

Grasping the context

How Michael Joo's works capture the times we live in

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Michael Joo is an artist devoted to the intangibles. His sculptures, installations, video and performances investigate the evolution of cultural values and the place of spirituality in the contemporary world.

He is one of the few artists who are well-known, thanks to him winning the grand prize at the 2006 Gwangju Biennale. He returned to Gwangju last year with "Indivisible," an installation built around clay sculptures and transparent, riot-police shields.

It garnered attention because it doubled as a tribute to the city's past, epitomized by the 1980 Gwangju Massacre, Chun Doo-hwan's brutal crackdown on demonstrations against his military junta proved to be a turning point in Korea's democracy movement. History has been an inspiration for Joo, who consistently explores how

"The shields used in this work form a structure that at once supports and threatens the objects suspended below them. They are interdependent in a sense, and I see them as a cross section of a larger organism. Though there is no overt message intended by the work, I hoped to create a sense of calm stillness that is a part of tension. I was looking at a lot of mobiles, like those of (Alexander) Calder, which I think embody that sense," Joo said in an interview with The Korea Times.

"While the installations themselves contained only minor shifts of a few objects and positions to suit the space, the real difference is only in the context of the exhibition venues. These include the histories and socio-political identities of the venues and the audiences and what they bring to the work as a viewer."

Joo said Indivisible was a result of a series of his personal experiments and represent a new direction for his future works.

"Most of my work comes from how I process my environment and the world around me."

the past has shaped the present and how the present continues to bury the past in a culture of amnesia.

Joo recently presented a new version of Indivisible at Art Basel's Unlimited, the gallery's new exhibition project tailored for large sculptures and paintings.

"I have worked with the shield forms and oil clay objects for the past eight years so I am not in a hurry. Since the oil clay in 'Indivisible' does not dry and remains pliable, the work is always somehow changing. I may force these changes or allow for outside forces to do so as the works



Michael Joo's "Dissembled," currently on display at Glasstress 2013, a collateral event of the Venice Biennale
Courtesy of Kukje Gallery



Michael Joo works on his installation, "Indivisible," at last year's Gwangju Biennale.

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

develop," he said.

Joo is enjoying increasing international recognition, his work "Dissemble" is on display at Glasstress 2013, a collateral event of the Venice Biennale. The work is similar to Indivisible as it uses riot shields, but they are placed on the floor, instead of hanging from above.

"Most of my work comes from how I process my environment and the world around me. As such, it is important for the process that feeds my artwork to involve spending time in other cultures and social systems, and sometimes deep into less populated parts of the world. I grew up surrounded by nature and science and so those languages appear frequently as themes," he said.

Joo is Korean-American, but has no intentions to tie his works to his ethnicity.

"I think my personal history and individual experience informs my art more than a larger sense of ethnic identity," he said.

Artists are unique in that they

endeavor to produce something for which there was no specific demand, according to Joo.

"Though they sometimes participate in it, artists can also provide a space for a break in the cycle of commerce and capital; mediators between culture and capital," he said.

"I think artists can be successful at conveying what they want to express with or without using direct political positioning. Sometimes work that has no apparent political address can have more effect when it is made with a political or social philosophy in mind to help preserve its integrity."

Joo is currently on a hectic schedule. In addition to the ongoing Glasstress exhibition, he is expected to participate in group exhibitions in London and New York this fall.

Next year will be a big year for him, with solo exhibitions planned at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., and Kukje Gallery in Korea.