

MYONG HI KIM

– *DYNAMICS OF DISLOCATION* –
Paintings on Chalkboard

The subjects of Myong Hi Kim's oil pastel paintings range from small experiences of everyday life to dark memories of Korean history. Since 1990, an abandoned schoolhouse in a remote mountainous area near the DMZ has been her home and the locus of her artistic creation. Through her work, Kim offers commentary not only on the issues of representation but also their social and cultural connections. This article traces Kim's artistic journey that traverses nomadic wanderings and settlements.



Myong Hi Kim was born in Seoul in 1949. She graduated from the College of Art at Seoul National University and went on to complete her graduate studies there. Then she attended Pratt Institute in New York for further studies. Since her first solo exhibition at Goethe Institute in Seoul, she has had five solo exhibitions and participated in numerous group exhibitions. Currently she works in an abandoned schoolhouse in Naepyeongli, a tiny mountain village near the city of Chunchun in Kangwon Province, South Korea.

Mirroring the Boundaries

Jieun Rhee (Ph. D. Art History), *Wolganmisool* , June 2003

translated by Yer-ae K. Choi

The post-colonialist critic Abdul JanMohammed defines the specular border intellectual as the one who “is familiar with two cultures, finds himself or herself unable or unwilling to be ‘at home’ in these societies.”¹⁾ Unlike the cultural immigrant who adapts to the new culture, yet looks nostalgically upon his or her culture of origin, the specular border intellectual attempts to form a new group through tenacious investigation and analysis of the cultural boundaries.

Even after 17 years in the United States and more than ten years in Korea, Kim’s works do not veer away from the boundary. They are the mirrors that are held up to reveal me and other and us and them, serving as hinges between the different cultures. Kim’s artistic world is well represented in her recent show at Gallery Hyundai, titled “Dynamics of Dislocation.”

Kim spent a good part of her childhood in Tokyo and London where her father served as a Korean diplomat. On the family’s return to Seoul, she attended Ewha Girls’ High School and on graduating, studied Painting at Seoul National University. Going against the prevalent current of Westernization, she chose to write her Master’s thesis on *hwagak* handicraft, an indigenous form of Korean painting.

With her 1972 solo exhibition at the Goethe Institute in Seoul, Kim’s artistic career was launched. She also began teaching at her alma mater, Ewha Girls’ High School, where she met her future husband and fellow artist, Tchah-Sup Kim. In 1975 she headed for New York to study further at Pratt Institute. The following year she married Tchah-Sup, and the couple settled in Soho. The couple’s lives as full-time individual artists, however, soon stalled as Kim began to shoulder the more pressing matter of making a living.

Recollecting their early days in New York, Kim describes their respective endeavors with these words: “I viewed Tchah-Sup’s work, with its historical perspectives, as our ‘son,’ and my work, with its psychological underpinnings, as our ‘daughter’.” As an Asian woman living in the United States, she appears to have started her life as an outsider, both as a woman and as an artist. She adds, “Our focus was our son, and our daughter grew up on her own for the most part.” Her remarks underscore the commitment to life that informs the entire body of her work.

¹⁾ Abdul R. JanMohamed, “Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual” in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Michael Sprinker (Cambridge, Blackwell, 1992), p. 97

On their return to Korea in 1990, the couple decided to live in an abandoned schoolhouse located in a remote corner of Kangwon Province—a far cry from the tall buildings and narrow skies of Manhattan. There she came face to face with the chalkboards, discarded when the flood due to the construction of a dam nearby forced the school's closing. For Kim, the chalkboard developed into an experiential as well as a textual space, where her own life experiences and the traces of memory and introspection coalesced.

In “The Excursion that I Missed 02”(fig.1) Kim superimposes her own imagistic “text” over the already existing text on the chalkboard—the numerals, mathematical notations, and other random names and notes. The children who learned the lessons from these chalkboards have long grown up and gone their separate ways, and Kim fills the space with other children. The chalkboard's raison d'être is for it to be used over and over again. With the passage of time, the memory carried by the chalkboard continues to grow in layers, and the story conferred by the artist in turn engenders new memories yet to be recorded.



fig.1. The Excursion that I Missed 02, Oil pastel on chalkboard, chalk, LCD Monitor, 539 x 120 cm, 2002

The sense of layered time heightens with the introduction of the video screen in this work. The video screen, embedded in the middle of a chalkboard originally used for music lessons, shows a group of children romping through the yellow leaves on a bright fall day. One can almost hear the children singing and feel the artist attempting to recapture the missed moment. “The Excursion that I Missed 02” along with “Preparing Kimchi,”(fig.2) is the most confessional of the artist's works.



fig.2. Preparing Kimchi, Oil pastel on chalkboard, chalk, LCD Monitor, 240 x 120 cm, 2000

In “Puzzle”(fig.3) a little girl, sitting at a desk in front of the word cards (*l, erase, chalkboard, picture, etc.*) faces the viewer, and in the background, diagrammatic drawings of a cube and an hourglass appear on the chalkboard. These images, as in traditional paintings, represent the compression of space and time, but also are suggestive of painting as a process vehicle for manifold combinations.



fig.3. Puzzle, Oil pastel on chalkboard, 91.5 x 61 cm, 2003



fig.4. Dream, Oil pastel on chalkboard, chalk, LCD Monitor, 142 x 150 cm, 1996-2003

In “Dream”(fig.4) Kim juxtaposes, in a manner reminiscent of Chuang Tzu’s dream of a butterfly, the painted image of a sleeping baby and the video image of the baby, now a little boy, stroking the image of himself as a baby. On the video screen, Kim poses the question, “Illusion or Illusionism?” that cuts through the distinction between artistic representation and video recreation. Kim turns the traditional distinction on its head, revealing a highly analytical intellect devoid of sentimentalism.

Reflecting on the Everydayness of History

Kim’s preoccupation with the issues of representation and their sociological connections persists in “Child from Northwest”(fig.5) and “Child from Southeast.”(fig.6) The realistically rendered subjects of these two works (both are from the same slide, one being flopped) appear, at first glance, identical except for the fact that one is dressed in red and the other, in blue. However, these images, viewed within the context of the two maps of Korea in “Boat People,”(fig.7) take on an added meaning.

“Boat People” shows an enlarged pixellated image of a North Korean refugee family arriving in South Korea, flanked by the two identical maps of a unified Korea. In one corner of each map, the news footage of the family’s arrival repeats on the LCD monitor. Then on the screens, Kim floats these questions: “Are you ready for me?” and “Am I ready for you?”



fig.5. **Child from Northwest**, Oil pastel on chalkboard, 122 x 122 cm, 2003



fig.6. **Child from Southeast**, Oil pastel on chalkboard, 122 x 122 cm, 2003



fig.7. **Boat People**, Oil pastel on chalkboard, LCD Monitor, 596 x 120 cm, 2001

Given the ossification of the cultural differences resulting from a half century of division, the economic chasm, and the other intractable issues surrounding reunification, the family's exuberant statement made to the milling press about their happiness to be in the "arms of freedom" rings somewhat hollow. Does the freedom they envision approximate the freedom we can offer? Kim's probing leaps out of the locality of Naepyungli and reaches far beyond the country's borders.

In 1997 Kim traveled on the Trans-Siberian railway in order to trace the life of the Korean settlers who were forced to relocate to Central Asia. The four works, "Forced Dislocation,"(fig.8) "The Golden Peaches of Samarakand,"(fig.9) "Hybrid,"(fig.10) and "Exile,"(fig.11) all address the historical events in which the Soviet government, in order to gain control over Siberia, forcefully relocated 170,000 ethnic Koreans to this remote region.

In "Forced Dislocation," Kim shows a group of girls in Korean dress against the background of birch trees. The birch trees symbolize both the uprooting experience of the forced relocation and the subsequent cultural hybridization of the Koreans in an alien land. The birch, fairly common in the Northern hemisphere, was traditionally viewed as sacred because its white bark showed the way as hunters returned home in the darkness. Easily bent but not easily broken, the birch is also one of the first trees to sprout its leaves in the springtime. It is also a familiar sight in Korea, the name of whose legendary founder Tangun means "King of the Birches."



fig.8. Forced Dislocation, Oil pastel on chalkboard, LCD Monitor, 830 x 120 cm, 2002



fig.9. The Golden Peaches of Samarakand, Oil pastel on chalkboard, 204 x 114 cm, 1999



fig.10. Hybrid,
Oil pastel on chalkboard,
114 x 204 cm, 1999



fig.11. Exile,
Oil pastel on chalkboard,
114 x 204 cm, 1999

The video screen in the upper right-hand corner of this work shows three images in succession: The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad (whose footage Kim had unearthed in a Russian archive), the mounted Mongol horseman, and the flying golden goose. The image of the goose with its flapping wings (which Kim herself took at Lake Baikal) captures the pain of the creature's separation from its southern home. Just like the resilient birch, the Koreans have put down their roots in the frozen Siberia and a remote corner of Central Asia.

“The Golden Peaches of Samarakand,” in which a group of Korean girls reappear, also addresses the journey of dislocation that spans Central Asia, China, and Korea. The peaches, believed to have reached Korea by way of Central Asia, feature prominently in this work. In many classical paintings of Asia, such as Tao Ch’ien’s “The Peach Grove” and Ahn Kyun’s “The Peach Grove in a Dream,” the peach appears as a symbol of paradise or eternal youth. In Kim’s work, it seems to offer itself as an antidote to the deep sense of alienation, as reflected in the faces of the old couple in “Exile,” who, after their sojourn in an alien land, would likely fade into oblivion. Kim also turns her attention to the issue of mixed blood, an inevitable aftermath of dislocation. In “Hybrid” a young Korean-Russian woman stands with a Korean fan, her demure pose evocative of Korean culture coursing through her veins.

Between Dislocation and Settlement

Is Kim searching for the common ground where the two disparate cultures collide and mingle? After 17 years of residence in the United States and currently spending a third of each year in her Manhattan studio, diaspora remains very much a part of Kim’s life. In the 80s, during several automobile trips across the United States, the ubiquity of the mounds she encountered hit home. To this day she remembers the thrill she experienced at a Native American anthropological site in Ohio, standing before a quarter mile long mound in the shape of a giant serpent. This excitement is recreated in her installation, “Meta-Travel Along the Mound Builders’ Route.”(fig.12) On the three video monitors, Kim shows her own videotaped images as well as excerpted scenes from existing documentary films that trace the remnants of the ancient mound building peoples of North America, Korea, Siberia, and England.

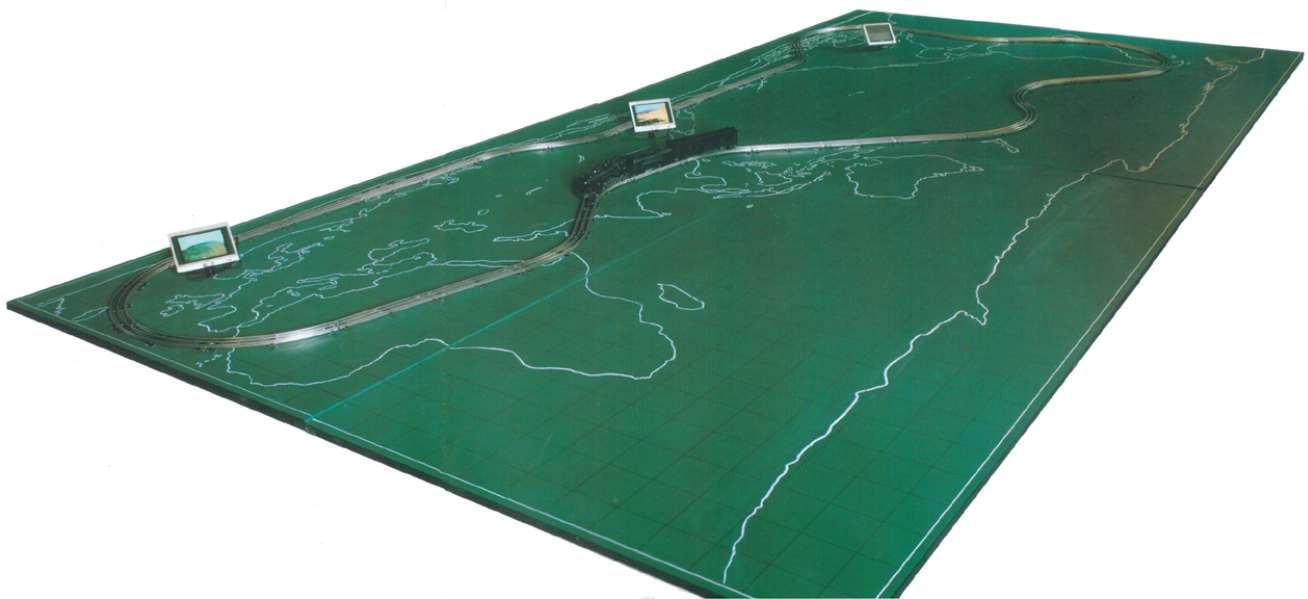


fig.12. **Meta-Travel Along the Mound Builders’ Route**, Oil stick on chalkboard, toy train & track, LCD Monitor, 480 x 240 cm, 2003

On a giant chalkboard, Kim connects the mound sites with a model train. (The train was supposed to run on the tracks, but due to the gallery's space limitation, the work ended up hanging on the wall, with the train affixed to one spot.) Small LCD monitors are installed at three of the mound sites—Silbury Hill, Kyungju, and Cahokia. The mounds of North America, in particular, offer a commentary on the cruelty of the white people who systematically destroyed the Native American culture. To Kim, the history of the mounds parallels the history of human dislocation.

With Chusok (Korean Thanksgiving) approaching, Kim reflects on the “great migration” of the Korean people occasioned by ancestor worship, search for identity, and the instinctual desire to return to one's origin. Her most recent work titled, “Han River 12 Zodiac Effigy Mound Project”(fig.13) is a projected plan for a large-scale artwork to be installed along the waterside of the meandering Han River in Seoul. It involves the installation of the 12 animals of the zodiac, traditionally believed to be the protectors of mounds. Kim explains the genesis of her plan, “While driving around the Han River, I felt a sudden urge to give meaning and form to the nondescript terrain.”



fig.13. Han River 12 Zodiac Effigy Mound Project, Oil pastel on chalkboard, 120 x 240 cm, 2003

Kim's plan calls for locating the correct positions for the multiple installations. For example, the mouse would be placed in the northeast. Careful positioning would not only ensure that the people crossing the Han River bridges would get a full view of the animal structures but also that the first rays of the morning sun would fall on a particular part of each animal's body. To Kim, the Han River's waterside represents a great mound, a common repository of memories that connects the past and present and the East and West.

Working in her Naepyeongli studio, Kim's thoughts race over the Siberian steppes, and while breathing Manhattan air, her mind lingers on a mound in Kyungju. Her “homeless” life, her refusal to settle in one geographical location, signifies neither an outsider's sense of

alienation nor a traveler's longing for home. Her home, as Edward Said puts it, is the world, and being "at home anywhere," she lives the life of complete freedom. This is the life she has chosen for her pursuit of the Tao, and for her the lack of a home to which one can return constitutes a true spirit of diaspora. Poised between cultural dislocation and resettlement and between cultural confrontation and hybridization, Kim's work traces the great route of the East-West connection, and in so doing holds up a mirror that reflects the boundaries with luminous clarity.