

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Hyeree Christina Mary Ro
- Interviewer: Jenny Wu
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- Recorded and Transcribed by Youngshin Yook (AKAA Research Fellow 2022-2023)
- 1 Video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Jenny Wu (JW): Hi, how are you?

Hyeree Christina Mary Ro (HCMR): Good. How are you?

JW: Good. So I wanted to ask you a few questions about your work. So for viewers who don't know, you work in sculpture and performance, and at the intersection of these practices, your works often include objects and stages that are activated through storytelling, either by yourself or with other performers. So I was wondering, how did you begin drawing from different disciplines, and what has this approach allowed you to explore in your work?

HCMR: So, at the beginning of my art life, in art school, I was into different mediums, including painting, drawing, installation, sculpture. But all the while, I was always kind of not convinced with the medium choice, per se. And the current form of performance in my practice came about in 2016. I guess it started from maybe, probably further back, but in 2015, I had a trip to Los Angeles to meet my father, for the first time in 13 years. And I wanted to put or find some kind of form to that story and experience. And, sometimes when you're trying to talk about something difficult, there's like, if you hold something in your hand, kind of fidgeting with it, it helps people speak about it. I think it's kind of related to that. I started talking with small objects in hand. And that was the start of it. But thinking of it, retrospectively, even from when I was really little, I was interested in all these different kinds of discipline. That's incorporated within my performance pieces, such as making objects, storytelling, writing stories, or different movements. Like I was always into taking various classes like dance, martial arts, or yoga, a lot of things that involve body engagement. And I think those things informed, organically into the performance.

JW: Yeah, I definitely want to return to this 2015 trip to LA later on in our conversation. And it's really interesting that these forms sort of congealed for you around 2016. Because one of the works that first struck me in your body of work was titled *Piano*, and it's also from 2016. And in this work, you're performing around a structure that loosely resembles the instrument. And it seems to be these wooden keys on hinges. And, you know, in this work, and in others, you seem to choose to perform with sculptural objects that in some way, mimic the look and the feel, and sometimes the sound of functional objects. So how do you distinguish between the objects and your performances and their counterparts in the world?

HCMR: I think this is a really interesting and good question. So when I make objects, I collect a lot of things both physically, but also image wise, I take photos. I literally just collect, pick up stuff from the street or buy things from the store. Also, record. I guess I'll strictly speak about objects for now. But then the way I use and make objects are, kind of trying to strip away the function, original function and meaning of the object, so I would collect found object but when I'm using that object as a material, I'm saying object too many times [laugh], when I'm making

the object, I try to alter the object so that it is reminiscent of certain objects, but it's not that. And what I aim to create, I think it's like a in a way more primordial form of an object. So you look at it, for example, you look at this, and it could remind you of like this or that, or you could imagine, this kind of function, that kind of function, but then it is not known function in this world we live in. And I like to create objects to that state and create new connections, new connections and possibilities of [...] potential, like connections with body, narrative, and language.

JW: Yeah, and speaking of language, like with these objects, and also with your body, you perform monologues, that's also part of your work. And these often have to do with history on the micro and macro levels. And so do the objects spark narratives in your mind? Or is it the other way around?

HCMR: So the funny thing was, well it's not funny [laugh], is that a lot of the process and my creating performance works is it goes through the collection period, and then stripping away the meaning and function part into different fragments and pieces. But then later on, they come together to create connection to each other. So coming back to your question, it will be a specific object that wouldn't necessarily spark a specific narrative. But there needs to be a certain kind of connection, I guess. Let's see. So for example, earlier, you mentioned *Piano* piece and the keys. But in my opinion, what's interesting is that those keys were actually different pieces of wood that's like this short, and then was a very small hinge, it was hinged to a wooden structure. And this one other performer was lying down underneath the structure pushing the key up while I held them up like this. So in a way that it can be reminiscent of piano keys, but then how piano keys are made and look like, which is like a really long strip of wood. And it's a hammer and a pressure instead of pushing up. Like there's different. I don't know. It's similar, and it's enough to remind you of certain things, but it's not exactly that. And I think I tried to look for that space when creating a narrative or object. Yeah, I don't know if that answered the question.

JW: No, absolutely. Yeah, I do sense a recognition without [...]. And so to sort of go back to these monologues or these stories, they sort of come out as monologues in your performances, but they also seem very much collected very much like a magpie. You know, searching for anecdotes. I'm wondering when you compose, or when does a performance or a monologue feel complete to you? Sort of, does it come piece by piece? Or is it sort of all at once?

HCMR: Right. I think, in general, a lot of components within the work do come in pieces. And sometimes when they come as a chunk, I actually make them into pieces, too. Yeah, so when I'm writing, I call them script or text. Usually, I make the objects first. And then when the objects are kind of complete-ish, which could be another question how do you know when it's

complete, when it's somewhat complete in my mind, then I would start writing but writing would come actually from real experiences that I like to call my performances as like, I witnessed something in my life and I am telling what I have witnessed to the audience, and the audience, at that time at that space becomes a witness to this performance. And I gather, I record, almost daily, either maybe writing notes, or sometimes I voice record too, the conversations. And those things live as pockets of records, references. And then when I do have a subject matter that I'm working on as a project, I gather those things, and then look at them, edit them, and some other things come in. And at first, it's like putting everything that might be related to that subject into one big bucket, or one long, first draft. And then it just goes through different editing processes.

JW: I love this idea of being a witness to your personal experience, especially a daily witness to that. Just sort of go back to the idea of your personal experiences. You mentioned a trip to LA in 2015. And several of your works deal with a theme of family, thinking specifically of *LA-sung* from 2016, and *Thirty-thousand Dollars*, and so from 2016. So what was your motivation for speaking about things that were so personal?

HCMR: I think *LA-sung*, and *Thirty-thousand Dollars*, and *Piano*. And *Kidney* and *Romance*, like those five works from 2016, through 2017, is actually like a series, I bracket them as like a *LA-sung* series. Right after creating the first piece, which was *LA-sung*, I decided that this needs to be a series of performances, and then thought of different themes that I will deal with. And so, early 2016, it was already determined, all five works, its themes and titles. And for that body of work, it came more as something that I needed to tell something that I might have wanted to tell, like all my life, but didn't quite know how to tell and also at the same time, didn't really want to completely reveal. But then, as I was working on those pieces, I think I realized that this very intimate, private or very personal family history, actually might not be just, personal. I was having conversations, or I would realize that people sometimes find their experience from these works. Like even if it's one phrase that I say, or a certain kind of moment that connects to their memory or their experience in their life. And I think I started moving towards being more conscious about those connections with the audience as I work through.

JW: Yeah, these moments of recognition, definitely take your work from sort of micro history, personal history into the macro. And so I wanted to sort of transition here to talk about some of the historical anecdotes in your work that deal specifically with geopolitical conflict in East Asia. So I'm thinking of your work, *flour hat (floor)* 2021, where you make a hat out of flour, and that references the wheat that Americans brought to Korea in the 40s along with their occupying troops. And you and two other performers here, wear this flower hat in tandem, and you perform these tasks like braiding each other's hair. And so I'm wondering, did you feel in this

case that you were enacting a form of remembrance or reparation? Like what did that work mean for you?

HCMR: I think this is a little bit of a difficult question to answer. I think every, almost every form of work is some kind of remembering that I don't necessarily associate my work to be a form of remembrance or reparation. But I do see where this question could be coming from. So, yes, in that sense, it's difficult to answer but I think with this piece *flour hat (floor)*, specifically, flour came from my grandfather's job, working at a flour factory in the 40s, 50s. And a hat came from my dad's one time job at a hat company. And then the floor is actually kind of me doing a performance. So these things come, these elements come from my family history, which is quite directly involved with Korean history or Korea-US relations of a specific time period. But then I think that I would like to think that these elements kind of informed the project, not so much I'm trying to remember or create a narrative that represents certain history.

JW: Another really distinctive feature about that piece was the collaboration or that you had with other performers. And I was wondering if you could speak broadly about your collaborators and their backgrounds, and what it's like to be coordinating with multiple bodies during the course of a performance.

HCMR: So I guess I have worked with people over the course of years. There were times when [...] *flour hat (floor)*, I will speak from that. So I think I like to work with people who know me, know my work, understand my work, and I understand their work, if they are artist, but also not necessarily just artists, but mostly so far, all the collaborators generally have been artists, but generally, I like to work with colleagues, friends. And I think it's important because that part like working with friends or colleagues who understand each other's work is important because the basis of it is like both friendship and trust in each other's work, that creates a really good starting point and working environment. And for *flour hat (floor)*, or what else is there? Or *Seseri video* where, four or three other people, including me, do certain kinds of tasks, holding each other's wrists and walking or holding each other's ankles and stuff like that. They are all fellow artists and friends. For *flour hat (floor)*, another criteria per se was that they should have long hair. And because I wanted long haired people. And one of the important scenes, as you mentioned, is braiding each other's hair. And I actually specifically wanted the other two people to be male identifying. Which is a personal reference point to my grandfather and my father. And also a little bit of like, not strangeness, but it creates a different kind of vibe with these three people. Yeah.

JW: It seems like when you start from a position of trust, you can do all these playful things. So I'm wondering, so my next question has to do with the concept of play, and games. In a way your performances sort of model this kind of made-up game. They're playful, yet, it's a kind of highly intentional, focused play that seems to draw something very serious from the objects.

And your monologues also strike me as somewhat mnemonic. Like almost like a verbal game that allows you to re-embodiment memories. So I'm wondering, do you think play serves a purpose in the act of remembering or processing difficult memories and histories?

HCMR: Yeah, I think I love games and play and elements of it. Yeah, it plays an important part in my practice, I think. The beauty in games or play is that it's so structural, you know, and there are different components, players, elements that make up the whole structure. And a lot of times these structures, even in like real life histories, I guess, have served as a certain kind of like, sometimes like a teaching tool, even for difficult lessons. Or like a verbal. What is that called? Passing down certain, like, memory or history, like through either songs or like games. For example, do you know, but I don't remember the lyrics. Like there's like a [...] posies, full of pockets.

JW: Oh, yeah. The bubonic plague.

HCMR: Yeah, that's about the Black Plague. And it's like a playful song. But it's also telling you it is not instructional but informational per se. And there's a certain gruesomeness of it in the end, because it is about plague and they all drop to ashes. Why did I go there? But [about] playing games. So I really liked how you mentioned mnemonic. Because as I was thinking of that term, I was thinking about creating performances, and rehearsing them. One question that I get or a comment that I get, a lot of times or often is that, how do you remember all of it? Or how do you memorize all the movements, and then script? But then the thing is, I don't need to memorize them. It comes from the process of making, but because I create structure, when I'm making the movements, and movements with the objects, but also with the choreography of the performance, I think a lot about the entire structure of it and adjust them a lot. After a few rehearsals, or practices, it is in me. It's not memorizing at all, and it's because it's not acting but like telling with cues with objects. So in a way it is somewhat mnemonic. You know, and I think it's related to how I edit down my script into almost like a very bare bones. A lot of times, it's not full sentences, it's like a word. But then that kind of word and then the narrative structure, like I sometimes use repetition, and this scene is like a twin to this scene, [so] there's this type of structural planning behind making the performance that, I think, the different rules of the game definitely exist in the performance making.

JW: Yeah, it's really cool to hear you talking about that. And I guess the sort of the opposite of structure might be the element of surprise, which is also something that's present in your work. There's so much suspense, and tension and intrigue and surprise, I'm thinking, for example, in *Sandosi*, from 2017, there's this moment when you open a sort of escape door, and there's a white envelope inside, which I think is such a classic moment of surprise. And other times, you're using different objects in surprising ways. It just keeps the viewer on their toes. So I'm wondering, how do you factor in or do you think about the element of surprise in your work?

HCMR: So surprise. I don't think I associate, or I thought of the word "surprise", but definitely the element of unexpectedness, I do think about when creating. Because performance is such an interesting thing that's so easy to lose attention. I do factor in a lot of how the viewing experience would be like as much as the telling part from me is important. So sometimes I would have objects that I don't touch in the piece, because it kind of comes from breaking the expectation of the audience, when people think, oh, okay, all the objects have each scene or story, [but] I try to break away from being figured out a lot of times, and I think that could relate to surprise, in a way. Trying to think of other examples that I could think of from the work, but definitely, surprise, or certain parts that are not easily explainable. I do factor those things.

JW: Yeah, I'm thinking also of *Sandos* that work in Japan, there's this metal funnel that you, I was so surprised when you sort of put your head in it and vocalized into it, just using the objects in ways that you wouldn't think is their original function, which goes back to what you're saying. And so, in terms of more recent works, I know you just had a show in Seoul, in 2022, and it was titled *Jinhee*, can you tell me a little bit about that work?

HCMR: Yeah, so *Jinhee*. Jinhee is a kind of a more or less common female name in Korea. I know a couple of Jinhee's in my life. But, the whole project started from this dog named Jinny, that I started living with last summer, 2021. And I think I started noticing how Jinny acts in studio space. I got curious about her behavior. So she would, it was almost as if she knew which objects or things are [art] work and which are not work. So with work, she would like to be careful, go around it and she doesn't disturb them. But things that are not work, she would step on or even sit on or lie down on it. And I thought it was interesting and wondered, because in my studio, I mean here it's more or less kind of clean, but I a lot of times work on the floor. I lay things down and have raw materials, but also working objects on the floor. And I don't know, even to some human eye, it might not be that distinguishable, which is like work-in-progress versus raw material. But she would distinguish them as I would [distinguish them], so I was wondering if there is a certain kind of innate property within the object that tells the dog and me that it's something more considered. Or it could also be the way I approach objects that are work versus just material, but the project started from that, and it consisted of sculptural objects and two performances. And these two performances dealt loosely with the whole theme of the project.

The first one is called *Jinhee and Jinny*. I invited this artist friend of mine to perform with me and collaborate. Actually, she performed with me like in 2016, on *Piano* piece, as well. Yoon Young Jeong, we worked with the objects that I created in the space, but I was telling my experience and what I have witnessed living with Jinny in Austin, Texas, New York, and New Haven. And she told stories about her taking care of stray cats in this town, this is redevelopment town, Imun-dong in Seoul. It was the cat stories and dog stories that were

crossed in the piece. So that one was more narrative-based and object body engagement-based as is similar to previous works. Whereas this other piece titled *Maju*, that I performed with Lucas Yasunaga, who actually was in the *flour hat (floor)*. I guess I do like to work with the same people [laugh]. It was more focused on the object itself, and sound. So we did an improvisational sound performance. And the duration, because it's improvisational, the duration varied, it lasted like 40 minutes to 50 minutes most of the time. At times, it will go for an hour. But we were trying to have a conversation without words, or language, but more with the sound objects are making. So he brought in some of his objects from Japan where he grew up, but he visited for the first time three or four years. And we were trying to socialize my objects with his objects. And we were thinking about boundaries. And I guess social boundaries also, when you first meet, there's like a certain kind of spatial boundary that forms, and we were thinking through those kinds of things in introducing our objects to each other.

JW: That sounds so cool. And in terms of I know, you were just speaking of some, like echoes and continuities, some performers that have reappeared throughout your body of work. And I noticed in *Jinhee*, the use of screens is something that you've done throughout multiple works, especially *Falls* from 2022. And I was really struck by this language of enclosure, as well as sort of the color palette of *Jinhee*. There's this really nice green color along the stage, which echoes a work previously titled *Kidney*, I think, from 2017. And so I was wondering if you could speak a bit about echoes or any sort of secret easter egg echoes in this work or how do you determine what gets carried forward?

HCMR: Screens are as you mentioned, screens appear multiple times, I think, in my work. *LA-sung* was first performed behind the really low about this height barrier hinged screen, *Three-thousand Dollars* not so much [...]. Yeah, *Falls*, but also *flour hat (floor)* installation had small screens that I actually titled *screen or sift or fence*, or even in *Sandosji*, so it repeats a lot. And I think screens are pretty interesting, it is a barrier. But a lot of times, it's also not so much like completely blocking out something. But it does create a certain kind of spatial division. So I think of it as like a division but also connected in a way, the set, in a sense that it's also collapsible, or movable. And I think, in that sense, I do believe that screens might continue to appear in my work. But in terms of enclosure, I like to approach things from the side, like both physically, architecturally, but also even in relations. Not like straightforward head-to-head, which is nice as well. But I like to think through and approach things in a more relational or roundabout way. And I have created this kind of audience's pathways. In *Jinhee*, and *Falls*, *Seseri*, or in *Sandosji*, that was performed in Seoul, they all kind of had this way. I guess all of those times, screens were used to guide the audience to approach the work from a side and then the reveal kind of came. And when I feel like there was a second part.

JW: I was also curious about color, other colors that reoccur for you.

HCMR: Colors. I think I generally associate a project with a color in mind. But reason or quote unquote, logic, it's not logical at all. Logic for it differs from project to project. So certain, in certain cases, it was actual the physical space of the performance that informed the color. For example, *LA-sung* was like performed outdoors on a kind of like, field where they play small football, that was really green. So like, in my mind, *LA-sung* it's like green. Or like *Kidney* you mentioned that actually came from so I was I visited this museum that I was going to show. And I visited the space to like, plan out the install. And then all the works from the previous show was deinstalled but the colors of the wall were like left, you know, and then the color actually that green color was already painted in that space. And I was thinking through my work *Kidney* and then thought oh, actually this color would work well like it would accentuate the work. So I requested a platform to be built and the platform to be painted in the same color as the original wall color in that space. Yeah, so it comes from sometimes like the space itself. Or sometimes it comes from how the work will look, I guess, like, I would think about the color formation of the objects in that piece of in that piece of work. And then think through what would bring out the works, which was the case with like, *Jinhee* and *Seseri*.

JW: It's really interesting how you mentioned that the works and installations guide, not only you know, your performances, but also the audience, or through the space, and something about your work feels very intimate to me. And I was wondering if you could speak a bit about, you know, the role that you see the audience playing, I know it in one of your previous works, *Moving Prints*. You toyed with the idea of sort of limiting the number of audience members at your shows? And so, sort of what is the ideal audience engagement for you? And what kind of experience do you most hope for audiences to come away with?

HCMR: I think up till now, my performances are best viewed, when in an enclosed, quiet space where the audience can focus. Which, I mean, in group exhibition settings, sometimes it was a little different situation. But I think, yeah, it is best viewed in that kind of situation. Because there's a lot of my performance, I think, you need to follow a lot of things both visually, but also sonically, maybe narrative, or the sound object is making. And even like, the pauses of silence is a factor that I think about a lot. So I guess that intimate space or quiet, intimate space was required so far. I also don't know what my work will pick on from now on. And I think, this time of focus, I hope the audience would connect to the telling of the performance and have an image of, I don't know, what's being told, but also hope it brings or sparks some kind of memory or experience from their life. You know, like, yeah, I don't know. I think that's like what I'm hoping for.

JW: Yeah, and speaking of your audience, and that sort of connection, another sort of aspect about it is the fact that you're multilingual and your performances are as well. And so I'm wondering just in terms of how you connect with your audience, are you hoping to speak to

different groups of people at different times in performance or speak to a sort of multilingual diasporic subject?

HCMR: So yeah, I am multilingual. I think and write and speak in both languages, dream in both languages, and it's also a very common way for any multilingual person. Like, you would mix in a certain word that has a more exact meaning or feel, to the experience that you want to speak about. Within one sentence, you would mix up words. So I play with that a lot in my works, but also I think of language as forms. Actually, this is what my mother told me back when I was in elementary school first learning English. I told her that, oh English is so much rounder than Korean, Korean is more angular in sound. And I think that carries on a little bit, I think of them as a form, and I create physical, visual objects with different aesthetics in mind like texture, form, or volume, shape. I approach language in that sense as well. But at the same time, depending on the audience, I do think about what can be more concealed through speaking certain lines and speaking which lines and which language for what kind of audience. So, yeah, for example, like, in *LA-sung*, in the very end, I would just speak in full English sentences for a bit. Things that I wanted to say, but I didn't really want the Korean audience to understand easily or fully. So I would just speak fast in English sentences. But of course, that would have a completely different effect in the US, for example. So I think it's kind of interesting when thinking about performing in US, or Canada, which I have at some point, because it creates a multiple layers of audience, because there are people who only speak this language, but then there are people who only speak this other language, and then there are people who are comfortable with both. And yeah, kind of think through what is being understood, and how much in things like that, but I don't think I aim for it to be understood by a certain audience only.

JW: Yeah. I love that idea of languages concealment or un-concealment, sort of sculpting it the way you would, a material. And thanks for sharing the anecdote from when you were a child. That's really cool that you thought that way even at a young age. So I'm wondering about your development, especially your influences, and we can start from when you were young, or recently, what are some of the things that have spoken to you or shaped you, this can be artistic or literary or anything else.

HCMR: From a young age, I was always a maker. As a kid, I made my first book in second grade in elementary school with a friend which consisted of poems, my dreams, which was like I had 20 dreams, and short stories. And also made [...] Wait, these are not influences. But I always loved fiction as a kid. Even now, I read a lot of literary stuff. Recently, I've been thinking about writers that I really like, for example, Ágota Kristóf, *Three Notebooks* [*The Notebook Trilogy*]. There's something about her writing, that's very structural, per se. And she doesn't speak about a specific year or country. But the stories are very specific, but at the same time

universal, and I love that aspect. And I guess in a similar sense, Lydia Davis or Raymond Carver. And then a little different, but I really like Elizabeth Strout as well. Italo Calvino. And then as for artists, there are numerous artists that I really love all the time, but recently I've been thinking a lot about Louise Bourgeois and how her practice just constantly surprises me. Couple of weeks ago, I was at Mass MoCA, and saw her marble piece, which I have seen before, but at a different angle. Like it was like, it felt totally different and how she approaches texture and form was very inspiring. And I also like her other body of work as well. And then Eva Hesse. What is that piece called? They recently showed at Guggenheim, a couple months ago. That was an interesting experience. Because I've always, I think I've only seen her most of works, I've seen it through catalog. But it was a certain kind of presence in the work in the materiality and the physicality. That really made me feel like oh yeah, I want to do more work. And then I had a couple more people. And then films. But with films, I usually go with directors, a lot of times. [For example,] Eric Rohmer, I've enjoyed his films for a long time, how the dialogues create the whole scene. I guess a lot of the influences come from narrative or how they structured the narrative. Or Lygia Clark. And I love seeing fellow artists and what they do, it's always nice to follow, it feels like I'm lucky to be following their trajectory and their practice.

JW: Absolutely. I do. Everyone you mentioned I do see some of them in your work. And it's really interesting to see you in a lineage as well as to see you in a constellation of your contemporaries. So, yeah, thank you so much for speaking. I hope this is helpful for the viewers and researchers.