

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Why Contemporary Korean art is everywhere right now

Exhibits at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Clay Studio and Temple Contemporary are spotlighting Korean and Korean American paintings, sculptures, and crafts

By Rosa Cartanega
December 10th, 2023

L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Soojin Choi's ceramic work "Don't Forget About Me" (2023), featured in the Clay Studio's "Between Horizons: Korean Ceramic Artists in America," running through Dec. 31. Courtesy of Soojin Choi

In 1987, artist Sunkoo Yuh left South Korea for the United States. Yuh was one of many who departed, during a time of political unrest, burgeoning democracy, and increased globalization. Twenty five years later, he planned to return and visit his parents for the first time, but they both died unexpectedly before he arrived.

Through clay, he channeled his memories, pain, and the straddling of two cultures to

create the towering, totem-like sculpture *Monument for Parents*, a glazed congealed mass of faces, animals, and symbols representing his multiple personas.

The nearly 12-foot-tall sculpture sits at the entrance to the Philadelphia Museum of Art's show, "The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989," running through Feb. 11, 2024. Yuh is one of 28 artists in the major exhibit.



Sunkoo Yuh's "Monument for Parents" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art's "The Shape of Time: Korean Art after 1989," running through Feb. 11, 2024. Credit: Timothy Tiebout

Yuh's work asks viewers to look deeper, to stand closer — there are so many different heads, it's hard to know where to look or where to start. That could also describe the museum's extensive exhibit, which spans video installations, photography, craft, and sculpture, and this moment in Philadelphia's art scene as a whole: Five exhibits across separate institutions this season have showcased contemporary Korean artists. This confluence is part of a nationwide focus on Korean art, from the Guggenheim and the Met in New York to the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington.

After the exploding popularity of K-pop, beauty, food, and cinema in the U.S., fine art from Korea and the Korean diaspora is getting its due. "Shape of Time" curators Hyunsoo Woo and Elisabeth Agro's initial plans for the exhibit were delayed by the pandemic. Since then interest in Korean culture has continued to expand.

“When I finally saw that you could get gochujang paste at Giant supermarket in Wynnewood, I knew our show would be successful,” said Agro, curator of modern and contemporary crafts and decorative arts at the Art Museum.

Woo, who was named the museum’s first curator of Korean art in 2006 and is now deputy director for collections, moved to the U.S. about 27 years ago and has dedicated her career to showing Korean art in top American institutions.

The Art Museum’s goal is to offer a “friendly” exhibit for those familiar or unfamiliar with Korea, Woo said, and to provide historical context surrounding these works. The artists examine their home country’s history, politics, and continuously changing society, some making direct connections to U.S. pop culture and to Philadelphia. Inhwan Oh’s *Where He Meets Him in Philadelphia* is part of a series in which the artist outlines the names of queer bars in each host city in red incense powder; here, it remains inactive and unlit (due to PMA safety restrictions) but the names are visible.



Juree Kim’s “Evanescent Landscape – Hwigyeong: Philadelphia” (2023), soil and water. The work is part of the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s exhibit “The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989.” Credit: Tim Tiebout

Other works are meant to fall apart over the course of the run. Juree Kim used unfired clay to build a small city in *Evanescent Landscape — Hwigyeong: Philadelphia*. Museum staff will pour water on the artwork periodically so the meticulously crafted houses will disintegrate and crumble, drawing a connection between the gentrifying cities of Seoul (Hwigyeong-dong is one neighborhood there) and Philadelphia.

As the exhibit came together, local curators began planning their own shows in response. The Clay Studio in Olde Kensington is running “Between Horizons: Korean Ceramic Artists in America” through Dec. 31 with a dozen artists who studied ceramics in South Korea before moving to the U.S. Sunkoo Yuh, who’s now based in Georgia, contributed two glazed and grotesque stoneworks, including *I want you*, echoing the Army recruitment slogan. The exhibit’s works are colorful and eccentric, connecting big ceramics communities in both Philadelphia and Korea.

L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Sunkoo Yuh’s “I want you,” on view in the Clay Studio’s “Between Horizons: Korean Ceramic Artists in America,” running through Dec. 31. Courtesy of the Clay Studio.

The Locks Gallery exhibit “Lee Kang-So: Wind / Flow,” which ran through November, featured both sculptures and large paintings. It was the first time Kang-So, a notable veteran in Korea’s experimental arts scene, showed his paintings in Philadelphia.

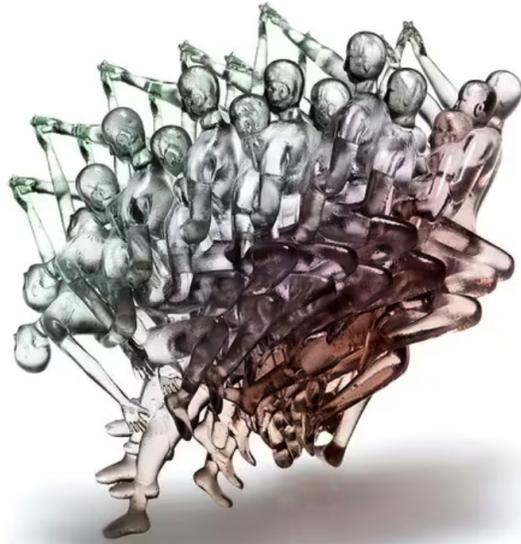
“People are amazed by the history and culture popping up everywhere,” said Locks Gallery owner Sueyun Locks, who grew up in South Korea. “It could be just a moment or maybe it’ll continue, we don’t know. But it’s a good feeling.”



Lee Kang So's "The Wind Blows-230333," 2023, acrylic on canvas, was part of the exhibit "Wind / Flow" at Locks Gallery. Courtesy of Locks Gallery

While clay dates back to prehistoric times, Temple Contemporary's exhibit "Decorative Digitalism," running through Feb. 3, 2024, highlights the latest digital technologies. A collaboration with Kookmin University in Seoul, the show features 13 artists presenting 3-D printed pieces and silver works that bridge jewelry and sculpture.

"The idea of the exhibition is to challenge the concept or challenge the preconceived notion of what jewelry is, and even what wearability is," said cocurator Doug Bucci, who runs the metals, jewelry, and computer-assisted design program at the Tyler School of Art and Architecture. Some works might deteriorate over time, through oxidation, not unlike the made-to-disappear works at the Art Museum.



Wan Hee Cho's "Unfamiliar Familiarity" (2022), on view at Temple Contemporary's "Decorative Digitalism" exhibit, running through Feb. 3, 2024. Courtesy of Wan Hee Cho

Wan Hee Cho's *Unfamiliar Familiarity* is a small translucent brooch with several conjoined figures, splayed out like a fan of bodies meant to evoke fluidity, movement, and connection. Cho considers the body a rich terrain to explore through jewelry, which is often defined by how it adorns the wearer.

The body takes center stage, too, in "Threading Memories" from Philadelphia artist MiKyo-ung Lee at the Princeton University Art Museum, running through Jan. 7, 2024. Lee, who also cocurated the Clay Studio exhibit, uses pipe cleaners, zip ties, and twist ties to make intricate abstract sculptures. Inspired by bodily functions, Lee created "Bubble," three hanging yellow works that echo the brain while sleeping and dreaming. The large bright red work "Bubble #3" evokes how a womb expands and transforms the body during pregnancy.

Like Art Museum curator Woo, Lee came to the U.S. about 30 years ago and she's heartened to see the attention that Korean artists are receiving in the Philadelphia region. She sees the embrace of artworks as a big step forward for cultural exchange. Though these exhibits highlight Korean and Korean American experiences, "I really think that it's connected to everyone, because in a way, many of us are immigrants and many of us left home," said Lee.



LOCKS GALLERY



MiKyoung Lee's "Bubble" in the Princeton University Art Museum's "Threading Memories" exhibit, running through Jan. 7, 2024. Photo by Joseph Hu