

# Jenny Holzer lets the words do the talking

December 18, 2019 | By Yoon So-yeon

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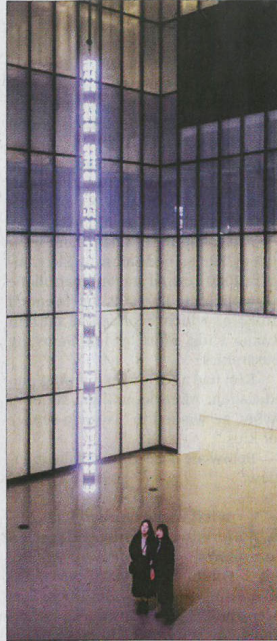
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“A strong sense of duty imprisons you.” “You are guileless in your dreams.” “Boredom makes you do crazy things.” In Jenny Holzer’s work, the art is the words.

A text-based conceptual artist, Holzer has created three works commissioned by the MMCA — two of which use the Korean alphabet, a first for the artist. The pieces are now on display at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) Seoul and at the Gwacheon branch in Gyeonggi until July 5 next year.

“We often work in public, and so it’s only sensible to use the language of the country for public pieces,” she said to the local press. “What was scary to me was my own ignorance. I had to run to experts for a lot of things like the fonts, to make it work for the program and to have the right feeling for the text. I routinely lean on people who know what they’re doing to work as broadly as my studio needs to. I’m glad to be a little less ignorant now.”

Born in 1950, Holzer is a “legendary figure in the contemporary art world” who has sharply pinched political, social and cultural issues of the modern society since the 1970s, according to curator Lee Hyun-ju. Sometimes using her own truisms and other times taking lines from other people’s works, she began showing her texts on



Jenny Holzer’s commissioned work “FOR YOU” hangs from the ceiling of MMCA Square.

the streets of New York. She gradually moved to other props such as shirts and hats to sculptures, digital devices, architecture and nature. She took part in the Venice Biennale in 1990 as the first female artist to create a pavilion for the United States and has since had her work displayed at major museums around the world, including the Guggenheim in New York and Bilbao, Spain, the Whitney Museum in New York and Louvre Abu Dhabi.

The reason Holzer uses language and text in her work is because she wants to offer art that everyone can understand, not only people in the art world, she said.

“I wanted to be an abstract painter, but I failed miserably. Simultaneously, I wanted to have very explicit content in my work, but I couldn’t reconcile these two things. In despair and hope, I went to language because when you have a good day, language can be used to communicate many things.”

Three works have been created for MMCA. The first is located in the lobby of MMCA Seoul, which has been covered in parts of “Truisms (1977-79)” printed on white papers and parts of “Inflammatory Essays (1979-82)” printed on colored paper. The second, “FOR YOU,” a long LED sign, is also at the museum. Holzer’s words have been engraved into stone at MMCA Gwacheon in a piece titled “Selections from Truisms 2019,” which carries

short but strong messages that will stay in your mind, such as “Solitude is enriching,” “Listen when your body talks” and “Raise boys and girls the same way.”

The highlight is the 6-meter LED sign that hangs from the ceiling of MMCA Square. Taken from works by five female writers — Svetlana Alexievich, Hawzhin Azeez, Han Kang, Kim Hyesoon and Emily Jungmin Yoon — “FOR YOU” cycles through sentences from literary works that touch on social issues such as feminism and authoritarian oppression.

“I tend to believe that one should address the most difficult things, because these can hurt us. The lovely parts of life take care of themselves. I wish I were an artist like Matisse who produced the joys of life, but I’m not. I tend to present things that worry me and worry other people.”

On the question of what it felt like to work with hangul for the first time, she said that Korean letters felt to her more like “pictograms” than letters — in a good way.

“I must apologize for my profound and enduring ignorance on Korean characters. I like how they’re different from English alphabets in that they seem to represent an image rather than what’s been quite abstracted in the English alphabets. I like them as pictures,” she said.

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