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Assembling Korean Identity with Kwang-Young Chun

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South Korean artist [Kwang-Young Chun](#) has devoted two decades to his “Aggregation” series. He uses Korean mulberry paper to wrap thousands of individual plastic-foam triangles and meticulously ties them together before gluing the pieces onto a two-dimensional surface or assembling them into free-standing installations.



Chun Kwang Young, Aggregation 10 – MY016 BLUE AND RED, 2010.
Mixed media with Korean mulberry paper. 131 x 195 cm.

“My “Aggregation” is completed when small triangular units are accumulated. Each triangle piece wrapped in mulberry paper is the basic unit of information,” explained Chun. “They are the basic cells of life that only exist in art. By attaching these pieces one by one to a two-dimensional surface, I wanted to express how the basic units of information can create harmony and conflict with each other.”

Rich in social, political and cultural narratives, Chun’s work expresses the plight of the modern man who is driven to devastation by materialism, competition, conflict and destruction. “I tried to transform my canvas and the mulberry paper pieces into a window that reflects the history of human life. All units and the natural, social groups they constitute are dynamically conflicting with each other, and I wanted to chronically document the force and direction of their energy.”

Chun said just as two nations at war constantly transform their border, leaving scars on their neighboring countries or just as tens of millions of years ago the earth’s tectonic plates collided, creating deep ocean trenches and high mountains, the small units of mulberry paper in the universe he conceived create projections and holes all over the surface.

The collision between each triangular units represent the clash between different thoughts, ideas and opinion on both an individual and societal level, while the mass collision represents a greater clash of events that leaves permanent changes and deep scars.

His earlier works from the series tended to be in monochromatic black-and-white or sepia. By using subtle difference in colour and shades, the irregularly deployed triangular form gives only an echo of light. He started to use striking color in his later works: "The loud colours such as blue or orange-red radiates a certain impression of light."

Twenty-two works from his "Aggregation" series will be on display at [Art Plural Gallery](#) in Singapore from 29 May to 27 June in an exhibition titled Assemblage.



Chun Kwang Young, Aggregation 13 – MA003, 2013.
Mixed media with Korean mulberry paper. 151 X 151 cm.

Born in 1944, Chun grew up in Hongcheon County, in South Korea's Gangwon-do province. After receiving a Bachelors of Fine Arts from Hong-Ik University, Seoul in 1968, he moved to Philadelphia the following year to pursue his postgraduate degree. It was in America that he began his career as an [Abstract Expressionist](#) artist.

"As a foreigner, I experienced the sense of confusion, anxiety and sorrow. I wanted to express my emotions through art and Abstract Expressionism seemed to be very appropriate."

Chun acknowledged that his work was deeply affected by the social and political events of the 1970s. Issues of race and class which he had experienced firsthand as a foreigner in America too left their mark.

"I explored the strong coloration of the 70s and 80s, and it expanded to the all-over patterns of the late 80s and early 90s. Collision of coloration and brushstrokes made the tension, and through this I could freely express my inner conflict, both historical and cultural."

Despite a successful career as an artist in America, Chun grew increasingly dissatisfied with Abstract Expressionism. Eager to develop his own artistic language and identity as a Korean artist, he journeyed back to his homeland in a bid to resolve his inner struggle.



The seminal moment for Chun occurred on a late spring day in 1995. Fighting off a bad cold for a few days, Chun was sitting at home when he stared at a glass of water and a packet of medicine that his wife had brought to him. Taking the packet into his hands, he felt the pills through the thin paper packaging and was suddenly struck by a childhood memory that he had long forgotten.

Growing up, Chun was a sickly child and his mother used to take him to the Chinese doctor in their neighbourhood. “I never liked the place because of the strong odor and the threatening sight of acupuncture needles.”

While the doctor checked his pulse, he would fix his gaze upon the ceiling from which hang numerous mulberry paper packages each containing different medicinal herbs. Known as hanji, Korean mulberry paper is deeply rooted in Korean tradition and was at one time a ubiquitous household material used not only for wrapping medicine but also food.

Chun always had the desire to communicate his art through a Korean sentiment and the image of the mulberry packages suspended from the ceiling became a new pivotal theme in his art practice – one that he would continuously explore for over twenty years.

The exhibition will run from 29 May to 27 June at Art Plural Gallery at 38 Armenian Street, Singapore.

IMAGES COURTESY OF ART PLURAL GALLERY

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