

In-Between Places

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IN-BETWEEN PLACES IS A PROFOUND STATEMENT that all of us as immigrants face in the United States. For innumerable reasons, we have all made decisions to leave our homelands to find another way of life. We are filled with hope for the future, yet we find ourselves faced by unimaginable hurdles that cross culture, race, gender, caste, class, religion, politics, and language lines. Today, California—not even two hundred years old—is an immigrant state. We who live here now, have mostly come from elsewhere, including large numbers of people from Asia propelled into this mix by the Gold Rush in the mid-19th century wars and now by the technology industry. This population brings with it, distinctive cultural beliefs, rituals, celebrations, and values.

Many Koreans, including artists, have made Northern California their home. Creative people—whether writers, poets, musicians, or visual artists—often present nuanced perspectives on the reality of life, and this is the case with the eight artists in this exhibition who are addressing questions of identity, belonging, inclusion, and exclusion. The exhibition *In-Between Places* addresses the basic human need to know and to belong—to know where one is in the maelstrom of identity and social politics. In this respect, the artists in this exhibition address concerns that are universal.

When asked how her art might be different if she were an artist in Korea, Minji Sohn replied, “I can only imagine vaguely that if I had remained in Korea and became an artist, I would at least be making art dealing with different issues that would be important to me in the moment.” Her response brings to mind the art of most immigrant American artists, in particular, that of Hung Liu, who left China in 1984, after surviving the Cultural Revolution. Since she came to California, Liu has resolutely critiqued the Chinese political system, often through veiled analogies that carry unprecedented weight because she is Chinese. Now, after many years, she is turning her brush to critique the American social system. The question, of course, is what

Miran Lee, *Black Mountain*, 2008, silk,
courtesy of the artist





Jung Ran Bac, *TEAter-Totter*, 2014, porcelain.
Photo courtesy of Michael
Rauner Photography

would Liu, like Sohn, be doing if she had remained in her homeland? Sohn, through her performance pieces depicts herself as betwixt and between. *Turn Right, Turn Left* shows her at the cross-roads, or the turning point of her life: should she move or stand still; join the crowd or remain isolated; dress in black or white. Sohn is obsessive by nature; she is constantly questioning and searching. Her acts are repetitive whether through enumeration or through endlessly, mindlessly counting, printing, assembling, erasing.

The intensity experienced in Sohn's performative art is muted by Younhee Paik's hanging forest of monochromatic charcoal drawings on rice paper. Who living in Northern California hasn't gazed up through the high canopies of redwood trees searching for their tops? Although Paik has drawn different trees, she captures the magic of walking through forests and groves of trees. One can almost hear the wind blowing through their branches, and birds calling to each other. Paik recalls that one of her first impressions of California was that of intense light and dark shadows so different from her native Korea, and evident in the silhouetted trees that she now encounters. Her response to Nature is a universal one that crosses cultures. Yet the long hanging scrolls covered in black and white charcoal drawings reflect a distinct East Asian aesthetic wherein vertical scrolls are meant for public viewing, as opposed to small, intimate hand scrolls. Thus, viewers are invited to wander through these lofty trees. Unlike her floating celestial banner paintings, they are accessible and recall nights spent under the stars.

Unfamiliar Mountains and Water is the title of a popular Korean song that, for Miran Lee, summons up emotions when coming to terms with the golden, dry California summer landscape. Like Paik, Lee finds solace in Nature. Having left Korea in mid-life she had to start again, forging new ways of being. She talks of *le mal du pays* or suffering from homesickness, and describes the deep sorrow felt in an unfamiliar landscape. This sense of loss is evident in the two silk and *ramie* (recycled bed linens) pieces in the exhibition. They are made from old fabric that belonged to her mother that was wrapped in paper bearing the name of the person who wove them. Lee has carefully stitched the translucent sections together, their edges delicately overlapping, recalling the exquisite layering of *hanbok*, traditional Korean clothing. The colorful blues and greens of the sky and sea are sewn together in a turbulent way that is countered by the natural flax color of the sedentary rocks and mountains. Although the symbolism is evident, the manner in which the fabric is sewn directly relates to the styles of *hanbok* and *bojagi* (traditional wrapping cloths). Thus, this installation becomes an interpretation of California through a Korean perspective.

Young June Lew is also affected by the brilliance of California sunlight evidenced by the rich gold backgrounds in her art that set off the cool stony-grey pagodas. She recognizes that being an artist is a lonely, isolating experience. For her, Buddhist monuments form a bridge to the

world of God, frequented by winged angels, that recall ancient memories of the Noontime Pagoda in Korea. In Lew's art one perceives a deep sense of loss and longing.

Nicholas Oh, a ceramicist, creates life-size figures that question his constant experience of otherness. In several works he has made life-size ceramic self-portraits in which he is seated in the lotus position eating take-out food with chopsticks. Like the Buddha who during his meditations was attacked by evil forces, Oh has been faced with discriminatory insults, and has covered his body with racial slurs. This sculpture calls to mind the work of the Chinese artist Zhang Huan, who also used his body as a canvas for political messages. In the standing portrait in the exhibition, Oh has painted on his back an auspicious blue dragon a symbol of strength and fortitude, and on his torso Chinese hexagrams and symbols of good fortune, portraying a certain hopefulness. In *Justice or Else*, Oh has created eight life-size headless figures dressed in military fatigues, each holds a billy club that reinforces a menacing sense of being surrounded by negative forces. Oh served in the United States Marine Corps where he came face-to-face with racism, and the inevitability of having to deal with thoughtless, ignorant stereotyping, which may account for the missing heads. As a Korean American artist, Oh does not avoid discrimination, rather he explores it with a certain amount of removed objectivity as he “. . . realizes that certain situations are caused through the prejudice of those who act.”

Sohyung Choi also grapples with what it means to be an immigrant artist, and in particular her sense of responsibility to her Korean heritage. In accepting who she is, she recognizes the need to bring together the different parts of herself—the Korean and the American—to represent the hybrid of both cultures, the reality of who she is. In video installations, using time-based technology, she superimposes images that fade and change, stirring poignant memories of bygone times and people. They impart a sense of longing for what can no longer be, and hence a sense of loss—the loss of culture, connections, and family that all immigrants experience to a greater or lesser degree. In her video, *Repetitive Dream*—she runs and runs and runs—we never see her face; is she chasing or being chased? The repetitive dream seemingly turns into a nightmare from which she cannot escape—she endures in a dream-like state of being in between places, in between cultures, in between identities.

Jung Ran Bae, a performance artist and sculptor who works primarily with clay, uses the figure to create a visual autobiography. She is known for her whimsical constructions that allude to home and the contents of home such as *TEAter-Totter*, 2014, that consists of crazy off-balance towers of white porcelain teapots, teacups and saucers, that emerge from beds of ceramic shards. Delightful as these installations are, the inevitable breakage that occurs is a routine domestic occurrence, whether it be in a Korean or American kitchen. In her performance *Fish Salt*, Bae is blindfolded and dressed in a traditional Korean *dopo* (robe); this allows her to travel the fine line between her different identities, one she treats with

a certain amount of humor, and the other evokes a deep sense of loss, which she describes as “identity instability.”

This same sense of memory, history, and loss is evident in the art of Kay Kang whose feminist leanings have led her to chafe at the restrictions of Korean and Korean American patriarchal traditions. She openly admits that living in the Bay Area has allowed her to express herself in ways that would still not be tolerated in Korea. Yet despite her newfound freedom of expression she, like so many immigrants, is drawn back to her roots in Korea, inspired by nostalgia for a life she once had. Her long scroll-like collaged painting, *Bhaljachi (The Journey)*, is the story of immigrants’ journeys and also of domestic pattering feet. It consists of many *beosun* (socks) that were worn by Korean women to cover their feet, and one can sense them walking, moving constantly. The reference is particularly poignant for Kang as she made them from ramie that her family used during the hot, humid Korean summer days. She claims that “These linens are over 40 years old, and as much as they were a functional use for my artwork, they were sentimental.” The *beosun* remain a touchstone for Kang’s identity, yet speak to the universal immigrant experience.

Kang’s painting, *Guests Missed*, truly speaks to the immigrant experience. It is a poignant work that shows *beosun* inscribed with letters and records of visitors who attended her grandmother’s memorial in 1974 and her father’s memorial in 1975. Her family in Korea chose not to let her know about these deaths, supposedly for the fear of upsetting her. Such retention only added to her grief and sense of isolation and alienation. Zarina Hashmi, noted international artist who was born in India and lives in New York, experienced a similar sense of distancing from her family, when her parents passed away. In *Letters from Home*, a series of lithograph prints, Zarina has printed letters written by Rani, her sister, over ground plans of their homes. The letters written over several years describe heartbreaking decisions to sell their family home, and accounts of their ailing parents, but her sister never sent them. Both Kang and Zarina have moved from their homelands. They are no longer part of the families and culture that were once theirs, and now their grief is one of silence, isolation and loneliness.

What is evident in looking at the art made by these eight Korean American artists is that there is a deep longing for cultural roots. Each artist is coping with identity, isolation, and alienation. They are expressing the immigrant experience, of the need to belong to a society. They are *in-between places*, belonging to neither their home country, in this case, Korea, nor their adopted country, America. As Minji Sohn so thoughtfully expressed it, “Who knows what my art would have been like if I’d stayed in Korea.”