

1996

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Australia

# Yun Suk-nam

*I understand that you did not receive a formal art education. When did you begin making art?*

I started in 1979, at the age of forty. I was involved in artistic activity in junior high school, but when I was sixteen, my father, a novelist, passed away, and I had to find a job to help out the family finances. Then I was married, and after eight years of ordinary life as a homemaker and after the birth of my child, I initially turned to calligraphy as a way to discover myself.

*You've moved from working in two-dimensional planes toward three-dimensional creations ...*

When I started making art in 1979 I mainly did two-dimensional work. Then beginning in 1989 I lived for a year and a half in the United States, where I enrolled in the Art Students League in New York and began turning toward three-dimensional work, at first attaching objects to the canvas surface. Then I happened to encounter, and was deeply influenced by, the works of Edward Kienholz and the Cuban artist Alejandro Aguilera.

Before I left for the States, I used to make frequent visits to the flea market stalls in Janganpyong, and the memories of shaman dolls, flower-decked funeral biers, and *dan chung* (colours and patterns found primarily in traditional architecture) I saw there also had an influence on my work. Some dramatic aspect residing within me seemed to compel the transition toward three-dimensional creations.



left: YUN SUK-NAM, *Night*, 1995, (detail). Photograph The Third Space.

opposite page: YUN SUK-NAM, *Day*, 1995, chairs, metal pegs and blades, wooden planks with acrylic. Collection the artist. Photograph The Third Space.

*From the beginning your work has dealt with women and mothers. Please explain their significance.*

In my work I'm trying to give honest expressions to the thoughts I've had in my experiences as a woman, mother and daughter. I often deal with maternal relationships because the subject of mother can refer at once to myself or to my own mother.

In many cultures the mother as an entity must maintain an ambivalent position, having to be complicit in the construction of a patriarchal society that favours sons over daughters and, at the same time, being oppressed by that very social construction. While dealing with such problems I also want to express compassion and love for my own mother. As a woman myself, I want to speak to the hardships of women's existence, which could best be summarised by the Korean term *han* (a concept encompassing all manner of inconsolable sorrow).

*In your recent works direct representations of mother images and figures have been disappearing ...*

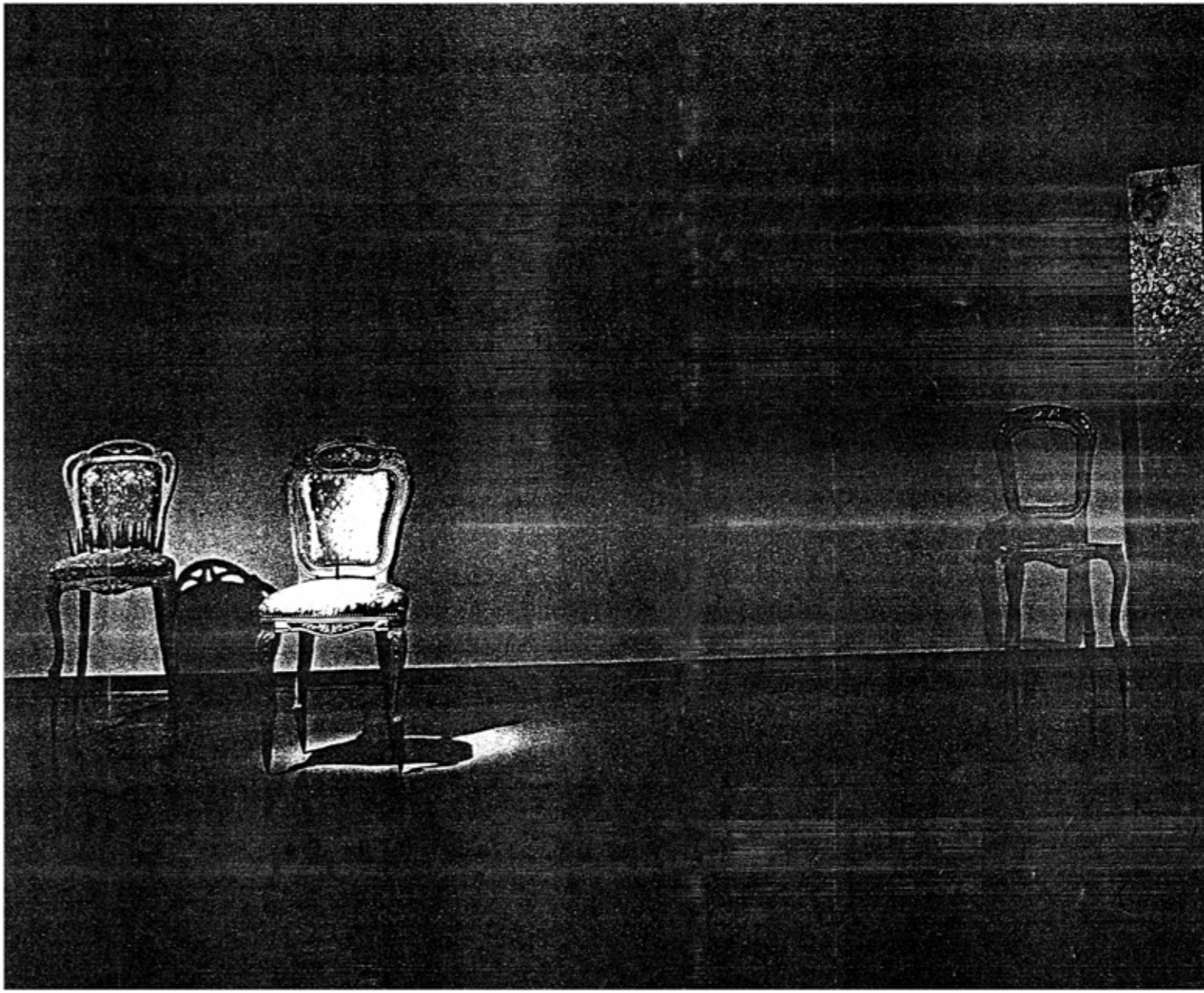
Previously I used objects relating to women's daily life, such as washboards, traditional wooden Korean gates, and family registers, to create a kind of portrait. Past works like *Mother and Daughters*, *The Bench*, *The Gate*, and *Genealogy* were all figure sculptures, but recently chairs have come to stand in for such figures.

Taking chairs that have been salvaged from trash, produced in a factory, or that I myself have made, and upholstering them with fabric and fitting them with steel legs, I turn them into personifications of women. I cover the chairs mainly in brilliant, intensely coloured Korean silk because of the strange allure of the fabric's hues, the pink, indigo, and yellow. As for the steel legs fitted on the chairs, they appear stable but, in their knife-like appearance, also express the fierceness of women. In form and material, the chair legs are related to *eunjangdo*, the small knives that Korean women commonly carried for self-defence during the Chosun Dynasty.

*You're known as a pioneering figure in Korean feminism. Please talk about the women's movement in art.*

The 'Group Exhibition' at Kwanhoon Gallery in Seoul probably marks the beginning. It featured work by Kim Jin-sook, Kim In-soon, and myself, and later, in 1986, we initiated an exhibition, the first in Korea to deal with women's issues, entitled 'From the Half to the Whole'. The aim of that show was to take art outside of the gallery, into a park within an apartment complex where we could engage our intended audience, the ordinary housewives living in the apartment complex. This effort was joined by another cultural initiative and in 1988 resulted in 'Cross Encounters with Women, Liberated Poets and Paintings', a show of illustrated poetry.

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Translated by James B. Lee





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**Yun Suk Nam** *Her pinks* 1996  
Installation (wood figure, used chair, sofa, steel nails,  
white and pink plastic beads) 230 x 300 x 300cm  
Photo: Photopia Professional Lab



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