

Art Essay:
Yun Suknam

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Women, who have had to exist beyond history, floating on the surface of water, inspire me with their traces of the brilliant spirit with which they lived their lives. I am pleased when I unearth their sorrow, agony, and anger out of the dark grave of history and give them shape. Sometimes I even sense that these women dwell in my body and soul.

—Yun Suknam

HOME, CONSIDERED TO BE the women's sphere although never fully occupied by women, is the symbolic territory explored by Korean feminist artist Yun Suknam. Traversing the borders between fine art and craft and drawing and sculpture, her art represents the conflicting sentiments about womanhood that are particularly evident within the Korean traditional sense of home: love, care, conflict, and sacrifice. But if much of her art symbolizes women caught in the bondage of family and motherhood within a patriarchal society; her work, at the same time, constitutes a documentation of mothers' all-encompassing strength, across multiple generations.

Born in Manchuria in 1939, Yun was the third daughter of six children in the family of Yun Beck Nam (her father) and Won Jeung Sook (her



LADY, 1993.

Acrylic on wood
installation: 180cm (h)
x 150cm (w) x 35cm (d).

From Mother's Eye series.





GENEALOGY, 1993.

(Opposite)

Acrylic on wood and paper
installation: 270cm (h)
x 150cm (w) x 150cm (d).

From Mother's Eye series.

DAUGHTER AND SON,
1992.

Acrylic on wood
installation: 180cm (h)
x 170cm (w) x 100cm (d).

From Mother's Eye series.

KITCHEN, 1999.

Mixed media installation: 150cm (h).

From Pink Room series.





TO BE LENGTHENED—HAND, 2003.

Acrylic on wood:
299cm (h) x 96cm (w) x 46cm (d).

From To Be Lengthened series.



LOTUS, 2002.

Acrylic on wood and steel nails installation:
298cm (h) x 158cm (w) x 90cm (d).

From To Be Lengthened series.





mother). In 1945, at the end of the Japanese occupation, Yun's father moved the family back to Korea, where he became the founder of Korea's first Western-style theater, a movie director and producer, newspaper writer, and historical novelist. His death in 1954 at age sixty-six left the family destitute and forced her mother (then thirty-nine) to give up her traditional middle-class Korean housewife role to work as a street vendor in order to support the family.

Yun recalls her mother's strength during those difficult years: "The young, ignorant, but strong widow never stopped nurturing, feeding, and educating us. She built our clay house by herself.... Although she had to work outside [the home] all day...she would wake us up late at night, when she came home, to play games, so that we wouldn't lose our sense of humor and happiness." Yun believes that it was her mother's wisdom that enabled her children to understand that poverty was not shameful: "Due to my mother's philosophy of life, we would grow up as considerate persons who do not discriminate against people based on their social class. That's why, when I started painting, the subject of my art was my mother. I believe even now that it was because of my mother's determination and endless sacrifice, as well as love for her children, that we could overcome devastating and miserable hardship while enduring the poverty-stricken historical period of the 1950s."¹

Yun's personal history is itself Korea's modern history. Poverty cut short her education. After graduating from high school, she worked for four years at the Korean Electrical Company before entering Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul where she studied English literature for only two years (1959-1961) before having to drop out for lack of funds. She married and became a mother, slipping quite easily into the traditional role of Korean women. In time, however, she began to question that role. "I could not continue suppressing questions about my self-identity," she recalls. "I could not find the meaning of life or the purpose of life in my marriage.... The daily repetition of necessary domestic tasks depressed me.... It became more important to find out who I really was.... I am absolutely sure that this was the most important reason I became an artist."²

It was then that Yun began training in calligraphy with Doo Jin Park. It appears to have changed her life. At the age of forty, Yun determined to

have a career as a professional artist: "I thought that creating art was a way to look for my real *self*." This was also a crucial moment in the development of her technique as an artist as well:

I was deeply fascinated by the...the possibilities [of]...[infinite] expression with just one simple black ink stroke. The calligraphy lessons were the reason I still use an oriental paint brush in all my work.... I use it because the oriental brush helps me to draw detailed and lively images.³

Following this initiation into the life of an artist, Yun began taking lessons in drawing and painting; and then, in 1983, she moved to New York City to study printmaking and drawing at the Pratt Institute Graphic Center and later, painting and drawing at the Art Students' League.

In 1985, in reaction to the invisibility of gender within the work of the male art establishment in Korea, Yun cofounded the feminist "October Group" with a number of other Korean women artists. Their 1986 exhibition, *From Half to One*, in which Yun worked with artists Kim Djinsook and Kim Insoon, was the first to directly address women's issues. This experience was significant in that it exposed her to the burgeoning Korean feminist movement and the group "Alternative Culture." For her, artistically, feminism became a way to imagine an alternative world of gender equality and to make visible what was invisible regarding women's lives

With a belief that art is molded by history, Yun insists on the significance of the personal. "Even though genuine art is said to transcend time and space, I deem the authenticity of an artwork to be based upon historical as well as social context. An artist's individual experience penetrates her/his work of art; that is, it is socially and historically constructed and interpreted. Therefore, my task is to read a specific historical period from women's perspectives and simultaneously to connect my personal experience as a Korean woman to my way of reading history, [asking] who has been invisible and nonexistent throughout history, society, and culture." With her matter-of-fact presentation of the paths along which the subject comes to look for one's "self," her art came to represent temporal, spatial chaos, and the experience of multiple disruptions and contradictions that result from this. It is a metaphor for Korean society itself, which embodies a chaotic mixture of traditional, modern, and post-modern cultural norms and systems.

One of the most important themes of her work is the reinterpretation of “motherhood” from a feminist perspective. For Yun’s generation, the very word “mother” invokes ambivalence. On the one hand, there is the image of the mother who sacrificed herself for the sake of her children. On the other hand, motherhood is also considered strong and noble, mothers’ fortitude having sustained the Korean nation through the colonial period and wars. Therefore, motherhood itself comes to symbolize the distorted history of modern Korea, as well as Korea’s ambivalence toward its history. One of her earliest exhibitions, *Mother’s Eye*, aspired to make visible the invisible: to visualize a mother’s herstory embedded in Suknam’s personal memory and eventually to confront repressed aspects of women’s lives in general. As her own mother had faced many of the obstacles that Korean women typically faced, she began with the experiences of her mother.

These conflicting feelings regarding motherhood are well represented in Yun’s choice of medium: rotten scraps of wood. “While painting my mother on it, I immediately realized that the medium I had been looking for was this rotten piece of wood.” Its texture—its wrinkled skin like her mother’s, but with a softness that invokes a feeling of intimacy—gave birth to a new series of mixed media installations. We see “body without flesh” in her art; women’s bodies are fragmented and hard to feel, and the fleshy intimacy is deficient. Deficiency is a symbol of how women have been seen, while also representing their repressed desires and unfulfilled wishes. Thus, in mixing socio-historical distortion, negation, and fantasy, her work uncovers women’s collective subconsciousness. But then, through the series of *Pink Room*, Yun started visualizing stories from her own life as the mother of a daughter, a contemporary middle-class woman who seems to be independent and self-sufficient. Here, she expresses female fantasy as uprooted, void in the center, and yet full of desire for self-realization and self-fulfillment. Thus the *Pink Room* series explores the negative as well as the positive strengths of femininity, a metaphoric meaning of the color pink. What is the metaphoric meaning of pink? “femininity”? or positive strengths of femininity”? Through these artworks, Yun seeks to model the situational reality of womanhood and reconcile conflicts between two generations of women.

Throughout the 1990s, Yun's art challenged the gendered order of Korean society by representing hierarchical spaces of heterogeneity. However, her interest seems to be in connection rather than disconnection, hybridity rather than dichotomous heterogeneity, reconciliation rather than division, and reconstruction rather than destruction. According to art critic, Jee-sook Beck, Suknam's artwork pursues "the encounter between the traditional and the modern with the specific energy of the female subaltern."

In 1996, Yun became the first woman recipient of the Eighth Joon-Sup Lee Award, the highest honor accorded to Korean artists. The following year she received the Prime Minister's Prize for Women's Development. The images we present in these pages are from the series *Mother's Eye* (1993), the *Seeding of Lights* (1997), *Pink Room* (1997), and *To Be Lengthened* (2003).

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes are from the author's e-mail correspondence with Yun Suknam (translated by the author).
2. Suknam Yun, interview with Hwa Young Choi Caruso, 9 Apr. 2001, in Hwa Young Choi Caruso, "Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity, and Gender in the Work of Korean/Korean American Women Artists" (Yong Soon Min, Suknam Yun) (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University Teachers College, New York, 2004), 113.
3. Ibid., 114.