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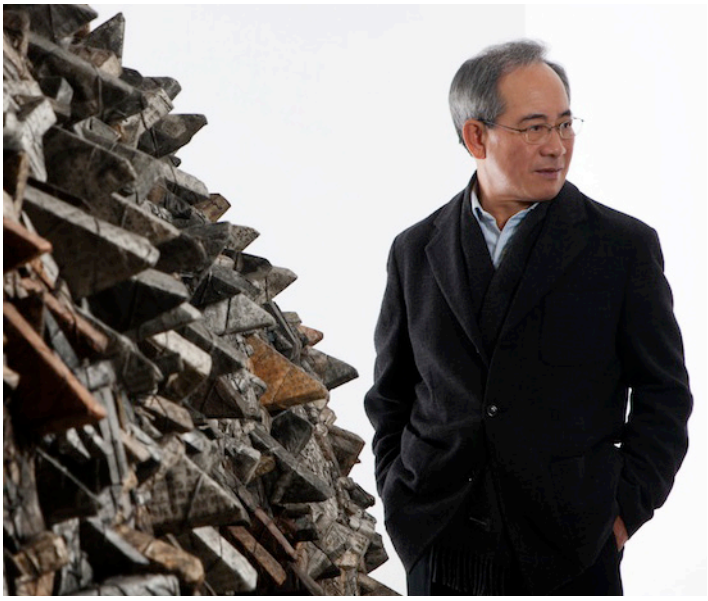
Kwang Young Chun

Mulberry Mindscapes

By: Katherine Hahn Published: July 14, 2014



Kwang Young Chun has a story to tell.

The Korean visual artist who loves fishing in the quiet countryside is the force behind a career of stunning and meaningful work that gives insight into the history and culture of his homeland.

"Kwang Young Chun: Mulberry Mindscapes" is a breathtaking visual journey into Chun's story and into his native Korea. Accompanied by text from John C. Welchman and Carter Ratcliff, the monograph's 200 illustrations carry us from Chun's early abstract paintings to his famous "Aggregation" series of exquisite mulberry paper sculptures.

"The language is not so good," he says over the phone, laughing. We are speaking across continents, he in London, I in the U.S., and through a translator, curator Heejin No.

The language barrier soon falls away as Chun's thoughts are conveyed seamlessly through his translator, and his clarity of message is unmistakable.

His works tell a story of Korean culture and identity, past and present.

The mulberry papers or hanji he uses as an artistic medium carry years of history, yet the triangle shapes speak to a modern artistic style. He takes his papers from discarded books, which are up to a century in age.

"There are lots of souls in these pages, this kind of material," Chun says through his translator.

Even though he is an ocean away, Chun's artistic roots stretch to America.

"America was a country for every young man," he says through his translator. He earned his MFA at the Philadelphia College of Art in the late 1960s and '70s, where he dabbled in genres such as artistic expressionism. He was heavily influenced by Western style art, long before he even came to the United States.

Even though he got along well with his American cohorts, Chun felt different as an artist. Something was missing. Inside he was Korean. He felt the pull of his homeland in a way he could no longer deny, and he knew he was destined to return to Korea.

In 1995, Chun began creating the large sculptural works that would earn him his place as one of Korea's foremost visual artists: "Aggregations."

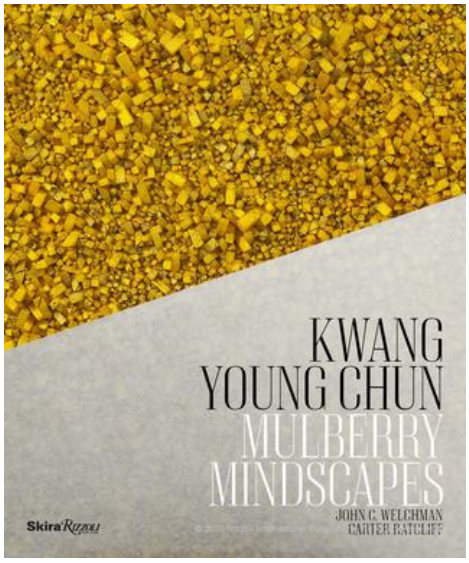
"The 'Aggregations' are large, even imposing, and it is something of a shock to realize, from up close, that they achieve their grandeur with such small elements," Ratcliff writes.

When asked whether an artist can ever truly be satisfied with his or her art, Chun laughs. His answer is rather unexpected.

For him, Chun says, it is very possible to be satisfied with his art. He can't speak for anyone else who experiences his work, but he knows he has created something unique and told his story – and that is more than enough for him.

The Interview: (Translated by curator Heejin No)

Hahn:
The book explains how, after the Korean War (1950-1955), Korean art was divided into two camps, if you will: that of traditional ink painters and that of modern artists who were drawn to more colorful media and subjects. How were you, as a young artist, influenced by this divide?



Chun:
After the post-war period he was obviously heavily influenced by his teachers and his surroundings, which wasn't exactly ink paint – it wasn't an environment for older generations. So he was very deeply influenced [by Western style paintings]. Then he had the opportunity to go to America in the late 1960s, and that opened up his eyes completely. It really changed everything dramatically.

Hahn:
"Mulberry Mindscapes" explains how you've worked in several different artistic genres over your half-century-long career, from Abstract Expressionism to post-painterly Abstraction. In general, do you find yourself inspired by specific genres or simply creating works that happen to fit into them?

Chun:
His work is very much about showing his identity. Hanji, for example, is very much in line with the Korean tradition of wrapping things with different types of fabrics. And the color he uses in his artwork is also about Korean tradition and daily life. For the work itself, every inch is very much planned around presenting his identity. He didn't have any intention to fit into a specific genre.

Hahn:
In your website bio, you say you initially embraced the artistic freedoms of abstract expressionism but began to feel doubts and crave originality. Can you explain those feelings?

Chun:
At the time when he was painting in America in the style of abstract expressionism, he felt different from the crowd. He tried to explain this feeling of separation through his painting by using color; specifically, bolder colors.

Hahn:
The book explains how you were drawn to hanji or mulberry paper as an artistic material for its history and nostalgia, but also for reasons of form and concept. Would you explain this choice?

Chun:
The mulberry paper is very important to him. The paper he uses is from old discarded books, which could be 40 to 100 years old. It was a popular medium for printing and flooring; it's not paper you can paint or write on. They used this mulberry paper in daily life; there were so many uses for mulberry paper. The books he uses could be medical journals or a grandma's bedside book.

There are lots of souls in these pages, this kind of material.

The new mulberry paper that's manufactured does not have the same significance; it's just paper, but the mulberry paper he uses for his artwork is very meaningful to him.

Hahn:
You say, "The artist is a witness to his times, and the canary in the coal mine." What does your work say about the relationship between Korea and the wider world art practice?

Chun:
Apart from his work, he never plans out any consequences. He really tries to convey himself, his identity, his culture. At the end of the day, if an audience appreciates his works artistically, it is appreciated – if they don't respond to it, he can't do anything about it. It's all organic, he believes, the relationship between himself and his work, and how the world understands his work.

Hahn:
You earned your MFA at the Philadelphia College of Art. How did your time in America influence you as an artist?

Chun:
When he went to America, he was already familiar with images of American masters and contemporary artists from books, however to be able to see the original artworks in front of his own eyes was a real shock, because he could now deeply understand this material or that painting and they were so different from the images he had seen before. He could finally really understand those paintings. After leaving 10 to 12 years later, he had changed – he was very much about Abstract style, which was influential at the time in the U.S. But he started to care more about his Korean identity. So even though he loved his colleagues in America very much, he decided he wanted to talk about his own identity and his own cultural background, which was different from theirs. He's quite true to himself.

Hahn:
What made you decide to leave the United States and return to Korea in 1977?

Chun:
For Mr. Chun, America was a country for every young man, and that's why he went there. If he was an ordinary business man, he would have probably remained in America. But he was an artist, and his work was very, very Korean. He needed to be in Korea. At that time, he wanted to go back to Korea to understand his own identity as an artist.

Hahn:
In your opinion, is a thirst for originality what drives true artists to push themselves further?

Chun:
He believes being original is not necessary for artists. He doesn't think originality is the only thing artists can express. In his case, even though he thinks his way of making art is maybe crude or unfamiliar to other people, maybe too different, he doesn't really mind because the story he wants to tell is his own story. But in general, he doesn't think about creativity or originality. It's not a necessity.

Hahn:
What do you think makes a truly great visual artist? How much is talent, how much is vision and how much is technique?

Chun:
He thinks it's very much different now, in the 21st Century, from in the past. It's not only about artistic talent whether an artist is to become successful or known. You need the talent, but artists also need to be marketable and very well promoted. As an artist, he feels like he has been quite naïve about this and doesn't quite understand what it is. For him, marketability is not really his style and he doesn't want to risk his art for it.

Hahn:
How much does materiality of medium mean to you as artist and how does it governs your artistic practice?

Chun:
As an artist, he thinks this particular medium [mulberry paper] really tells his story. He thinks that every artist can be different in terms of medium. Oil paint – he could have used it, but he feels like mulberry paper and the history of mulberry paper really tells his story. This material is very important and necessary to create his art. Every artist can be different; it depends on what kind of story they want to tell in their artwork.

Aggregation 13-JU022, 2013

Hahn:
Do you think it is possible for an artist to ever be completely satisfied with their creations?

Chun:
He said it's very possible, and quite a few times he has been very happy and very satisfied with his artwork. But he can't say if anyone has had the same feelings as him. He doesn't know if his technical work or his telling of his story was good enough for other people to have the same satisfaction that he has. But for him, yes. It's possible for him to be satisfied with his own artwork that he created. Also, he is very proud of his work because he has not found references to any artists who created works like his.

Hahn:
Outside from art, what are some of the things in life that you enjoy or have as much passions for?

Chun:
He particularly loves fishing in a very quiet countryside in the mountain area, because he can clear his mind. It's very therapeutic and reflective. When he doesn't make art, he loves fishing.