

Harvest Moon





Jung Hun Yee

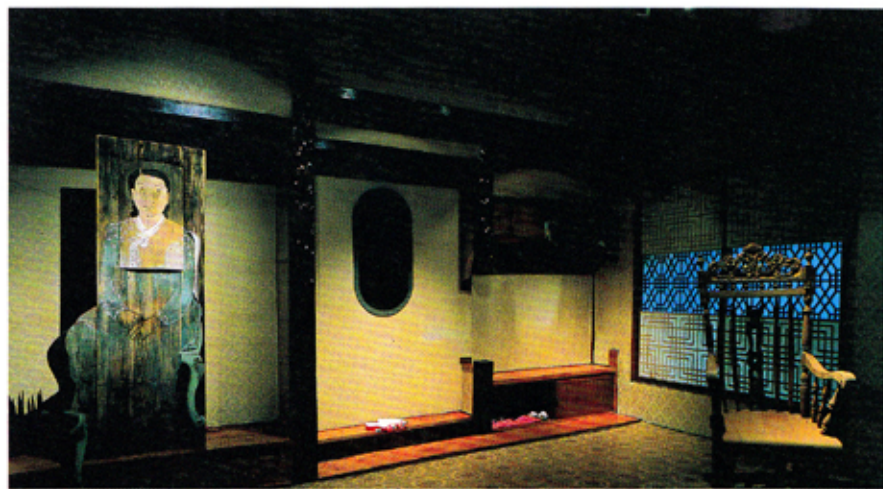
The Ssack exhibition at the Sonje Museum

You are invited to an old tile-roofed Korean house.

It is a rather rare opportunity to come across such old houses these days in Seoul, a city that has been transformed into a mammoth cosmopolitan place. If you had taken the opportunity to come and visit, you would have been charmed by the interesting story behind this one-time residence and also by what it presents to you. This old house will soon be demolished. After an aggressive exhibition program since its opening in 1991, the Sonje Museum of Contemporary Art in Kyungju, an ancient capital of Korea, purchased this house and will build a branch museum on its site. The Seoul Sonje Museum, as the new museum will be called, is scheduled to open in 1997.



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Prior to demolition of the existing building and the opening of the new museum, Sonje invited seventeen young artists to work within the given spaces of the old house. Each artist chose a space in the house that had served a particular function – the master bedroom, study, den, bathroom, kitchen, hallway, storage area, the garden – and installed their work within the given area.¹ Since the house had until recently been inhabited by the family who had previously owned the house, the spaces the artists worked with were not merely simple or innocent backgrounds for the work. The installation works in this exhibition, entitled the ‘Sack exhibition’,² were based on the interpretations of the significance and meaning that each respective space held for the artists.

The exterior of the house, which was built during the Japanese occupation, looks like any other old Korean tile-roofed house. However, if one looks in the interior, the living spaces are laid out according to the principles of Japanese domestic architecture, wherein the family room is in the centre, with rooms allocated on all sides and a narrow hallway that circumscribes the inner spaces. To access the Japanese structure of the house, the visitor must enter through a hallway that has been fashioned according to a western modernist cube structure annexed to the old Korean house. Probably the only Korean element in this compound is the *chang’dok dac* (outdoor storage area for food containers) which is separate from the main house. In the words of the museum’s curator Kim Sun Jung, this house is indeed ‘a remnant of our past that is symbolic of the histories of modern culture in Korea’.

Korea first encountered western painting during colonisation; full-scale assimilation of modern/western art came only after independence in 1945. Since its early beginnings, Korean modern art has evolved as rapidly and aggressively as the economic developments of the country itself. Whereas traditional art was categorised as ‘oriental art’ or ‘Korean art’, modern Korean art is today just as heterogeneous and hybrid as the history and the structure of this old house. Under the rubric of contemporary art, Korean artists have devoured the histories of western art together with their own traditional culture and this house was made available to these artists as a symbolic transitional point, in anticipation

of a new phase of cultural activities. On a small scale, the installation works within this very special historical house were the artist’s individual interpretations of the meaning of each of the allotted spaces; on a larger scale, the house required the thorough comprehension by the artists of the context of modern Korean culture.

As the visitor enters the main gate and steps into the frontyard, there is a dog house titled *Gae’bang-kuk’soo* (open-noodle) by Kong Sung Hoon. But instead of finding a dog barking to notify its master of an intruder, there is a bowl of noodles placed inside the dog house. The word *kuk’soo* (noodle) has the same pronunciation as *kuk’soo ju’wui* (ultra-nationalism). Logically, there is no door to the dog house and therefore this little dog house is inevitably always open-door-policy. The reference to ultra-nationalism in this small, doorless house is perhaps meant to be nonsense, a kind of *noodlism* with cultural connotations relating to the context of the work.

From here, your sense of smell will be stung by the stench emanating from the rotting fish decorated with sequins in the service quarter installed by Lee Bul. You are probably loath to approach this room to actually locate the source of the stench and you might decide to just take a seat and sit in the garden for a while. If you did, you have come in direct contact with the marble table titled *The Weight of Cézanne* by Bahe Mo. The artist has inscribed the shapes of a cylinder, cone and sphere in the table which correspond to a plaque which is inscribed with the words ‘rice’, ‘sugar’ and ‘salt’. This is a subtle critique on the anxiety of influence and the pressures of modernism that had weighed heavily on the post-independence art community in Korea. Further away in the sunken store house at the edge of the backyard, one finds the video installation of Yuk Keun Byung which repeats, in endless citation, the words ‘survival is history’.

As you open the front door to enter the building and step into the modern style entrance, you are greeted by the photographic works of Ko Nak Beom and Oh Hyung Keun. In his appropriation of David’s *Death of Marat*, Ko Nak Beom obliquely comments on the reliance on reproductions of such masterpieces in the study and experience of the history of



art, and questions the identity, authenticity and originality of contemporary Korean art derived from the second-hand experience of studying such reproductions. Oh Hyung Keun takes portrait photography of aged and forgotten singers in Korea which seemingly recalls our memories of times gone by (as does the old age of this house) and of the recent past of Korean popular culture.

On the walls of the central space of the main house, on the places where various picture frames would have decorated the interior previously, there is a picture of the Japanese animation figure Atom strangely combined with the features of Mickey Mouse. The visitor fails to detect that this is a hybrid creature, combining the image of Atom and Mickey Mouse: we are so inundated with visual stimuli from the pop cultures of both Japan and America that maybe it doesn't matter whether this creature is more like Atom or more like Mickey Mouse. Opposite this picture is a large screen projecting the image of people riding a rocking ship in an amusement park, rocking back and forth, with piercing shrieks and screams. To live in a Korea that has undergone rapid growth and transformation in industry and economy – isn't it as challenging and thrilling as a ride on the rocking ship?

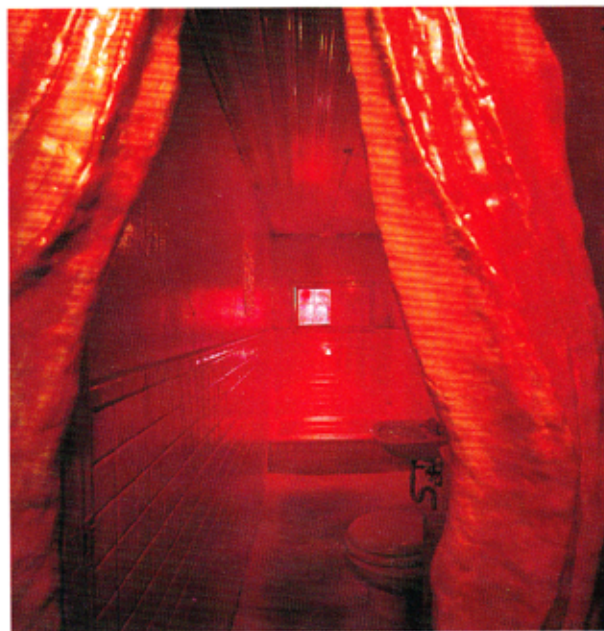
Traditionally, the most important space within a house is the master bedroom and Yoon Suk Nam was the artist who selected this space. When she chose this room, which would have served as the private space for the husband and wife, the artist said that it gave an unusually formal, dry feeling, devoid of sensuality. Therefore she installed her work as a sort of ceremony to call back the desires of the female spirits. She opened the closed drawers and took out the shoes of the

absent woman of the house. The woman of the house appears as a shadowy image on the wooden boards, visiting the room from which she had been absent as footprints without physical body.

In the far corner room the grandmother, represented by reproductions made by the photographer Park Young Sook, occupies the space with a presence, and seems to be mumbling to herself. She has given the key to the storage to her daughter-in-law and has retired to the far corner space of the house, dreadfully lonely and full of trivial worries, but she is also a stubborn woman. Unlike the absence of womanhood in the master bedroom, this small corner room is filled with the remorse of this old woman. According to the artist, the old woman is obsessed by the honour of the family, the success of the husband, the wellbeing of her children – by things that are not of her own self. The image of this stubborn and lonely old woman for whom no one cares is fastened flat onto the floor.

The study is the most solemn space in this house. It is a space dominated by men. As if to reveal the male bonding of the study, all the objects in this room by Ahn Kyu Chul are connected and attached. The artist is a true craftsman and has personally hand-crafted the shoes and eyeglasses and sewn the clothing – but they are all non-functional objects. It is a solemn, steadfast and perfectly crafted authority, and a power which is impotent.

Opposite the study is the toilet transformed by Choi Keum Hwa. The visitor enters by walking into a vagina-shaped entrance and as you take the first step inside the toilet you will feel slightly dazed and lose balance. This bright red interior is covered with thick padding on the floor and the space is filled with a sound installation. Here, physical existence is



- 1 YOON SUK NAM, *Master Bedroom*, 1995, (detail) mixed media installation
- 2 CHOI JEONG HWA, *Miss Korea*, 1994, polycoat, 47 x 82 x 64 cm
- 3 LEE BUL, *Majestic Splendour*, 1995, (detail), fish, sequins, glass, steel box, 100 x 100 x 100 cm
- 4 KONG SUNG HOON, *Kae Rang-Kuk Soo*, 1995, dog house, noodles, 50 x 50 x 90 cm
- 5 LEE BUL, *Majestic Splendour*, 1995, fish, sequins, glass, steel box, 100 x 100 x 100 cm
- 6 YOON SUK NAM, *Master Bedroom*, 1995, mixed media installation
- 7 AHN KYU CHUL, *The Study*, 1995, mixed media installation
- 8 PARK YOUNG SOOK, *Grandmother's Room*, 1995, photograph, silk screen, computer printer, installation
- 9 CHOI KEUM HWA, *Bathroom 1*, 1995, polycoat photograph, sponge, installation
- 10 PARK SO YOUNG, *Wipe*, 1994, mixed media, 180 x 85 x 25 cm



verified by excrement and desire. As one hurriedly gets out of this toilet, you will see at the far end of the hallway the narrow vertical mirror installed by Park So Young. A neatly dressed arm is attached to the side of the mirror and as the visitor approaches the mirror, a sensor triggers the arm to wipe the mirror surface. This purposeless and repetitive cleaning motion implies a narcissistic obsession with purity.

In the little space attached to the kitchen, plastic food prepared by Choi Jeong Hwa is laid out in abundance. This is surely the trappings of a *kut* (shaman ritual) and is where the children have most fun. There is no trace of the sighs of the grandmother, the repressed withdrawal of the mother and wife, the solemn dignity of the man; neither abstinence nor narcissism, but only the joys of a child. What of family name and custom? Such things do not mean a thing to children, for whom all such things are just fun and games. And the pig head on top of the mother-of-pearl inlaid red lacquer table is made festive by a blinking light, like a toy animal. The plastic pig heads face each other, nose touching nose with a big grin. The child looks at the pig heads and thinks that the ears look like little buds. Contemporary art to Choi Jeong Hwa is like a fun-filled ritual toyland.

There is an old custom in Korea of consoling the spirit before commencing construction of a new building. This ritual, called *ko'sa*, involves laying a table with rice cakes and a pig head and paying homage in front of the offerings on the table, praying that the construction work will go smoothly. When the ritual is finished, the rice cake and food is shared between neighbours. The meaning of the ritual is not only to pray for the new building but is also a way of telling your neighbours that there will be construction work going on that will involve noise and bustle, so a way of asking the neighbours to please bear with the trouble for a while.

In other words, you have been invited to such a ritual at this old traditional house which will soon be demolished to give way to a new art museum. This event was nothing extraordinary – yet another event in the active and buzzing art community in Korea – and it will not single-handedly reinvent the past of Korean art for a better future. But through the ritual of planting new seeds for a reconstruction of the old and the rebirth of a new museum at Sonje, we have experienced that the new museum will be a place and occasion for the representation of the dynamism of the younger energies in Korean art, a testing ground for their ambitions and creativity, freedom and responsibility, as they shed the complex that Korean art has had about its cultural identity.

- 1 The artists who participated in this unique exhibition project were Ko Nak Beom, Kong Sung Hoon, Kim Woo Il, Kim Yoo Sun, Bahe Mo, Park So Young, Park Young Sook, Ahn Kyu Chul, Oh Hyung Keun, Yook Keun Byung, Yoon Suk Nam, Lee Dong Kee, Lee Bul, Choi Keum Hwa, Choi Sun Myung, Choi Jeong Hwa and Hong Sun Min.
- 2 *Ssack* means bud.

Translated by Jae-ryung Roe.

10 Jung Hun Yee is an art critic who lives in Seoul.