

## **Michael Joo: 'I was taken by the fact that there was a space that was inaccessible but real'**

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The New York-based conceptual artist talks about growing up among scientists, what drew him to working with silver nitrate, the endangered red crane in the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea



Michael Joo was born in Ithaca, New York, to Korean parents in 1966. His work moves seamlessly between sculpture, performance, drawing, video art and installation. The New York-based conceptual artist makes work that engages with unique methods, such as his large paintings and site-specific installations using silver nitrate. In his art, he seeks to conjure invisible aspects of life, addressing monumental themes. His art practice centres on the question: "Why do we perceive as we perceive?" Having shown already in London and in Ireland this year, when we speak, he has just completed the installation of Perspectives, a major exhibition at the Arthur M Sackler Gallery in Washington DC.

**Janet McKenzie: You have been making large paintings and site-specific works using silver nitrate, since 2006. When I saw your exhibition Radiohalo at Blain Southern, in London, earlier this year, I was taken by the strange beauty of your very large works, associating silver nitrate with photographic processes, and therefore illumination, yet the chemical substance is also a toxic one. How did you come to use silver nitrate?**

**Michael Joo:** I guess I first encountered it in the laboratory as a test for aldehydes but, technical stuff aside, it reappeared ironically for me light years later, or so it seemed, when I was in Venice (15 or 20 years ago, now). I had no intention of working in glass, but I was brought into some great craftpersons' studios – I'm a big fan, of course – of all the pyrotechnics involved within the process of work [methods] and there are not many that can rival glass-making. Some of the glass mirroring I first came across was in an out-of-the-way glass studio in Murano. Watching the process [of treating glass with silver nitrate to create the mirroring] was incredible. It was created with no safety equipment and very gracefully done, quite cavalier – not only managing to not get silver nitrate poisoning, but done with grace and familiarity. I was drawn to the combination of the performative aspect of mirroring the glass and the chemical science; it was perhaps alchemical. Watching the traditional transformation process recalls the past, but also looks to the future of mirror in technology in the performative ballet that they had perfected.

**JMcK: You were a scientist first?**

**MJ:** I wouldn't call myself a scientist, but I grew up rather immersed in an environment surrounded by scientists. My mother was a seed physiologist and my father worked on cattle ranches as a breeder. Growing up, you tend to get that part of the process and part of the language embedded in you, so invariably I migrated into that field.

**JMcK: The way you seem to visualise a lot of quasi-scientific ideas, and the way you energise them in your work, precipitates a lot of thinking. I found the presence of your work implied that, behind it, there was a tremendous amount of information and thinking. It was very provocative and that's why I engaged with it.**

**MJ:** That's a great point; there is something about the interrelationship between art and science, a deeper connection. Silver nitrate [used in this way] is a material compound. It is just an inorganic compound, but it's called a precursor, a precursor to many silvers, a lot of faith. There is something about its chemical fact that is undeniable. It does exist, but in terms of visual culture, it isn't yet, so at what point does it exist? And it is a question of when is it, rather than why is it that is the interesting question.

**JMcK: It's a conceptual anomaly, and perhaps the lack of precision is what gives it a conceptual energy that an inert material simply never could. Reading about your work can be slightly intimidating, but your practice is undeniably profound and intriguing. Materials are exciting and the meaning of materials is hugely important in conceptual art practice. Was Joseph Beuys an influence on you?**

**MJ:** Absolutely. Beuys was an artist whom I initially saw as a kind of scientist in many ways. He had a certain kind of methodology and discipline and, for the lack of a better word, a faith in the delivery of meaning, a kind of leap so to speak, between materialising performative action and its reception. I don't think he was about proselytising, but there was transformation going on, on many different levels that in itself is an inspiring model.

**JMcK: That's a beautiful response. If you love birds and find them interesting, it is quite difficult to explain just how extraordinary they are, both in all their statistics and everything they do, but also, as cultural icons that can epitomise so much in our life. What I admire in your work is that you have done something of great importance, and with great imagination. Your new work takes the red-crowned crane, an endangered east Asian bird, some of which have wintered in the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea during the past 60 years. It seems like a situation out of science fiction? Can you explain how you discovered this remarkable creature?**

**MJ:** In most of East Asia, the bird is very well known, and it is a pervasive symbol from ceramics and textiles. I grew up in a fairly Korean household in America, so the red-crowned crane, also known as a Manchurian or Japanese crane, is a common image. It came to my attention while I was looking at the idea of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) over a long period in the 80s. I was taken by the fact that there was a space that was inaccessible but real; it wasn't secret, but it was not for human habitation, and that idea stuck in my mind. In the 70s, I read about the cranes' reappearance, the occupying of their former habitat that had been decimated during wartime between North and South Korea in the 50s. It was now a heavily demilitarised sanctuary of sorts, such a science fiction image to me, that there was an ecological sanctuary. Even as a teenager, that grew in my imagination. Among those species there was a crane, and that stuck with me for some time and it appeared in a number of artworks even as a student.

**JMcK: OK, I thought it was a new preoccupation. The crane is a star occupant, but were there other creatures when you visited? Did it resemble a normal place in any way at all?**

**MJ:** My time there took place in the Citizen Control Zone, whereas the DMZ cannot be accessed without military permission, which I haven't done yet. I was very close to it, so it is not so much an encounter with the creatures in the DMZ, but I'm very interested in the fact that these organisms, these things, are the subjects purely of our observation. If we could smell them, they would be part of our other senses. We can't occupy the same space as them, we can't touch them, but I'm very interested in the fact that we have to look across [demarcation] lines at them, to another space. It's real, but it's not actually a space that we can be part of, and that's something I certainly saw within the flora and fauna that I could see. The growth of trees – the clusters, the pairings, the type of relationships they were sharing – is completely different, unique; this landscape had a shape all of its own. Driving in vehicles up to the zone was a special experience, to reach a point that was quite different to the South Korea that I had travelled through to access the zone. When you peer from the CCZ to the DMZ, it is so different. It's phenomenal. It's like the experience of a broken finger – you break an appendage and it's so jarring that something is out of order.

**JMcK: It feels from your vivid description that you were approaching and then observing an impending death? An afterlife that resembles the familiar thus known, but with differences defined by an artificial line that determines where you as the artist and we as viewers exist. Are you presenting this curious zone as if it is another world that you can anticipate but are suspended in front of?**

**MJ:** It might be an impending feeling of life that is experienced in a place like that.

**JMcK: It does sound “space age-like” when you describe it like that.**

**MJ:** It is like that. I feel that it is very much a time capsule for the future, for future archaeology. [All the things there] are future fossils. Can you imagine if everything in that zone were suddenly fossilised with a completely different makeup to anywhere else? What would we make of that?

**JMcK: Has the work been well received in the Arthur M Sackler Gallery?**

**MJ:** I hope so. I was very happy with how it occupies the space. It is a space that has the dimensions and proportions that I would not call grand, but huge. It's also an atrium and an entryway to the rest of this pretty fabulous collection. It is an exhibition space that can take quite a bit. We are talking about works from all of Asia – the concept of Asia, near and far, and places that we didn't used to call Asia – works from antiquity to contemporary works and across mediums. So as the passageway into these, not just repositories but active repositories for art works and culture, it's a place where I felt a lot of pressure, a lot of responsibility. I was very happy to have my works in that space and hope that it reflects the architecture and the function and idea of movement.

**JMcK: It must be mentally very demanding to travel to London, to Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates to Ireland, back to the US: to go from and to conceive different bodies of work in relation to different environments?**

**MJ:** It's so energising to have to be somewhere so fully interested in sculpture and material and process, to have to be present and that is a welcoming challenge.

**JMcK: Where will you be working next?**

**MJ:** Next, I will be on the Barrier Islands on the coast of the state of Georgia, US, spending time looking at some old architectural techniques, plantation islands and also, hopefully not in the same 24 hours, in Seoul, South Korea working on a public project.



Michael Joo. Prologue (Montclair Danby Vein Cut), 2014-15. Danby Quarry marble, silver nitrate, steel, 304.8 x 302.9 x 63.5 cm (120 x 119¼ x 25 in). Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.



Michael Joo. Prologue (Montclair Danby Vein Cut), 2014-15 (detail). Danby Quarry marble, silver nitrate, steel, 304.8 x 302.9 x 63.5 cm (120 x 119¼ x 25 in). Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.



Michael Joo. Untitled, To (Drive), 2015-16. Silver nitrate and epoxy ink on canvas, 91.4 x 71.1 cm (36 x 28 in). Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.

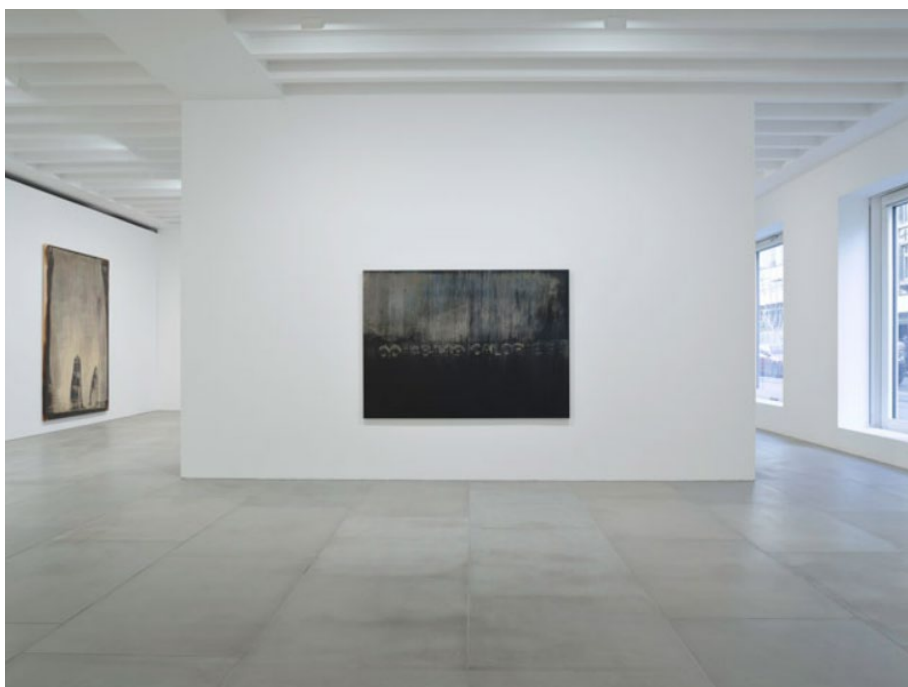




Michael Joo. Untitled (Radiohalo 1), 2016. Silver nitrate and epoxy ink on canvas, 313 x 242 cm (123¼ x 95¼ in). Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.



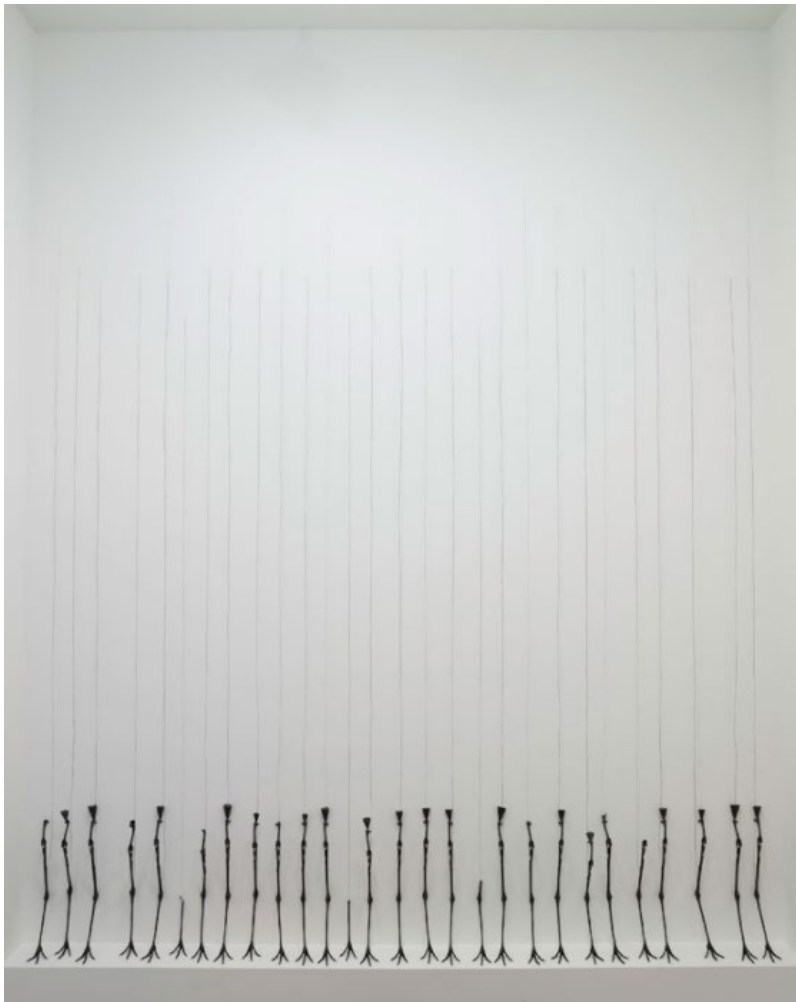
Michael Joo. Untitled (Take), 2016. Silver nitrate and epoxy ink on canvas, 233.7 x 182.9 cm (92 x 72 in). Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.



Michael Joo. Radiohalo installation view, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern.  
Photograph: Peter Mallet.



Michael Joo. Untitled (Radiohalo 1), Untitled (Radiohalo 2), Untitled (Radiohalo 3), installation view, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.



Michael Joo. DRWN, Carunculatus (28), 2015. Graphite impregnated urethane, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern. Photograph: Peter Mallet.