

Seoul Searching

"Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art"

An automaton greets us: Yong Soon Min's *Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride*. She stands on a carpet smartly inscribed with wifely sentiments: *Welcome! Please walk step by step all over me! now as always! I am you humble and obedient servant/ your comfort girl/ your faithful daughter*. Step on the carpet and the elaborately dressed figure is supposed to bow. At the opening, however, the recalcitrant robot refused to budge. But its audiotape voice whispered: *Where is my demilitarized desire, where is my decolonized body politic?*

Byron Kim and Michael Joo may be hotter names, but Min's piece is strong. The wall label calls it a life-size recreation of an *inhyong*, a Korean doll, but Min's figure also happens to be — with a nod to Duchamp — a life-like replica of a traditional Korean bride. (There's a photographer at Kyongbok Palace in Seoul who does a thriving business renting the identical garb to Korean newlyweds for the purpose of a souvenir photo.) *Across the Pacific* is not a theme show, but it is an exhibition with a dual theme: the complexities of contemporary Korean cultural identity and of Korean American identity.

Identity has always been at issue in Korea. Because of its long history of being invaded, partitioned, and occupied, Korea's national and cultural identity has always been an uneasy mix of adaptation and resistance. *Han* is not just the name of the seething river that runs through Seoul, but also the national characteristic, which, a colleague in Korea once told me, means "bitterness and rage." As for female identity, Korean society is one of the more sexist you are likely to come across.

Does this give contemporary Korean artists a head start on the burning issues of the moment? Not exactly. For the past few decades, most of the fractious Korean art world has been busy adopting and adapting Western surfaces — mod and post-mod — while avoiding any question of its own context or identity. During the politically turbulent 1980s, however, a radically sociopolitical activist art movement called *Min Joong* (people's art) took to the streets with the protesters. *Min Joong* artists (rumored to have been inspired by critic Lucy Lippard's work) depicted a history of resistance and rejected Western ways. They borrowed from the Mexican Social Realists as well as tried to recoup traditional Korean techniques and styles.

This eclectic exhibition proposes to bridge a gap that is wider than any ocean: between the angry *Min Joong* art of the 1980s and the more cerebral identity-explorations of a new generation of South Korean and Korean American artists, whose work is fierce

and furious in trendier ways. Against all odds, *Across the Pacific*, curated by Young Chul Lee and Jane Farver, succeeds.

Upstairs at the Queens Museum, some of the best *Min Joong* art, along with video documentation of the huge street-banner paintings called *kulkae*, shares space with newer Korean work. Most of the dozen artists are male. The selection, which includes Dong Park's post-industrial photo-collages and Jong Gu Lee's rice sack portrait of his farmer father (both were in the 1989 *Min Joong* exhibition), raises questions of what constitutes authenticity in a culture that has absorbed centuries of simulation without losing its own soul.

Is Korean identity found in the 1980's alteration of past models or the 1990's attempt to capture the complex present? Is it in Min Hwa Choi's peasants hiding in the trees, or in Jung Hwa Choi's flashy urban image (with real plastic chairs) titled *Made in Korea*, an odd amalgam that cuts straight to the core of contemporary Seoul? Is Hong Joo Kim's portrait of a sage with a beard of linen threads any more authentic than Soo Kyung Lee's *Getting Married to Myself*, which comments on Korean female identity? Is Ho Suk Kim's *Mock-Chosun* portrait with four hallucinatory eyes more "Korean" than Kyu Chul Ahn's suitcase for a corporate salary-man's clipped wings, titled *The Man's Bag*?

Downstairs, 11 transplanted and American-born artists (five are women) explore issues of hybridized identity. Byron Kim's skin-colored monochrome titled *Mom* shares space with new gray-green canvases that refer not to flesh and blood but an ancestry of Koryo celadon glazes. Michael Joo's salt-block, bug-zapper, and synthetic sweat-and-tear constructions allude to Asian American stereotypes, caloric expenditures, and male identity. Other smart works including videos and films also deal with the suspension between two cultures and the "colonization of consciousness."

In the recent preoccupation with ethnicity and what is called "hyphenated" identity, we tend to ignore the confusing edges where national, ethnic, and personal identities collide, blur, and diverge. *Across the Pacific* complicates the current art-world issue of cultural identity. That is exactly what we need. Δ

"Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art" is held at Queens Museum of Art, New York, until January 9, 1994.

[Kim Levin]

Above: Yong Soon Min, *Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride*, 1993, mixed media with audio tape, 68 x 24 x 24 in. Photo: Courtesy of the Queens Museum.

