

Finding the Center in a Dislocated world :
The art of Myong Hi Kim

Like many artists today, Myong Hi Kim is experienced in the ways of the modern nomad. She moves between homes in New York and Korea, she pursues her art in remote corners of the world, most recently traveling the length of the Trans-Siberian railroad, and she exhibits her work internationally. Such mobility no doubt contributes to her interest in earlier migrations, both voluntary and forced, which are an essential part of her Korean heritage.

Underlying Kim's work is the cultural memory of the Korean people's history as nomadic people. Sweeping down on horseback from the steppes of Central Asia many centuries ago, they eventually came to rest in their current home in the Korean peninsula. More recently Koreans have undergone dislocations as a result of political and economic upheavals. Kim's work offers meditations on the effects of such disruptions. She examines the artificial boundary which has separated North and South Korea for the last 50 years, the gradual emptying out of the Korean countryside as people increasingly cluster in giant cities, and the relocation and partial assimilation of native Koreans under the Soviet Empire. Kim deals as well with dislocations caused by time. Since moving in 1990 to an abandoned schoolhouse in the remote northern countryside of South Korea, she has become increasingly haunted by the children who once studied there. This interest was heightened by her discovery of the chalkboards once used for lessons. These have become the canvases for many of her recent works. In these paintings, shapes and forms emerge from the mysterious blackness of the chalk boards like ghosts temporarily freed from the constraints of history. Many feature children much like those who would have gathered in her schoolhouse home many decades ago. Often there are chalk markings in the background of these paintings. Half erased Korean inscriptions or mathematical notations conjure daily lessons created to be erased, like the memory of these children, so that others can replace them.

Animating all Kim's work is the effort to work out ways to exist in a world which seems to have lost its traditional sense of center. She proposes a variety of strategies. One is to locate the center within oneself. One of her most lyrical paintings, [Preparing Kimchi], is actually a self portrait. In this work, a Korean woman sits surrounded by vegetables, quietly absorbed in the process of making kimchi. In a composition strikingly reminiscent of Vermeer, light flows from the window to the left and reflects up from the table onto her face. However, there is a modern touch, the window is actually a video screen which contains the gently moving image of waving willow leaves. The serenity of the still life tradition reappears in several other paintings. [Harvest], in which peppers, eggplants and other vegetables are arrayed on a wicker basket, conveys a sense of the fecundity of nature. Several small paintings focus simply on lilies and other spring flowers, harbingers of spring and renewal.

There are more uneasy undercurrents in other paintings. [Girls from Seoul] is a portrait of a pair of young sisters who live in Korea's most populous city. They stand clasping hands with childish awkwardness as the elder girl grasps a butterfly net. Slung around her neck like a collecting bag is a video monitor which presents a film of butterflies fluttering their wings and gathering nectar. There is clearly a disconnect between the fluidity of nature suggested by the butterflies and the desire of the young urban girls to capture a trophy. Children appear in other paintings that speak of a disconnection from the past. [The Excursion that I Missed] originated in a personal experience of a trip she did not participate in as a child. It now becomes a metaphor for the loss of childhood. In the painting a group of young Korean boys in western dress play with tops as they mill about before a blackboard with mathematical notations. Behind them on a video screen children play in fall leaves, a reminder, perhaps, of the carefree spirit of youth which vanishes so quickly in the face of life's cares.

Other works draw on a broad historical understanding to emphasize connections across history and geography. In [The Golden Peaches of Samarakand] a group of young Korean girls in native dress stand quietly in a group. Edges of light pull their figures out of the black ground in a composition which is reminiscent of Rembrandt's guild portraits. The painting has two centers of interest, each focusing on a luminous peach which clusters of women gaze upon with fascination.

The title of the painting references the trade routes which once cut across Asia, while the peaches have multiple symbolism. Culturally, in Asia, Peaches reference longevity. For Kim they also have a more personal significance as symbols of wholeness or integrity. In the painting they suggest precious objects to be passed along like rare spices or jewels.

A more recent migration is the subject of [Boat People]. This multi-part installation work deals with the passage of a group of refugee boat people from North Korea to the South. Their difficult journey is suggested by a number of devices - a video has been altered so that the crowd of refugees comes in and out of focus, at times dissolving into the geometric patterns of the digital image underlying pixels. One such pixellated image has been translated into a large painting. This lack of definition might be seen as an expression of the way in which fifty years of separation have blurred the relationships between two peoples who once had a strong sense of mutual identity. The video rests over a large map of the Korean Peninsula unmarred by the border created by the 38th parallel which has divided it into two countries for the last half century. However, a text which occasionally flashes over the video monitor provides a cautionary counterpoint to the promise of reunification. Are you ready for me? it asks. Am I ready for you?

Another series of works deals with the relocation of 170,000 Koreans to Central Asia in 1937 as part of a Soviet era effort to control Siberia. The difficulties experienced by these forced migrants only increased after the fall of the Soviet Empire. Forced to make a new home far from their native country, they now are being challenged by nationalists who want to reorganize this newly liberated area around Muslim lines.

In an effort to understand their plight, Kim retraced their exodus in 1997 traveling deep into central Asia on the trans-Siberian railroad. Her experiences have yielded a group of paintings which reflect on the meaning of dislocation and migration. For instance, [Hybrid] is a portrait of a young woman whom she met whose face clearly reveals her mixed Korean and Russian heritage. [The Exiles] presents a weathered old Korean couple who appear to be slowly morphing into stone, suggesting the impossibility of return.

[Forced Dislocation] is a monumental painting of a birch forest. Clusters of young women flicker through the trees wearing hybrid clothing which attests to their mixed status as Koreans and Russians. A video attached to the painting flickers with images that reference migration - moving trains, railroad bridges, a goose in flight. [Silent Witness] is a painting of an older Muslim man who came to meet the train. He was unable to speak to her, and Kim has painted him surrounded by small medallion portraits of Koreans from the communist era. But perhaps the most direct - expression of Kim's vision of the world as a place of dislocation and constant movement is [Meta-travel along the Mound Builders Route]. This is an installation work created over a world map which has been placed on the floor. A model train runs over the map, retracing the movement of the ancient mound builders between America, Korea, Siberia and England. From the viewer's lofty perspective high above the earth, Kim seems to indicate, very little seems to change from millennia to millennia.

But despite Kim's awareness of the toll exacted by time and history, her ultimate message is one of hope. The chalkboard on which she paints her images embodies the promise that history can be rewritten in this new century. Similarly, the figures in her paintings, however much burdened by outside forces, remain resilient and unbowed. Change may be inevitable, and dislocation the human condition, but Kim suggests that we don't have to be defined by the cruelties of the past.

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