

Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea



BAHC YISO,
(Front) *Untitled*
(*The Sky of Los Angeles/Houston*), 2000/2009.
(Back) *Wide World Wide*, 2003. Courtesy the estate of Bahc Yiso.

“Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea” was the first major show of contemporary Korean art in the United States. This overview featured mid- to late-career artists with ethnic roots in Korea as well as educational and artistic connections to Europe and the US, rendering the exhibition both Korean and global. In Los Angeles, home to the largest Korean community in North America, it was local too.

Museum visitors first encountered two pieces by pop artist Choi Jeong-Hwa, whose large outdoor installations transformed the grounds of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). The artist’s aptly named *Welcome* (2009) had banners of fabric in red, yellow and blue—combinations of colors commonly associated with Eastern philosophy and popular Korean culture—adorning the exterior of the institution like giant party streamers; *Happy Happy* (2009) gathered hundreds of chintzy plastic baskets such as those commonly found in Korean markets, which were stacked and strung up like a forest of bead curtains.

Many of the works in the exhibition, which occupied the entire second floor of the spacious Renzo Piano-designed Broad Contemporary Art Museum (a new annex on the impressive LACMA campus), had a distinctly industrial, unfinished feel, perhaps a reflection of South Korea’s rapid economic development, and almost all of them commented on today’s global society. The optimistic, affirmative title of Bahc Yiso’s *Your Bright Future* (2002/2009) belies its ironic subtext. Ten standing floodlights—strangely human in proportion and suggestive, in their arrangement, of blind followers behind a malevolent leader—cast an eerie incandescence upon the blank gallery wall. Bahc’s *Wide World Wide* (2003) is a monochromatic world map painted on unstretched canvas, garishly illuminated with fluorescent lights. The geographical formations are created out of sequences of Korean lettering with city names labeled

DO-HO SUH,
(Front) *Fallen Star 1/5*, 2008. (Back) *Home Within Home*, 2009. Courtesy the artist.

in English, but the map only shows little-known towns and boroughs instead of the usual capitals and megalopolises. Bahc sheds light on these obscure places.

The coming together of locations across the globe is a theme eloquently addressed by Do-Ho Suh’s sculptures. *Fallen Star 1/5* (2008) is a literal visualization of colliding cultures. In a minutely observed but colossal sculpture, Suh has created a one-fifth scale model of the traditional Korean home designed and built by his father during Suh’s childhood in Seoul, and shows it crashing into the brownstone apartment of his undergraduate years at the Rhode Island School of Design. The actual clash of cultures seems violent, but the artist, who has lived in the US since the early 1990s, envisions it as a “soft landing.” Haegue Yang similarly considers the concept of home, and plays upon her own international existence. Growing out of a practical and logistical circumstance, *Storage Piece* (2003/2009) is an accumulation of her unsold artworks, packed up in shipping crates and sitting on pallets to be gradually revealed and installed over the course of the exhibition.

In a myopic review, *Los Angeles Times*’ critic Christopher Knight discounted the exhibition as dated. He failed to grasp Yang’s playfully organic observation on her peripatetic existence between Korea and Germany, misinterpreting *Storage Piece* as a criticism of art institutions and the commodification of the artwork: “. . . sculpture as the problematic residue of participation in an international art world.” Equally unimpressed by Bahc’s title work, Knight once again saw a trite critique of the institution—throwing light upon the walls of the “white cube”—and sidestepped the specific commentary on South Korea’s history of dictatorships, not to mention the current state of North Korean affairs. But even the acerbic Knight was awed by Suh’s work, embodying the exhibition in its contemplation of the necessary displacement of the artist for engagement in the larger art world, as well as the universal need for a place to call home in an increasingly global society. ●

Jennifer S. Li

