

# Between the **Real** and the **Fabricated**: A View on Contemporary Korean Art

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When looking at the current artistic development in South Korea, it is all too easy to be seduced by the degree of sophistication and diversity in terms of media and subjects. On the one hand, it is almost impossible to discern a distinctly 'Korean' art, since over the last few decades South Korean artists have explored most of the aesthetic and discursive concerns of modernist and postmodernist art, just like

their contemporaries elsewhere. Issues such as representation, originality, authorship and identity politics have become as important as any issues particular to Korean society. On the other hand, there are trends which focus on appropriating the traditional language of Korean art, in its medium and aesthetics. Abundant opportunities to encounter foreign art and culture seem to have created a kind of rediscovery of what is, or appears to be, authentic to Korean sensibility. Furthermore, such enquiries into the tradition and history of their own culture have generated among Korean artists a renewed interest in the definition of cultural identities and their differences.

It is neither practical nor appropriate to discuss the different approaches in contemporary Korean art as a single entity. Thinking and speaking of contemporary art in terms of nation-based boundaries seems almost irrelevant nowadays in any case, as the globalization of both commerce and culture has deeply influenced artists' choice of formal and subjective languages that are no longer culturally or geographically specific. However, there are undeniable ruptures in our understanding of contemporary art

as something homogeneous and indistinguishable. Certain notions and ideas seem more difficult to translate beyond their own social and cultural boundaries, not only due to their historical implications, but also because of their contextual complexity.

In this article, therefore, I would like to explore certain aspects of contemporary Korean art that are of particular interest to me, instead of attempting to offer a comprehensive survey. My personal perspective will not be able to embrace all the significant currents in this particular field, but rather will suggest various possibilities of understanding contemporary Korean art. Additionally, my discussion will be limited to South Korean art, since the political division of South and North Korea has created a profound difference in art and aesthetics between the two societies.



(Fig. 1a) Detail of *New Folder - Drag*



(Fig. 1) *New Folder - Drag*  
By Yongbaek Lee (b. 1966), 2007  
HD video and installation  
Variable dimensions  
(Photograph courtesy of Arario Gallery, Seoul)



(Fig. 2) *CNN*  
 By Kijong Zin (b. 1981), 2007  
 Four-channel video installation (real time), CCTV camera, LCD monitor, mixed media  
 Variable dimensions  
 (Photograph courtesy of Arario Gallery, Seoul)



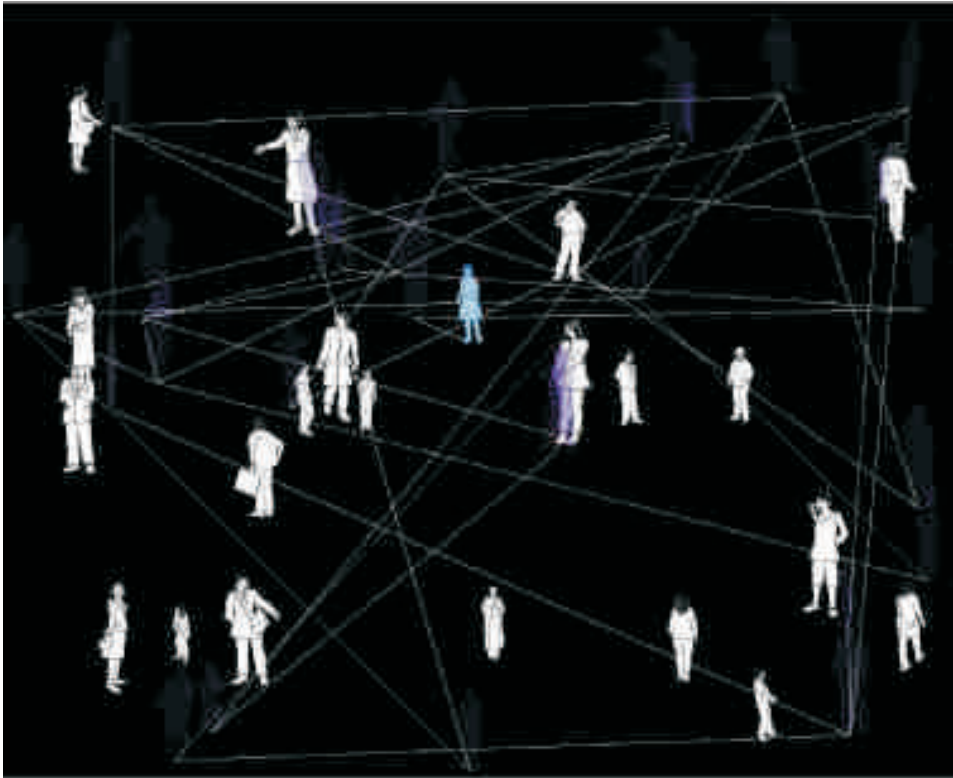
(Fig. 2a) Detail of *CNN*

One of the most fascinating and confounding aspects of advanced industrial societies is the proliferation of communications via a vast range of media. Since the early 1990s, several Korean artists have been working in a variety of different technological media including video installation, interactive and kinetic art, and web-based art. The processes of digital media and technology seem to have fascinated a number of emerging artists in particular, who grew up in the late 1970s and the 1980s, a period of radical change in Korea's political and economic environment. In a political sense, it was a time of shifting power relations, with the regime of the military-based government finally coming to an end in 1981. However, in one sense this shift caused more uncertainty and confusion, and a succession of paramilitary governments continued to repress any truly democratic discussion or debate. In an economic sense, though, it was a time of prosperity, largely due to technological advances and the active promotion of exports. Such a combination of absolute authority in the political domain, the new attraction to technology and lingering collectivism in the social sphere appears to have affected the ways in which this new generation of artists views and interacts with everyday life.

New media artist Yongbaek Lee (b. 1966) has been exploring the processes of digital media and technology, and the ways in which the development of electronic mass media has shaped our means of communication and our view of the world. Using various new media, including robotics, interactive art and performance-based video installation, Lee emphasizes the dissolution of the boundary between the actual and

the artificial, which is closely linked to the disappearance of reality and the creation of illusion. The complicated processes Lee employs are reminiscent of the way our relationship with the internet, mobile phones, TV and other modern technologies breaks down and confuses the conceptual boundary between physical space and cyberspace. As seen in his recent video installation *New Folder – Drag* (2007), the distinction between the natural and the replicated is sometimes physically challenged in a humorous yet symbolic way (Figs 1 and 1a).

Kijong Zin (b. 1981) is another artist whose works draw attention to the way in which our perception of reality is manipulated and controlled by the mass media. Subverting the techniques and effects of television in particular, his *<On Air>* series investigates the broadcasting of sensational events. These range from the bombing of Baghdad and the historic moon landing to false DNA tests in stem cell research and a faked nature documentary. One of the works from the series, *CNN* (2007), depicts the live telecast of the 9/11 terrorist attack (Figs 2 and 2a). Seemingly realistic in its details, the work consists of CCTV cameras, an LCD monitor and a stage-like set. The viewer first encounters the monitor, which broadcasts an attack on the World Trade Center, but soon realizes that the images on the screen are not an actual scene but a fabricated version. Zin reveals a miniature set of makeshift models and simple mechanical devices behind the monitor, showing how information can be manipulated during delivery. The artwork questions the supposed reality of live transmissions of spectacular events and exposes the uncertainty of the boundaries between truth and falsity, actuality and fabrication.



(Fig. 3) *Life Fishing*  
By Kyungwon Moon (b. 1969), 2006  
Media installation  
Variable dimensions  
(Photograph courtesy of the artist)

Kyungwon Moon (b. 1969) employs single and multi-channel video and sound installations in which still and moving images of people and scenery are formed, transformed and restructured through the use of custom-designed computer software (Fig. 3). The objects, figures and scenes of daily life, such as passers-by, trees and buildings, are rendered as silhouettes and outlines – they are often simplified and stylized into images which combine software techniques and processes with the appearance of lyrical hand drawings. Moon seems to be able to capture time and space in these images, but at the same time, to dislocate and transform the temporal and spatial senses. In her seemingly hand-drawn yet precisely programmed scenes, the continuous movement and rhythm of the abstract computer lines erase and cancel the organic traces of her subject. Although not overly mechanical in its appearance, Moon's work is bound up with the recent developments in computer science and programming technology. What makes it interesting and unique is the contrast between stasis and motion, the organic and the mechanical, the use of traditional drawing techniques and cutting-edge technology.

When reality is perceived as constructed and rearranged, history and nature can also be viewed as manufactured and assembled. U-Ram Choe (b. 1970) has constructed his characteristic aesthetic language by developing machine-like sculptures which evoke the imaginations of science fiction. It seems that technology and science are not only a practical means for the artist to realize individual pieces, but also a theoretical basis for his work as a whole. The large, chandelier-like structure in *Una Lumino*, for example, is constructed of translucent plastic flowers that open and close, producing a metallic

sound; within them, lamps flicker on and off in varying rhythms (Figs 4 and 4a).

It is not unusual to find artworks with mechanical devices or moving parts in contemporary art, yet Choe's machine sculptures create an extraordinary dimension, with the support of constructed natural-history elements and the artist's some-



(Fig. 4a) Detail  
of *Una Lumino*



(Fig. 4) *Una Lumino*  
Scientific name: *Anmopispl avearium cirripedia uram*  
By U-Ram Choe (b. 1970), 2008  
Aluminium, plastic, servo motor,  
LED and electronic devices  
Height 520 cm, width 430 cm, depth 430 cm  
(Photography by Kioku Keizo)



(Fig. 5) *Mus Animatus & Felis Catus Animatus*  
 By Hyungkoo Lee (b. 1969), 2006-07  
 Resin, aluminium sticks, stainless-  
 steel wire, springs and oil paint  
*Mus Animatus*: height 15 cm  
*Felis Catus Animatus*: height 88 cm  
 (Photograph courtesy of Arario Gallery, Seoul)

what literary imagination. Beginning with *Ultima Mudfox: Anmoropral Delphinus delphis Uram*, made in 2002, the artist conceived a series of mechanical organisms that originate and evolve independently of human intervention, using palaeontological systems of classification. His machine sculptures are shown with pseudo-scientific information such as place of origin, habitat, host and regimen, and sometimes resemble exhibits displayed in natural history museums. With the addition of scientific names in Latin and hypothetical statements as to their genesis, these works become the palaeontology of the future as well as the paradoxical proof of our scientific understanding, which is actually based on such hypotheses and arbitrary speculation. The artist's concept of lifelike machines employs evolutionary terms like 'mutation' and 'the survival of the fittest', and demonstrates his belief that technical advance is an extension of natural evolution.

(Fig. 6) *City on a Bombshell*  
 By Jin Ham (b. 1978), 2006  
 Mixed media on bombshell  
 Height 37 cm, length 122 cm, width 38 cm  
 (Photograph courtesy of PKM Gallery, Seoul)





Hyungkoo Lee's (b. 1969) work is also based on a pseudo-scientific reconstruction of imagined as well as natural species, and is consciously ambiguous in disclosing its fabricated nature. *Homo Animatus*, a series of works begun in 2002, appears in the first instance to consist of skeletal remains of pre-historic creatures. Often presented in a dramatically dark setting with spotlights, Lee's sculptures again resemble the displays in natural history or science museums. On closer inspection, however, it gradually becomes evident that these are not the skeletons of ancient species, but of imaginary creatures and creations with no real origin, such as the cartoon characters Road Runner, Bugs Bunny and Tom & Jerry (Fig. 5). Once



(Fig. 7) *Bewitched #1*  
By Yeondoo Jung (b. 1969), Seoul, 2001  
C-print photograph diptych, one of an edition of five  
Variable dimensions  
(Photograph courtesy of Tina Kim Gallery,  
New York and Kukje Gallery, Seoul)

the viewer realizes this, the painstakingly reconstructed details heighten the sense of deception and dubiety. The combination of popular culture, laboratory-based science and mythic alchemy seems to sit comfortably in Lee's artistic practice, which addresses a variety of issues concerning the body and its distortion and idealization.

Jin Ham's (b. 1978) tiny sculptures are exemplary in showing a sensibility that values the solitary and relatively isolated condition of modern existence. Using lumps of clay, discarded pills, plastic waste and other worthless material, Ham makes miniature beings that occupy cracks, holes and other insignificant places in a given domain. Beyond their astonishing appearance, these beings purposefully construct narratives that are bound up with the artist's private universe. Playful and at times satirical, as in *City on a Bombshell* (2006), the imaginary world these beings build and inhabit is parallel and analogous to the outer world (Figs 6 and 6a). The differentiation between these two worlds is as arbitrary as their authenticity.



(Fig. 6a) Detail of *City on a Bombshell*

The lack or insufficiency of authenticity in modern life creates a need to make alternative realities where the boundaries between actuality and fantasy cannot inhibit the existence of multiple realities. Yeondoo Jung's (b. 1969)

photographs of imaginary scenes are staged, narrative images which merge real and fabricated environments and objects. Jung abstains from digital processing and image manipulation, opting for more traditional theatrical and cinematic techniques to construct his scenes. He often builds elaborate sets using props, painted or photographed backdrops and studio lighting, which he combines with actual landscapes and characters. *Location* (2005-present) is a series of vibrant C-print photographs of constructed landscapes that has the appearance of stills from seemingly familiar yet imaginary movies; the fusion of real locations and actors with fabricated scenery creates a fantastic, hallucinatory atmosphere. It seems that the artist seeks to redefine the conventions and languages of both landscape and portrait photography, bringing to the genres the more visionary autonomy of painting and even literature.

Jung's interest in giving form to hidden fantasies and desires can also be noted in his project *Bewitched* (2001-present). In this work, Jung recreates the dreams of people he has encountered around the world. Each project is comprised of a pair of portraits of a single subject, one an image of the person in his or her current reality, the other in his or her ideal identity and surroundings. Subjects include a young boy working at a

petrol station in Seoul who dreams of becoming a Formula One racing driver (Fig. 7); a middle-aged man in Liverpool who wishes to play the spoons with the Philharmonic Orchestra; and a fashion model who wants to have a family, with three children and two dogs. Having interviewed his subjects, Jung carefully reconstructs the scenes of their hopes and ideals for the future, but for now the accomplished dreams remain in the realm of fantasy, just like his imaginary landscape scenes.

Do Ho Suh's (b. 1962) sculptural and architectural installations demonstrate the complex balance between the personal and the social. Suh's works are often based on his own experience as a Korean-born artist living and working in the US, where he came to question Korean ways of thinking and attitudes. For instance, a large-scale textile piece, *Seoul Home/L.A. Home* (1999), introduces specific cultural references into his architectural works, showing a series of interiors rendered in sea-green silk and nylon. One half of the work is an exact replica of his family home, which is typical of traditional Korean residences, and the other half a faithful copy of his apartment in the US. By rendering the actual architecture in the more ephemeral material of translucent textile, however, Suh transforms the corporeality of the spaces into something nos-



(Fig. 8) *Uni-Form/s, Self-Portrait/s: My 39 Years* By Do Ho Suh (b. 1962), 2006  
Fabric, fibreglass resin, stainless steel and casters, one of an edition of three  
Height 169 cm, length 254 cm, width 56 cm  
(Photograph courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York)

(Fig. 9) *The White House*  
 By Joonho Jeon  
 (b. 1969), 2005  
 Computer animation  
 (Photograph courtesy  
 of Arario Gallery, Seoul)



talgic and psychological. The themes of cultural displacement and identity have also been central in his subsequent works.

The traditional celebration of the collective rather than the individual in Korean culture has influenced some of Suh's works, as in *Uni-Form/s, Self-Portrait/s: My 39 Years* (2006) (Fig. 8). This is an assemblage of the artist's uniforms from nursery to high school and compulsory military service, symbolizing the collective nature of Korean society. Indistinguish-

able in these 'Uni-Form/s', the identity of a person is veiled beneath standardized archetypes. What becomes problematic, however, is the artist's subsequent realization that the collective identity is not universal or natural, but constructed and idealized.

The appropriation of real stories and the ordinary events and objects of daily life is also one of the main subjects of Joonho Jeon's (b. 1969) work (Fig. 9). Using his own, distinct



(Fig. 10) *Winter*  
 By Kyung Jeon  
 (b. 1975), 2006  
 Gouache, graphite  
 and watercolour on  
 rice paper on canvas  
 Height 90 cm,  
 width 135 cm  
 (Photograph courtesy  
 of Tina Kim Gallery,  
 New York and Kukje  
 Gallery, Seoul)

perspective, which is at once politically charged and highly personal, Jeon questions the hegemonic structures of Korean society and politics. Through his references to objects and icons such as US-dollar bills, North Korean banknotes, an American-football player, the Statue of Liberty, and the logos of Nike and McDonald's, the artist expresses a critical analysis of the media, capitalism, and the political and economic dominance of the US. He encourages the audience to question their view of reality, revealing its distortion by the mass media and deconstructing the myths and power structures of contemporary society.

However, it is also true that Jeon's work goes beyond the realm of the critique of economic and cultural hegemony, with his recent emphasis on power relations in the domain of the individual and the personal. For instance, *Alpram – the Absolute Command* (2008) is based on the official statue of the founder and former leader of North Korea, Kim Il-sung (1912-94), which is an unparalleled icon within monumental and propaganda sculpture. While the work is representative of the artist's critique of overwhelming power and social fiction, it also refers to somewhat more abstract and broader resistance through the conscious link with Alpram, a medication for panic disorder. Recognizing that psychological states are not entirely separate from physical and material ones but are sometimes simply responses to chemical processes, Jeon leads us to the revelation of the functions and forms of power that permeate into the most private and subjective levels of life.

The creation of personal mythologies and allegorical narratives can also be seen in the work of artists who combine them with the formal language of traditional Korean painting. Kyung Jeon (b. 1975) is one of the artists who adopt the genre of drawing as an effective technique to represent complex and fantastical stories. Using the traditional support of Korean mulberry or rice paper mounted on canvas, she produces rather childishly rendered images of small figures and their surroundings. As seen in Figure 10 and in her more recent work, *a story* (2008), comprised of thirteen large-scale paintings, the figures and stories depicted are often based on the artist's own imagination and experience. However, the narratives are generally fragmented rather than coherent, indicating influences from the visions of such artists as Henry Darger (1892-1973) and Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516).

In a similar manner, the art of Yoonyoung Park (b. 1968) references the techniques and motifs of traditional Eastern calligraphy and landscape paintings, but reconfigures these elements and conventions and combines them with aspects of

modern life and culture (Fig. 11). A wide range of events and memories informs her works: incidents such as the Picton Farm murder case, the Virginia Tech shooting and the Exxon Valdez Oil spill inspire her own interpretations, and influences include David Lynch's TV serial *Twin Peaks*, as well as Latin American shamanism. However, the details are re-imagined, restructured within the artist's own imagined space. Real occurrences and scenery are rearranged and blended with the artist's own experiences and definitions to form dream-like narratives, presented in a variety of media including painted scrolls and screens, installations and mystery novels.

Seung-ho Yoo (b. 1973) produces intricate and humorous works in pen-and-ink on paper that blur the boundaries between word and image, and play with language, text and the traditions of Eastern landscape painting and calligraphy. Yoo recreates traditional landscape paintings, specifically the type of monumental work in ink on paper from China's Northern



(Fig. 11) *Logo Landscapes*  
By Yoonyoung Park (b. 1968), 2005  
Chinese ink and colour on rice paper  
Each: height 210 cm, width 39 cm  
(Photograph courtesy of Arario Gallery, Seoul)

Song dynasty (960-1279), which depicts picturesque scenes of mountains, trees and water. Nevertheless, on closer inspection we see that the images are made up of tiny characters in Hangul, the official Korean script. The delicate craftsmanship, scholarly air and elegance of the originals are here transformed into something playful and comic. Yoo's art is at once poetic and quirky, expressing both a poignant nostalgia and a childish sense of humour.

Within the current artistic developments in Korea, there is a tendency to reflect the rapidly shifting nature of social and political life and culture in a contemporary world of mass production, mass consumerism and media saturation. Although not consciously collective in their activities, today's artists appear to share a particular view, seeing reality as constructed and imagined rather than authentic and natural. However, the artistic response to the view of reality as fabricated is not limited to the social and political spheres, but extends to the per-

sonal and private. There is a shared artistic sensibility that is distant from grand narratives, direct politics and spectacles, focusing instead on personal myths, subjective narratives and the aesthetics of the fragments of daily life. These artists commemorate the humble and seemingly insignificant moments of social and personal history, and emphasize an outlook that is at once meditative and private, and socially engaging.

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*Artist websites*

U-Ram Choe (<http://www.uram.net/>)

Hyungkoo Lee (<http://www.hyungkoolee.net/>)

Yeondoo Jung (<http://www.yeondoojung.com/>)

Kyung Jeon (<http://www.kyung.com/>)

