

# AHL Foundation

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

- Interviewee: Jinchul Kim
- Interviewer: Jinyoung Koh
- April 7, 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

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**Jinyoung Koh (JYK):** Thanks for participating in the interview today. I see some abstract and figurative aspects in your painting. I'm very impressed by your technical skills and beautiful interpretation of the light sources. First of all, how do you approach the process of constructing new languages in your art?

**Jinchul Kim (JCK):** Contemporary artists learn from tradition and go for new artwork because we don't want to be just a follower. Of course. If we try to find an authentic way to express our own thoughts, and having kind of a frontier, spirited sorrow learning from tradition, but moving towards the future, and you could say progress in a deeper way. I think that I like to start with my schooling when I was in Korea, of course since I came from Korea in 1989. Just like many other artists at the time in the 80's, we've been thinking about going to art colleges and which school might be good.

In South Korea, two major schools that we prefer to go to are Hongik University and Seoul National University. I was interested in going to one of those schools. My foundation skills were pretty good for drawings and paintings, and SAT, the national standard test score was great as well. My academy teacher was attending an MFA program at King Sejong University at that time. One day, a professor at King Sejong University (that was Sudo Woman's College before), Chang Rak Kim (1924-1989) well known as the father of Korean came to visit my teacher's studio.

I was there in the studio, to make some watercolor paintings. Chang Rak Kim told me that if you want to be an artist, you should learn academism (formal or conventional rules and traditions in art) first to be able to paint a flower that looks like a flower, not something else. I was really shocked at that moment, because we were thinking about going to Hongik University or Seoul National University, and those colleges are really conceptually driven and there's a lot of minimalisms, abstract expressionism, and conceptualism in the early 80's. I was really shocked, and I was doing watercolor painting, a very traditional painting with still life like a green scallop, apples, and other things like that. I was really shocked, and really liked his comment. And then I was to start thinking about King Sejong University. So—I visited the school and the school was certainly focusing on academism which was kind of rare in the 80's at that time. I thought that this is the school I'm going to! It was an amazing experience actually. And in the school during their academic years, basically you're not allowed to do anything else except naturalism and academism. And the one thing that really impressed me was that your model should be 8 feet away not like 6 feet or 9 feet to focus on creating a depth of a space. Now I know it's a part of the Leonard Da Vinci's aerial perspective, sfumato (Sfumato is a visual art technique that creates softened, hazy effects with the natural gradation of colors, tones, and shadows, and eliminates lines and borders), and other technical aspects. But at that time, I didn't know. We talked about art history, Renaissance and all other stuff.

But, from that challenge, I've been really thinking about space and what is the actual meaning of creating our sense of a space or even energy in this two-dimensional space. my main goal every day, just simply doing figure study, life model painting while creating a sense of a space and energy. The professor was definitely a master, but unfortunately,

he passed away from cancer. I was supposed to study in a graduate school and maybe come back to college to teach. But his sudden death changed everything. Creating a new language and a story is based on my study on naturalism and academism from 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> century of Western art, and I never regret it. Although my friends studying at Hongik University and Seoul National University were doing all minimalism, abstract paintings, or conceptualism, I was very proud of doing representational works in my studio at that time.

Around junior year, I know a lot of art students do a lot of experimentation and play with abstractions, and some different sort of finding a new way to create more subjective works. But I wasn't really interested in doing any kind of a special effort to find something through experimentation. I realized that when I was a junior, I started thinking something a little different from just a simple representation from what I see. A lot of contemplation walking helped me to recover my peaceful mind and get back to painting again. And then, I naturally move my work to a certain level. Although I still had the figures and representational elements, I wasn't painting traditionally. I was painting something a little bit more contemporary at that time.

When I was junior, I wanted to try an art competition because my parents gave me a studio, and actually I had Polio when I was 2 from a polio vaccination. This handicap physical disability has been in my life throughout the whole. I've been painting every night since I was an undergraduate. My parents gave me a motorcycle with the side car, and I was riding. I was thinking something about the painting, and I didn't see a little manhole on the road. The wheel got stuck and spun around, and I passed out, and I still have a little scar on my face. After that incident my father gave me a studio space, so I have my studio space near my home. I secretly prepared for the Dong-A Art Prize competition. The competition in South Korea at the time in the 80's, a lot of professors applied, I was the youngest recipient in 1984. I was constantly inspired by many artists who try to break the rule and give us alternatives all the time, and I'm interested in finding one. Francis Bacon's works were striking figures at the time. It's just incredibly shocking, but if you're carefully looking at Francis Bacon's works.

It's a still representation of a figure opening the mouth that is really psychologically distorted. That's something that we see from a horrible movie. That whole thing is still a representation. That was shocking because nobody has done that before. But if you're looking at a painting now. I'm not trying to take down Francis Bacon. But people think that's a mostly innovative painting at the time, but it's still part of a representation. It's still part of a representation of the face distorted strangely, unusually almost like a person has a psychological trauma. So, I've been thinking about a lot of other things. Human beings spent 1,800 years discovering the beauty of our surface when they looked at Henri Matisse's paintings. They realized paintings can be something more than representation of the space that can be on the surface. There's a lot of other things that I'm questioning, but my journey as an artist is learning from the against tradition from what we see and from representation to construct new ways in the ongoing process.

**JYK:** Thanks for sharing your story with many aspects. You came to the United States. Was that the one of the reasons you changed your figures in the environment and

surroundings?

**JCK:** Yeah. After I finished my MFA at King Sejong University, I've been looking at a lot of other art, particularly happening in New York, and I've been subscribing to Art in America magazine when I was in South Korea between 1987 and 1988. I wanted to be in New York. Since I thought that New York is the center of art. And I also wanted to have more opportunities with my disability. There was a little bit of prejudice from people in Korea. First, I went to Long Island University's MFA program, and I talked to one of the professors there and after looking at my work, the professor said, "You'll be interested in going to School of the Visual Art (SVA) instead of here. I transferred to the MFA of SVA in New York. There were about 20 students in the program at the time, but a few students were only painters. They were not even traditional painters, but doing something with the painting. I was still painting, but it was an abstract form using some kinetic elements. For example, my painting, Man and Woman, I painted with oil and I put a timing motor and clock in 1993. The power came from the ground. It touches a little bit of a biblical background since the male in the work received the power from the god and transferred the power to the female portion. Other kinetic elements were creating a piston movement that represents a physical relation. It also has my son's little toys making "quick" "quick" kind of a funny noise. My son was young at the time.

**JYK:** You are also doing quite a traditional way of creating art as well. The traditional way to paint figures, landscapes, or surroundings. When you experiment with the interactive aspects with contemporary aspects, how do you see your art contributing to the larger conversation around the contemporary arts with the painting?

**JCK:** I think through contemporary history. There are many painters. They have been trying to bring us to a new idea of a painting, and the painting is always an important part of visual art. There are also many young painters. They blur the boundary between drawings and paintings. Like Dana Schutz and Lisa Yuskavage, they're trying to give us a new way. I also include some manipulation of the figure, but I like to include a lot of things from representational to more renovated work at the same place. It's so easy to manipulate some figures. Of course, you can stretch, you don't fully depict, you can just have a form, or paint running down, but I think the reality is something that we cannot deny. So, I want to include some representational, realistic forms that I want to start from. That's one of the things that I like about photo-naturalism. I don't think it's photo-realistic, but photo-naturalistic style at least in some places I want to include because that's where we are, and there's a connection to it. And sometimes I look at some paintings of Eric Fisher, Edward Hopper, or Diego Velázquez and I find solitary, or you know some. Some of the work, maybe representational elements, are maybe too strong. Some artists created kind of an intermediate like some representational, not too realistic or not too abstract, so right in between. Cecily Brown is talking about her painting. When she creates abstract works, sometimes she wants to bring the figure back, so she can bring the figure back a little bit, but then it's maybe too much, so then she dismantles that.

A lot of artists do that, and also a lot of critics and viewers are looking at some works with higher appreciation, like something more philosophical or psychological, or something profound and innovative. I like to challenge that by having maybe a

completely normal or generic kind of a form, but I am trying to use that to bring out the most uncanny elements. People might think that this is a young female and what's up with that.

When I was looking at the American model, it was a really fresh impression. So that was the one thing that I wanted to do figure paintings again in 1995, and I've been painting something more figuratively. I am interested in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, Epoche, meaning "Suspension of Judgement," quantum physics, and some modern philosophy like Gilles Deleuze's diverse perspectives of our lives and directions. Although my painting "A rotten apple" in 1985 superficially shows the rotten apple in that form, I was thinking about my disability since I had Polio. But I know it's very challenging to compose all the philosophical, physical, and psychological elements because people still see that figure painting. Eventually I like to increase the volume of distinction, so that people can hear that. But I like to have many people look at my work.

**JYK:** When you mentioned your uncanny aspects in your painting, I thought similar things because the artificial lighting makes the uncanny valley between the movie scenes or natural situations, and natural human beings versus humanoid robots or AI generate faces. I see the colors and figures are very vivid and shiny, and it's sometimes more than real. That's why it's surrealistic, and very interesting. And sometimes you add some texts in your painting.

**JCK:** Yes, language is part of our communication because each word has a certain meaning. So it is a promised content. It is a fixed kind of content, of course, although some words can have very vague, open interpretations. I am constantly inspired by films like video streaming, Netflix, and other media. We can look at all other countries and all connected. The different languages are also super interesting to me. If you don't know French, you don't know what it is, but you will look at the whole painting, and you're trying to guess what this means. But once you read the translation, and then suddenly the meaning will be part of this whole interpretation. It looks like a cinematographic image, but when you look at it carefully, you can see that the figure is in front of the screen. So, the figure is not part of the film and the background would be a wall or might be an illusion or something. It looks like they are in the same space, but they are not. What does it mean? What if it is our same space or not? Thus, I also give you little clues like "I see you, but..." in the painting. People see this as a certain thing, but is it really what it is or maybe something else? I wanted to ask you a lot of questions. They can see something more than what surface can provide, but not only superficial elements that images simply provide to the viewer. Using representation is a vehicle to show some new possibilities. Cecily Brown was influenced by Francis Bacon's representation. I think even Mark Rothko created representational paintings of stages of the mind. A lot of artists create representations whether it's like your life or visual aspects of philosophy or psychology. But I wonder how I can handle this representation more openly and not limit it to representation as naturalism or realism. I'm trying to do more than that.

**JYK:** You showed me the painting with the artificial green light source. Sometimes films have that kind of lighting source to emphasize the emotional aspects in the scene. It's not a natural source in our daily life and we often see this kind of emphasis on the

isolation of the person in movies. I can see some new ways of showing the figure in your painting rather than just a natural situation in our daily life. Your artist statement describes the “blurring boundaries between predated aesthetics.” Can you describe a time when you felt particularly successful in blurring the boundaries between predated aesthetics?

**JCK:** I have been questioning those a lot, the boundaries between abstract and realism, abstract expressionism and minimalism, and the flat surface and also painting as an object. So, I'm trying to re-questioning those things to provide other alternatives and options through my work and I don't know if I am successful to do that or not, but after reviewing all of those from prehistoric art to contemporary art, and also, I am also teaching in my class. I'm just questioning a lot of other things such as what makes particular movements and how young artists, contemporary artists, and avant-garde artists are trying to provoke their thoughts. My way of blurring boundaries is having them in one place to let them harmonize. I guess that's my invention. Bring things together, and let them entwine into one together. I'm still working and interested in blurring the boundaries for sure. Sometimes it's successful and challenging, maybe still in the box.

**JYK:** Based on that, do you have any future plan with your project to develop or improve some aspects or you want to make something new?

JCK: I've been working with figurative directions, and I'm also interested in working with the natural environment subject matter wise. I like to touch on some naturalistic subject matters like forests, woods, and trees. I'm thinking about applying a Plein air painting application, but not naturalistic or traditional. I would use the alla prima (wet-on-wet) type of application which was used by Vincent van Gogh and Richard Schmid in my own way. My studio has an open backyard to see forest and I have a couple of large outdoor easels that I constructed during the pandemic. One day, I will set up a large landscape painting simply looking at the forest. I may start with a background like Alex Katz's "5 hours" huge painting, and then trees. I will be looking at the natural world in front of me, and of course this has to be happening outside in my backyard. It's private, so it's good. I'll be painting all day and I may start adding some elements that are not representation and that are not abstract. People might think abstract with naturalism.

JYK: You are in the United States and you're creating your scenery here, but I'm just curious that you are interested in any Korean scenery, Korean philosophy, or content itself as well.

JCK: I love utilizing the empty space because I am from Korea. Asian and Korean paintings have that empty space, and the empty space might be physically empty, but it is filled with psychology as well. So I am very interested in portraying emptiness in paintings.

JYK: Thank you for sharing your work and the wonderful talk with you.

JCK: Thank you.

