

Interview with Jin-me Yoon Canadian Contemporary Artist

Interview by Isobel Sinclair



Isobel: The theme of this issue of the Lyre is 'On The Record'. What role does the 'record', whether historical or personal, play in your art?

Jin-me Yoon: Art for me - in the broadest sense involves externalizing in forms - material or immaterial - into the realm of the public where viewers meet the work with their experience. I have been transformed by artworks that are now curated into my body. In this way, being an artist and a recipient of the art of others, is an immense privilege and responsibility. To both record and witness a particular

historical moment with all your senses, intellect and affects. This moment is an intense time. We're kind of like canaries in the coal mine, so to speak. I don't mean to sound romantic, as I think artists can be very tough. Not in all cases, because being an artist can mean so many different things. But I think that's something I appreciate when I look back to other artists, thinkers and writers from other historical moments. Artists have in whatever ways, whatever forms, whatever topics, whatever focus, put that on the record. Witnessing is a kind of act that's an active way of being in the world without a kind of hubris,

I guess, without the assumption that you have the right answers. Because I don't. I'm willing to take chances. To say, I want to question this. I want to be able to talk about this. I don't want to keep silent, because I think when you have been silenced – or you don't even realize you've been silenced — that's the most horrific condition.

IS: Continuing on the idea of the record, do you have any reflections on your role as a Korean Canadian artist? I am particularly interested in how you raise questions of identity and belonging in your photograph series *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996) and *Souvenirs of the Self* (1991).

JY: I want to shift this question away from narrow ideas about 'identity' and 'belonging'. Both works address the very terms of inclusion into a particular formation of Canada as a white settler colonial state. It's an open-ended question that involves a commitment and responsibility that we're struggling with reckoning as we are with is fact. For me belonging and community can be overused to mask the conditions that are about a management of terms of inclusion and the exclusion. I want to instead welcome other ways of co-existing and a sense of well-being

through being 'with' and 'alongside' in difference and not in sameness. And this includes being alongside non-humans in an expanded sense. Yes, we can enjoy the sense of being loved and attachment that 'belonging' can promote but it is across many forms of attachment and not necessarily tied to one particular aspect of one's identity. We see potentially the outcome of this manipulation of populist tendencies that then succumbs to right wing nationalism, facism and authoritarian rule. More war and violence against 'others' in the name of belonging. Because I'm a feminist, I am also very reluctant to sign up for anything wholeheartedly in terms of identity. And when people say my work is about identity politics, that's so lazy. And that has shifted what identity politics means. Coming here to Canada, people have misunderstood my work as if I'm saying we belong here too, but that was never quite my intentions. So, you know, when people say, oh, how could you dare do that to our beloved Emily Carr or Lauren Harris? They were just looking at themselves in the mirror. I wasn't doing anything. [I] simply put Korean figures from my community, which was a made-up community. They project that we're a totalized community. No, we're from a

broken place of war and displacement and dispersal. And we all come here. The reason why you have to get along is because you have to survive, you know? You have to survive, right? I think it's complicated and messy. Mixing is messy. And I think we should grapple with it. We should struggle with it. We should be fraught but also be fed by it, by the possibilities of being together in a different way. And that's been my entire project, you know. And it still is. And I do that because I think we should try for a different kind of future than the one that we're signing up for right now.

IS: Your art often features members of your family. I was wondering about the ideas and context behind this - is it an active connection between your personal life and your professional life?

JY: My family, friends and community are living histories. I don't privilege scales: micro and macro. Intimacy and distance coexist. Though there are tension between my personal and professional life given all the demands, I don't distinguish types of life. Life is life. The same ethical principles guide my private life - which I protect - and my public professional life.

IS: Do you have any reflections on your years of teaching as part of the School for the Contemporary Art faculty at Simon Fraser University? What do you see as fundamental parts of teaching?

JY: Teaching has been a great joy. It's been tough sometimes when I came into the institution in the early 90s. And there were a lot of struggles. And I think being in my body and the kind of stereotypes to perform the model minority and also the emotional labour of women in institutions. In terms of representation, a lot is foisted on you. You want to take that up in a good way to uplift your students, especially marginalized, underrepresented, queer students. I kept learning because I was in the privileged situation of being alongside my students, and I think I continue that. I will always do that part of being because I get energy from it. It's like kind of being a vampire. I get energy from young people, but they also get something from me. And I see that, that there's a kind of reassurance that, you know, certain experiences have been noted or on the record, right? And also that I welcome being challenged as long as we're respectful.

IS: You have accomplished so much in recent years with your exhibit at the

Vancouver Art Gallery, the Scotiabank Prize, and the release of a biography. I was wondering what your thoughts were on how far you have come since your days as a student at Emily Carr? How has your perception of art changed as you became more solidified in your field?

JY: That's a large question as the only constant is change. But the digitalization of all aspects of life would one of the most singular defining difference from when I was a student in analog times and now. This is too big to get into unless we were to do a series of conversations about this topic.

IS: I attended your exhibit at the Evergreen Cultural Centre in Coquitlam where you used audio recordings of a workshop you had previously held. What was fascinating to me was how the arrangement of the speakers meant that everyone had a different experience. How do you think people should think of and interpret and experience your art?

JY: Just open to it. Then if you feel further curiosity, look into it further by doing research. For example the sites and the histories, formal aspects and art historical alignments or influences etc.

I think Canada is in the process and lots of complicated and sometimes contradictory ways grappling with its formation and continuing exercise of state power in many instances as a white settler colonial state. And I think that's just a fact. And I think that was something that I wanted to probe because it seemed to me that art historically, let's say, in the instance of landscape painting or thinking about the way that place was represented, you know, that's a group of 67.

And then there's gender aspects and whiteness that comes into it. But Emily Carr, in fact, was one of my very favorite artists. I don't expect artists to be outside the conditions of their own historical formation.