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Eimi Tagore, An Interview with Hyon Gyon and Her Cruel World, November, 2017

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An Interview with Hyon Gyon and Her Cruel World

November 09, 2017 by [Eimi Tagore](#)

As her recent explosive solo exhibition wraps up at [Ben Brown Fine Arts in Hong Kong](#), we had the chance to speak to artist Hyon Gyon (b. 1979) about the motivations behind her enigmatic, often large-scale mixed media art practice. Hyon Gyon was born and raised in South Korea, and received her M.A. and PhD from Kyoto City University of Arts in Japan. She moved to New York in 2013, where she is represented by Shin Gallery. Unintimidated in the face of new environments, Hyon Gyon has continued to carve out a space for her work in the international scene in the US and Asia, with one-person and group exhibitions at the Museum of Kyoto, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the Kyoto Art Center, Kyoto, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, among others. She has received several fellowships and awards, including the Asao Kato International Scholarship, the Kyoto Cultural Award and the Tokyo Wonder Wall Competition Prize.

Your latest series of work for your recent solo show 'Cruel World' have been described as autobiographical. Is this a new shift in your work, or has this always been part of your process?

The painting called *Mother* from my recent solo show 'Cruel World' is about my mother, so let's say it's very autobiographical. When I think of my mother, I remember her preparing breakfast in the kitchen where there was no heater, packing my lunch, running to the hospital carrying me on her back when I got sick, selling her wedding ring to pay for my surgery, sacrificing her life for her children while she didn't spend any money on herself, praying for her family at a temple or to the shaman occasionally, and protecting me against all odds – like when I had nightmares, was sick, or when I was attacked by the outside world or by the illness of my mind. In this cruel world, I can survive because of [this] mother. Mother is the most strong and beautiful human in the world who would stand up for me, for us all the time, and make me feel secure.

I am not just talking about my mother. Mother is a symbolic word that could have tons of different meanings. She can be a real mother or earth or even could be a father or other family or friends – and it can even be religious, or a society. Some of my works regarded as autobiographical are connected to the society that I belong to, and they inevitably affect each other. Living as a human, as a daughter, as an artist, and as a hybrid of the figurative, I believe that the feelings I get from living my life are the most private and the most social at the same time. So I've always had this idea which affects my work process. I use things that are seemingly autobiographic in symbolic ways which can have many different meanings.

The artwork you make often touches on social politics, especially related to identity. How does your own identity come through in your recent paintings and sculptures?

My work is created based on my daily life experience. For example, my three-month residency [in New York] inspired me to make the first piece of the *Harlem Gold* series, although later pieces displayed in my recent show were created after I left Harlem. I was also inspired by a movie titled 'Straight Outta Compton.'

Although the *Harlem Gold* series looks dazzling and colorful at first, it bluntly shows the truths about alienated African-American society from an Asian female artist's point of view. It represents the violence of society hidden in darkness away from the streetlights and neon signs in big cities, and the anxieties we get from living in that modern society.

Another piece of the series called *Eleven Minutes* at the show was created when I was inspired by Paulo Coelho's book. The book obviously talks about sex and physical attraction, but I don't think his book is only about female empowerment or human trafficking – it also teaches what love is and the fact that being loved means much more than sex. In the book, he wrote: "No one loses anyone, because no one owns anyone." That is the true experience of freedom: having the most important thing in the world without owning it. It speaks about everything metaphorically, relationships among power, society, love, etc and it has influenced me, my work and my own personal boundaries, which helps me think about my limits and the way I see this world.

So yes, I can see and I try to be aware of it but I know well enough that I have no power over social politics. And my work is more about universal issues and emotions that include, but are not limited to, current political climates. Even so, I make intense works since I want to express any anger and negative emotions and let it all go. I use the canvas to create my vision. So it's been my identity as an artist that I have been able to talk about political events in any way I want and I've been doing this all along, not just for my recent works.

You have lived in different countries around the world – experiencing and adjusting to different cultures. Has your time living away from your home country contributed to this exploration of identity?

I've lived in a few countries including Korea, Japan, America and currently Poland. But yes, I have to experience and adjust to different cultures. I definitely am a Korean and a woman and many more things. I don't have to doubt my identity just because I stay at different places

away from where I was born. But yes, living away from my home country has definitely affected and contributed to my work and my identity. Sometimes [these impacts] happen naturally, and sometimes I tried to find them.

That is the true experience of freedom: having the most important thing in the world without owning it.

I am an expressionist and I try to keep the traditions alive in terms of traditional Asian art influences and being completely free to use any material. I scratch the surface, I place it on top of uneven surfaces, I write words in different languages on it, I take something from the elements and make it my own. I take in the idea and concept of modern American art and digest it – make it my own. And I enjoy being an Asian female artist living outside Asia who's not afraid to make artworks, and who's not relying on the stereotyped idea of being "exotic." And I enjoy meeting people who would not see me particularly as Asian or female. From all my experiences, I try to adopt as many things as I can find and explore my identity.

You've said that your work is influenced by Korean Shamanism, and that art can transform emotion into different forms of energy. Do you find that creating art does this for you, or is it something you project onto viewers with your paintings?

Most of my works are influenced by Korean shamanism. It addresses negative emotions or sadness that can happen in our lives. Most of the problems we have could also happen to anyone. I am into how to survive when those negative feelings or emotions arise, how to get over them, how I can touch [others'] emotions and drag them out, and how to turn [the emotions] into other energies that are acceptable in the society. When I create art, I am merely a medium. So I'd say I might project it on viewers with my artworks.

Do you find yourself feeling the most attached to the your most recent works?

I don't think so. I always work with same intensity. And I find myself feeling attached to all of my artworks the same.

This year you spent over 12 hours a day for two months making your 20.4 meter long painting for 'Culture City of East Asia 2017' at the Kyoto Art Center. Can you elaborate on this experience and the painting you created?

It was such a meaningful time for me because Kyoto is where I spent more than 8 years for studying and making art. I pursued my dream for the first time as an artist in Kyoto. And the 'Culture City of East Asia 2017' exhibition invited artists from Korea, China and Japan, which rarely happens. I stayed in Kyoto for two months. During my stay, my work schedule was pretty much the same as the first time I lived there so it let me go back to [my] beginning as an artist. I made 20.4 meter (17 panels) long artwork and it's my biggest work so far. It's a mixed media artwork made with fabric foam and oil-paints, and I melted Styrofoam and polyester fabrics with fire. The process was such a violent [one], and produced much toxic air. I kept working like crazy over 12 hours a day because I didn't want to waste any time, so I only had a shake for lunch. The whole process was a devotion. I am quite proud of what I have devoted to this project and the amount of time I spent on it.

There are some elements you can notice in the 17 panels. You can see a skull with flowers, an atomic bomb with tons of eyes, rainbow, running skulls and screaming naked people that almost look like meat, and the screen is full of flames. The strange unidentifiable elements in my artworks are neither human nor complete forms of motifs. I used those motifs for indescribable emotions, such as sadness, fear and pleasure. [These emotions] harmonize and collide with each other; good and evil are swallowed up and energies of different vectors appear and disappear, constantly and repeatedly.

Korea, Japan and China have had bad relationships in the past. Sometimes wars or terrible events are caused by destiny and sometimes we become the judge of matters of life and death, which normally is out of our hands. In those times, art is absolutely powerless. But I think that's exactly why the fundamental power of art is required. Art requires acknowledging the reality, new understanding of liveliness, predicting the future, and passing on the skills that can help people through the frustrating times they may face in life. I named this painting *We Were Ugly*, using the past tense because I want it to mean that there is hope. We still are ugly sometimes though.

Your methods are often unorthodox, not totally along the lines of 'traditional' painting and sculpture. When did you start experimenting with mediums and which materials do you gravitate towards naturally?

It totally depends on each work. A panel painting using oil or acrylic takes the longest time from shaping the ideas, selecting a motif, drawing and deleting. The more time I spend on my art, the more I feel attached to it but it also requires lots of time and patience. The artworks that require fabrics and layering processes, or the ones using a mixed media [such as] fabrics and foams takes time and energy so there are health risks...some of my work are finished in one day and some of them take longer than a year depending on the features.

The process, the concept and the visuals of each artwork are important but size is also important in that I consider physical contact with my artwork very important. I believe that people could see strong vibrations arising from physical contact between my body and my artwork, most of all those that I've created by intensely using my hands and feet.

I don't do well when I'm taught by someone else. I always felt like I was slow at school and I couldn't understand what the teacher said because I was thinking something else during class. I was not happy with having to follow the basics....but filled with passion and ideas. So since school, I choose my own rules and my own way – that's the only way that works for me.

Do you think you will explore other mediums in the future such as performance and/or digital media?

I filmed a few performance videos while I was working in Japan, but I have stopped doing it since I left for various reasons. I always go with the flow and follow my instincts when it comes to work, so I don't have specific plans – I can't promise you anything now but I am quite open-minded. So if it's needed for my work, who knows?



*Hyon Gyon in her studio in New York.
Image courtesy of Shin Gallery and Hyon Gyon*

We have seen some amazing photos of your studio spaces. Does your studio setting always look so full of life? How does this add to your creative process?

This is my lifestyle. Should I call myself a minimalist? I don't want to own or collect anything. All I had when I moved to New York was two suitcases and even after 3 years in the city all I had is 6 boxes, that's all.

But when I work, I need to get everything out in the open to feel being surrounded by them. It naturally gets messy when I work but sometimes that disorder and chaos relates to my ideas. I also enjoy wandering around looking for materials, bringing them to my studio, living with them and waiting for the right time to turn them into art. When I am surrounded by materials while I make plans in my head, new ideas about the next work come up, and then they lead to other ideas.

We heard that you've just recently moved to Poland. What's coming up next for you? Do you have any big projects planned for 2018?

The reason I came to Poland is not because of a career opportunity but for personal reasons. However, on the other hand I have expectations about my work in a new environment and this could be an opportunity for me to go into the European art world. Collaborations with other artists, my solo exhibition in New York, and group exhibition in Korea are definitely happening. And we are talking about an exhibition in Europe, which is too early to mention anything about, but if it's decided, it might be a huge project.