

The artist carving the city a Korean legacy

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Page 1 of 6

Kim Yun Shin channels the universe through a chainsaw at her workshop in Buenos Aires' Korean neighbourhood.



You might not expect Buenos Aires with its Creole and European heritage to have a large Korean presence, but the neighbourhood of Flores is home to an energetic Korean community with excellent restaurants serving bulgogi, bibimbap and kimchi, and in turn inspiring the local chefs, shops selling K-pop merchandise, a church and an intriguing museum dedicated to the work of a fascinating artist and a pillar of the local community who was attracted to Argentina because of its trees but fell in love with its people.

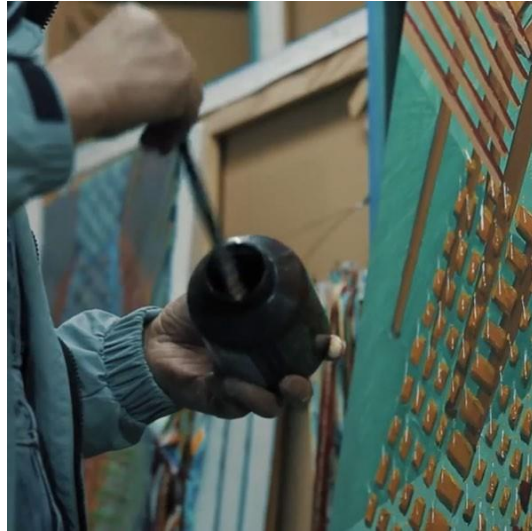
A quiet residential street in the neighbourhood of Flores seems unlikely place for a museum – and a chainsaw seems an unlikely tool through which to channel a communion with nature and the universe – but this is where Kim Yun Shin creates and exhibits her transcendent, exploratory artwork.

To Buenos Aires with love

Kim Yun Shin was born in 1935 in the city of Wonsan, now in North Korea, during Japanese occupation. Part of her family escaped to the south after partition in 1945 and she studied art in Seoul. She went on to study in Paris during the sixties then returned to Seoul to teach at university for 20 years. She moved to Buenos Aires in the 1980s to stay with a relative. Why? She liked the availability of wood to create sculptures with and was offered an exhibition at the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art as a starter, but then she fell in love with the people.

"I arrived here and found this wild nature and open land, and nice friendly people, and I felt the warmth of the people," she says through a colleague who acts as her translator. Behind her a photograph of Argentina's Pope Francis tacked up on the wall of her workshop at the back of the museum is perhaps a sign not only of her religion – raised a Buddhist she converted to Catholicism – but also her pride in her adopted country, of which she gained nationality in 1987. Even now she still speaks little Spanish, but says she always has someone to help her be understood. Armed with her chainsaw and following an unconventional career, might make one see Kim as a punk artist, but she says she's not rebelling against anyone. She works diligently in from 8am to 8pm in her workshop in profound silence and calm – in summer she makes sculptures with wood and in winter when it's cooler she stays inside and paints. "I pour my thoughts into the wood, not with violence but with my heart and soul," she says. "Within this, I ask who I am. The answer is that I am nothing, and I am nature. I am Kim Yun Shin but I'm not Kim Yun Shin - that's only a name."









Totems from childhood memories

Kim Yun Shin's early work soon evolved towards abstraction which looking back she now things was inspired by childhood experiences. She remembers as a young child when her brother disappeared from her life because he had to do military service, that every day her mother would take her to seek fresh water from the mountainside and would pray for her son.

"She would take stones and pile them up then light a candle," Kim says. "This action stayed with me, the action of my mother praying, trusting, seeking the help of something else."

This search the inspires sculptures in which by cutting away and removing pieces of wood, Kim creates unplanned works of art, feeling her way and respecting the natural form of the wood, often with the idea of vibrations, shadows and echoes expanding "I love nature so I always contemplate the wood's natural state and leave in this element part of its natural state. This is why you can see sculptures with bark. Cutting away pieces, something is formed and that's where I start to work on this idea of what it not there that makes that something is there. We can think of my movement as energy that emanates from me, whether I'm painting a colour or cutting a line, and this is a vibration that expands."

A legacy for the community

Buenos Aires' Baek-Ku, as the Korean neighbourhood is known among its residents, is small, extending along Avenida Carabobo, between the avenues Eva Perón and Castaños, but has a distinct identity. Kim has gained a respected position in the community and now sees her work as a legacy for the city. "The Korean community has a strong kinship and puts a lot of energy into everything it does. I want to leave this world of my work as a legacy like other immigrants have left this children as a contribution to the city, and a contribution to the Argentine community of this Korean drive."

Kim Yun Shin says that though she may have turned her back on many things, the city has given her something more important. "I left many things maybe, and in Korea you can live well as a teacher, but here I have the freedom to create and I have happiness. I live happy."