

Artist Yang Hae-gue keeps searching for alternative lens to counter 'given' history

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Above is an installation view of artist Yang Hae-gue's solo exhibition, "Double Soul," currently held at the SMK, the National Gallery of Denmark. "Sonic Intermediates — Double Soul," the two-part sculpture displayed in front, is inspired by two figures of art history: Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, left, and Pia Arke. / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Yang Hae-gue, also stylized as Haegue Yang, is a globetrotting artist whose years-long "nomadic" life spent alternately in Berlin and Seoul, as well as other major cities where she holds her shows, has led to her distinct preoccupation with exile, transnationality and decolonization.



Artist Yang Hae-gue, also stylized as Haegue Yang / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Then, it is perhaps only natural that Yang's works often contemplate on the modern history of marginalization and formation of identities within different regions she visits across the world.

At her first-ever large-scale solo exhibition, titled "Haegue Yang: Double Soul," at the SMK, the National Gallery of Denmark, her latest two-part sculpture on display ("Sonic Intermediates — Double Soul") portrays the tangled relationship between Denmark and Greenland, fraught with history of colonization and forced relocation of the indigenous Inuit population.

"Sonic Intermediates — Six-Fingered Wayfarer after Arke," which forms one part of the double sculpture, achieves this by focusing on the life and work of artist Pia Arke (1958-2007).

Arke was a Greenlandic-Danish artist, who dedicated her works to exploring the asymmetrical power relations between the two countries in the wake of colonization and addressing the limited historical representation of the Arctic Indigenous population.

Born between a Greenlandic Inuit mother and Danish father, she never had a chance to speak her native language growing up and eventually moved to Denmark, where she was trained as an artist. Defining herself as the "mongrel," she focused on tracing and redefining the previously written colonial history of Greenland.

"Although she was faced with the fate of having to study the culture of her motherland with the language of the enemy, so to speak, she never avoided or denied it. She instead made it the critical starting point of her archaeological investigation," Yang said at a press conference held at the Kukje Gallery on Monday.

She came across Arke's notable work, "Legend I-V," made up of collages of family photos placed on scientific maps of Eastern Greenland published in the 1970s. Arke peppered rice, sugar and other goods on these maps as evidence of Danish colonization, thus visualizing how an allegedly "objective" representation of the Arctic island nation, in fact, carries distortion of the indigenous culture and history.

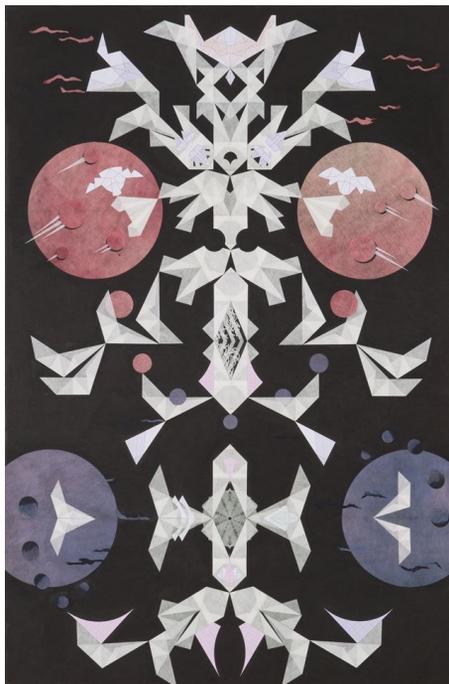
"I felt that Arke's works offer an alternative way to view and map our world," the 51-year-old said. "That was my personal re-interpretation — that her understanding of the world is otherworldly and different from 'the given,' almost like a shaman."

As a nod to Arke's map of Greenland, Yang's "Sonic Intermediates — Six-Fingered Wayfarer after Arke" is made up of five gigantic hands carrying a globe with two alternative world maps. One depicts a hypothetical scenario of continental drift, where all continents are grouped together into one single landmass. Another is a circular world map created in Korea during the 17th century, called "Cheonhado," or the "complete atlas of all beneath the heavens."

"What I found to be the most interesting feature of Cheonhado was that it reflected both the scientific knowledge of mapping newly introduced from Europe and mythical places appearing in the ancient Chinese book, called Shan Hai Jing ("Classic of Mountains and Seas)," she said. "It calls attention to a worldview that refuses to distinguish clearly between objective reality and imagination."

The artist added that the Danish museum was initially hesitant to touch on the subject of Arke due to the obvious problematic history between the two countries and the possibility of its inclusion backfiring. But she persuaded the institution to refrain from unnecessary self-censorship and instead examine the figure under the proper context as a way to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the modern history of Denmark.

"Arke's life can be defined as non-mainstream and marginalized. But what's most important is that she never made compromises when faced with those situations," Yang said, noting that the Greenlandic-Danish artist became "a harbor where my works could anchor."



"Planetary Chain Signal Formation — Mesmerizing Mesh #31" (2021) by Yang Hae-gue /
Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

Hanji collage series infused with Korean shamanism

In addition to the two-part sculpture, the artist's longstanding interest in the peripheral as an inevitable shadow behind mainstream cultural narratives has also been reflected in "Mesmerizing Mesh," a hanji (traditional Korean paper made from the bark of paper mulberry trees) collage series inspired by the particular practices found in Korean shamanism.

The series will be unveiled in Europe for the first time this year at the Barbara Wien Gallery in Berlin in April and at the Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris in October.

"As an artist who first launched her career in Europe, it was actually paganism, which remained on the fringes of Western history in opposition to the mainstream Christian tradition and ideology, that initially grabbed my attention," Yang said. "As I studied pagan practices, I came to realize that a similar idea existed in Korea in the form of shamanism."

Among a number of shamanistic practices, she turned her eyes to the Sacred Paper Cutting tradition, which forms a significant part of "gut" (shamanistic ritual) performed in Taean County of South Chungcheong Province and parts of Jeju Island.

For Sacred Paper Cutting, one must fold the paper multiple times and cut out particular patterns to create different shamanistic objects, which are then used to decorate the ritual site either in order to drive out evil spirits or commemorate the soul of the deceased.

"The reason I was so captivated by the usage of paper as a spiritual medium is because it is inherently a very 'humble' and frail material, an object to be burned off after the ritual," she noted. "I found it meaningful that a shaman would imbue such a trivial material with something deeply spiritual."

Yang's "Mesmerizing Mesh" series, which visually reinterprets this practice of infusing the spiritual and the otherworldly into handcrafted items, also introduced her to the power of hanji.

"It's so fragile but at the same, so firm. Hanji gives me plenty of room to experiment with it — whether it be by adding colors or folding it into different layers. [My series] can only get more profound from here."

Other works reflecting her ceaseless artistic exploration will be on view throughout the year at a handful of solo and group shows around the world, including "Shifting the Silence" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and "Moved by Schlemmer — 100 Years of Triadic Ballet" at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart in Germany, both of which will kick off next month.