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## CONSTRUCTING STORIES

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*We catch up with Korean artist Chun Kwang Young, whose work with mulberry paper has evolved over more than two decades*

**M**agnetic, sometimes disconcerting, Chun Kwang Young's paper sculptures compel some sort of reaction. The 70-year-old's works are represented in galleries across the world. In Singapore, they can be found at Art Plural Gallery. The Korean artist, who moved to the United States in his twenties to pursue his Masters in Fine Arts, found himself feeling alienation and loneliness there. While drawn to Abstract Expressionism, it wasn't enough for him. He found himself questioning his identity as an artist if he were to delve deeper in the art movement. "Those feelings made me find my own art and identity," he says, which led him to explore Korean mulberry paper as his form of expression, and *The Aggregation* series was born.

Made from a laborious process, mulberry paper is indigenous to Korean culture. Chun's dramatic works utilise mulberry paper from old books, wrapped around small Styrofoam wedges and tied with strings. He works on his reliefs and towering sculptures in his studio, a stripped-down contemporary building surrounded by a large compound filled with magnificent trees, located in a quiet rural town.

***What do you find most challenging about the works?***

Creating an *Aggregation* piece requires an enormous amount of time, as it is labour-intensive work. Therefore, I need to have patience. I am challenged both physically and mentally when I focus on the

work for long, especially when I created *Aggregation 06 — JN025*, a huge sculpture work. I wanted to include Korean history and agony in this work. I was so absorbed in it that I became challenged not only physically, but also emotionally. It was sort of like re-experiencing the history again through my mind and body.

***The paper is taken from discarded books that are up to a century in age. How difficult a decision has it been to use them?***

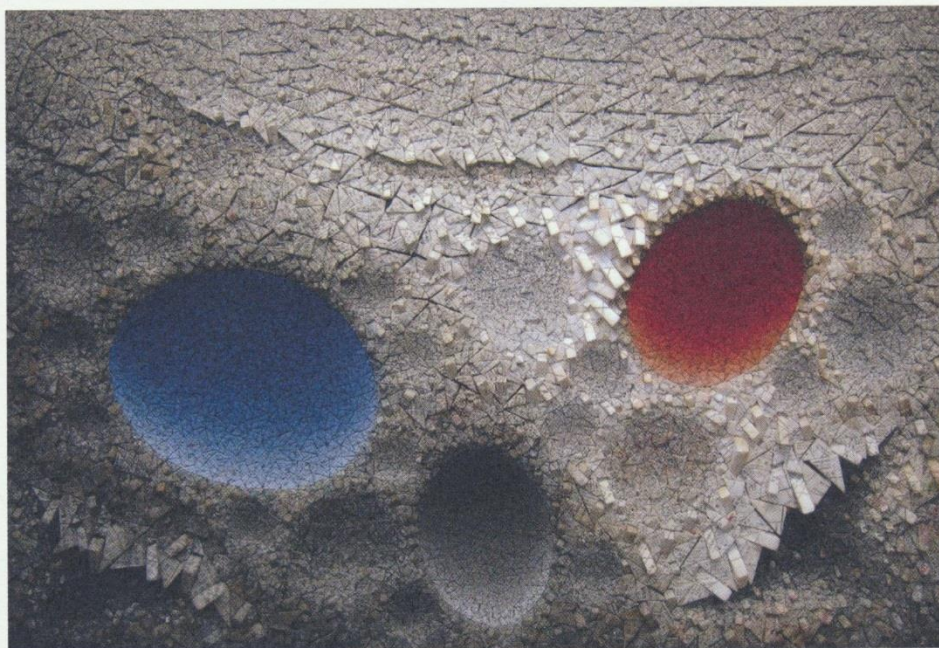
Old books have their own story through time and space. I wanted to embrace the history of people who read the books, touched them and thought about them. Also, the wrapped form of the paper was a very familiar scene from my childhood spent in an herbal medicine shop. Using them in my works was a very natural result and decision.

***How many triangle pieces are there in your works?***

Actually, I do not exactly know how many are included in the works. I guess, approximately, a 163 cm by 131 cm size work involves about 6,000 to 7,000 pieces of triangular forms. But it depends on the work's size and style.

***How does mulberry paper help to tell your story?***

I want to tell about Korean history, culture and identity through the *Aggregation* works. At first, mulberry



paper — which is the Korean traditional paper — and the contents of the books are in accordance with my intention. These books were read by Korean ancestors, and they were deeply affected by the contents of books. The old mulberry paper and books are re-contextualised through my Aggregation works. Consequently, mulberry paper, old books, Korean people and Aggregation affect one another mutually.

*You were deeply influenced by Western art, especially in the years spent in the USA. But would you say that being in America gave you a deeper appreciation for your culture?*

When I first arrived, I was captivated by Abstract Expressionism. I created such style of works for years. But as time passed, I felt like I was just an imitator of Western art and I struggled to find my own style and identity as a Korean artist. If I did not learn and practise the works of Western art style, I would not have contemplated my country's culture and history. The experience in the USA was a sort of turning point that made me explore my own art and identity.

*Tell me about your artistic inclinations when you were young.*

When I was a young child, I enjoyed observing nature and drawing them. I thought I was good at drawing but

my father never praised my pictures. He did not want me to be an artist. But my friends and teachers in school said that I have a talent in art. Such praise motivated me to not give up my dream to be an artist.

*Most of your works in the series used to be in black and white. Then, those produced around 2004 looked like lunar landscapes because you wanted to express your criticism and anger over society's treatment of the environment. In 2008, your works in colours were described as a reflection of human possibilities. How would you describe your views towards society or the world in general today?*

Yes, my works include certain attitudes toward society. Also, I try to embrace changes in society today. Thus, it could be read with other various points of view. In my new works, I reflect the changes in technological phenomenon today. Although I do not use the technological element in my work directly, some critics find certain notions of information theory, pixel and bit photography, and grid network, which are often mentioned in the contemporary world. In this regard, technological developments in our society influence not only my concept, but also critics and their interpretation of my work. I think this is a reciprocal effect.

