

## TYPHOONS KNOW NO BORDERS: INTERVIEW WITH HAEGUE YANG, PART 1

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Portrait of **HAEGUE YANG** at the opening of "O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O," at National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Seoul, 2020–21. Courtesy Hyundai Motor.

In spite of the many logistical difficulties of 2020, Haegue Yang managed to mount solo exhibitions on three continents—even if she wasn't able to see them in person. In this first part of their interview, the artist tells deputy editor HG Masters about the visual and audio components of her exhibition "O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O" at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Seoul, and "Cone of Concern," at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila. In part two, Yang discusses the new works she created for Tate St. Ives, and how she put together her retrospective, "Emergence," at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

**"O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O" looked at how material things are transformed by their contexts, from the wall print *DMZ Un—Do* (2020), featuring various electronic devices, solar panels, and elements of the electricity grid, as well as barbed wire and signage from the de-militarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea, to your hanging blind installation *Silo of Silence – Clicked Core* (2017), which was originally produced for an industrial space in Berlin that has been transformed into a cultural venue. Your show also included the Mok Woo Workshop display of 108 wooden spoons, created by the hanok carpenter Woohee Kim, who was a member of the Chamgeul: Masan–Changwon workers' literary society. How did his productions end up in "O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O"?**

From the beginning I was inspired by Woohee's writing. I bluntly proposed to be his conversation partner for a year. Each time I visited his studio in Masan, we talked about the spoons he was making. Then we expanded the critique sessions to my whole studio. We decided that our role would be in the display [of his spoons], and we engaged more closely in the process of the spoon production. We read all his texts together and made selections of texts and began categorizing the spoons.

On the surface the presentation is very "craft-y." What does "craft" mean? I'm interested in that question, in a critical sense. We can approach it ethnographically or anthropologically, but also in an engaged way, design-wise. To me, Woohee built an interesting island in the ocean of craft. He's self-taught but he doesn't negate learning; his practice is based on his encounters.



Installation view of **HAEGUE YANG's** *DMZ Un-Do*, 2020, digital color print on self-adhesive reflective and self-adhesive vinyl film, dimensions variable, at "O2 and H2O," MMCA, Seoul, 2020–21. Graphic support by Yena Yoo. Photo by Cheolki Hong.

Courtesy MMCA, Gwacheon / Seoul / Deoksugung / Cheongju.



Installation view of **HAEGUE YANG's** *Silo of Silence – Clicked Core*, 2017, aluminum venetian blinds, powder-coated aluminum and steel hanging structure, steel wire rope, revolving stage, LED tubes, cable, 1654 × 780 × 780 cm, at "O2 and H2O," MMCA, Seoul, 2020–21. Photo by Cheolki Hong. Courtesy MMCA, Gwacheon / Seoul / Deoksugung / Cheongju.



Installation view of **HAEGUE YANG's** *Mok Woo Workshop, 108 Wooden Spoons*, 2020, 108 wooden spoons, dimensions variable, at "O2 and H2O," MMCA, Seoul, 2020–21. Photo by Cheolki Hong. Courtesy MMCA, Gwacheon / Seoul / Deoksugung / Cheongju.

**Another work in the show is the AI-generated sound piece, *Genuine Cloning* (2020), in which a voice contemplates its own disembodied selfhood, and reflects on absurd-seeming human instincts like giving personal names to typhoons. How does the notion of consciousness relate to “O2 and H2O”?**

An AI—here meaning “deep learning”—was used to clone my voice. We then worked with the production company to make an ASMR version of my cloned voice, which was used to read the script I wrote. In the text, I talk about everything from the perspective of the voice, meaning there is no notion of a body. A body has an inside and an outside, and there is a border where you end. The skin and body defines you as a territory and location. For me, the AI voice is interesting because it doesn’t have a body, but still, a voice implies a throat and a windpipe. The ASMR voice has even less “body” because it’s just the air blowing through the windpipe.

Throughout the exhibition, I tried to maximize the process of “losing the body.” Especially in the room at the MMCA with *The Intermediates* [2017–20], I chose sculptures with tentacles and no body, or where the head is directly connected with the legs so there is no core. In the script the voice talks about the body, and how the body is connected with the idea of belongingness.



Installation view of HAEGUE YANG's *The Intermediate – Five-Legged Frosty Fecund Imoogi+*, 2020, powder-coated stainless steel frame, steel wire rope, plastic twine, brass plated bells, metal rings, 405 × 562 × 452 cm, at “O2 and H2O,” MMCA, Seoul, 2020–21. Photo by Cheolki Hong. Courtesy MMCA, Gwacheon / Seoul / Deoksugung / Cheongju.

**The other audio element is the sound of birds, which was captured by reporters during the 2018 meeting of South Korean president Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in the DMZ. Why did you choose to juxtapose that with the cloned voice's monologue?**

The practical reason was that I wanted to have some undoing of the voice. I've used this birdsong many times. It's so comforting and peaceful. Even though 99 percent of visitors don't recognize it comes from the DMZ it pairs with the sublime panorama of the wallpaper [*DMZ Un—Do*] where we also had this visual element—someone said it was a "visual bombing"—related to the DMZ. I wanted to have separate but parallel ideas.

**Why are you drawn to the DMZ?**

It's partially my critique—the way people approach the DMZ is too literal and too practical. The full potentiality, for me, of what can be projected on the DMZ is much bigger. My proposal is suggesting how far it could go, but at the same time bringing the DMZ closer to daily life or the common space. The motifs are about energy. There are huge ecological projections about DMZ, in terms of the animals and plants that might live there. At the same time it's also contaminated and dangerous after various military actions and tests. I can't commit to only the ideal version—we have to be aware of the abuse as well.



Installation view of **HAEGUE YANG's** *Five Doing Un-Doing*, 2020, aqueous inkjet print on polyester fabric banners, ad balloons, eyelets, steel wire rope, Hanji, dimensions variable, at "O2 and H2O," MMCA, Seoul, 2020–21. Graphic support by Yena Yoo. Photo by Cheolki Hong. Courtesy MMCA, Gwacheon / Seoul / Deoksugung / Cheongju.

**In the corridor outside the exhibition, you suspended banners from balloons with cut and folded hanji paper from shamanist rituals. There's also a lot of collaged imagery in these banners. What are these based on?**

The idea of energy and entropy became more and more important throughout the exhibition, as in the DMZ wallpaper. These five articulations in the banners, *Five Doing Un-Doing* (2020), represent the philosophy of the five ways. Three are vertical and two are horizontal, and they represent the five elements: water, fire, metal, wood, and earth. These are elements of the ancient philosophy that China, Korea, and all of the cultures of this region share. And these five elements are also symbolized in the five colors [known as *Obangsaek* in Korean].

The English translation of the Korean title is borrowed from the philosophy of the Five Ways, *Oh Haeng*. *Oh* is five and *Haeng* can be translated as "action," "way," "need," or "doing." The "un-doing" part in Korean, *bi-haeng*, has many [alternate] meanings: "flying," or "misbehavior." I was attempting to break down these ancient elementary ideas of interpreting the cosmos in the environment into a more secular, contemporary way. The earth banner, for instance, represents real-estate but also compost, with the worms.

Human beings have always been interested in matter or substance, and what the world or the cosmos consists of. In every ancient culture there is this attempt to find the elements, both philosophical and physical. And today, even with such a large accumulation of knowledge, this eagerness still has not been satisfied. But I also wanted to show how we lost that curiosity as something very pure. Our curiosity about the earth is just greed for more real estate and investment—though I'm not dismissing the need to have a place to live, but we used to think about the soil differently, in terms of what it means.



**How humans interact with or understand the natural environment was a subject in your MCAD exhibition, “Cone of Concern,” where you displayed new rattan works that you had produced remotely. Can you tell us about that process?**

Normally I learn a skill, such as basket weaving, and then teach it to my studio members. We practice and develop some hybrid out of it, and slowly we are able to make sculptures. “Cone of Concern” was the first time that I did not learn the skill myself. Fortunately the workshop we worked with had a good aesthetic orientation, good communication, plus their workers are well-treated and their materials are all-natural and non-toxic.

*The Randing Intermediates – Inception Quartet* (2020) was the first work. I focused on the shape: how complicated the shape or edges could be. Each one has a single color but still it took a long time for all four of the colors to have a good harmony. They look like insects or animals. Some of the “shoulders” come from a traditional Filipina costume, or they appear like an arm or a crown. With the *The Randing Intermediates – Underbelly Alienage Duo* (2020) I wanted to move underground: one is a sea cucumber and the other is a mushroom. There we focused more on the dying and weaving types, which combine to create the gradations, while the sea cucumber has a lot of patterning.



Installation view of HAEGUE YANG's (from left to right) *The Randing Intermediate – Open-Armed Long-Eared Monarch* and *The Randing Intermediate – Crested Duck King*, both 2020, stainless steel frame, casters, wicker, nylon, cord, stainless steel rings, dimensions variable, at “The Cone of Concern,” Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), Manila, 2020–21. Photo by At Maculangan. Courtesy MCAD.



Installation view of HAEGUE YANG's (front) *The Randing Intermediate – Underbelly Alienage Duo*, 2020, stainless steel frame, casters, wickers, nylon cord, stainless steel rings, stainless steel handles, powder coating, artificial plants, chair cane, ropes, dimensions variable; and (back) *The Fantastic Warp and Weft of a Tropical Depression*, 2020, lenticular prints, dimensions variable, at "The Cone of Concern," MCAD, Manila, 2020–21. Photo by At Maculangan. Courtesy MCAD.

**The motif of the typhoon comes up at MCAD as well, in the title, which refers to weather forecasting for storms, and also the mural, which you called *The Fantastic Warp and Weft of a Tropical Depression* (2020). How did you come to relate the weather phenomenon and textiles?**

Because MCAD has a very long and deep space, I put up five banners to break it down. The pattern I used is binakael, from a northern Philippine textile tradition. Most of the textiles carry figurative motifs like birds, eagles, and frogs; I found very few abstract patterns. One of the abstract patterns looked like Op Art, a [Victor] Vasarely-like pattern. It's the same mechanism I always get enlightenment from. It can symbolize rain, swirling storms. My own association with that abstract pattern is so contaminated by Western art history and artists like Vasarely, so I focused on that pattern. It reflects a Filipino, tribal view, but also my view.



*This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

*HG Masters is the deputy publisher and deputy editor of ArtAsiaPacific.*

*MMCA Hyundai Motor Series 2020: "Haegue Yang: O2 and H2O" was on view at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, until February 28, 2021.*

*"Cone of Concern" is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila, until March 31, 2021.*

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