

The Shape of Time: Korean Art after 1989

시간의 형태: 1989년 이후 한국 미술

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Philadelphia Museum of Art

2525 Pennsylvania Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19130

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Among several recent major museum exhibitions of Korean art in the United States,¹ *The Shape of Time: Korean Art after 1989*, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, stood out not only for its visually impactful presentation of thoughtfully selected works, but also for providing context for an audience unfamiliar with the recent history of South Korea. Curated by Elisabeth Agro, Curator for American Modern and Contemporary Crafts and Decorative Arts, and Hyunsoo Woo, Deputy Director for Collections and Exhibitions and a specialist in Korean art, the exhibition provided a well-balanced range of works from twenty-eight artists.² While including a variety of lens-based media—photography, film, and new media, the strength of the exhibition lay with craft-oriented works that bespeak

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¹ *The Space Between: The Modern in Korean Art* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (September 11, 2022–February 20, 2023); *Only The Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s* at Guggenheim Museum (September 1, 2023–January 7, 2024); *Korea In Color: A Legacy of Auspicious Images* at the San Diego Museum of Art (October 28, 2023–March 3, 2024); *Lineages: Korean Art at The Met*, Metropolitan Museum of Art (November 6, 2023–October 20, 2024), *Wonders and Witness: Contemporary Photography from Korea* at the Center for Creative Photography, Arizona (November 18, 2023–January 27, 2024).

² In the catalogue, thirty-three artists are included, but the exhibition showed only twenty-eight. The five artists who did not make the final cut due to the budget constraints were Young In Hong, Namdo Kim, Ki-baik Youn, Wookjae Maeng, and Haegue Yang.

“materiality, handmade, and objecthood.”³

The year 1989 is the beginning point of this exhibition, a logical choice not only for Korean politics, but also more widely for geopolitics, as the 1980s was a time of dramatic change toward globalization. South Korea had hosted the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games and the government had lifted its international travel ban on ordinary citizens. The artists in this exhibition were born between 1960 and 1986, and many of them were educated abroad, mainly in Europe and the US. Within the time frame of “after 1989,” the curators play with the concept of time with elasticity and flexibility, heavily influenced by George Kubler (1912–1996)’s “radical rejection of a linear art history” in his seminal book, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962).⁴

While the exhibition explored five themes—transition, tension, displacement, conformity, and feminist resurgence—it was neither rigidly grouped nor thematically presented: the themes arose throughout the exhibition, leaving to the visitor the discovery of commonalities among works.

Just outside the entrance to the exhibition, visitors were welcomed by Sunkoo Yuh (b.1960)’s towering totemic ceramic sculpture, *Monuments for Parents* (2013). Yeondoo Jung (b.1969)’s *Eulji Theater* (2019) greeted the viewer inside. This brightly lit large-scale photograph in a light box measuring nearly thirty-three feet long is an absurdly comic panoramic tableau of the northernmost observatory at the boundary between North and South Korea. Works that highlight the history of South Korea provided the overall context for the exhibition, especially in the early part of the show. Educating the general audience, an introductory video in the first room explained the history of South Korea. Noh Suntag (b.1971)’s series of worn-out funerary photographic portraits of young victims of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement of 1980 provided painfully moving effect. However, the work’s serious quality, due to photography’s inherent indexicality, seemed a bit at odds with the rest of the exhibition, which offered a less overtly political experience. Seoul’s prodigious urbanization and gentrification and its consequent displacement of residents were presented in Kim Juree (b.1980)’s sculpture and Ahn Sekwon (b.1968)’s photographs.

Among especially delightful works were Donghyun Son (b.1980)’s *Portrait of the King series* (2007-8), in which Michael Jackson is depicted in courtly Korean painting techniques seated on

³ Elisabeth Argo and Hyunsoo Woo, “Korean Art in the Long Twenty-First Century,” *The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989* (Philadelphia Museum of Art: New Haven and London), 15.

⁴ Argo and Woo, *Ibid.*, 15. Kubler’s foundational work provided the title for Argo and Woo’s Korean exhibition.

a red throne like the rulers of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). If pictures of the “King of Pop” appealed to the general audience, Oh Jaewoo (b. 1983)’s video *Let’s Do National Gymnastics!* (2011) brought hilarious collective memories to Koreans who had experienced compulsory morning exercises at South Korean schools between 1977 and 1999. These repetitive daily routines indoctrinated innocent children into conformity and a collective national identity that continues to impact Korean society today. Perhaps the most daring work in the show was Chang Jia (b.1973)’s photograph, *Standing Up Peeing* (2006), which presented naked women urinating while standing, a challenge to social gender norms.

Interventions by the artists or exposure to the elements were important factors in the exhibition. Kim Juree’s architectural clay structures, inspired by the artist’s personal experience of losing her studio during the demolition of the Seoul neighborhood Hwigyeong-dong in the early 2000s, were designed to disintegrate by pouring water over them throughout the exhibition. Inhwon Oh (b.1965)’s site-specific installation, *Where He Meets Him, Philadelphia*, consisted of names of gay bars and clubs in Philadelphia written in incense powder on the gallery floor.⁵ Oh’s installation subtly yet powerfully protests the social conformity imposed by Korea’s Confucian tradition. Ephemeral site-specific works were evident in a specially commissioned work by Meekyoung Shin (b.1967), *Eastern Deities Descended* (2023), rendered from thousands of bars of Neutrogena soap. The work is based on John Gregory (1879–1958)’s never realized 1926 sculpture proposal for the museum’s south wing pediment.⁶ In Shin’s partial realization of Gregory’s proposal, the soap sculptures brought visitors’ olfactory senses to the experience, as one could smell the Neutrogena soap from a distance. Shin’s three statues were meant to disintegrate in the outdoor elements.

Viewer engagement was particularly encouraged where visitors could sit on the chrome-plated chairs by Ha Ji-hoon (b.1972) while looking up at the magnificent installation of Do Ho Suh (b.1962)’s 2012 house of silk organza suspended from the ceiling. This transportable fabric house is a replica of the artist’s childhood home in Seoul. Ha’s *Jari* (meaning ‘a place to sit’), also made in 2012, is a modular seating arrangement resembling the contours of the mountainous topography of Korea. The

⁵ In other venues, the artist had burned the powder to reveal the bars’ names, but the museum denied permission due to safety concerns.

⁶ Gregory’s sculptural proposal was halted due to his limited knowledge of his subject and his Western cultural bias. Moreover, the stock market crash of October 1929 that triggered the Great Depression suspended construction of the building’s exterior along with the sculptural program for the south pediment.

work's sensuous curves were inviting to visitors, and I saw many children lying and playing on it. A very clever curatorial decision, it encouraged visitors to peer into the interior of Suh's fabric house: nostalgia, placement, and displacement were thus intertwined.

The Shape of Time: Korean Art after 1989 provided a rich survey of Contemporary Korean Art while educating visitors about Korean history in accessible ways. Every work in the show delivered something essential about Korea, touching upon the various aspects of the nation's culture and history. The exhibition contributed to an understanding of Korea's rich culture and artistic expressions through the efforts of some of the best art practitioners of our time. The exhibition is scheduled to travel to the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where it will run from March 23 through June 23, 2024.



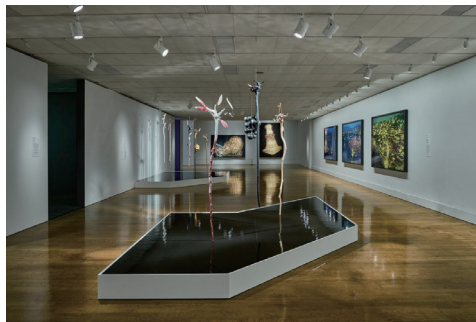
Do Ho Suh, *Seoul Home/Seoul Home/Kanazawa Home/Beijing Home/ Pohang Home/Gwangju Home/ Philadelphia Home*, silk organza, metal armature, 2012. Ha Ji-hoon, *JARI*, 2012, chrome-plated chairs. Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Hyewon Yi, October 19, 2023.



Installation view, Yeondoo Jung, *Eulji Theater*, 2019. *The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989*. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Timothy Tiebout, 2023.



Works by Donghyun Son, Kyeok Kim, Installation view of *The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989*. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Timothy Tiebout, 2023.



Works by Kyungah Ham, Minouk Lim, Sekwon Ahn. *The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989*. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Timothy Tiebout, 2023.



Kim Juree, *Evanescent Landscape – Hwiyong*: Philadelphia, 2023. *The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989*. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Timothy Tiebout, 2023.



Meekyung Shin, *Eastern Deities Descended*, 2023. *The Shape of Time: Korean Art After 1989*. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo: Timothy Tiebout, 2023.