

Great (Korean) Women Artists

May 31, 2021 | By HeiJeong Yoon

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The Artro presents two feature articles that shed light on Korean female artists and respond to their active role in the international art world. Korean female artists occupy an important position on the global art scene, with works that not only deal with individual artists' personal experiences, but also address Korean society's various social and political issues with a transcendental worldview. The first article features the activities and artistic universes of eight female artists with a presence in the art market as well as the museum scene gathered by HeiJeong Yoon, director of Kukje Gallery.

Today, even after decades since "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", a 1971 essay by art historian Linda Nochlin, was published, gender imbalance in the art world is still a deep-seated and fundamental issue. However, there are signs of subtle changes in different corners of the art world. Starting May 5, the Pompidou Centre and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao are touring an exhibition titled 《Women in Abstraction》, covering women abstract artists, while Sotheby's will be opening an auction titled '(Women) Artists2021' for the first time on May 20. The official purpose of the auction is to commemorate the contribution women artists made in the past four centuries. But there is also a glimpse of intention to find clues to a solution for the crisis in the art world, which rapidly changed since the COVID-19 pandemic, through the existence of women artists. Coincidentally, early this year, The Art Newspaper and Artprice reported "demand for the works of women artists in the art market, including at auctions, more than doubled in the past decade."

Amid these big and small changes, remembering and supporting women artists and their work is as much as important as the argument that advocates the need for a fundamental reevaluation and reexamination of women artists. This is the reason for focusing on eight women artists of Korea who are writing a chapter in history, showing outstanding accomplishments despite challenging circumstances.

These artists are Haegue Yang, who unfolds rich cultural references that encompass multiple space and time through thinking around modernity; Kyungah Ham, who shines a spotlight on today by awakening the functional relation between politics and art; Minjung Kim, who unveils abstract painting of a new concept where the East and the West coexist; Seulgi Lee, who connects our daily life, objects, and art with an anthropological perspective; Lee Bul, who captures sociocultural discourse through innovative aesthetics; Kimsooja, who integrates life and art with a transcendental view of the universe; Suki Seokyeong Kang, who adapts traditional values into the most contemporary artworks; and Koo Jeong A, who expresses 'infiniteness', 'boundlessness', and diversity through art.

Haegue Yang



Haegue Yang (b.1971) Installation view of Haegue Yang: ETA 1994-2018, 2018 Wolfgang Hahn Prize, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2018 © Haegue Yang Photo: Museum Ludwig, Šaša Fuis, Cologne Image provided by Kukje Gallery

The accomplishments of Haegue Yang, who lives up to her reputation as one of Korea's greatest artists, was never not in the spotlight since her first solo exhibition in 1995 in Frankfurt, Germany. But her active work as an artist in the recent years has further solidified her unequaled status as a true international artist. In 2019, Yang ranked 36th in ArtReview's Power 100, the highest any Korean artist recorded. In 2018, she was the first Asian woman artist and the first Korean to win the Wolfgang Hahn Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in art. Yang engraved her artistic language in the history of contemporary art through her large-scale retrospective exhibition 《ETA 1994 – 2018》 held at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, that was held at the same time. Her solo exhibitions that were unveiled simultaneously at iconic and sacred locations of contemporary art from 2019 to early this year, including The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, The Bass in Miami Beach, Tate St Ives, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, received attention from art critics and the public. An unusual scene unfolded, especially, when curators of four museums in different continents which held Haegue Yang's solo exhibitions around the same time, held a discussion inviting viewers online. The event became an opportunity proving that Yang's works 'formed distinctive yet universal bond based on cultural references of different times and regions.'



Haegue Yang (b.1971) Sol LeWitt Upside Down – Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times, Split in Three 2015
Aluminum Venetian blinds, aluminum hanging structure, powder coating, steel wire, fluorescent tubes, cable 3 towers, 438 x 426 x 426 cm each, Tate Collection, purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee and Kyung-soo Huh, Sung-Moon Kwon, Tae Won Hahn and Byucksan Foundation 2018, Installation view at Art Basel Unlimited, 2016,
Photo: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

Yang's strength comes from her bold formative language that penetrates tradition and avant-garde, disparate narrative and personal experience, multisensory installations that summon vast thinking transcendent of dichotomy, and moreover, her commitment to communicate with the world crossing the boundaries of art. Her collaboration work, <Quasi-Pagan Modern>, with Galeries Lafayette in Paris in 2016 is a case of a longstanding discourse that encompasses otherness and identity coming through in daily life and commercial space. 'Haegue Yang-style avant-garde', which involves dozens of show windows, large-scale dome ceiling, and 150,000 shopping bags, made art into a special experience. Yang's important pieces are parts of collections at distinguished galleries and are subject of study. Her 2009 piece displayed at the Korean pavilion at Venice Biennale, <Sallim> (2009), became a collection of MoMA in 2010. In 2018, <Sol LeWitt Upside Down – Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times, Split in Three> (2015), a blind installation and part of the collection of Tate Modern, was loved by local viewers.

Her many artworks from 'Sonic Sculptures' series to 'Lacquer Paintings' are viewed at various art fairs and her doorknob shaped edition pieces are sold immediately at their release. Yang currently works as an exclusive artist for six galleries, including Kukje Gallery (Seoul) as well as dépendance (Brussels), Galerie Chantal Crousel (Paris), Greene Naftali Gallery (New York), Barbara Wien (Berlin), and kurimanzutto (Mexico City).

Kyungah Ham



Left Kyungah Ham (b. 1966) Installation view of Asia Society Triennial: We Do Not Dream Alone at Asia Society Museum, New York, October 27, 2020–June 27, 2021, Photo: Bruce M. White, 2020, courtesy of Asia Society, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

Right Kyungah Ham (b. 1966) Until dawn the chessboard keeps them in its strict confinement with its two colors set at daggers drawn 2012-2013 North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, anxiety, censorship, wooden frame, approx. 1800hrs/2persons 189 x 189 cm Courtesy of the artist, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

Kyungah Ham's 'nomadism' work as a practical methodology has been the focus in her 'embroidery' series since around 2008 after many experiments and attempts. The artist, who encountered North Korean propaganda leaflets by chance, planned for an artistic message to send to the people in North Korea. The official process includes sending a pixelized design of words, phrases and images collected on the Internet to North Korean embroiderers through a broker, and then receiving the completed embroideries. There are, however, countless obstacles in reality until the work gets to the artist. The New York Times (July 26, 2018, article) called Ham's work "the art world's most extraordinary, ongoing collaboration."

Uncontrollable variables, including not only issues like censorship, brokers, and repossession, but also physical, psychological, and political disconnect, gap in ideologies, and taboo, become non-tangible materials in the works. In that sense, to quote Rosalie Kim, curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum which owns Ham's embroidery, "Ham's works cannot be thought separately from their production process." The uncontrollable and unstable process of the 'impossible communication' is the message itself in the artist's pieces. And embroidery becomes conceptual art where the value of time, labor, politics, and capital is discussed.

Last fall, seven pieces of Ham's series <What you see is the unseen / Chandeliers for Five Cities> (2016-2019) was unveiled at the Asia Society Triennial in New York. Ham also unveiled her Chandelier series at the 《Border Crossings-North and South Korean Art from the Sigg Collection》, by art collector Uli Sigg's collection on North and South Korean art (until September 5, Museum of Fine Arts Bern). She also regularly takes part in group exhibitions of various context such as KAI 10 by Arthena Foundation in Düsseldorf, Germany. The core sentence 'Are you lonely, too?' embroidered on the artist's <Sending Message Service (SMS)> at the online exhibit Real DMZ project 《Negotiating Borders》 (until May 23), held as a part of the '2020 Traveling Korean Arts', resonates in the DMZ. Her embroideries that awaken the functional relation between politics and art at biennales, museums, and virtual reality paradoxically show strong presence in the market as being crafty, oriental, and psychedelic. Not only her Chandelier series, which brightened the glamorous art market, but also detail pieces that provide a close up of some of her <SMS> series are loved by many collectors.

Minjung Kim



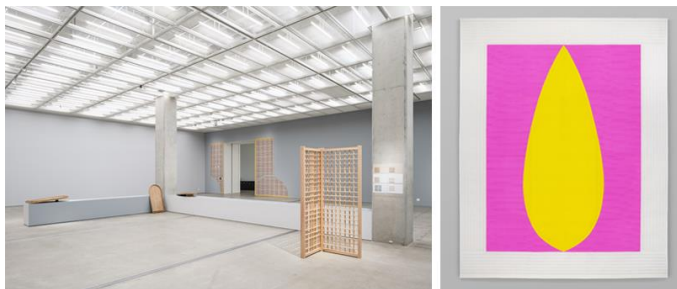
Left Installation view of *《Timeless》* at Gallery Hyundai

Right Minjung Kim(b. 1962) *〈Mountain〉* 2021 Ink on mulberry Hanji paper 136 × 173.5 cm

In the work of Minjung Kim, an artist of new concept abstract paintings, there exists Oriental thinking accompanied with traditional ink wash painting and the vocabulary of Western abstract art. It is why Kim's work is not considered to be exotic. Rather, her works are figurative yet abstract, performative yet formal with the artist praised as 'post-monochromatic painter' in the art circles in Korea and overseas. Kim, who has been fascinated with hanji (Korean traditional handmade paper) for about 30 years, placed the medium's delicate yet strong properties that endure the time of thousands of years at the center of her work. The subtle smudges of lines and ink created by scorching the edges of hanji using candlelight or incense in the process of cutting and arranging hanji became the artist's unique methodology since the early 2000s. And her attitude in expressing respect for the aesthetic vitality of hanji and ink became her philosophy. Minjung Kim considers herself as a connector that enables 'collaboration' between paper (hanji) and nature (fire). And the lines that are created through 'controlled coincidence' transcend into dreamlike shapes of mountains, oceans, lands, and skies that are impossible to express artificially. Like the artist says, "my work is about the visualization of contemplation and meditation," Kim expresses the essence of nature and the universe as well as her contemplation and anguish where hanji becomes the medium of her paintings as well as a stage for her meditation.

Kim studied Korean painting and continued her studies in Milan. She is an artist based in Saint Paul de Vence in France and New York. Her background adds pretext for her works where the East and the West naturally coincides. And this duality delivers an unfamiliar experience yet familiar sensitivity to not only Koreans, but also audience overseas. Kim's activities are gaining much expectation, especially, since her solo exhibitions at White Cube in London (2018), Langen Foundation in Neuss(2019), Hill Art Foundation in New York (2020) and Gallery Hyundai in Seoul (2021). Her works are currently part of the collections of The British Museum in London, Fondazione Palazzo Bricherasio in Torino, and Museum Sbygningen in Copenhagen. Art book 『Vitamin D3: Today's Best in Contemporary Drawing』, published by Phaidon Press last year, introduces Kim as an artist representing Korea, along with her meditative pieces <The Room>, <Mountain>, <Phasing>, and <Insight>.

Seulgi Lee



Seulgi Lee(b. 1972) <DONG DONG DARI GORI>, 2020,

Installation view of 《Korea Artist Prize 2020》 Image Provided by MMCA

Right <U: The young leaf is yellow = Wrong beginning>, 2018, Korean silk,

collaboration with Korean Nubi quilter of Tong-Yeong, 195x155x1cm, Image Provided by Gallery Hyundai

The exhibition that won Seulgi Lee the 'Korea Artist Prize 2020' was recognized to have "interpreted the concept of 'the beauty of void' with a modern perspective using traditional materials such as dancheong (Korean traditional decorative coloring) and traditional doors." As one can assume in the title, 'Dong Dong Dari Gori', Lee's installation inspired by Korean folk song stands out, but the exhibit also reads as a 'performance without scenario' that weaves a profound interest and metaphorical reflection of the world beyond the typicality of 'tradition-modern reinterpretation'. Since 1992, Lee has been based in Paris, and her hybridity is exhibited across form and content. The artist's sincerity in moving beyond boundaries of installation, sculpture, painting, and performance as well as toward her surrounding environment such as human and objects, craft and art, and literary imagination and artistic means, weaves the multiple aspects of her works. She interprets daily objects with an anthropological perspective and enjoys playing with words. And her open mind becomes the ability to add wit, humor, and jokes to contemporary art.

When Lee did performance art walking down the streets of Corsica as a woman wearing burqa in the early 2000s, it was not easy anticipating her influence in the art market. But in her journey of finding new meaning in daily life, history, and objects, it seems Lee has found a way to share artistic subjects with the world outside galleries. Lee's key projects include <Blanket Project U>, a collaboration piece with quilt blanket artisans in Tongyeong; <Basket Project W>, which captures thoughts around a dying language with artisans of Oaxaca region in Mexico; and <Tamis Project O>, a collaboration with French wooden net artisans. It is said that Lee is working on a terracotta piece with artisans of Morocco. These collaborations do not stop at transforming regional identity and folk culture into the language of art, but rather, expands the value of art works. Blanket Project led to a cashmere quilt collaboration unveiled as a limited edition of Hermès in 2017. She also sold rugs she made in India as part of IKEA Art Event 2019. The pieces of Lee's Blanket Project, which first began with the support of Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques in Paris, were completed commissioned by Gwangju Biennale, and became a collection of the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia.

Leebul



Installation view of 《LEE BUL : Beginning》, SeMA, 2021, photot : Hong Chulki. Image Provided by SeMA

《Lee Bul- Beginning》 exhibition, which is held at the Seoul Museum of Art until May 16, further solidifies the artist's journey in rewriting aspects of the history of Korea's contemporary art through Lee Bul's early soft sculptures and performance records. It is because Lee's early pieces in the first decade as an artist were the drive that expanded her scope of work, which was focused on femininity, body, and gender, into sociocultural area and the steppingstone that made her works shaped by great social discourse exhibit influence in the art market. Like the root of her 'Cyborg' series in the late 1990s, Lee made the differentiation between human and machine, popular culture and fine arts, future orientation and self-reflection, sci-fi aspects and criticism of the time, personal memories and historical events, beauty and ugliness, and utopia and dystopia meaningless under her name. Lee's vast and ever-changing works are almost impossible to lump together. However, to quote Ralph Rugoff, director of 2019 Venice Biennale and curator of London's Hayward Gallery who designed a large-scale solo exhibition of Lee Bul in celebration of the gallery's 50th anniversary, it is in fact true that Lee solidified her status as 'the most interesting and creative artist of time' over the past few decades.



Lee Bul(b. 1954) <Willing To Be Vulnerable>, 2015–2016. Installation view of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, 2016.

Heavy-duty fabric, metalized film, transparent film, polyurethane ink, fog machine, LED lighting, electronic wiring, dimensions variable. Photo: Algirdas Bakas. Courtesy of the artist.

Since the 17-meter silver zeppelin titled <Willing To Be Vulnerable - Metalized Balloon> was first unveiled at the Biennale of Sydney in 2017, the piece was toured at galleries, including the Hayward Gallery in London and the Art Basel Hong Kong Encounters, demonstrating aspects as a masterpiece of a star artist. This piece, which raised the philosophical subject of hope and despair at center of the hottest art market, implies that there is no need for an 'artist's success' to lean towards or be restricted to either the galleries or the art market. Lee was the first Korean artist to be invited to the Venice Biennale's main exhibition (in 1999 and 2019). And she made headlines at every one of her large-scale solo exhibitions held at prestigious museums, including MoMA New York, The Guggenheim, the New Museum, the Mori Art Museum, Mudam Luxembourg, and the Gropius Bau. At the same time, Lee's Infinity series, early silk paintings as well as various paintings and installations created different dramatic sceneries at affiliated gallery booths, including PKM Gallery, Thaddaeus Ropac, and Lehmann Maupin at art fairs. Lee's works are traded at auctions in Korea and overseas, achieving meaningful results.

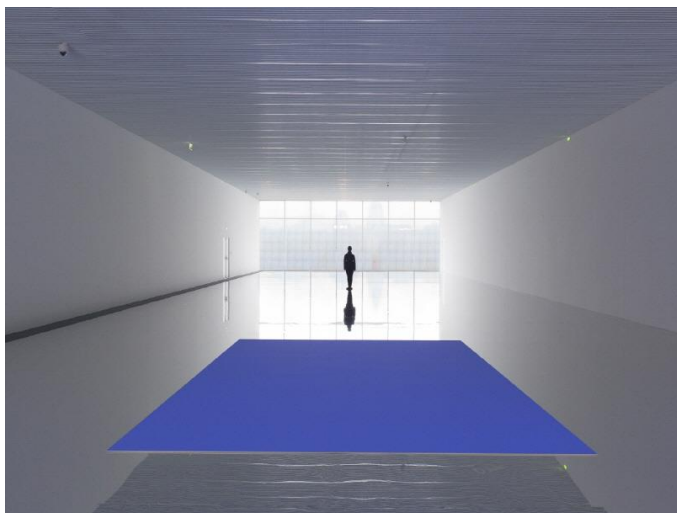
Kimsooja



Left Kimsooja (b. 1957) <To Breathe> 2015, Site-specific installation consisting of video projection, mirror, diffraction grating film, and sound, at Centre Pompidou-Metz, Commissioned by Centre Pompidou-Metz, Courtesy of Institut Français/Année France Corée, Kukje Gallery, and Kimsooja Studio, Photo: Jaeho Chong, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

Right Kimsooja (b. 1957) <To Breathe> 2019, Mirror, artist's performance sound The Weaving Factory (2004-2013), Site-specific installation at Tour Maubergion at Palais des duc d'Aquitaine, Poitiers, Franc, Courtesy of Ville de Poitiers for Traversées/Kimsooja and Kimsooja Studio, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

The discourse that runs through the life of conceptual artist Kimsooja questioned the essence of the conditions of human and the role of art through her screens, sculptures, installations, performances, and videos. In 2009 when her back was projected on the wall of the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, in 2013 when Kim transformed the Korean pavilion at the Venice Biennale into a meditative space, and in 2020 when she unveiled her new piece <Sowing Into Painting> against the background of the fields of Wanås Konst in Southern Sweden, Kimsooja became 'a needle woman', sowing land and land divided by borders, human and nature, everyday life and art, embracing them with the concept of 'bottari (tied bundle)'. Kim calls herself a 'cultural refugee', having traveled many distinguished museums such as MoMA and MoMA PS1 in New York, working in Seoul, Paris, New York, and Berlin. The core of Kimsooja's 'nomadism' that transcends the geographical, cultural, social, and aesthetical boundaries of the world lies not in the traveling itself, but in the soul-searching and meditation, the existence and relationships, the understanding and tolerance, and sharing and co-existing brought about through activities.



Kimsooja (b. 1957) *«To Breathe 2015»*, Site-specific installation consisting of video projection, mirror, diffraction grating film, and sound, at Centre Pompidou-Metz, Commissioned by Centre Pompidou-Metz, Courtesy of Institut Français/Année France Corée, Kukje Gallery, and Kimsooja Studio, Photo: Jaeho Chong, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

Kim's cosmic works that have resonated at the point where life interacts with art transform into environment, wherever it may be. Her site-specific installations that have taken root at every corner of the world are the marks of her almost 30 years of artistic journey and serve as an opportunity to rethink about the identity of contemporary art. In the fall of 2019, the artist was selected as the first artist for *«Traversées / Kimsooja»*, as part of the project of the City of Poitiers, France. Kim reinterpreted the Medieval city with 16 artists she invited with an artistic, sensuous, and historical view, recreating the entire city into an artwork. Kim also received the 1st Lucas Art Award presented by Lucas van Leyden Fonds in 2020. As part of the prize, Kim is preparing her large-scale piece *«To Breathe - Leiden»* to install at canal of Leiden. The piece is along the conceptual, symbolic line of the artist's previous works, *«Bottari»* and *«To Breathe»*, while at the same time, reflects the history and life of the city. It will be comprised of thin rings of a variety of colors like threads embroidering water, land, and sky, embracing the canals, shining of five cardinal colors. Kim, in her solo exhibition *«Kimsooja: To Breathe»* held at the Centre Pompidou-Metz in 2015, had transformed the large exhibition space into a spatial painting. In the near future, Kimsooja plans to express her respect for arts and history once more by culminating the world's largest stained glass of Cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Metz, a historic architecture of the city, with her *«To Breathe»*.

Suki Seokyeong Kang



Suki Seokyeong Kang (b.1977) Installation view of *《Suki Seokyeong Kang》*, Mudam Luxembourg, 2019, Collection Mudam Luxembourg - Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Photo: Rémi Villaggi / Mudam Luxembourg, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

Suki Seokyeong Kang connects the past and the contemporary present by reinterpreting traditional Korean concepts with artistic elements such as painting, installation, video, and performance. 'Paintallation', which adapts formative elements and methodologies of paintings into installations, redefines the realm of painting. Kang's works, which especially takes Hwamunseok (artifact of the Joseon Dynasty), Chunaengmu (solo court dance performed on a hwamunseok reed mat), and Jeongganbo (traditional music notation) as important references, build a contemporary grid that enables us to contemplate on the physical and symbolic 'place' we stand today. In June 2018, Kang was the second Korean artist, following Haegue Yang (in 2007), to receive the Baloise Art Prize at Art Basel, internationally recognized for her creative and firm world of art. Major works, including *⟨Grandmother Tower - tow⟩* and *⟨Rove and Round⟩*, which stem from the artist's oldest series inspired by her grandmother, *⟨Grandmother Tower⟩* (2011), reflecting on existence, memory, and space and time, were donated to Mudam Luxembourg. And in the following year, Kang unveiled her multimedia installation *⟨Black Mat Oriole⟩*, which pursued contextual evolution beyond a formal attempt in painting, at Art Basel's large-scale project 'Unlimited' sector.



Suki Seokyeong Kang (b.1977) *Black Mat Oriole*, 2016–2017, Video still 8:46 minutes 3 channel video, color, sound,
Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery, Image provided by Kukje Gallery

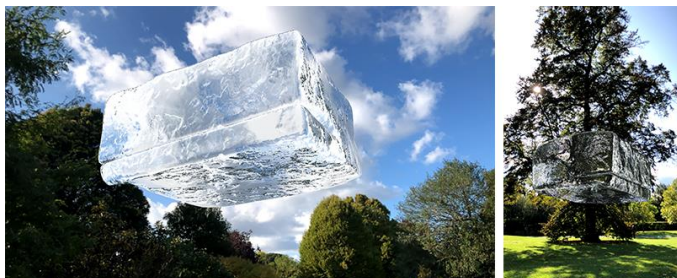
Seokyeong Kang's power comes from allowing 'the very Korean' to be accepted as universally valid art instead of making it otherized. And her unique artistic language she devoted to weave gained tremendous power and momentum in the recent years, leading to the artist gaining more and more attention at art fairs and through her solo exhibitions. Kang was selected as Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2012 and won the Excellence Award at the 13th Songun Art Award in 2013. She also demonstrated her presence at various art arenas in Korea and overseas and continued activities on the global stage, including a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2018 and participating in Liverpool Biennial and the Shanghai Biennale. Ralph Rugoff, who attended Liverpool Biennial as a viewer, invited Kang to the Venice Biennial 2019, which led to the artist participating in the main exhibition. The artist's *Grandmother Tower* unveiled at Venice and *Land, Sand, Strand* along with other major pieces are part of the collections of the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Princeton University Art Museum, and the Walker Art Center. Kang's works are on the 'must-have' lists of collectors in Korea and overseas, who are captivated by the artist's works that capture the traditions of Korea in a modern, artistic way.

Koo Jeong A



Koo Jeong A(b. 1967) <resonance>, 2020, 620x810x70(h)cm. Image Courtesy of PKM Gallery

Conceptual artist Koo Jeong A is described as an 'internationally renowned artist' or known as the 'only Korean artist other than Nam June Paik who held a solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou' due to her being more active on the global stage since the early 1990s. But this is not enough to define Koo. More than anything, Koo is an artist who redefines the meaning, role, scope, and essence of art today. She describes herself as an artist who 'lives and works everywhere' and chooses acute artistic language to gain universality, without constraint to methodology, media, or genre. Her glow-in-the-dark skate park sculpture <resonance>, which gained much attention when installed during her PKM Gallery solo exhibition in 2020, was first unveiled at the Art Center in Vassivière island in 2012. It was then unveiled at Liverpool Biennial, the São Paulo Art Biennial, and Triennale Milano, gaining passionate support from in and out of the art world, making it the artist's most representative piece. The work tears down boundaries between reality and fiction, existence and absence, reason and emotion, and the tangible and the intangible, representing its characteristics of integrating art and life as well as symbolizing diversity, which is required of all artworks.



Koo Jeong A(b. 1967) <resonance>, 2020, 620x810x70(h)cm. Image Courtesy of PKM Gallery

In that aspect, it was especially meaningful when Koo Jeong A ranked 32nd among 'the World's 100 Most Inspiring People' in 2019 by the Austrian magazine OOOM. It would have been impossible without the artist's open attitude in the most contemporary perspective and in adopting the most evolved method in poetic perspective. And it proves the artist's strong influence as much as her winning the Hermès Awards (in 2005) and ranking amongst the finalists for Hugo Boss Prize Guggenheim Museum (in 2002). In 2019, Koo unveiled her AR piece of a lump of ice drifting in midair, 《Prerequisites 7》, on the digital exhibition platform 'Acute Art'. It contributed to sharing her expanded world through the Beyeler Foundation of Art Basel, Frieze Sculpture in Regent's Park, and Berlin's Julia Stoschek Collection. In 2017, Koo held her first solo show in Korea at the Art Sonje Center. A new world of 'infiniteness' and 'boundlessness' that resonated there at the center of a mixture of painting, 3D animation, croquis and large-scale installation continues to materialize in her work. Koo plans for a solo exhibition 《Highlighting Contemporary Artists IV: Koo Jeong A》 at the Busan Museum of Art from September to February next year as well as large-scale exhibitions and projects in Arles, Paris, Barcelona, and Copenhagen.