

## KOREAMERICAKOREA

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Modern American art carries a heavy burden.

Not only is it expected to function within the framework of modernism, that is to say, art that convincingly exudes a sense of its own invention and an affinity for "the new," but it has a second task to accomplish as well. Not only do American modern artists have to continually reinvent what it is they do, but also they have to perform from a most unstable position. The American modern artist must somehow speak to the continual re-invention of the American identity, locating within a constantly shifting field, a critically necessary foundation for the production of art. In a sense, the American artist must simultaneously invent on two levels, one being the literal re-invention of artistic practice demanded by the restless and relentlessly rootless nature of modern art itself, while in parallel the American modern is continually re-inventing the ground for all of this within a constantly unfixed sense of cultural context and self.

This is not all bad.

The appeal of American modern art derives in no small part from the complexity and delicate necessity of these tasks - tasks which must be performed with the confidence and daring of a blindfolded tightrope walker; tasks resulting in art that - as a result of its inherent hybridity - is both robust and curiously post-national.

There was a time when American art, like that of other British colonial cultures, was measured by its relationship to its European heritage. And quite frankly, for many, that time has never gone away. But in its inexorable appetite for re-invention, modern American culture has given birth to the idea of an untethered, post-colonial sense of national identity. Twentieth-century American art has not only recognized and tolerated, but has fully embraced the idea of its own root identity as completely hybrid and in a state of constant transformation. It has declared, in many ways, that its strength and vitality is measurable in direct proportion to its complex and ever-changing identity.

This is not to say that this particular idea of American art is uncontested. Quite to the contrary, since its earliest flowering in the 19th century, this idea of American art has been extremely controversial. Not only have American conservatives continually longed for American art (and all of American high culture) to be rooted in the firm ground of western European heritage, but some also continue to feel a nearly racist sense of revulsion when confronted by what they consider a mongrelized culture: a culture literally cannot recognize *the hybrid modern* as anything but the sorry reflection of paradise lost. Not surprisingly, it is not only the European nativist/racist who holds this position, but many American descendants of non-European cultures similarly feel threatened by the loss of their distinct historical identities, and reject the modernist melting pot in favor of attempts to maintain a living link to their own traditions.

This contested sense of place and conflicted notion of belonging works not only along the lines etched by national origin, but can be drawn from points emanating from other aspects of social identity as well. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, and other religious sects may each feel that only certain forms of cultural expression can be considered legitimate from their own parochial perspectives. Specific prohibitions against forms of representation, or even notions of ideas that may or may not be explored in art, can present barriers to the idea of art's universality.

Yet against all odds, and despite the continuing pressures to the contrary, American modern art has found itself the site for a contest of values and ideas that has transformed our notion of artistic practice and has caused a thorough reconsideration of the ways in which we understand the qualities that distinguish successful artistic practice from other forms of common communication or mere entertainment.

This exhibition KOREAMERICAKOREA contains new work by eleven artists of Korean-American descent. Eschewing nationalist and racist simplifications, the exhibition claims no over-arching notion of Korean-Americaness beyond the simple shared heritage that indeed links these artists into a provisional community of sorts. Though the selection of artists does in a way reflect the continuing interest in technological and

engineering innovation that has since the earliest days of American modernity, been an important feature of its cultural perspective and identity, the technology itself is not a subject of this small survey. Taking this extremely diverse group of artists out of their normative cultural context and isolating them within the organizational framework of this exhibition, is an exercise in recognition, as well as an attempt to disprove the notion that within even a population with such a strong sense of and pride in its cultural origins as the Korean-American community, what we find at the end of the day, are American modern artists applying the ontological and methodological priorities of Modernism to their quite individual notions of who they are.

As the world emerges as a single community of nations unified by technology, however, the reality of cultural difference does not simply disappear. Hatred and misunderstanding (borne by age-old prejudices, class inequities, ancient tribal conflicts as well as the lingering ideological conflicts) continues to influence art and all related cultural production. Lack of respect for or simple ignorance of the wonders of non-western culture continues to cloud our ability to read and appreciate fully the complexity of art that has within it, the subtle expressions of traditions that have survived the challenges of diaspora.

Through our use of the typographic construction that forms the title of this exhibition, we have tried to convey the reality of not only the Korean-American cultural experience, but of the American experience *sui generis*. Has the Korean experience in America not had its special conditions? Of course it has. Hasn't the relationship of Korean culture to the other cultures of northeast Asia, of greater Asia, and the world had an influence on the shaping of the Korean-American experience made visible through its art? In superficial ways, and in art that resultantly often reads as superficial, perhaps. But this is not to say that there is not specifically recognized Korean content or forms in this exhibition. Nor am I stating that some of the concerns explored by artists selected for this small survey do not relate to the particularities of being a member of the Korean-American community, sharing language, cultural history and significant manners and customs with those who remain Korean in Korea.

In fact, several artists are represented by work exploring specific relationships to the idea of having Korean ancestry, and the complex and sometimes conflicted nature of what remains specifically Korean within an American context. Carole Kim, a sculptor living in Maine and California, reveals the collaborative nature of identity formation in a series of haircuts that she invites a range of acquaintances to give her over the course of a year. Each haircut - in fact a distinct new style - relates Kim's physical identity to the concerns, prejudices, as well as the widely ranging tastes of her circle of friends. In a way, a group portrait in reverse, etched onto her appearance, the work entitled "Plush: A Hair Invitational" is itself a group show with Kim's head as the shared space within/upon which her identity is constructed, shifted, and re-built.

The late Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, in her 1980 multi-media work "Exilee," explored the subtle implications of linguistic transformation as a component in the transformation of identity, and within the context of social and ideological transformation that is a direct function of this profound change. Power relationships are transformed by relative positions of the speaker, mediated by the specific ways in which intimacy and longing are projected into the need for freedom on one hand, and control on the other. Cha's concern for the ideological condition of Korean life during a particularly unstable period in Korean history is reflected in her expressed sense of cultural exile and dissociation.

Ik-Joong Kang, whose work has often made use of the work processes associated with hybridization and the acquisition of something unexpected, uses the idea of Bruce Lee, the Hong Kong action film icon, to represent the mythic power of a conquering Asian warrior-figure within the broader notion of transnational cultural identity politics. Along with (and again projected onto) a series of miniature paintings typical of Kang's output, the Lee figure takes on the heroic role not usually associated with cultural identities in transformation. In "Enter the Heaven," a parody of the legendary Bruce Lee mega-hit action film "Enter the Dragon," Kang takes on both the warrior concept as well as the successful multi-cultural crossover star as his subject. *Like much of Kang's installation sculpture, it is a work of pointed humor and political satire. The heroic standing Bruce Lee figure represents both an idealized notion of Asian masculinity, and a somewhat debased notion of the pan-cultural concept of the heroic savior - the single strong man who makes things right for the oppressed and the weak.*

*Similarly, Sowon Kwon has produced a work of digital art that uses the transformation of the computer-generated image of a female athlete's body to express a metaphor for transformation itself both on a personal and gender-specific level, as well as on the more generalized level of social and cultural transformation itself. The eerie yet*

beautiful line-drawing which emerges from and then fully alters our sense of the body represented, is an apt metaphor for the kinds of representations and the ways in which they are simultaneously both controlling and out of our direct control.

Byron Kim, ostensibly a formalist painter, concerned with subtle and delicate manipulations of color, is also engaging in a kind of situation and social-specific conceptualism. His large white paintings are not only meant, as are the white paintings of Agnes Martin, for meditative contemplation and the aesthetic pleasure associated with pure visual experience. Kim's use of white functions as an element of a conceptual artwork. Like his earlier flesh tone works that made specific reference to skin and more specifically to skin color, the white paintings are an ontological device forcing a consideration of white as a social construction as well as a formal pictorial element.

For this exhibition, Kim has chosen to produce a new work in which he explores the specific color and texture of the paper wall-screen material found in traditional Korean interiors. He remains interested in the physical associations one has with color, surface and texture, and the resulting emotional and intellectual residue of the primary visual experience. Kim is a contextualist, however, and as such he is often interested in the complex intersection of the formal concerns of painting, and the social and sociological ramifications of certain iconic forms and processes.

The Los Angeles painter Yunhee Min communicates her aesthetic sensibility both within the private space of her works on canvas and the even more hermetic architectural model/constructions. In presenting her window works - paintings applied to the inside of large windows found in public buildings like museums or department stores - we chose to present works that mix Min's formal use of color with her concern for the push-pull of public-private space.

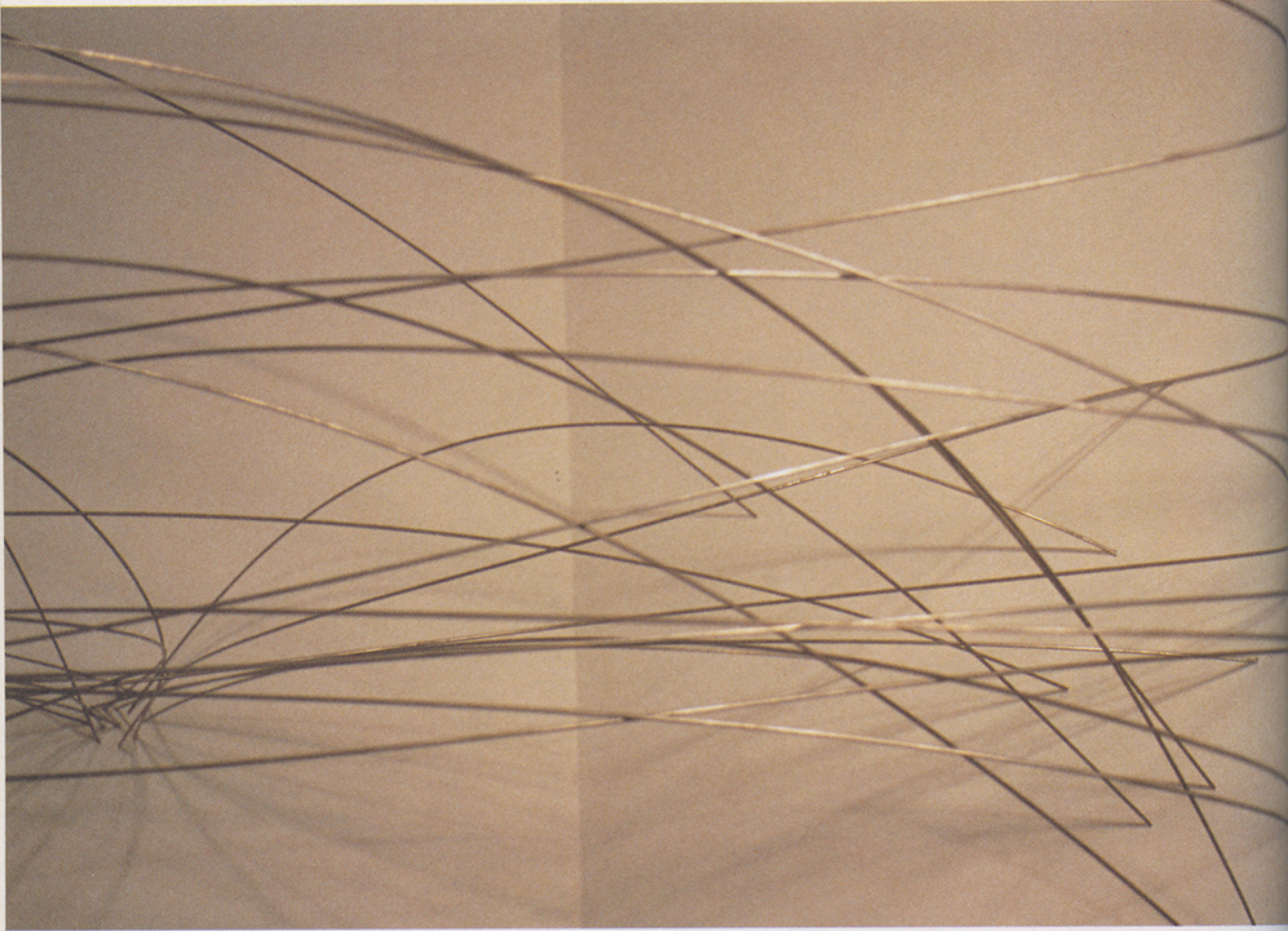
In her wallpaper pattern works, the Los Angeles sculptor Kyung Mi Shin has chosen two subjects for her exploration of the notion of pervasive cultural influence. The media-derived images she selects to represent through the vehicle of a miniaturized repeating pattern, underscore the ubiquity of cultural influence in the construction of American identity. Her selection of Bob Dylan and Pope John Paul II reflecting a satirical approach to traditional notions of the sacred and the profane also reflects the reality of the filtering and amplifying aspect of the ongoing cultural negotiation of American cultural life.

The New York filmmaker Lara Lee is focused on the synergy that is produced by the constant interaction of new technologies with traditional disciplines of architecture and music. In her mixed media project "Architettura" Lee reveals these connections as she celebrates the powerful new forms unleashed by the ever-changing alliances within the world of art and technology.

The New York sculptor Michael Joo, on the other hand, produces work that is perhaps the most complex in its representation of technology and an assimilated American culture. His headless and transparent Buddha forms have qualities of Neo-Surrealist representations of the body coupled with a direct reference to notions of scientific objectivity - the see-through body of an educational toy modeled to instruct children in the intricacies of anatomy. Only here, the interior life exposed is not the interior life of the functioning body, but the impossible to see interior life of the Buddha made ironically visible, but like so much else that cannot be simply revealed, remains fully invisible whilst ostensibly on view. Technology, like other mechanisms of learning and knowing, provides no more than access to the world of outer (and even inner) appearances. American (or any) cultural identity is a similarly visible yet essentially invisible mechanism of meaning whose ultimate purpose is private and undirected by social or ideological concerns.

The Los Angeles photographer and sculptor Soo-Jin Kim reflects upon analogously abstracted notions of transformation and dislocation in both her beautifully subtle yet highly evocative color photographs and her graceful corner installation "Flight." Both works evoke a sense of transience, unease and imminence; an unsettled and somehow disconnected state of not having yet arrived at home or even at a place of rest.

Finally we see the New York sculptor Do-Ho Suh's bridge, which serves as a literal and metaphorical connection into the museum itself. Like so much of this artist's work, it seeks both to serve as a symbol of the kind of connective relationship that art has to the expression and reception of cultural identity, and the specific role that



21.

비행

세부

강철막대

가변치수

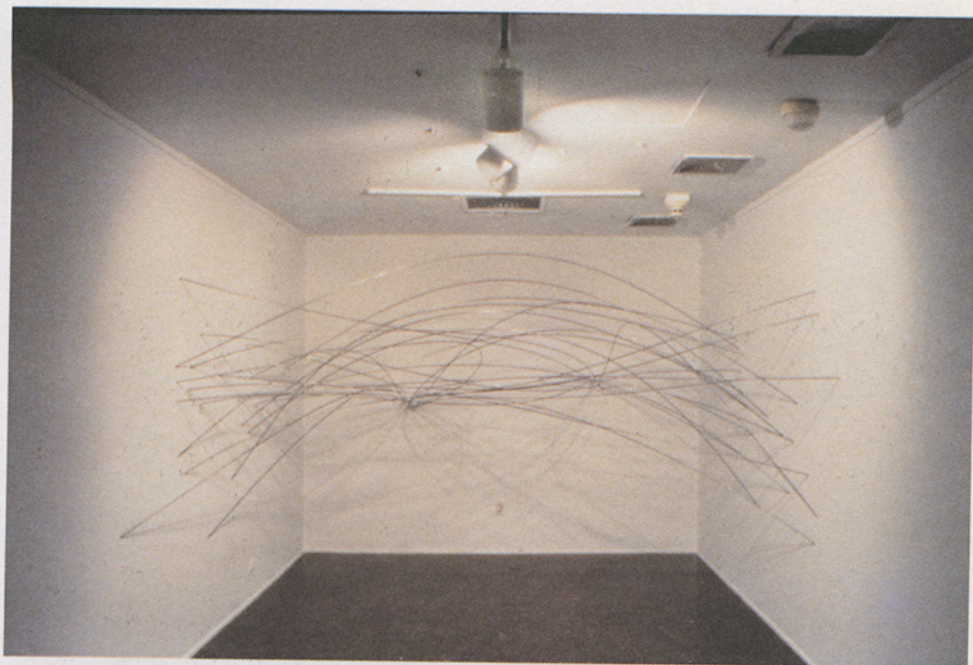
*Flight*

detail

steel rods

dimensions variable

2000



22.  
비행  
강철막대  
가면치수  
*Flight*  
steel rods  
dimensions variable  
2000



23.

랜드 (Montana 1)

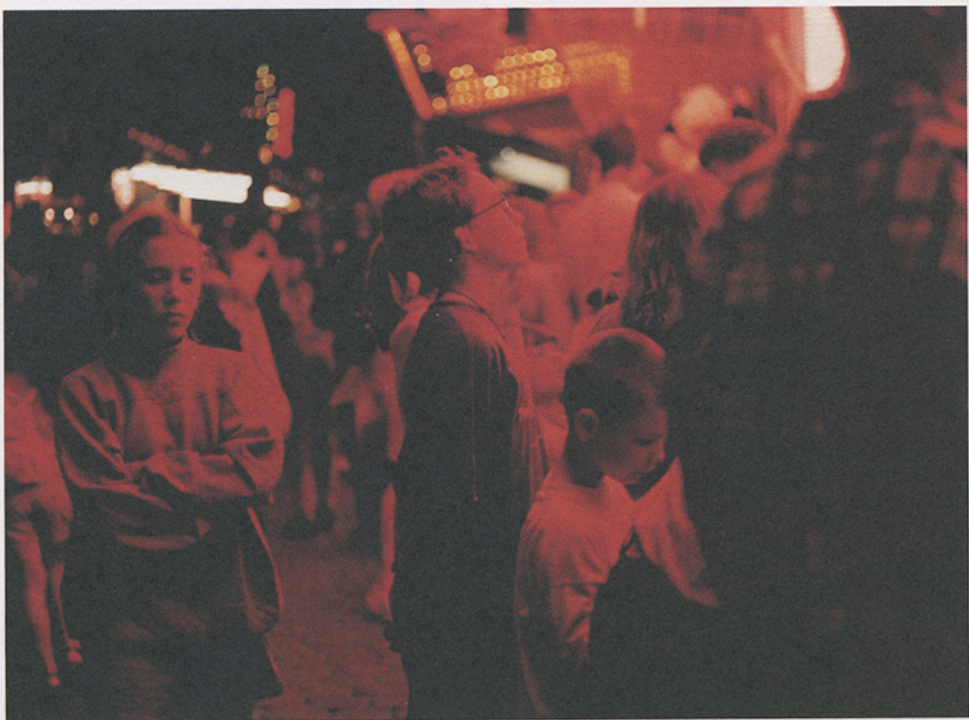
일포크롬 프린트

*Land (Montana 1)*

ilfochrome-print

76.2 x 101.6 cm

1999



24.  
브뤼셀 (Red)  
C 프린트  
*Brussels (Red)*  
C-print  
76.2 x 101.6 cm  
1999