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McArdle, James 2001, *Photographs for the journal article 'Time travel: memories and traditions'*, Australian Institute of Art Education, Paddington, N.S.W.

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TIME TRAVEL: MEMORIES AND TRADITIONS

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Abstract

Increasingly, international students are completing postgraduate studies in visual arts in Australia. In this paper I present some of the challenges and advantages of this process. Reflections on my personal responses to these experiences and on my visits to historic sites in Korea have played an integral part in the development of my creative work over the period. The methodology used in my research was autobiographical with a phenomenological approach to search for the underlying meaning in experiences. The full account of my art journey is told in my doctoral dissertation, *Connecting Fragments of Self and Tradition: A Korean Study* (Yun: 2000).

Introduction

When I reflect upon my art practice, I ask the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I from?' My experiences have informed my work. I was born into a rapidly changing Korean culture, yet I have inherited a Korean art tradition that can be traced back to the fourth century BC. As a Korean artist, I have for some time felt a personal necessity to rediscover elements of Korean Indigenous art as a creative source. The artistic traditions of the Three Kingdoms Period (37BC - 668AD), Koguryo, Paekche and Silla, and traditional religious concepts are mediated for me by contemporary technology, and in several cases, by experiences of Western culture through my travels and research in Australia. In my journey, my artworks have evolved with these influences. My art relates not only to the traditional history of my culture but also to the influences of Australian culture and the environment. In this paper, I will reflect upon this period in Australia while I studied for my postgraduate degrees. The questions of identity expressed above guided this research.

Masters study in Australia

After I completed undergraduate study in Korea, I travelled through Europe. This was truly an 'exotic' experience for me to meet and interact with 'foreign' people and different cultures. I thought that this would bring a different visual experience to my art and as it turns out was a momentous decision for my own art practice. Then I came to Australia in the

winter of 1995. Everything was so different from my own country: the language, the people, the culture and customs, and nature. By March 1996, I was working on a new theme entitled *A Modern Interpretation of Ancient Korean Murals* for my masters research (Yun: 1997). Interest in this study can be traced to my encounter with ancient Koguryo murals (37BC - 668AD) displayed at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Seoul.

Let us go back for a moment to the exhibition of Koguryo murals (in the winter of 1993 in Korea). The murals showed events from ancient Korean everyday life including symbolic images representing religious beliefs. The tombs were divided into several chambers, the walls of each chamber depicted prayers for the deceased. They expressed the mysterious spirit and vigor of an ancient Korean people. When I saw them, the things that impressed me most were the strong symbolic images and heavy pigments of the murals. These huge murals, which decorated the tombs at Koguryo, were the inspirational source for many visual stories. They gave me a strong visual and emotional impulse.

Something from the exhibition turned into personal emotion. That visual source gave me the idea to paint using the traces of ancient Korean art history. I loved the symbolic images of ancient Korean art, in particular the mysterious animal symbols. I began to introduce the ancient Korean symbolic images into my contemporary art and also combined ordinary objects from the landscape with ancient Korean symbols. How did these ordinary objects enter into my art practice? As I travelled from Bendigo to Melbourne by train (reminiscent of my train trips as a student in Korea) I was gazing at the many differently shaped rocks in the Australian countryside. It was then that I realized that they were impressive forms of nature. It brought to mind a religious custom, a shamanistic ritual, that utilized rocks and stones in Korea. This custom involved Korean people piling up stones in front of a big tree or a big rock, when they prayed for something. Each stone contained a hope or prayer. Rocks also symbolize longevity. In traditional Korean folk painting, there are ten objects used to symbolize longevity, including rocks, mountains, water, clouds, pine trees, turtles, deer, cranes, the fungus of immortality, and the sun. These symbols made appealing motifs for folding screens, lacquered

TIME TRAVEL: MEMORIES AND TRADITIONS

chests, ceramics and embroidery on clothes for daily use (Heritage n.d.). That vision gave me the idea to use ordinary objects in my artwork. I used the fragments and forms of rocks on which I painted ancient Korean symbolic images.

In creating my own visual works about ancient Korean symbolic images, texture was an important element of the works. I tried to develop my own method on canvas through the use of rough textures. I experimented with mixed media on canvas. Through building up the texture on canvas I was able to allude to ancient times. When I was satisfied with the archival texture, I started to paint symbolic images on the canvas. In later works for my Masters degree, I also combined ancient Korean symbolic images with the sunlight colours of Australia which are bright and intense. For example, the colours of my work were inspired by the cobalt blue sky, turquoise blue ocean and red desert. My paintings incorporated very vivid colours such as bright blues, light reds, oranges and yellows through to textured ochres and browns.

During this period in Australia I immersed myself in creating a journey through ancient Korean art. I was far away from my home and suddenly realised how much I loved my country, family and friends in Korea. Distance from home made me more aware of who I was and what I was doing. Most of my paintings are rooted deeply in ancient Korean culture. Each of the ancient Korean symbols allowed me to interact with and be in contact with my culture and family. Every painting had not only ancient Korean symbolic meanings but were personal expressions of my separation from home. These themes continued into my doctoral study.

Doctoral study in Australia

While completing further study in Australia, I continued to suffer terribly from homesickness. As a result of this longing for home and family, the direction of my art practice turned to a journey into my childhood memories. The ancient Korean symbols still fascinated me and became increasingly more valuable to my sense of being Korean. I wanted to undertake new and different works that would express feelings from my childhood and from my culture.

When I revisited the southern part of Korea in the winter of 1997, another specific moment had an unexpected and significant impact on the direction of my art life. Today Kyongju, which was the capital of

the Silla Dynasty (57BC – 935AD) in Kyongsang Province, is one of the world's most historically significant sites, featuring numerous well preserved relics of the past history of the Silla Kingdom, including architecture, tombs and sculptures (Kyongju: n.d.). This was the second time I had travelled through Kyongju. The first time I had been with teachers and classmates during a high school excursion. Unfortunately, at that time of my life, I was oblivious to the wonders around me. Our teacher took us to the historical sites and the museum in Kyongju, but I was busy chatting and taking photographs with my high school friends. In 1997 I visited Kyongju again with my family. It was strange because I had a totally different experience. Every site of Kyongju led me to mysterious moments and diverse meanings. Every object touched me with personal emotion and aroused memories. It was like exploring underground caverns, all the while being led on unexpected pathways as my senses were gradually being opened up to a long series of beautiful experiences.

First I went to Sokkuram and Bulguksa. Sokkuram is the finest example of Korean Buddhist art and shrines. It is a cave-temple carved out of granite by human hands. It faces east from high up on Toham san (Toham mountain). Its purpose was to calm the raging East Sea of Korea. As I followed the road upwards, a great pleasure arose from seeing the landscape of Toham san. When I looked at Sokkuram, I felt that I had met with the spirit of an unknown ancient Korean artist across time. This shrine reflected not only great technical achievement, but also the spirituality of ancient Korea. At eye level, the walls surrounding Buddha's statue led me through the relief of Gwuneum Bosal (the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy) on the eleven sides. Each image of Gwuneum Bosal has a rhythm just like a piece of sacred music. It also reminded me of the images of the celestial beings in the Koguryo murals. The calm and spiritual environment made me feel and think about my inner self, the outside world, reality, unconsciousness, nature, history, time, philosophy...

Bulguksa (Bulguk temple) was built in the mid-eighth century during the Unified Silla period (668-935 A.D.). Bulguksa symbolizes the Buddha Land in this world. Two of the finest stone pagodas, Dabotap (Abundant Treasure Pagoda) and Sokgatap (Sakyamuni Pagoda) are located in Bulkuksa. Traditional Korean pagodas have an odd number of storeys (three, five, seven, or nine storeys) because odd numbers are attributed to the yang, the active power aspect of the yin and yang philosophy. The

storeys of the pagoda, therefore, represent active movement toward heaven. The pagoda is one of a vast array of provocative structures and objects in a temple (Yun, J. n.d.). It was to prove to be a great experience for my art. As I moved through the temple I began to notice, in particular, the recurring Buddhist symbols. I found myself stepping from one fully expanded lotus to the next, as cursory glances downward revealed a myriad of lotus motifs beneath my feet on the courtyard tiles.

As I explored the main hall of Bulguksa, I found the Buddha of Paradise seated on a lotus throne. Lifting my eyes towards the decorative ceiling, I found a pattern of lotus intermingled with other symbols. The beauty of the vista was over-powering. This beauty of the Buddha image is thought to be present in the lotus flower. Tradition has it that when Buddha reached enlightenment, miraculous lotus blossoms bloomed under his feet (Yun, J. n.d.). Even though I do not have specific knowledge of Buddhism, each symbolic image spoke to me of an immense calmness of spirit. I saw the image of Buddha's light and truth in this structure, the landscape, colour and light. I have often used patterns of lotus which were integral in Three Kingdoms art, including the Buddhist art of Bulguksa. My love for the mystical and the hidden meaning of the lotus is reflected in my contemporary images.

Following these sites, I visited Tumuli Park. When I entered downtown Kyongju, the first thing that caught my eye was the group of huge burial mounds in Tumuli Park. Tombs took on the appearance of small hills. The burial mounds are some of the many royal tombs scattered in and around Kyongju (Tomb n.d.). When I went through the tomb I felt that I was transported into another world. I wanted to capture this mystical moment of the Silla tombs. The impact of the sight of the tombs gave me the idea to use light as a medium in my work. The contrast of dark and light could recreate the mystical tomb environment as images of shadow and light contributed to the composition of each object.

Last, I visited the National Kyongju Museum, which has the finest collection of Silla Dynasty artifacts. The museum consists of a two storey main building with a traditional Korean roof. In the garden of the museum, hundreds of stone relics transferred from the sites of temples and palaces are displayed. Most of these relics are stone: a statue of Buddha, a stone pagoda, stone basins, stone lamps, and monument bases. They surround the main building of the museum. When I visited the museum in the winter

of 1997, it was holding a special exhibition of Silla *tou* (clay figurines). The encounter with *tou* was an unforgettable moment in my life. *Tou* were first made in the Neolithic period in Korea. The Silla *tou* were diverse images of ordinary Silla people that showed the everyday life, humour and dreams of ancient Koreans. I was fascinated by the images of *tou*, each of which seemed to be a story in itself. They made me commence a journey back in time from the present to the roots of ancient Korean culture. In the *Ancient Dreams* series I have incorporated *tou*.

Throughout my travels in Kyongju, I experienced a peculiarly exciting feeling. The trip was a challenge in that I found myself confronted by questions about my heritage and roots. It made me aware of ancient Korean cultural beauty. I yearned for the answers to these questions, and I believe my artwork assists me in finding them. Back in the studio, the questions "What does it mean to me?" and "How do I feel about it?" demanded answers. So I have tried to convey my emotional and personal responses to the ancient Korean heritage experienced through the trip: to what I saw, felt, heard and touched. Simultaneously, it offered a new possibility in my art practice the possibility for installation and for engagement in three-dimensional work. For my artwork, installation has the ability to reach a more emotional level through the senses it conveys. It occupies space and appeals to people's touch. It also requires people's participation as they are immersed in it. I am excited by the ways in which installation transforms the space. I feel that it is a more direct expression of the relationship between artworks and viewers - a form of communication. The purpose of my installation is not just to seek to convey a particular message, but rather to create a dialogue between artwork and viewer.

In my doctoral work, entitled *Ancient Dreams 2* (Picture 1 and cover) I combined bisque tiles with *tou* (clay figurines). The idea of tile work was deeply influenced by the courtyard tiles of Bulguksa, and the bricks and tiles of Paekche art (18BC - 660AD). *Ancient Dreams 2* also reflected my early childhood experience of playing on the floor and the wall while growing up in Korea. Since childhood I have had a keen interest in drawing and painting and as a child I enjoyed scribbling or drawing on the floor and the wall. During the process of my doctoral art practice when I painted on the tiles it brought me back to these memories of my childhood.

As my work develops, I am becoming more able to rely on cultural intuition to guide the forms.

TIME TRAVEL: MEMORIES AND TRADITIONS

Based on the ideas of ancient Korean symbolic images as this symbolic imagery emerges, I become more aware of the feeling of my inner consciousness. Sometimes, it comes out as an obscure memory of a fragment of my inner realm. Memory is visible at times, but the great bulk is beneath my conscious mind and reveals only part of itself for a moment at random intervals. When I create art, the image of each memory touches me and appears subtly in the work. In my art practice, I want to incorporate my childhood experiences and memories with the symbolic images of Korean art. Having grown up, I now look back to my childhood, which appears to be such a different world from an adult view. The world of the child would be one of beginning, a new world, fresh and clear. One artist said that when an artist stopped being a child, he or she would stop being an artist (Selz, 1996: 521). When I mould *tou* (clay figurines), paint the symbolic images and narratively organize the works on the wall, it reminds me of my childish playing with clay and scribbling on the wall, a primer for images and shapes I now produce. The elements of childhood experience bring forth the images of my artwork: simple, evocative and mysterious.

When I looked back over my earlier work as an undergraduate art student I found that initially I was painting people and landscapes in the European Impressionist style. I appreciated the beauty of European art. On my visit to European countries, I saw the beauty of European culture and art but I understood that that was not my heritage. When I depicted the landscape of a Korean village and countryside in the Impressionist style, I realized that that did not come out of my own experience. Therefore, I tried to develop a style of art which related to what I imagined to be the Korean identity. I still painted figures and molded figurines, but without the use of chiaroscuro and perspective.

Later, when I was adjusting to life in Australia, I became aware that this vast country, was unfamiliar to me and the need to think about my identity and heritage had become more pressing. The loneliness that I experienced in my life in Australia led to the discovery of something comforting in my research on ancient Korean art. I was able to understand things of value about being Korean. For example, I began to value the beauty of the 'flat appearance' and almost one dimensional approach of traditional Korean painting, the beauty of the mythological symbols and simplicity of form of Korean decorative art. From this appreciation emerged a new idea for my installations. In my work, entitled *Ancient Dreams 6 & 7*

(Picture 2), I incorporated the yearning towards my country, family and friends in the form of the wooden cabinet. The cabinet had traditional Korean door patterns of lattice and combined the Korean alphabet, *hangul*, on the paper lining. Inside the cabinet, I piled up stones or rocks which I cast from plaster moulds of Australian stones. On each cast stone I painted bright colours and an image from the ancient Korean symbols. The intense, bright colours were influenced by Australian landscape elements. When I piled up stones in the cabinet, each stone held meanings of my yearnings, hopes and dreams, as in the shamanistic ritual already described.

In 1997, my three-dimensional forms changed. I had already stopped painting on canvas and so began to create installations in a Korean style. It is appropriate for me to work in this style as I have developed a unique response pertinent to my experiences of living a dual life-style. Any artist working now has the opportunity to take advantage of the technological advances of the past hundred years and use them creatively. I introduced electric lights into the installations (Picture 3). In Buddhism, traditionally light is cherished as the symbol of Buddha's wisdom (Buddha n.d.). In my works, light has the meaning of discovery of my heritage and, therefore, of myself. It is a way to interpret the past and the present, and draw out my personal memories. Through combining traditional Korean symbolic images and forms, with contemporary technology, I tell my personal story. It is a dialogue with ancient Korean people and their thoughts and, also, an expression of yearning for my homeland. It is also a connection with my childhood, carefully protected and cherished in the world of my dreams and my art.

Conclusion

In my works, I have tried to incorporate a distinctly Korean sense of aesthetics, which embraces contemporary artistic style and the age-old traditions. For me these aspects of traditional Korean art represent an inner harmony which I have sought to evoke in my own work, in an attempt to not only honour this harmony but also re-create it through contemporary means. Through my journey of linking the traditional history of my culture and researching ancient Korean art, I became aware of how my life has also been influenced by the extended experience of working in an Australian setting. In this regard my work had to engage directly with globalizing effects of different geographical contexts.

At the same time, being at a distance from my homeland, has strangely brought me closer to my heritage. I can stand back and look at my heritage with an outsider's view. My works reflect my interest in the traditional perception of Korean heritage, as well as recognition of connections and breaks with aspects of Australian experience, in particular, the colours of the Australian environment. This can be seen in my attempts to incorporate the intensely coloured cast stones within the traditional forms in the installation of Korean furniture. I felt free to use these aspects of intense colours in my work and therefore wanted to use these hues in the installation as a record of my journey in Australia because they prompted my further engagement with traditional colours and images.

My isolation from my home, my loss of language, the ancient Korean arts, and my art experience in Australia have had a great influence on my works. Through this experience I have endeavoured to capture a past culture which, at this time in my artistic development, is far more important than the more progressive nature of the electronic medium of artistic expression. On reflection, perhaps had I stayed in Korea completing my doctoral research, I too would have wanted the input and influence of the international sweep of digital art forms current in today's art. Perhaps the move away has driven me in the direction I have taken. I have learned something I did not envisage at the time. In becoming an expatriot of Korea. I did not realize how I had taken my heritage for granted. Now I am richer for the experience of being able to choose which line of artistic expression to work with during my study in Australia. Though I had the choice of working with computerized, digital laser light three-dimensional visual art, I chose instead traditional influences and incorporated them into my place in society at the time; as an ex-patriot in a non-Korean speaking culture.

While studying art outside my country, my aesthetic sense has shifted from traditional representation to recognition of the growing trends of globalization. It has been an important factor in my art process. My works have engaged with the issues of globalization, which have included the themes of Australian influence, contemporary technology in the use of electric light, and expatriation from a distant homeland. Starting with the 'Who I am' and 'What I inherit,' I am moving gradually towards a global awareness. National and personal identities are overlapped by issues of a global nature. It is becoming increasingly clear that in the processes of memory and of recalling cultural traditions of the

past, the memories and traditions are inevitably changed as they are interpreted in my thoughts and in my works in the present. I have explored my identity through these processes: the selective use of Korean cultural myth and heritage, the memories of my childhood and the Australian influences. Ancient symbols and contemporary technology are metaphors for my memories and experiences. For the present and for the foreseeable future, questions like 'Who am I?' and 'Where am I from?' will still provide direction for my quest. Behind this journey is the insatiable need to understand the processes of life and death through my art.

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TIME TRAVEL: MEMORIES AND TRADITIONS
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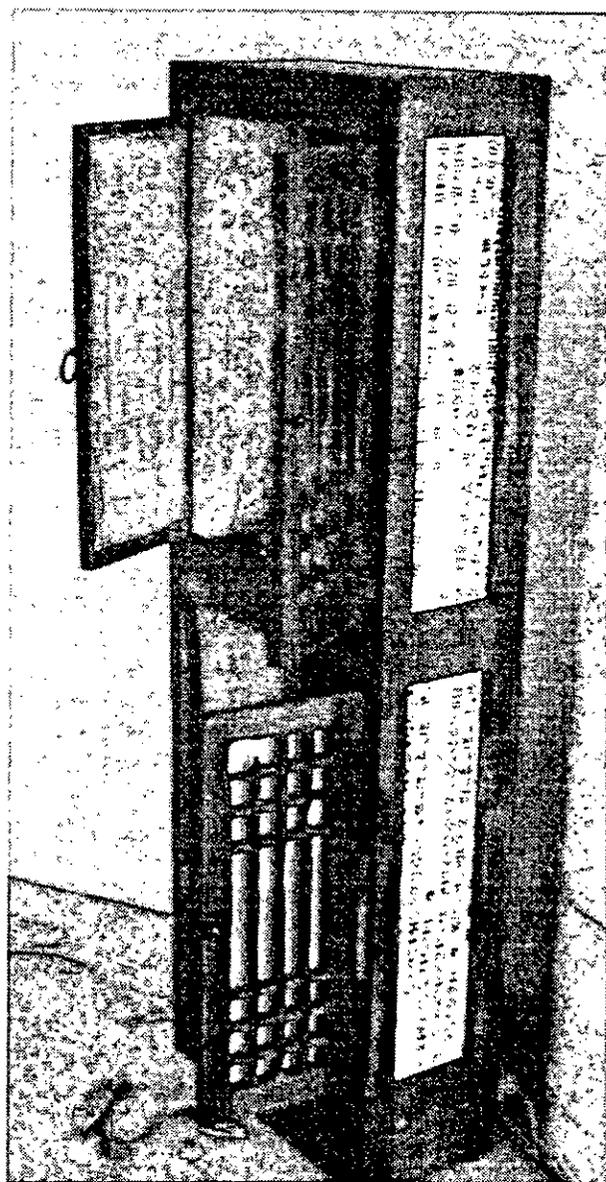
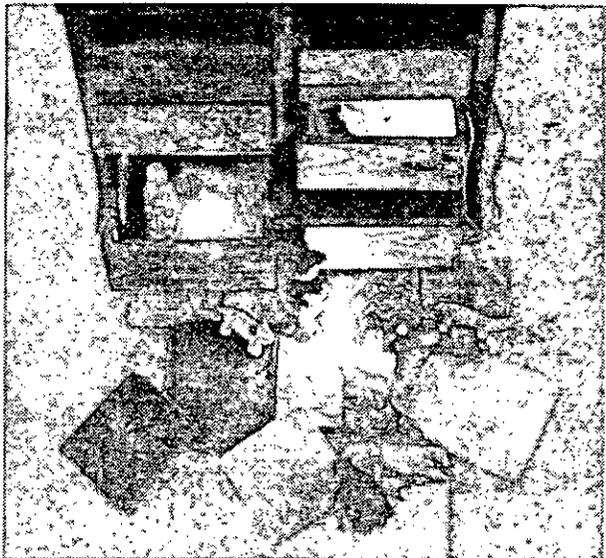
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Editorial note:

Eunsil Yun has successfully completed doctoral studies in visual art at La Trobe University, Bendigo. She has returned to Korea in anticipation of an academic position.

Special acknowledgement and thanks to James McArdle, Bendigo Latrobe University for photography of Eunsil's work.

**Picture 1.****Picture 2.****Picture 3.**