

Jung Hee Choi Interview by ACAW

1. How did you start making art?

Art-making is a drive that the artist is compelled to fulfill and is the highest experience for the artist. It started as natural as breathing.

2. Briefly describe your art from the perspective of what it could tell us about you?

Utilizing both traditional and experimental techniques, I have worked in a variety of contemporary media; painting, drawing, video, photography, and sound. Ancient and universal themes inspired me to create new forms of artistic expression in visual art and music. In a process of assessing and defining the nature of reality, my inquiry focuses on how we perceive being and consciousness, and ultimately, how ideas representing the interaction of opposites intertwine with one another.

In recent exhibitions, I combined video projection as the illumination source with large scale graphite drawings on black paper and self-performed continuous sound compositions, creating an environment of deep introspection. The slowly moving video image elucidates the luminous and dark areas of the drawing, making “manifest and unmanifest” the details of the calligraphy, depending on the position of the viewer in relation to the light. The contrapuntal overlay of my composition *Tonecycle* sounded throughout the gallery, weaving a unity of space and form.

I believe in the evolution of a work and often return to earlier work to continue to expand the ideas. My video sound work, RICE contains sustained ever-changing abstract images and sound. There can be an ever-larger number of fluctuations of ever-smaller amplitude. Unlike a repetitive optical pattern, the RICE images are a process in time that reflects the self-organized formation systems used to create structure by all living things in nature.

For the music, my *Composition in the style of La Monte Young's 1960 sustained friction sounds*, I used a cooking pot as a resonating body and set it into vibration through circular motion with a wooden rice paddle. In the audio installation the audience hears the amplification of multiple layers of the RICE sounds which have been pre-recorded. Through amplification, the higher partials become more clear and audible. This unconventional instrument generates harmonics in systems of both rational and irrational intervals. RICE was chosen as one of The 10 Best of 2003 in the December *Artforum* and presented in the La Monte Young Marian Zazeela *Dream House* installation as part of *The Third Mind* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum on March 28, 2009.

3. What experiences have most influenced your choice of subject matter, medium and style?

In 1999, I became a disciple of La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela in the study of music and art, with the classical Kirana tradition *gandha bandh* red-thread ceremony in 2003. As a student of Indian classical music, I became deeply interested in the nature of sound. The study of different traditional modes of thought led me to a more universally informed approach to my work and has developed my understanding of the nature of sound.

Becoming a musician and being a musician have largely changed my understanding of life. It is said that Indian classical music cannot be learned properly in schools or from books. In order to understand the subtleties of the art and the vast body of knowledge that is secret and esoteric to the *gharana* (family/style), intensive training with the guru is

considered mandatory. In India, music has a long tradition, and guru-disciple relationship is divinely ordained. In 1970, La Monte and Marian brought Pandit Pran Nath, the greatest exponent of the Kirana *gharana* to the U.S. and became his first Western disciples, studying with him for twenty-six years in the traditional manner of living with the guru until he passed away on June 13, 1996. They were true devotees. La Monte recollects his guru in the interview with Frank Oteri for *New Music Box* magazine, "He was a remarkable human being. He was a rare person. In India, it's true, everybody says my guru is the greatest and nobody else is any good. So I accept that context, but even so, Pandit Pran Nath was a miracle of God, literally. He was a very rare human being. He definitely had extraordinary psychic and physical powers."

Pandit Pran Nath died of congestive heart failure and complications of Parkinson's disease on June 13, 1996 a few hours following a final singing lesson conducted over the telephone. It is said that when the guru dies, he literally gives his soul to the disciple. What the guru leaves with the disciple is what was the most important thing in the guru's life. And so the disciple then takes that on and becomes a guru and teaches the next generation. It pushes the evolution of human mind.

My work has been greatly inspired by the visionary artists, La Monte and Marian. My multimedia installation, *manifest unmanifest*, video projection on a graphite drawing was influenced by Marian's drawing, *7 // 73 – 2 // 74*, a unique technique of drawing that she developed in the '70s. I was captivated by the beauty of her drawing and the special effects that she created with the luminous reflective graphite lines while the black paper absorbed the light.

As the title suggests, my sound work *Composition in the style of La Monte Young's 1960 sustained friction sounds* was created in the style of La Monte's early works such as *Vision* (1959), *Poem for Chairs, Tables, Benches* (1960), *2 sounds* (1960) etc.

4. Is your formal or informal training as an artist useful? How?

It is necessary to have discipline (training) to achieve freedom in a creative process. To create my video sound work, I had to first discover and master the techniques. Once I had mastered the techniques, it was then possible to freely create images or sounds that appear to flow from a cosmic source of inspiration.

Joan Miro wrote that he had allowed the night, the music, and the stars to play a major role in suggesting forms for his paintings. Sometimes these sources in music and nature produced chance shapes. Then he let them happen and did not try to control them but released them freely. Later, he looked at them again and tried to achieve a compositional balance, to attain a full and complex equilibrium. Even though Miro's paintings appear like fantasy, as if they were painted in complete freedom, he pointed out the role of discipline in the following description of his own character: "The Catalan character is not like that of Malaga or other parts of Spain. It is very much down-to-earth. We Catalans believe you must always plant your feet firmly on the ground if you want to be able to jump in the air. The fact that I come down to earth from time to time makes it possible to jump all the higher." (Chipp 435) Miro knew he needed to first use control to become a master. Through mastery he could attain freedom.

Similar to Miro's understanding of the necessity of using control to attain freedom, in the study of Indian classical music, one spends many years learning vocal techniques, the structures of the ragas and how to improvise with these techniques within the raga structures. The renowned North Indian master vocalist Pandit Pran Nath pointed out that after mastering the techniques and the raga structures, when it is time to perform one sits on stage and forgets everything. The internalized material then comes forth inspired by a higher state of consciousness. The result is complete freedom, which has been attained

through discipline and mastery of the elements.

However, freedom and discipline are not mutually exclusive concepts. In fact, they are in constant interplay in the creative process and they can be thought of not as paradox but as interdependent complements. These complements define each other as do positive and negative poles, such as the positive and negative pulses of a vibration. The opposites, discipline and freedom, structure and anti-structure, balance and imbalance, argument and reconciliation create an arc of energy. The traditional poles of thesis and antithesis create the energy arc through synthesis.

5. Does your work reflect issues in yourself, in society or community? What would you say is the purpose for making art?

Through the process of art making and by adopting a more receptive sensibility, one can become better able to understand about oneself and one's relationship to others. The notion of oneness and the ability to understand its underlying continuum provide a basis for how we relate our experience of both the universal and the particular, the eternal and the temporal states of being.

6. Do you appreciate culturally specific works of art? If so how does your personal and cultural background show up in your work?

It is not surprising that the mainstream of Western intellectual tradition does not consider the nondualistic Eastern thought as philosophy but rather as religion. In the nondualistic point of view, often represented by the Yin-Yang symbol, opposites are not separate entities but they turn into each other. There is no separation between subject and object. Therefore, subject and object are not discretely two but mutually inclusive. This paradoxical worldview of subject-object nonduality has provided the foundation for the concept of *liberation*. Knowledge is the perception of the transcendental reality that all is one. The liberated person can see that all boundaries are not real and can see nondiscriminately oneself with others and life with death.

Western philosophical presupposition stands in opposition to a worldview based on nonduality. From the rational point of view nonduality is not comprehensible but rather it is self-contradictory because it does not provide an objective foundation in dualistic reality. In Western thought, what is real is knowable. In Eastern thought, what is real is ineffable. The Eastern concept of knowledge discerns nuances in the sensory realm but requires the fine-tuning of one's perception and the cultivation of intuition.

Oneness is the essence of nondualistic thinking; it is the perception of absolute interconnectedness with and awareness of non-discriminative reality. The state of oneness has many names across many languages: Union, Samadhi, Turiya, Samae, Wu Wei and others. The Hindu concept of Samadhi is to achieve a state of mind by narrowing the consciousness to focus on one object of concentration, and by so doing, becoming one with the object. If one is to achieve the state of Samadhi through music, one does nothing more than experience the music in the moment and does not discriminate the agent (performer) from the action (music).

As an artist, art making is my way of reaching the liminal state of Samadhi. The video sound performance *R/ICE* incorporates a set of ritualistic and symbolic actions. On the day of the performance I take a long, extended bath. I try not to speak to anyone. I enter the space wearing a ceremonial dress. I sit cross-legged at my carefully placed instrument, a stainless steel cooking pot with a wooden paddle. Without thinking, I listen to the sounds I have prerecorded with the instrument and enter the world of the sounds. When I am ready

I begin to play. As I sit in front of the audience and prepare myself to perform, I become conscious of all that is happening. My body parts all start complaining and demanding comfort. It is at this moment that I become fully aware of my body. The back of my neck starts itching. My throat goes dry and my legs feel numb. Concentration is a choice. I concentrate to exclude everything except the object of my focus. My consciousness is narrowed until it can really focus on the sound. I become absorbed by the world of sound. At this point I am not choosing; I neither affirm nor negate particular sounds, but allow everything that comes. I become one with my breathing and with the sound and this oneness becomes my total existence. I play with complete spontaneity. In this state of Samadhi, my mind becomes quiet and gives up its physical desires. I experience the music as experience. The present moment is full. It is liberation from my own individuality in order to experience true unity with the sound.

Attempting to enter into transcendent experience beyond empirical perception is, of course, not something unique to my personal experience. Many artists, both Western and Eastern, knowingly and unknowingly use techniques and devices to achieve pure states of transcendental consciousness.

Note: This writing for #6 above was first published in the program notes for the March 28, 2009 performance of RICE as part of The Third Mind exhibition.

7. Is there anything you would like to say about your local art scene or the international art market, art education, and/or system for art exhibition?

I would like to address some of the progress that has been evolving in the Artists Rights movement in some parts of the world. Just as women had to fight for their right to vote and other rights of human equity, artists, a small but very important minority, have had to struggle to become more than just poor, starving artists. Before the awakening of artist rights, artists often lived in poverty and were enslaved by art dealers. Many artists have committed suicide. Many art dealers and collectors made their fortunes out of the blood of the artists. Evidently artists' rights have been trampled. If the purchaser makes a fortune from the artwork, some portion of the profit should return to its creator. I know that I can create only a limited number of drawings on large scale in my entire life. I have heard stories about artists who were not aware of their rights in their early careers and who regretted this later in their lives. They were unable to locate their work and then they realized their misfortune.

In 1990, the Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA) was passed under U.S. Federal law. VARA grants artists two new rights, the right of attribution and the right of integrity. The legislation also requires the Register of Copyrights, in consultation with the Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, to study the feasibility of implementing a resale royalty on the sale of works of visual art. The resale royalty would protect an artist's right to collect a percentage of the proceeds from the sale of her work to subsequent purchasers.

Resale royalty is a European concept called Droite de Suite. In 1996, the EU Commission proposed and then adopted in 2001 a Directive (legal requirement) that all Member States introduce this right into their domestic laws by 2006. Under French law, the artist shares in the total sales price of her work at resale. An Artists Resale Right became law in the U.K. in February 2006, which gives artists the legal right to receive a small share of the profits made on the second and subsequent sales of their works during their lives and for 70 years after death. A resale royalty right scheme was also introduced into the Australian Parliament and it is anticipated that the right will take effect from 1 July 2009.

Although it is a well-established legal right in some other countries, resale royalties in the United States for visual fine artists are not available except for the California Resale Royalty Act (Civil Code section 986), which entitles artists to a royalty payment upon the resale of their works of art. Opponents of the resale royalty right have argued that the difficulties in administering it make it prohibitive, and that it is antithetical to the Anglo-American tradition of free alienability of property. Their presupposition is that artworks do not have any intrinsic value and “the price of art, like other commodities, varies with supply and demand, and the artist is only one of the many factors that impact on price.”

I understand the point of view and agree that by signing the retransfer agreement with resale royalty right, the artist and collector are entering into a complex process of future transactions. However, the artist and collector are not in a usual manufacturer and consumer relationship, and artwork is not like other commodities. I do not see “selling work” as a goal and I don’t create an artwork to sell. I only create artwork because I believe in art. An artwork lives its own life. An artwork is a phenomenal manifestation of energy that has taken a form. Transcendentally, artwork embodies an indestructible and immutable essence that has been transformed and made manifest by the artist. It should be distinguished from transferring a commercial property as its value weighs more in its essence than its value as a physical object.

Unlike authors and composers who receive royalties through reproduction and performance rights for all the copies of their works, the visual artist creates only one or a very limited number of works. The value of each artwork lies in its uniqueness. In that regard, current federal copyright law has failed to provide economic incentives for visual artists.

Obviously, artist resale royalty rights are not only the way of the future, they are already a way of life in some parts of the world. The rights I am asking for are something that a collector as a noble patron of the arts should want to support. A collector is not only buying the property of the artwork but also becoming a patron and supporter of the artist. As the artist’s career continues and reputation increases, the work will increase in value. The work the collector has collected will also increase in value. There is a mutual benefit in this that both will be able to profit from in the future. The artist and collectors are working together toward the creation of high art that will benefit humanity throughout time.

8. How does your current portfolio fit into the rest of your body of work?

The ultimate goal of my ongoing study is to search for the universal and the specific in cultures of both ancient and contemporary traditions and to develop speculative thought about aesthetic experience and values in human society.