

SUKI SEOKYEONG KANG

October, 2019 | By Olivia Sand

page 1 of 3

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Suki Seokyeong Kang (b 1977, Korea) addresses sculpture, installation, video, and painting in an original and unconventional way as she draws on Korean traditions from the 1700 and 1800s for the basis of her practice. Relying on a traditional court dance, a traditional mat and a traditional music notation system, her work is open to a wide range of interpretations as the narrative conveyed by her pieces is evocative and rich. Her various works offer a redefinition of space and time, trying to bring together the interests of individual and collective voices. Featured in this year's Venice Biennale, her pieces should be experienced, or 'activated', bringing the installations alive. A dynamic artist, Suki Seokyeong Kang is curious about her surroundings and history, eager to translate her findings or observations into her practice. An accomplished artist, she describes her undertaking to the Asian Art Newspaper.

Asian Art Newspaper: Your work has strong connections with Korean traditions, featuring the traditional mat (*hwamunseoek*) and court dance (*chunaengmu*). How did you first come across these two traditions and how did you introduce them into your work?
Suki Seokyeong Kang: While at high school and university, I studied traditional Korean painting. Traditional painting has a different approach to that of making a contemporary piece. The former is much more about using a certain

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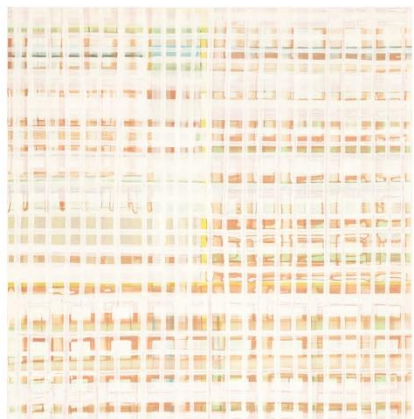
Suki Seokyeong Kang. Photo: Kim Young Hoon

kind of training, being able to absorb and read a given text, think about nature, and how to see the landscape according to traditional criteria. Considering this long heritage, I found it extremely difficult to complete traditional painting whilst also identifying and understanding my roots as an artist. In a way, I always considered the tradition as a kind of invisible territory where, all throughout my studies, I had to keep digging in order to learn about history, to find out where I stood within that history, and with which kind of tradition I was dealing. All these elements that I tried to identify from the past, within this unknown territory, are also essential in determining my future path as an artist.

Even if today my work looks contemporary, the very traditional themes and way of thinking, which emanate from studying traditional Korean painting, are deeply rooted in my work. For example, the piece exhibited at Art Basel Unlimited

Continued on page 4

4 Profile



Mora 20 x 120 — Bold #02 (2018), gouache on canvas, 120 x 120 x 8 cm, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Kyongtae Kim. All images provided by Kukje Gallery

earlier this year featured and referred to a dance called chunaengmu, a very old traditional court dance.

I am always fascinated to read and discover such traditions, their history, choreography and notation system as it was used in the 1700s and 1800s. In my practice, I make it a point to investigate the past, as it becomes a map essential in determining and understanding the future. In my opinion, every individual has their own tradition and history, but all too often we do not know how to relate to one another. In this context, I want to find out how I can absorb my tradition while living in today's contemporary world. Once I have identified my roots and a better understanding of the future, my goal is to share my conclusions with the viewers through a common structure. For example, the court dance chunaengmu (in reference to my work *Black Mat Oriole*) is a significant dance from the Joseon dynasty and has a unique platform, a stage called *hwamunseok* in the form of a square mat. At the time, before proceeding with my work, I forced myself to find out about the choreographic notation of chunaengmu. Although I did not recognise this traditional dance at first sight, I found the background information by reading ancient texts. The chunaengmu highlights the form of the stage – basically a square. This form of the invisible (or the visible) traditional square was used to perform the solo dance and translates in my practice as if I myself were standing on this small square. The idea was to share the idea of the restraint of the square as a boundary, or as territory where we

can live together using the form of the mat, I place great importance on the fact that the mat is 'acted' by people performing on it.

To better explain how I incorporate these traditions in my practice, I need to highlight the ancient concept of 'true view' that was used from the 1700s according to Korean tradition to complete landscape painting. It emphasises the importance of inspiration drawn from natural landscapes to convey the harmony between man and nature. I rely on the concept of true view, not as in ancient times, depicting a traditional landscape featuring mountains, but to capture the truth according to what I see here and now. I attempt to take the concept to a more universal level, creating a universal way of viewing things. Therefore, the mat that was used in traditional court dances in the 1700s now represents the present moment – where we stand together for the future. These ideas are fundamental to the piece *Black Mat Oriole*, where the 'black mat' is the title of my square platform and 'oriole' is the name of a bird. Within the chunaengmu, there are three different letters combined to describe the spring oriole dance. To me, the oriole represents the individual on a black mat.

AAN: How do Korean people view your appropriation of these traditions?

SSK: The *Black Mat Oriole* project took five years of research. It started with me learning this centuries old dance, which today has evolved into being more contemporary than what it used to be originally. Actually, Korean audiences are not that familiar with these traditions. I try

to perpetuate our ancient traditions as well as certain crafts – the *hwamunseok*, for example. I work with ladies who are still making the mats according to the original craft. Instead of people just acknowledging tradition, I would rather get people gradually to acknowledge the present moment and their individuality in a larger context.

AAN: You have completed a number of videos highlighting these traditions. Do you appear in any of the videos of the performances?

SSK: No, mainly because I have not been showing any of my older work. In my archive, I have a number of pieces that were 'activated' with my body.

AAN: Has your work always related to these traditions, which served as the fundamentals of your practice? You seem to have gradually built on them to create your current corpus of work. Do you agree?

SSK: Absolutely. As I have worked in traditional figurative landscape painting as well as in calligraphy, history keeps adding to my practice allowing me to navigate the true-view moment (capturing the truth towards what I see, here and now) in which I exist. This leads me to think of myself as an artist in a vertical way, while making the work in different materials in a more horizontal way. This is how my practice is taking shape.

AAN: Your work also deals with time and space, two elements man wants to control. In a way, you address both, the individual voice, but also the collective voice. How can they be brought together in your work although the individual approach does not always reflect the interest of the collective voice?

SSK: As far as I can tell, every artist is thinking about time. In my case, I view time in relation to myself and in relation to history. Initially, I struggled a great deal as to why I had to learn history together with all these traditions that I found quite boring. Regarding traditional painting, there is a rich heritage which went from generation to generation that serves as my textbook. I consider a painting as a way of identifying where I stand in terms of time and space, or more

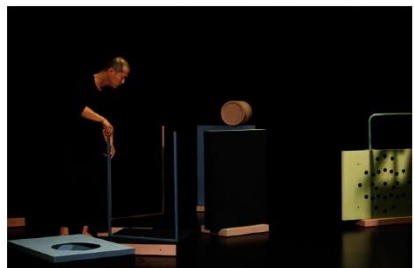


Grandmother Tower –
tow #18-01 (2018),
thread on reproduced
industrial dish carrier,
woven dyed
hwamunseok,
painted steel, wheel,
88.6 x 58.5 x 253 cm.
Collection Mudam
Luxembourg –
Musée d'Art Moderne
Grand-Duc Jean,
donation 2018 –
Balaise Group.
Photo:
Suki Seogyong Kang

precisely, to define where I stand between tradition and the contemporary. Time and space have become the guidelines I follow, not only to complete a piece, but also to move forward as an artist. This is how to live and balance the contemporary within tradition. It is precisely this way of thinking that leads me to rely on the form of the grid, the size of the square, the size of the notation. Every square-

within-the-square system used in the traditional way gives me a potential individual space in which to express my voice. The movement inside the square can, for example, be the *Black Mat* that on a broader scale becomes a collective simply by sharing this individual moment.

To further explain how I address the concepts of time and space on an individual and on a collective scale, I need to provide information about the traditional music notation system called *jeonggabo*. Within the score, this musical notation system features the pitch and the length of each note together with the gestures of each musician to play that note. This musical notation was used to play traditional court dance music. Initially, as I found out about these musical notations back in 2012–2013, I was not aware that these very simple grids were functioning as a notation system. Studying these square notations further, I realised they had a uniting function, for example, the first line being the lyrics of the song, the second line having the play of the instruments and the third line, another instrument. Basically, every square



Black Mat Oriole (2016-2017), video still, 8:46 minutes 3 channel video, colour, sound. Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery



Profile 5

line systematically featured the function of time and space. These notations showed me how to read the space, how to read the lyrics, which eventually becomes a voice. The part related to the instrument becomes the movement and these all combine to create a whole unit of harmony – people who look, move, and dance together within the square.

AAN: Every day, you complete a single painting in the *Mora* series. Is this series ongoing?

SSK: Yes, it is and the *Moras* are piling up in my studio! Every day, I paint a Mora, as it is a great inspiration for my overall practice. All the colours of the installations come from this specific series. I love to paint, but as of now I have never had an exhibition focusing exclusively on painting.

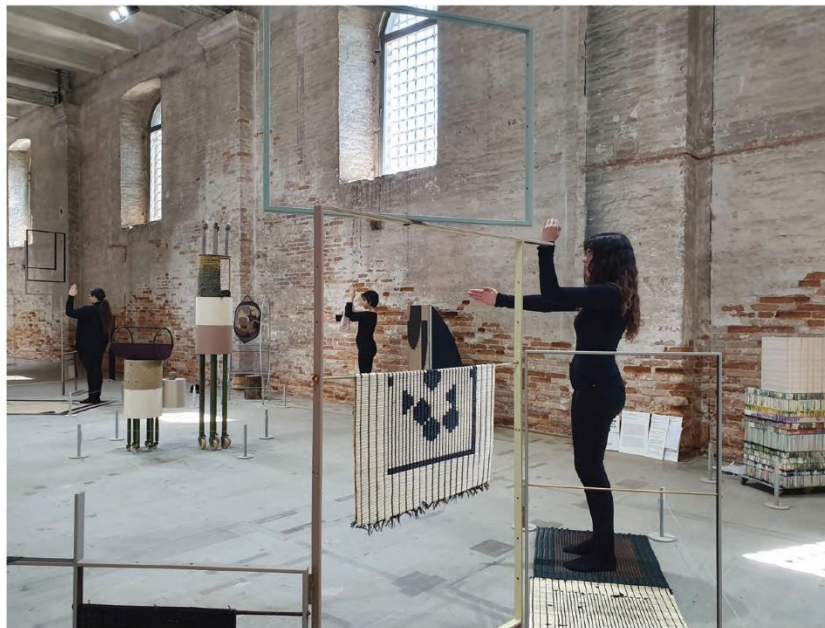
I nevertheless hope that someday I will have the opportunity to just show these Mora paintings on their own. For me, this series is like a diary. It is a daily practice and it is very personal. It is the first thing I do in the morning after entering the studio. There is nothing figurative in them, as I am aligning colours. I have often wondered why I kept working on the *Moras*, as no-one is forcing me to make them. In the course of completing them, I shout out a sound that bears no meaning, perhaps these sounds will eventually add up to the vocabulary that may turn into sentences in the future. The title *Mora* suits these pieces well, as according to my understanding of linguistics, *Mora* refers to the smallest time and weight of the syllable. I believe that if I keep making *Moras*, in the long run, it will become a sentence, or why not, even a paragraph. The *Mora* series remains the central pillar of the rest of my work.

AAN: Grandmother Tower was a central series in the development of your practice. Besides the traditional aspects (dance and mat), how important are family memories in the creation of your work?

SSK: Actually, they are extremely important. Even if I love studying various cultural aspects of my culture, at the same time, I always think about my personal history and family history, which is the very beginning for everyone. Starting with these roots, I reflect upon my history before I can start thinking about the history from other parts of the world. My work always features a certain duality, having a personal narrative within a wider outlook towards society.

AAN: The series that marked the beginning of your current work is *Grandmother Tower*?

SSK: Yes, indeed. It is a steel structure with thread on the surface. It looks as if it could hardly stand and if people touch the piece it might fall down. I started the piece as I decided to depict my real grandmother using her actual height before she passed away. I wanted to depict that present moment, relying on the true-view concept, in some way I wanted to reveal her life. Although the term true view is generally associated with traditional landscape painting, for me it translated in a very conceptual way. In the very first true view I created, I wanted to capture her passing away. I was looking at my grandmother, she was dying, but yet, she was beautiful and powerful. In order to make her portrait, I wanted to draw in space to achieve something like a sculpture, but to me, the structure looked like a painting, or a portrait of her body. This ended up becoming the Grandmother Tower. This work contains everything: the term 'grandmother' refers to moments of life, age and death, here we can imagine lots of things. In my work,



Land Sand Strand, installation view at the Arsenal for the 58th Venice Biennale, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Studio Suki Seokyeong Kang

however, it was all about a very thin and simple line using gravity, it was just standing by itself with all the threads. I was wondering how to convey the essence of her life, someone who had lived a powerful life and been through the Korean-Japanese war. I made her structure based on her height and, for me, her height became her life. Although this series started with my grandmother, it has become every grandmother.

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AAN: We have already addressed the importance of the grid in your work. How do you view the grid in the first place: is it a limitation, or is it giving

you more freedom, opening up new possibilities?

SSK: To me, the grid equals breathing. It gave me a lot of possibilities to reflect upon my work because I wanted to share a small character called *jeong*. Remembering the square notation, *jeong* looked like a Chinese character which also means 'squared vessel' (the water). I think this character brings me a ground to see towards a wider horizon. Consequently, for me the grid is not a restriction as it becomes an invisible territory into which I can expand towards the future.

AAN: You are also teaching in Korea. What do you teach?

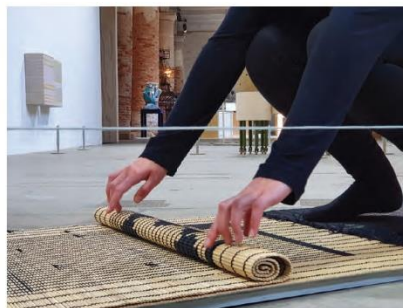
SSK: I teach at Ewha Woman's University in Seoul, it is from where I also graduated. It is the most important women's university in Korea. I am in the traditional Korean painting department, as well as teaching contemporary studio practice.

AAN: You are an artist who knows the art world and makes a living from art. What are you trying to convey to your students?

SSK: I always mention my failures to my students, because I personally struggled with tradition, and I am still struggling now. I basically try to make my students aware of the pace of the contemporary art world and how they need to address both words: the traditional and the contemporary. It is like having a right and left arm, it is all about finding the right balance.

AAN: When you refer to your failures, can you be more specific?

SSK: Actually, I have faced a lot of failures with my work, be this with the material, the understanding and interpretation of tradition, or theory. It begins with the very traditional theory, which as I have learnt was written like a poem in old Chinese characters. It subsequently had to be



translated into the characters we are using now with, consequently, possible misunderstandings.

I point out misunderstandings resulting in the freedom and failure of the material, the ink, or the paper. One can think about the paper being the space, the ink turning into the body and the text becoming a voice, this sometimes brings unpredictable results that can turn out to be failures.

AAN: You mentioned that you were teaching ink painting. Are you doing any ink painting, for your own practice?

SSK: No, I never complete any ink paintings within my own practice. However, where the *Moras* are concerned, I always mix the pigments with a little bit of black ink. Consequently, the colours are slightly toned down. As of today, within the practice of the *Moras*, I continue using a traditional brush applying gouache and ink, but ultimately it does not look like an ink painting.

AAN: You are now considered a mid-career artist. What inspired do you

have on your career so far?

SSK: As an artist, working in a rather small studio creating paintings using ink, I did not have any expectations and I never imagined my work could be shown in the contemporary art world. Sharing my work with so many people is similar to a miracle. I am thankful for this and also truly happy that people understand my undertaking. I was always hoping my work could become more universal, all the more so as it initially began with a lesser known Korean tradition as a starting point and turning it into something different. Basically, various backgrounds meet and merge in the contemporary art world which is fascinating to me. I always remain very curious about other countries which I love to study and research, finding out about their cultural background or meeting other people. More than anything, I want to keep reflecting on how we can live together while also surviving as individuals.

● Suki Seokyeong Kang's work is on view at Mudam Luxembourg, until April 2020

The Mora series acts as a diary. The word refers to the smallest time and weight of a syllable