



SEOUL MAN

Paper and paint are the chosen medium of contemporary Korean artist CHUN KWANG YOUNG, but it's not your typical oeuvre. PAYAL UTTAM delves into art whose beauty transcends the two-dimensional

THROUGH A GATE and into a clearing in a forest outside Seoul lies a series of wooden steps. Snaking past trees and wild flowers, they lead to a lone glass studio with a dim entranceway. A white paper orb dangles low by the door. Inside, a small army of assistants pads around in house slippers, moving through labyrinthine rooms. This is the sanctuary of one of Korea's most celebrated artists, Chun Kwang Young. Here he spends hours uninterrupted transforming tiny packets of mulberry paper into monumental sculptures.

Recently these paper structures have been cropping up everywhere. Museums and galleries worldwide are snapping up his pieces at a quickening pace. "It's quite dramatic, the impact of his art," says Soyoung Lee, managing director of Seoul Auction in Hong Kong, which featured his work in its private sale last month. "He's among the most well known Korean artists abroad." This year ART HK invited Chun to create a public installation; his moon-like sculpture suspended above the ground drew throngs of visitors to the art fair.

Contemporary Korean art has become increasingly popular in Hong Kong of late. Evelyn Lin, Sotheby's head of contemporary Asian art, says, "We try to introduce new works and new [Korean] artists every season, while our collectors continue to familiarize themselves with the works of masters such as Chun Kwang Young."

With exhibitions around the globe, it's rare to find Chun in Seoul these days. Equally rare is an afternoon meeting with the artist. Spending up to 10 hours a day cocooned in the wilderness, he takes a meditative approach to his practice. "I don't want anyone to break my artwork time," says Chun solemnly. Sitting in the foyer of his workroom, he comes across as warm yet slightly absent – a compact, bespectacled man with a paint-spattered shirt, suggesting a morning engrossed in work.

Chun explains that a single piece can take him several months to complete. The process begins by wrapping triangular pieces of Styrofoam with pages from historic Korean books and manuscripts. Made from mulberry bark, the paper is covered in traditional text. Chun then binds "threads" of twisted paper around the triangular parcels. Finally, he assembles the packets into sculptures and paintings coloured with vegetable dyes. What results is a mash-up of ancient Korean customs and contemporary art. The works often look like lunar landscapes with craters or crystal formations.

Asked what inspired him to use these painstakingly small parcels, Chun smiles and speaks of his childhood. As a boy, he remembers spending hours in his uncle's herbal medicine shop gazing at the ceiling. Dangling from the rafters were remedies bound in mulberry paper. Chun describes Korea as a "wrapping culture," while he sees Western countries as "box cultures" – when objects are wrapped



in paper, the proportions are flexible, whereas boxes tend to fit a standard number of items. For Chun, this is a metaphor for the warmth of Korean people. As if on cue, a young studio assistant shuffles through the door, offering green tea in rustic ceramic cups.

Chun reaches for his glass and I notice a series of small television screens flickering with red lights and psychedelic Buddhas on his right (an installation by fellow Korean artist Nam June Paik). Diverting my gaze, Chun points to an abstract red canvas on a different wall. "Do you know why that painting is there?" he asks in his Korean-inflected English. "It says 'Don't forget in 1973, you were in a really terrible place. If you are established now don't get excited, work harder.'" He looks at the painting early in the morning when he enters his studio and late at night to remind himself of his troubled roots.

In sharp contrast to his current lifestyle as a globetrotting artist, Chun began his career barely scraping together enough to eat. "I was just 48 kilos and doing really dirty work for little money," he recalls, shaking his head. Defying his father's wishes for him to become a lawyer or doctor, Chun moved to Philadelphia to do a master's degree in fine arts in 1969. "Korea was very behind at the time," he says. "People preferred realistic art and semi-abstract work." In the US, Chun was free to explore avant-garde techniques. By 1971, he was beginning to find his footing in the American art scene, but the moment he graduated, his visa expired. "They told me to go home," he says. "It felt like the sky was falling." Despite the financial strain, he was determined to stay in the country, and slipped under the radar as an illegal immigrant.

He worked in a clothing factory as a screen-printer, earning about US\$40 a week. Every time he received his salary, Chun says, a battle would rage in his mind. Drawing an imaginary map on the sofa, he pokes the fabric demarcating his home on one end, an art store on the other and the factory in the middle. He would begin walking home to bring

the money to his family, but invariably he would change course and end up at the art store. Spending US\$30 on paints, he'd return home with US\$10.

"My heart would be pounding and I'd ask myself, 'How could I do this?'" Chun says. "But I told myself, 'Why I am here in America? Because I am a painter. I want to gain some assets to bring back to my country.'" Eventually, 40 of his friends banded together and petitioned the government to grant Chun residency. Surprisingly, six months later he received a court date, and the outcome was successful. No longer living underground, Chun began making inroads into galleries across the country.

The persistence that lifted Chun from the lowest ebb in his life continues to shape his art today. At age 67, he shows no signs of slowing down. Memories of what he put his family through remain fresh in his mind and keep him grounded: "Life is just once, so I don't want to waste even one hour. It is my duty to leave lots of traces as an artist."



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