

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Komelia Hongja OKIM (KIM Hongja)
- Interviewer: Jinyoung Koh
- March 6, 2023 / Komelia Hongja OKIM (KIM Hongja)'s studio in Rockville, Maryland
- 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 (JK): I am very happy to be sitting with you in your studio. When did you know you wanted to become an artist? How, if at all, did early experiences orient you to pursue art?

Komelia Hongja OKIM (KIM Hongja) (KHO): When I was a child, I'd love to do drawings, and maybe like my brother and sister's homework. But after I went to Ewha Womans University, majoring fiber art, I started to be really serious being an art student and an artist, and then came to America and studied at Indiana University, I became more serious in art and doing the art helps me to be very happy challenging, and I wasn't afraid of doing anything in terms of their homework. I was intrigued by my assignments and the processes I was doing for school. I noticed living in America is very difficult, but whenever I did art, I felt very confident about myself and to me that's the happiest time. I had to re-study three more years for undergrad.

I studied at Ewha Womans University for three and a half years; I only missed one semester. So that time my credit was 110 or something, but Indiana University accepted only 47 credits, so I had to re-study for three more years for the bachelor's degree. When I was studying fiber art, I asked my professor what she thought, if I finish the grad studies, maybe teaching at the college. I asked her, do you think I'm capable? And she said, of course, so I was confident about myself, and then I was taking metal art which was on the same floor, and I liked their display. So, I started taking the class, and I was very happy doing the project. I like the processes, but at the end of the project, whenever I polished the artwork, many times I dropped or got caught in the machine and got dented. So, I told myself, "I will never take this class again". But my professor liked me and my work. So, she kept saying, you got to change to metal major. I was already married, so we were both at Indiana University. Going to the same graduate school wasn't easy. In America, they don't want you to go to the same graduate school. But my husband was there, and we both were working and studying. So I asked my metal professor if she would give me permission to double major, and then, if she would give me a teaching assistantship in the graduate program. Then I would take it. She said, "Of course". So, I taught three years as a graduate student, not helping the professor, but at Indiana University, particularly at that time we were teaching the same leading classes without professors. So, I was able to do that for 6 semesters. That was very challenging, and I gained confidence that time.

JK: How did you decide to come to the United States?

KHO: My mother is from Hawaii. When she was 10 years old, she came to Hawaii to meet my father and my grandfather. Maternal grandfather came to Hawaii in 1903 and my mother was born that time. Then, her mother and she came after 10 years. She wanted to marry a minister, and her father didn't like it. So, her mother and she went back to Korea to visit, and she ended up meeting my father. So, they got married and we always had a connection with Hawaii. During the Korean War, everybody wanted to

leave Korea. The Korean war lasted three years. There was a chance to come to America and my two brothers were going to come to America, and my family thought, if I waited until I graduated from the Ewha Womans University, I may end up getting married and never come to America. So, they encouraged me to go. So that's why I came to America in my senior year. I met my husband in Hawaii. I was in Hawaii for several years. His sister was my classmate in the English class, and his sister thought I was a very good candidate for her brother, who was studying University of Hawaii as a political science and philosophy major, so I met him, and then we were dating for a while. His sister thought I would be a perfect future wife, but he wanted to study law at Columbia University in New York. He said, "I'm not interested in getting married." So, I said, well, then, let's just stop meeting each other, and I went to San Francisco, where my sister was there, and then I was going to study there, and after several months he decided to get married.

I ended up going back to Hawaii, and we got married, and after he finished his undergraduate degree, we came to San Francisco. We both were studying seminary. From there we went to Indiana. So I finished my schooling there for 6 years. Three years of undergraduate, and three years of graduate. Indiana University has a three-year MFA program. I think studying for three years in graduate school really helped me to become a serious artist. I had my son when I was in second year in grad school. So, being a wife, mother, and then being an associate instructor was very happy to work hard. I was very serious, and enjoyed being a mother, even though it was very difficult. So, we took turns. If my husband was home, I went back to school and worked all night and did the work, and then I even nursed my son. So actually, all that hard work gave me more energy to be serious about my studies and my career. So, before completing my graduate degree. I finished all the coursework except an MFA show.

There was a job offer at Montgomery College, and another job opening at the University of Delaware. When I went to the interview, they already had a part-time person who's going to be hired full time. But, anyway, at the same time, Montgomery College sent out a note seeking for a person who can develop the program. One of the alumni of Indiana University sent out the note to my professor, so she asked me to apply. Then, they asked me to come and teach. So, I started the program. So, ever since I came here, my mother has helped me to take care of my son. My husband came 2 or 3 times a month during weekends for two years. So, after two years, he decided to leave his job at Indiana University to move here. He was a librarian, and he got two master's degrees there, and we were studying and raising the kid. I wanted to teach at a bigger school. But my husband said, "This is a great place and Washington, D. C. has many interesting people, and many of my students were government workers or their wives. So, I ended up being here for 43 years. In the meantime, I applied to go to Korea as a Fulbright research and lectureship in 1982-1983 and 1994-1995. I got lectureship and research. When I was in Korea, I studied fiber arts and never studied metal art in Korea. So, I did the research on Korean metal works. And then I taught at Hongik University full time

and I took my 12 years old son. They gave me a monthly stipend and an apartment to stay there because the Fulbright program is a joint program with America and foreign countries. I think the former president Kennedy made this program. At that time, they asked me to teach at different schools, but as a Fulbright researcher you were not supposed to teach at many schools, but I talked to an assistant director to teach one class at the school. So, she said it is fine.

I taught at three other schools such as Seoul National University, Kookmin University, Duksung Women's University, and Konkuk University in 1982-1983. For my second time in 1994-1995, I also taught at Wonkwang University as a Fulbright researcher. I also taught Seoul National University, Kyonggi University, and Sookmyung Women's University, and Konkuk University for their seniors and graduate programs. So, I got to know many young people. And then my influence was very strong for the metal programs in Korea during 1982 to 83 because I was the first professor who studied metal arts outside of Korea. Even the professors in the program didn't get the degree in metal art. Actually, they majored in other art programs.

JK: I'm intrigued by your work and it is very exceptional. What was it like to live as a Korean female immigrant artist and professor in the United States? Could you share your journey?

KHO: When I got the job in Montgomery College, one of the women professors said, oh, you got a job because you're a woman. But I don't think so. The chairman who interviewed me and he liked my portfolio, and he saw me being very strong in different ways. So, I really resented her statement.

That time, many Korean foreign students got jobs at many different places too. I never thought that I was discriminated against. But after a while, of course, there is always discrimination. My co-worker was invited, not me. But she encouraged Indiana University students to apply. She wasn't really trained in metal arts. Although she took some metal courses, her major was ceramics. Whenever there was a chance, she tried to show my mistakes in my speech or my pronunciations. But my colleagues and even school liked my active work since I was pretty well known nationwide, and I exhibited a lot. Although Montgomery College is a two-year program, I never taught students as a two-year college student. Other big universities don't let students take their majors until they become junior, but to me I thought of my students as juniors and seniors, and my standard was a little bit high. As a Korean woman from Jinmyung Girls' High School, which was a very traditional school, although I wasn't a very model student, I always had a strict upbringing. Like being a woman coming from Korea and studying in this country. I didn't think I was incapable. I always thought I could do anything if I wanted to because I went through the Korean War when I was only 11 years old. To me, the Korean war helped me to be very courageous and to have a stronger character personality as my strength.

JK: What kinds of aspects and the quality of the metal you enjoyed?

KHO: Yeah, small objects. I always use silver, it's easy to work with, and the color of silver is very nice for making jewelry. Of course, I use gold, too, but it's so expensive. Silver is my main material and medium I use.

For larger works because of the cost I use copper, bronze, brass, and nickel, and so on. I don't use steel because I'm dealing with mainly fine metals. They call it Pomoksanggam technique in Korea and Damascene technique in America. Damascene is well developed among Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese, and others. But I learned the technique, and I interpreted a different thing. And I learned about Keum-boo. Koreans love to use gold foil. Fuse to the silver, such as a spoon you eat. Taking gold to your system little by little, improves your health. There are 24 Karat Gold needle acupuncture, and that's supposed to improve your health.

So, I introduced Keum-boo and Pomoksanggam all over America, and other countries, too. To me, although those are Korean techniques, Americans should learn. So, I gave lots of workshops even in England, Norway, China, Canada, and so on. So, Keum-boo is even in the American Metal dictionary. "Keum" means "gold" and "boo" means "attached". You attach the gold foil to the silver. Lately some people attach to steel too. 24 Karat Gold leaf to the Buddha in temples as well. I use it for my metal sculptures. So, dealing with that silver and gold is very challenging. To me that really helps to introduce Korean techniques to this country. Two surface techniques are being well established or introduced in this country. When people look at my work very carefully, maybe there is some sensitivity in my work and surface techniques. The works also show natural or organic marks as silver gets tarnished by air. I have lived in America for two thirds of my life. I'm not a really perfect native American speaker. Do you think there's some Koreanness in my work?

JK: Yeah, sure. I see some texts on the plate and I see some context with your soup bowls.

KHO: When I was studying from 1966 to 1972. My old school system was that you have to know all the techniques you have to learn to make the tea pot, and then certain techniques, and so on. Nowadays, graduate students can only do any jewelry, hollowware, or sculptural piece. But one had to know how to do all these things before. So, all these things really helped me to deal with the students. I wasn't the professor who knew only certain things. I was able to deal with any types of techniques or scale of the work, and so on. So, in a way, I'm glad that I went through the old school systems, but it helps me to be busier and harder to deal with all these things.

JK: So, you applied the Korean way on the work. When you taught, did you introduce

some Korean methods?

KHO: Oh, yes, I did for advanced students. I didn't want to teach them Korean surface techniques. But since I'm kind of known to give this kind of techniques, doing my workshops and all of that. So, some advanced and continuing students. I never studied commercials. So, I was trying to do some production pieces. And I was trying to do some art fairs, but after I retired, I was entrained to be a commercial. Everything I made is one of a kind, and a more fine art approach than just fine jewelry with lots of gems. We use gemstones to highlight pieces.

JK: Yeah, I see that it looks like a necklace or jewelry, but it seems not possible to wear in a daily life.

KHO: Yeah, right. I believe that a body is a moving wall in the museum. To me, wearing art jewelry helps the person to be different than just wearing commercial jewelry. It really shows the person's personality, like just wearing a small sculpture as jewelry.

My pieces are small sculptures rather than just jewelry for ornamental purposes. You can't wear for 24 hours, but you may wear in the parties or opening receptions. Yeah, function is always there. Dealing with the aesthetics and rareness of the design or approaches. Paintings and sculptures are utilitarian too because they're in the environment to help you to appreciate and or be happy.

My mentors are not metal artists. My mentors are more sculptors and painters. For example, Georges Seurat's painting, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," really helped me to stylize and develop my figures mostly in profile. I like his design, approach, and treatment of people in the landscape. So, if you think about that, I think you can relate to my work much better. I like the paintings of Yoo Youngkuk. His boldness of shapes and colors make it so outstanding. Whenever I travel, I look outside of the airplane window a lot because I like the landscape looking down from the plane.

—and if you think about that, one can understand my design and concepts in my art jewelry and the objects with the shift, lines, shapes, and forms which is the foundation of the art and design. I'm not a commercial artist and to me it's very difficult to do commercial work. Although I went to school for almost 12 years and taught at the college for 43 years, it's very difficult to be a commercial artist even after I retired at the age of 75. So, I'm dealing mainly with the invitational shows and commissions. I don't ask them to buy my piece. I cannot deal with the way they want, and I'm not a commercial artist. So that's different. I have produced a lot because I have some invitations to show, including my 31st solo exhibition at Hyundai Gallery next year. To me, I believe in balancing life and the work as a wife, artist, and teacher. Whenever I produce artwork, I'm more energetic, then I prepare some food and cook when I don't do anything.

JK: I see that your works bring some natural shapes, and one of the recurring patterns and figures is organic figures. Could you tell us about your thinking there and how you approach the inspiring work that you make?

KHO: Yeah, I like to talk to people. Whenever I talk to people, I watch their gestures and the impression I get. And I always think about my work. So those things get incorporated in my creative work. And I like to watch landscapes, human gestures, and dance movements. I like modern dance better than ballet. because modern dance to me has more gestures and beautifying their forms.

In my daily life, whenever I cook, I'm more creative. So, I like to read cookbooks and then watch Youtube on how to do things, not really copying, but as a general knowledge, and then to get inspiration. What should I do? wherever I am to me is all those experiences or feelings I get from time to time that really incorporate in my creative works.

My professor, when she was teaching, and whenever we had a seminar, she had led us to bring drawings in detailed drawings, and she helped us to study sculptors and painters. She influenced me a lot too. She never got married. But whenever students don't work hard and late at night, just give notes saying, "where were you last night?" During my study, she always helped us to submit competitions as well, and so I guess I became very competitive, but not to try to bring somebody down, to make myself higher. Life is really a competition in a way. I have forced myself to think more Korean, because I learned the metal art techniques and approaches in America. So, I never studied metal art in Korea. So, I was dealing with Korean culture like bamboo, water lilies, and so on. But I was trying to think about my childhood landscapes in the water lily pond or bamboo forest. So, many of my works were influenced by my past memories.

I had three older brothers and two older sisters, and they lectured me every day. I don't try to look for certain memories to try to incorporate in my work, but even if I didn't pay too much attention, subconsciously or consciously, I think about my past, and then try to incorporate it. I don't try to do it, but it just comes out. My husband is from Japan, and my daughter in law is Chinese and is from the Philippines. So, we live worldly. We live in all four different cultures in the United States.

JK: Thank you so much for sharing your work and stories.