

A Conversation with Sangbin IM

Leeza Ahmady

How did you start making art?

I do not remember the exact moment. My mother told me that she remembers since I was little that painting was my love and it continued every single day. I also vaguely remember, whenever I finished the works, my mom put them up on all the walls of my house, then onto the ceilings. My works became the wallpaper of my family house, where each individual work served to become a big installation. As I look back, this was a formative experience: this collaborative installation at such an early age helped me develop my constant interest in the relationship between individual units and the whole.

At the earliest age that I could remember, I would like to say that my mind was somehow already made up as an artist, and since then, it has never changed. From the age of three throughout my elementary school days, I continued attending art institutions. Many art teachers urged me to apply for art middle school. So, I ended up going to art middle and high school before entering the Department of Visual Arts at Seoul National University. After graduation, I envisioned pursuing my study abroad, so I went to art school at Yale University where I received an MFA in the department of Painting and Printmaking. Afterwards, my interest in the sociological ideas of the artist, art and the market led me to pursue a doctoral degree at Teachers College, Columbia University. This degree kept my curiosity growing as an artist who would like to know better about my art and how it fits in today's world.

Briefly describe your art from the perspective of what it could tell us about you?

I do not like to frame and limit my interests. I like them to flow around and expand, so I have developed many projects over the years. However, at this point, I would like to say that my main projects are People, Museum, and Cityscape. These projects tell a mixture of my impressions/expressions, such as my fascination and anxiety with the spectacle of the modern megalomaniac city, institution, or other cultural sites that are driven and constructed by a capitalistic desire or vision, that stage and condition people in the way they live, work, and enjoy life. From this constant interest of mine, I would say that these projects indicate that I am a person who likes to live and work in cosmopolitan cities such as New York and Seoul, while being somewhat critical about those cities. In other words, I appreciate the contemporary spectacle. In the meantime, some aspects of it seem thought-provoking or problematic. As an artist, I desire to visualize both via my own artistic way of seeing and acting in the world.

What experiences have most influenced your choice of subject matter, medium, and style?

My interest in the digital language, even though my major has been always painting, goes back to my military days from winter 1996 through spring 1999. Before the military, I did not know much about the computer. I did not even know how to save a digital file. However, in the military, I suddenly became very good at the computer, simply because I had to. One of my jobs was to draw an electronic map for military action. When I drew an electronic line, minutes later or days later, soldiers actually followed the line! Digital came first and analog followed. The perception of signal play preceded the imagination regarding the impact of physicality. This relationship between the virtual and the real fascinated me and finally made me seek the ways to incorporate digital language into my traditional art making after finishing my military service.

In the meantime, my interest in the boundaries between reality and fantasy came from three major experiences which I often talk about. First, in 1982, I was conversing with my friend on a bridge. I was standing and he was on a bike. Suddenly, with a slight misstep on the rail, he fell off the bridge in front of my eyes. The second was in 1995; I was driving with my mom and younger brother. When I was about to park in a Sampung department store to have dinner, my mom suddenly added that the adjacent shopping center actually had the same menu but was more delicious, so we went to the other store. The department store that we were originally going to go to, suddenly collapsed, later revealed to be caused by faulty concrete. Third, in 2003, my first day in New York was during the historic black out on the east coast. I wondered around the city with such mixed feelings. The nonstop city as the world knows it suddenly seemed so far from actuality. These experiences directed my attention to the larger system that is capable of making individuals thrive or get lost. In addition, the tragic, surreal accidents blurred my perception of the boundary between real and fantasy. Finally, the architectural condition of the city where we are all bound together became one of my artistic subjects to ponder on.

Is your formal or informal training as an artist useful? How?

Yes and no. I have never stopped creating art, except during my military days. I probably would not have gotten my hands as experienced as they are now without my intense formal training. I have studied at art focused schools since my childhood. By the time I reached college level, I realized that university entrance exams in art were often not only boring but also too rigid. So, I had to back up a bit to reboot my creative energy. My undergraduate art school did not even have a photography major, but to me, photography was a really intriguing medium. My rationale at the time was that photography was more about ideas than the magic of hand. Moreover, by not using my hands too much, I would have the time and chance to cleanse or reformat them from past training.

Of course, as a painter, my approach to photography was different from many traditional photographers. My interest was not to take or capture images but to make or construct them. My concern was not the manipulation of the original but the construction based on

photographs of real objects to create a visualization of my world. Likewise, I have actively incorporated the painting language into photography, and my works have a painterly surface. Interestingly, more people think of me as a photographer. However, in my mind, I am an artist who uses a hybrid of media as a tool for my art. This year, I will be making more paintings than before. I will not frame my relationship to a specific media but open it up for more possibilities.

Do you appreciate culturally specific works of art? If so how does your personal and cultural background show up in your work?

Culture-bound perception often defines who I am and how I think. My artwork is both individualistic but inclusive and may have originated from the Korean culture of collectivism and connectedness. In addition, the state of the Korean IT industry may have influenced me to pay special attention to digital language in art making. (Seoul is one of the most digitally connected cities in the world). However, it is only one component that has influenced my work. As I have been raised in a modern city full of skyscrapers that delineate its look, my interest in modernity has been an important body of work, which is the Cityscapes. My personal and cultural background is more overtly shown in my work from this series, such as Seoul–New York where the two cities I call home, New York and Seoul, are bridged together, both visually and mentally. Though many of my subject matter deals with places in Seoul and New York that are biographically significant, these specific places are mere stages to investigate and explore my interest in 21st century visual culture.

How does your current portfolio fit into the rest of your body of work?

People, Museum, and Cityscape are the current main projects of mine. However, I continue other projects and tomorrow's projects are definitely unknown, but that makes them so enthralling. In my case, one project has often led to another as it develops. For instance, as of today, Paintings project is my most recent project as another branch of my current People project.

People project stages numerous people who are cultural nomads in this global world. They are not glamorous but ordinary people on the street who wear casual outfits for convenient travel. They happen to be present at the site during my shooting while enjoying a cultural spectacle, such as a museum, a tourist hub like Times Square, or a sporting event. Each person is shot individually and placed in the composition to create possible relationships and fictitious narratives. They have their own stories, but as a whole, they signify and energize the site, and represent a global culture.

The people in Paintings project are actual painted figures from various artworks, some from Old Master paintings. In the original paintings, these figures are the main subjects, a part of

an acceptable canon of appropriate subject matter such as Madonna and Child, nudes, and mythological figures. They are often portrayed with great theatricality: their draped clothing to show form, deep facial expressions, contoured bodily gestures, dramatic lighting, or other clever ways to heighten reality. Throughout art history, many artists are said to have painted the same figure again and again if that figure sold well at the time. By placing similarly painted subjects on the same stage, the project is about revealing the artistic variations among artists portraying the same character.

Likewise, the two projects share similarities and differences, so the tension between the ordinary and the theatrical is heightened and the meaning of both projects is expected to expand. There are many other projects in my mind that may or may not be realized, therefore, they will have to be discussed at another time. In art, I accept the fatal fact that nothing is fixed but in constant motion. This uncertainty amuses me and also motivates me to keep on going.

Leeza Ahmady: Born in Afghanistan and based in New York, Ahmady is an independent curator, and a noted specialist in contemporary art from Central Asia. She has presented artists at international forums such as Venice Biennial, Istanbul Biennial, and Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong and was recently member of the Agents/Curatorial team for dOCUMENTA(13) Kassel, Germany. She is Director of Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW) since 2005- a biennale of exhibitions and public programs at major New York City museums and galleries including the Asia Society, Museum of Modern Art, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum among others. Ahmady exhibits, contextualizes and advocates the work of contemporary artists and other arts and cultural practitioners working both locally and internationally in variety of formats, with a focus on complicating categorical notions about Asia as a geographical and conceptual space.