

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Maia Ruth Lee
- Interviewer: Diana Seo Hyung Lee
- May 13, 2023 / via Zoom Meeting
- 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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Diana Seo Hyung Lee (DL): [...] I want to talk about the show that you just had at Tina Kim gallery, because I see exhibitions kind of as - even if you're not an installation artist - exhibitions as kind of an installation or like an album, or a book for [...] a musician or writer. So I think of it as an important body of work that is being presented in a group. And I had the pleasure of seeing you right before you were installing, and then you were like, "oh my god, this is the exciting part." Because you don't really know exactly how it's going to come together. So I just want to ask you how you think about, how the show remains in your memory now that it's over, compared to the other times that you were showing the *Bondage Baggage* works, even as these were all new works. But still, the *Bondage Baggage* series is a word that you were using before. Now that the exhibition closed, I wonder how it compares to the other experience of showing it elsewhere.

Maia Ruth Lee (MRL): Yeah, sure. It's a great question. [...] Going back to what you were saying about how we met right before the show, before we started installing, I think when you're putting a show together, there are so many different stages that happen. And I think even in this case, the works before a show and after a show, I feel like they really transform and enter into a new phase. So not even comparing to a previous show, I think just even in this case, pre-show, and post-opening, I have such a different relationship to those works already, which is so interesting. And I think that's why putting an exhibition together, especially a solo show, is so exciting because [it gives the work] a new life or a new chapter of the works take off, which is always unexpected. But inevitably, a little bit of re-contextualization happens just from reorganizing the works. Also, when the works are viewed and experienced by the gallery goers, it, again, breathes new life. And for me, that part is really exciting to see. I was so happy that I was there for about a week after the opening of the show to really experience and listen to some of the feedback. For Tina Kim gallery, [...] I had such a different idea of the show. It really came together [during] the week of installing. We were moving the objects around the space, thinking about the footprint, thinking about the interaction that the public would have with the works. From the moment you enter the gallery, as you walk into the first gallery, and then the second gallery, and then back out through the first gallery. [...] I love imagining space design, along with the exhibition design. When it comes to the works, and specifically the *Bondage Baggage* works - when we decided to pile them up almost at the entrance of the space as an opener of the space or opener of the show, I thought it was a really smart decision on Junni Chen's part, who is the director. Because it introduced the works in a more ephemeral way, [and] I thought of it as an installation, instead of looking or viewing them as sculptures, [because] it really made the viewer enter into a specific space. [...] Actually, those works weren't even included in my proposal. In the initial proposal, there were some other sculptures. Now, looking back, I'm so glad I didn't go down that path. [...] The video was also inserted halfway through. The video wasn't in the original proposal either. So I love how, when designing a show, it really does change and shift along the way. And sometimes it's a collaborative decision. Sometimes it just happens when you're in the space and are inspired by the space. But yeah, I really do love that part. I don't know if that answers your question.

DL: No, it does answer the question. Thank you so much. Yeah, I think it's interesting, because you were talking about the collaborative decision between the gallery director and just going through the preparation process, and I really feel like that's essential. But also because I saw the works, I do feel that people who are working with you to guide the process are taking clues from the work [..]. They know what the work wants to do. Because I remember seeing the paintings leaning on the wall, when the art handlers were unwrapping them, and the sculptures weren't there, because you had to actually assemble them together. And I was thinking to myself, something's happening here, [..] So I can understand how Junni would have thought, I think we need to introduce these paintings through a walk-through, unfolding in time, because I think that time is an element that comes out in the *Bondage Baggage* paintings, [..] it's such a journey, just looking at it.

MRL: Thank you. Even with the paintings, the works were just canvas works when they left the studio. So even for me to see them stretched and framed and in a white cube space, it was the first time I'd seen them that way, too. So there is always an element of surprise when you take your work outside of the studio, and into a space like a white cube for the first time. Even for the artists who made the work, you're meeting them for the first time in a way. And it's exciting because you can really see the work for the first time too. It's not kind of [being] immersed in all of your work, craft and studio materials [in your studio setting] [and kind of viewing them from] your everyday POV. So it's really fun for me. And that's why I think installation time is my favorite because you're really looking at your work [..] for the first time. And you get to have really fresh eyes on the works. And you can design how you want people to interact with it and understand the work. So it's collaborative. You're right. I mean, the work definitely informs the decisions, but sometimes the artists, they don't know, because they're too close to it. So, sometimes that collaborative effort is very useful and helpful.

DL: I think that's so wonderful. And I feel like when you're talking about seeing the work for the first time, it's interesting because the works will always contain the memory of being installed, and part of that space. So it is really seeing it for the first time, and that way, it [feels] like when a child is born. The life has started inside the belly, but actually, the life unfolds, and you're meeting them for the first time. And I think for motherhood, that's a really important respect [..]. I like what you're saying about your work, because I think it's probably an approach that you carry for your relationship to people. I think there's a respectful attitude of discovery that I find to be everywhere in your work, which brings me to my next question. Because, looking back at your other works, there is no brand of Maia, aesthetically-speaking, visually-speaking. I feel like there is [...] something like a voice in an artist. So, I had this wonderful experience, where I read this writer who published something small, in a magazine, and then I forgot who it was. And then I remember going to a bookstore and leafing through this book in the new author section, and then thinking "I heard this voice before," trying to figure out where I had heard it. It turned out it was the writer I encountered in that magazine. And I think that, more literally, [it applies not only to] when you hear like a singer, but also with visual artists. It is a thing. So I

feel like there is maybe [something], if you made a work, that I never saw that maybe I can trace it back to you. I think that may seem a little bit presumptuous, but in a literal sense, there isn't a brand of Maia [or] signature, [even though] that word signature that I find troubling. Because it feels like marketing. It feels like mastery, which is another word that is troublesome to me because it's like this paradigm of master and servant. So you don't have that but you do have a voice. [So] do you ever think about that [or] worry about that or do you feel pretty much free of that because you're just following your conceptual curiosities?

MRL: I think the answer is yes, I do follow sort of a story before I figure out how to make it t, and the materials and construction around it – or the formatting around it – really happen more organically as I figure out how pragmatically or practically I can bring forth an idea or make something come to life. I think I'm naturally or inherently more of a practical person, and resourceful as well. So, I feel like I am not that kind of artist where I can [...] I'm not really interested in high production work, for example, highly refined. To me, that's less interesting than trying to figure out a simple idea with what I have around me. That's always been the way I've worked. And I think because of that, you can see or hear the voice from the simplicity of the materials or the practicality of the materials sometimes. For me, it's so hard to make something if it doesn't follow a narrative [...] there's no point. I feel like all artists have different callings and different directions of how they work and how they like to create. But for me, it's really hard to just have a white canvas in front of me and start painting [from there]—it's almost impossible. Actually, it gives me a lot of fear because I'm frozen in front of a white canvas. That's just not how I process things. I have lots of friends who start the process that way—with sketching, visualizing, prepping a white canvas, and adding on material, for example. But it doesn't work for me that way. It doesn't activate anything for me. So, the way I landed back on painting, for example, is like this roundabout way. If I were given the same materials, canvas, and a rope, and I was supposed to paint, or use paint brushes, I would never come up with those images. There's absolutely no way. So, in a way, I really love having very little to almost no control of how things end up looking because the [final look] is not really important to me. The end result is not the final say in the piece of art that I'm making. I think, in that process, letting go of a lot of control gives me more access to the materials or something like that.

DL: No, I think that's so true. I love what you said about being a practical person, which kind of makes me laugh a little bit because I don't know, Maia, are you “practical” person [laugh]? But I see as you were talking, it made sense what you meant. And it's interesting and important to clarify because you are talking also about like your mom making something out of anything and that we can all talk about being children of the postwar generation, where we were told we can't waste anything. And then we talk about *that* being practical. But there's such a strange, spiritual feeling in that practicality. There's such a hope and such a weird belief in things or something like a worship of things. [It's] almost like, when people say, “I'm gonna give you this sweater, it's old, but it still has some life in it.” That phrase [...] shows that people imbue so

much meaning onto things. And that [phrases] like, oh, 이걸 왜 버려? [translation: why would you throw this out?].

MRL: I think the practicality is interesting because a Western view of practicality is very different from the East Asian kind of traditional practicality in a way. And we can really go in and hone in on what practicality actually is, but I think you really pinpointed it. Well, the practicality that I'm addressing is really more related to the spirit of objects. It's almost like the preciousness of objects, but also simultaneously, the preciousness but also not preciousness of objects at the same time if that makes sense. This dual relationship you can have with something that you live with, or that you carry, or [it's about] the many lives that one object can carry. It's more like an East Asian philosophy of practicality. Whereas Western practicality is [about] what's the quickest, what's the fastest, what's the cheapest, what's the most logical, [Eastern practicality] is a very different kind of philosophy. So I guess what you're speaking about is definitely more of like an Eastern viewpoint of what practicality is or how our parents can view what practicality is. But [...] I know where this [question] actually comes from [...]. I do have [...] a very genuine curiosity for things. And not just all things. I don't really care for new things, I don't really care for fancy or flashy things. But I do have a general curiosity and a very deep curiosity for things that can carry meaning. Whether that is spiritual or not, it doesn't really matter sometimes, [and] something like an old puzzle will totally get my attention. Or an object that is an ancient tool for meditation, or a painting that is used for meditation, for example, a Tonka, like a mandala painting, is something that I grew up with. And I was always really taken with that format. But also, growing up in Nepal and being surrounded by such ancient things all the time [even though I was] not really understanding what things meant, I just knew that all things around me were symbolic. So I think I was really open to this idea of signs and symbols from a very young age. And I think that's the part that I [...] am playing with, [...] that there are things that are handed down generationally from many centuries ago. But there are also things that you can start imbuing meaning into [them] to pass down to the next generation, for example, and it's really like an open book. It's not like we make new rules, we can make new meanings, we can make new objects, and kind of put similar kind of depth and meaning into these things that we want to pass on.

DL: Thank you so much for saying that. I think that's why I mentioned the practicality part, not because I'm trying to judge you, [but] it was trying to get into those signs and symbols thing. It's about seeking meaning in things that other people might not. And that brings me back to this moment in your life. The video that wasn't in the show, *The Stranger*, and I love that moment where you said, you would look at this brick on your walk to school. And I know what you're talking about. Because [when] growing up, I [also] used to do something like that, where you fixate on some minor thing and something about it makes you think that things make sense, or it's just so interesting. And that's what art is. And I think that's why I just wanted to make sure that in this interview [...] because your work is about language. That's a broad thing

to say, but it is about language. And I feel like something like a word, like practicality, can be confusing for different.

MRL: Yeah, I love actually talking about sort of the many years of what that word can.

DL: And I think that is important because when you're talking about signs and symbols, that's a totally different experience. That's a totally different entryway into objects. That's very specific to your narrative history of growing up in Nepal. So [...] I just wanted to get away from the binary of thinking about, East Asian versus like Western, because that's not I think, how you're thinking at all. And then, we can unpack this more [later] but because you were talking, [your work is] also about using things that are in front of you that pique your interest. And [...] I want to talk about your video work, because I see it as the same as any of your other works where you are working. I mean, because it's found footage, it's not your footage, you're not taking the same thing, like you were saying about the canvas being blank, you wouldn't know how to paint it. I can't see you taking a camera and walking around, and then editing. So I love that, even in the video, you're working with footage that someone else took, which is your father, and then kind of going so close to it by making the text that moves [...] like the rhythm behind [and] how it moves forward is your voice or your text, which was your voice.

MRL: Well, it's interesting that now you've seen both *The Stranger* and *The Letter*, seeing them as a continuum, the first video being *The Stranger*. And I love that you caught on to that part about the brick. And to bring context into this interview, it's just a text about how [I was] as a child. I fixated on one kind of discolored brick on the wall every day on my way to school. And I had this fixation of checking it every day to see if it was still there. And I didn't share it with anyone. It was something that I kept for myself my whole life until I actually made that video and wrote that in there. But it was a personal marker for me to check that I was still alive. If that makes sense, that it wasn't a program, it wasn't this like that I was still kind of in charge of my, as a kid, in my mind, I think like my destiny or something. I just wanted to always make sure that the brick was there. And if I saw it, and if it was there, I knew everything would be okay. It could be seen as an OCD thing too, but I think that brick signified a lot because I can still picture where it was placed. And I still remember the wall. Looking back on that, I am proud of my younger self, or even having had something like that because I think a lot of other things in that time in my life were very precarious. And knowing that I didn't really have that much of a support system, mentally or emotionally or spiritually at the time, for me to have found something like that for myself, looking back, that was a pretty good idea. How did I come up with that? And I'm glad I had something like that [then]. And the video work is interesting too because I'm going back on text that I'd already written in the past. So I'm also going through old footage, but I'm also going through my old writing. And that's really interesting too, as I'm leafing through these old diaries, which was for *The Stranger*, or leafing through letters that I'd written, which is the second video, *The Letter*, and piecing together these different sentences,

sewing them together to make it sense. That process is interesting too. I'm seeing new things. I'm almost like hearing new things. And then I almost really don't remember writing this or feeling this. But it's almost like another rediscovery of old [but] a new emotion that I didn't really realize I had been. It's been interesting to work with my father's footage too because I am seeing them, or I'm meeting him for the first time too in a way, as I'm viewing the world through his eyes and the way he recorded his new environment around him. And seeing his curiosity is really interesting to me because it's the same things that I'm curious about now, or I've always been curious about too. So there's almost a little bit of a relief in that process and it's maybe kind of like seeing that the old brick is still there, feeling like okay, cool, everything's gonna be fine. Because it all turned out okay. Because the generational mirroring that I was talking about, between sort of me and my father in using this footage, is uncanny at points.

DL: Yeah, I have to say, it's pretty impressive seeing the footage that your father took because there's no point of view, or something feels very generous or meandering. Otherwise, you wouldn't have used it because I think it would feel obstructive, but there's something about the meandering point of view. And he doesn't seem to have a center when he's filming, but it's not so much standing in the way. He doesn't know what he's looking at. But I think it matches so well with the text that you're putting together and it's probably what you're saying, or what you've said about being around the same age as him. I don't know about for the *Stranger*, but still, it's like the same kind of general moment in someone's life of being an adult. Looking at something.

MRL: For sure, yeah.

DL: What are you feeling now? in terms of being in Korea.

MRL: Yeah, I mean, being back in Korea is always a trip because it's not just a visit, there are so many things that come up. During this trip, I really made the effort to kind of visit all of my different stomping ground areas. I visited my school, [... and] yesterday, I visited all the different areas where I've had studios, places that I used to hang out, and I met up with my college friends. I went to Gwangju and Busan, and Busan is where I was born. I met up with all my relatives; I have so many relatives here, I keep forgetting how many [I have]. But it was really important for me this time because my son is with me. So, I really wanted him to share this experience with me. And I feel like this is maybe the earliest age where he would really start remembering things. Age five is like a perfect time to introduce this kind of new chapter or this new layer of what he's part of. When he was younger, I was like [...] it's just gonna go over his head, it's not gonna stick. So I didn't even want to put the effort in. But from now on, I want to put the effort in, and I'm really happy that we made this trip. It's just him and I; my husband stayed behind. We really immersed ourselves in everyday activities that I normally would do with my parents or... learning, watching him learn Korean for the first time [was also very

interesting]. I always had trouble trying to introduce a new language to him because there's no context for him. There's no connection to anything except me that he's visibly aware of, especially where we live [...] there's no Asians or such; it's just largely a white neighborhood. So introducing him to Korean in this context made so much sense because now he sees how the language is used. He sees the body language that is used around the language, he understands what the words are used for at different times of the day, different words that are used in our customs, the different types of ways we say hello and thank you. And now it's contextualized. Now I can add more vocabulary to what he's learned, and he will know exactly where it comes from, instead of it being the secret language with mom and him. You know, so that really kind of opened my eyes up to be like, hey, this is actually a perfect entry point into him learning this language because it comes with culture, comes with food, comes with visuals, comes with customs. So language by itself, I felt it was such a difficult thing to introduce him to. But now, it's been really awesome to watch him [for example] in the middle of the night; he woke up yesterday, 물주세요 [Translation: Please give me water], and he walks out and says 안녕히 주무세요 [translation: Good night] to my parents, 재밌었어요 [translation: It was fun], 고마워요 [translation: Thank you], 감사합니다 [translation: (formal and respectful) Thank you], 안녕하세요 [translation: Hello]. I'm like, okay, cool, he's already learned so many words in such a short visit. I'm going on a tangent, but I feel like this layer is such an important part of his identity that I really want to properly introduce it to him. So this is [what] we did pretty well this trip.

DL: No, I think that's a good place to wrap up, right? I love that we ended with your son because [...]it's about] language [...]and] I think it encompasses everything you're doing in your practice, but it's not the way that you see it. It is not dogmatic, it's not just a system of semiotics. You see it in so many different manifestations of it, like you said, with food and stuff and body language. Thank you so much.

MRL: Thank you so much. I am so glad that we got you, Diana, because I didn't really know who I would even want to have a conversation with. And I was like, it has to be Diana. And I feel like we're new friends, but I feel like we speak a very similar language in terms of art and beyond. And it was very important to bring someone in that I felt comfortable with, so thank you.