going through. I would say the first thing is “learn English as hard as you can.” Being able to communicate with my grad school advisor fluently was the biggest impact on my artistic career. I think if I were to be more fluent in English, then I would have connected with them a little more. I feel like I'm pretty fluent, but still I had some limitations in terms of reading like we always had an insane amount of reading assignments every week for seminar classes. If I were to be a little more fluent in English, I would have read it faster, I would have understood it a little better. I still feel bad about that. So, I would say, work on your English. And another thing is “always connect to your Korean support group”. I think it's important that you are Korean but you're here. You're not really being supported by anyone. You will have support groups here like your friends, your advisors, and your school cohorts. But I think at the end of the day your friends are in Korea. Your parents are in Korea. So, I think keeping a good connection with them would always help you when you go through harsh times.

JK: Okay, great. Thank you so much for sharing your works and thoughts throughout this interview. I really appreciate it.