

Forever Stranger, Kim Yun Shin's Universe

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Kim Yun Shin's uncomplicated sculptures express the unrefined vitality of nature. Her unique works, charged with Korean ideologies and a Latin American temperament, unfold her spiritual universe in the most prestigious exhibition in the contemporary art world.

After living and working in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for nearly four decades, Kim Yun Shin recently returned to Korea. It was an abrupt decision for the artist, who had even reserved a cemetery plot, having been thinking, "I will work, live, and end my life there." Kim's solo exhibition *Towards Oneness* at the Nam-Seoul Museum of Art, which became the talk of the town, triggered this decision last year. "I was delighted to see my works being appreciated in Korea, but I never imagined returning like this." For the first time in her career spanning over seven decades, Kim welcomed new partnerships with major commercial galleries such as Kukje Gallery and Lehmann Maupin. Recently, the artist also celebrated her first large-scale solo exhibition at Kukje Gallery in Seoul. Kim Yun Shin, who has chosen Korea as her primary base for more active involvement in future works and exhibitions, intends to live the rest of her life as a full-fledged "nomadic" artist between Argentina and Korea. Kim faces her nineties, welcoming a new beginning. "I seem to be living the life of a stranger, even to the end."

The 60th International Art Exhibition of the Biennale Arte 2024 is titled *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*. The title, which manifestly depicts the contemporary era, is drawn from an eponymous series of neon sculptures that render the words "Foreigners Everywhere" in different languages and colors; the series was started in 2004 by the Paris-born and Palermo-based collective, Claire Fontaine. Adriano Pedrosa, who (surprisingly) is the Biennale Arte's first-ever South American curator, seems to have derived the theme from his very own existence. "*Stranieri Ovunque* has several meanings. First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners-they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner." Given that the theme of the Venice Biennale has never drawn far from the topic of "life," *Foreigners Everywhere* is both the most critical global issue of our time and an inquiry into human nature that lies on the boundary between the self and others.

This year's biennale emphasizes its theme by focusing on foreigners, immigrants, the disabled, asylum seekers, and refugee artists. Expanding the scope of foreigners to "strangers," it also sheds light on the practice of indigenous artists who are still considered foreigners in their home countries, self-taught artists, and queer artists who are still marginalized in society. Among the 16 modern and contemporary Argentine artists/teams (both living and deceased) invited by Pedrosa this year, is Kim Yun Shin. "The curator sent the invitation to the biennale after taking photos of the Nam-Seoul Museum of Art exhibition himself, but I deleted that email without even knowing what it was about. I didn't bother to read the email, as I had never imagined myself participating in such an exhibition alongside world-renowned artists. They later reached out to me again through the phone. What a relief!"

The presence of Kim Yun Shin, an Argentine artist and Korea's first-generation woman sculptor, encompasses this year's theme in its entirety. From the 1950s when she entered Hongik University as one of only two female students in the Department of Sculpture, until late 1983 when she left Korea, Kim struggled to exist as a woman artist in a barren era when both women and artists were marginalized. Moreover, by moving to Argentina, she physically separated herself from the mainstream artworld and voluntarily remained on its periphery, actively participating in numerous exhibitions and sculpture symposiums regardless of their reputations. This series of life choices, like her decision to return to Korea, is as close to improvised chance or inevitability under the guise of chance.

"I liked the vast landscape and horizon, the innocent and relaxed people, and especially the trees there. It had so many trees that were very hard, thick, and large enough to be hugged by a few men. I envied that." Kim, who coincidentally visited Argentina when she was a Professor of Sculpture at Sangmyung Women's University, was fascinated by the energy and atmosphere unique to Latin America. She head to the Korean Embassy in a bold attempt to earn an op-

Add Two Add One, Divide Two Divide One 1991-422, 1991, Onyx, 68x54x34cm





Add Two Add One, Divide Two Divide One 1979, 1979, Walnut Wood, 45x22x18cm

portunity to exhibit her works locally, and was introduced to the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires. At the request of the director at the time, Kim used a locally purchased electric chainsaw for the first time to carve out a section of a tree she had found in the neighborhood. "It was their first time seeing a sculpture that leaves the outer bark of a tree as it is, revealing the inside and creating a space. The museum immediately scheduled my exhibition at the outdoor garden for the following year." Within a short period of time, Kim was soon featured in local newspapers, and was bombarded with requests for exhibitions. Winter vacation was already over, but she could not go back. "I had to decide whether I should live as an artist in a foreign country, or as a professor in my homeland. The latter seemed comfortable, but it wasn't what I really wanted. Even now, I feel the bones, blood vessels, and life breathing inside the wood that I carve. I especially like the Algarrobo tree. It is hard, heavy, and receptive. I wanted to work my heart out in Argentina, laboring on such invaluable trees. Argentina gave me an opportunity, when no museum or person in Korea offered to exhibit my works or recognized my practice. This is why I would never leave Argentina for good, even after returning to Korea like this."

The eight sculptures on display in the Giardini, including four made of wood and four made of stone, represent Kim's unique oeuvre that has been founded upon her lifelong trajectory as a "foreigner" in this world. Two of the wood sculptures from 1979 are made of Korean pine and walnut trees, while the latter two (each created in 1984 and 1986) have been sculpted from deciduous pine, the first tree Kim encountered in Argentina. In the early and mid-1970s, Kim presented her *Stacking Wishes* series, which reflects her interest in (re)interpreting traditional motifs such as the Jangseung (a type of traditional Korean totem) and the custom of stone stacking in Korean folk religion. "My family consisted of five daughters and one son, and my only brother fought for the independence of Korea. So my mother always put fresh water in a bowl on top of a stand and lit candles. It was only later that I found out that my mother prayed for her son, who she didn't even know was alive or dead." This memory of stacking stones became the foundation of *Stacking Wishes*, establishing Kim's belief that art should not only discuss form, but also contain the spirit and the soul, like her mother's invisible world. The four wood sculptures presented in Venice are also representations of stack-

ing tree parts toward the sky, depicting the universality of humanity and the specificity of art by capturing humanity's intrinsic and fundamental senses related to transcendent existence.

Kim Yun Shin did not hesitate to go wherever there were good materials, even after settling in a foreign country for the Argentine trees she loved. "Since I settled in South America, I was going to do what only I could do with these materials. That was my sole desire." Between 1988 and 2002, Kim often left Argentina and traveled to other parts of South America to create semi-precious stone sculptures. In order to handle the hard stone, she had to change her tools and the way she used them; the sculpting process itself was demanding and dangerous enough to be deemed as self-inflicted tribulation. In Tecali, Mexico, where onyx is produced, she had only one meal a day of tacos with spicy peppers, cactus porridge, or roasted grass in the yard. After being advised that she could find high-quality, semi-precious stones in Soledade, she once drove hours and hours to the small mountaintop village in Brazil. The four onyx and jasper sculptures exhibited in Venice reveal the eternity and implacable beauty of nature, alongside the infinite yet fleeting sense of time through the contrast between their rugged surfaces and brilliant interiors. Kim pays homage to the history of the Earth and the order of the universe by engraving small signatures on the stone sculptures that she had a difficult time procuring, similar to her wooden sculptures.

Roberto Del Villano, former director of the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, who first discovered Kim and later became her close friend, wrote, "Kim Yun Shin is both Korean and Argentinian, so her works show a harmony between the delicate and ancient history of Eastern philosophy spanning over 1,000 years, and the unyielding nature of South America." Kim, who contemplated her inner self instead of following the mainstream art scene of the time, established an artistic universe in which she could roam freely. Kim's universe has become even more solid by converging into "Add Two Add One, Divide Two Divide One." According to this phrase, all matter in the universe can be described by the exchange in which two heterogeneous elements meet ("add two") and become one ("add one") through interaction; this sum is then divided into two again ("divide two") so each becomes one ("divide one"). This central concept, which has guided her artistic practice since the 1970s, has been adopted as



the title for Kim's sculptural work ever since, establishing itself as her philosophy, conceptual approach, way of life, and formal language. It also represents her sculptural process as well as a foundation for her life, in which she puts her 'soul' into the wood, fragments the space, seeing the true "division" of the wood being rematerialized in the form of an artwork.

"I don't plan anything for my art. I just observe the material first, whether it's stone or wood. In short, I try to pay attention to the natural qualities of the wood, including its appearance, the difference between the inner and outer bark, its texture, its innate vital rhythm, and its scent. Then at the 'right moment,' when my feelings and thoughts become 'one,' I pick up the chainsaw and begin working into the wood. The wood and I become "one" and form a union (add 合); this process of union is then subject to division and creating space in the material (divide 分). The resulting artwork (divide 分) then engages with different people and each of their worlds (add 合). Since this concept is based on the science of things, I dare say that my work is cosmic. This is why I believe that my work is born with a certain life. It is also why I prefer natural materials like wood and stone, and why I emphasize the natural vitality of materials the most in my work."

At a time when the boundaries of contemporary art

seem to be ever-expanding, Kim Yun Shin is an "artist" in the most traditional sense. Kim still stubbornly creates everything with her own hands, keeping her willingly-sculpting body at work, even as she approaches the age of 90. Kim's works, which have survived various stages of modern and contemporary Korean history, remain ever-evolving, driven by a desperation for life and eagerness for creation. Kim was able to tell herself the truth that "any external influences are neither what I want nor important" because she overcame the variables and difficulties of life with a simple and clear desire. "All I have to do is work with what I have, whether I am hungry or not." Even today, Kim Yun Shin picks up her chainsaw and paintbrush with the pure ambition to "leave [her] own art in the world." As Kim paved an unknown path for herself with passion and deficiency, her life became art, and this art filled her life with creativity. This veteran artist, whose soul is as generous as her trees and whose inspiration is as sparkling as her stones, claims to have been a "foreigner" all her life—all the while smiling like a child, delighted to be going to the Venice Biennale for the first time in her life.

WRITER/ Heijeong Yoon, Art Columnist
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