

## KUKJE GALLERY | PRESS RELEASE

### Wook-kyung Choi Solo Exhibition *A Stranger to Strangers* at Kukje Gallery Busan

Press Conference: August 25 (Fri.), 2023, 12pm at Kukje Gallery Busan

Exhibition Dates: August 25 – October 22, 2023

Venues: Kukje Gallery Busan

Kukje Gallery is pleased to present *A Stranger to Strangers*, a solo exhibition of Wook-kyung Choi, at Kukje Gallery Busan from August 25 through October 22, 2023. The fourth presentation of the artist at Kukje Gallery, this is Choi's first time being showcased in Busan. Best known for her expressionist use of bold brushstrokes and vivid colors, it was during her early years of studying abroad in the United States that Choi started constructing her unique grammar of abstraction. This exhibition presents 26 works on paper, mostly black-and-white ink drawings and prints, that highlight the artist's formative years of experimenting with diverse mediums and conveying her frank observations of America as both an artist and cultural outsider.

The exhibition borrows its title from a poetry book the artist published in 1972, when she briefly returned to Korea after her first phase of living in the U.S. A collection of 45 poems alongside 16 artworks, *A Stranger to Strangers* was a highly personal compilation of texts and images that powerfully captured the artist's experience finding her identity amidst the confusion and barriers she experienced as a foreigner, an experience that she recalled as having "shook her to her roots." Among the works featured in the book, six are on view in the current exhibition: *Study, Study I, Study II, Experiment, experiment A, and I loved you once* (all c. 1960s). While some of her later works—many of which had very direct titles based on her unique humor—seem to each narrate a complete story, the body of work presented in this exhibition is more fragments of thoughts. Recording these everyday observations, the works can be understood as candid yet unfinished entrees in a diary.

*A Stranger to Strangers* explores intimately an artist whose emotions and consciousness are actively evolving. This unique voice, in addition to the artist's decision to publish books that combine art and poetry, immediately set Choi apart. While her collage works, which are often compared to Rauschenberg's *Combines* (1954–1964), more directly reflect social issues such as war and racism, her drawings include more impromptu wordplay and thoughts born out of a stream of consciousness. In one *Untitled* (c. 1960s) work, a deformed portrait with the text "I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOUR DOING, BUT, I CAN'T HELP YOU BECAUSE I DON'T LIKE IT." dramatically fills the page. Whether it's words that the artist is directing at herself or something more extemporaneous, the image presents unfiltered emotions in a raw state. In another drawing precisely dated March 22, 1969, *Untitled* (1969) a dark fetus-like form fills the page along with text questioning, "When the time comes / Will the sun rise / Willow tree showing / Will the time ever come to me?" Poignant and achingly sincere, the words imply a deeply personal window into the artist's thoughts and feelings at the time.

After receiving her BFA in Painting from Seoul National University in 1963, Choi felt the need for change and decided to study abroad in the U.S. In an unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environment, she began establishing her own artistic language through countless experiments, exploring various mediums such as ink, pencil, charcoal, conté, and printmaking. During her time at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, Choi reassessed the significance of drawing and retrieved its basic practices, producing a large number of studies of the figure and croquis. "I really drew a lot during that time," Choi recollected, "after two years of intensive drawing, by graduation I could say 'Oh, this is what it is,' and reaffirm my path to draw and paint more." The artist's relentless will to persistently study the logic of painting was then vigorously manifested through what

were perhaps her most liberating media, the languages of poetry and drawing.

As in *Untitled (AM I AMERICAN)* (c. 1960s), in which she plainly questions her identity in a foreign country, one can witness the confusion the artist felt so far from home. Nonetheless, as we read through her poetry, her courage and forthright voice assert repeatedly that “tomorrow will shine with new sun / with blooming sunshine.” By reading her honest and frank poetry alongside her drawings, a portrait of the artist as relentless and as liberated as her mixed-media compositions emerges. As witnesses to her experience and powerful vision, a contemporary audience too can experience navigating our own storms and seeking the glimmer of tomorrow’s sun.

### **About the Artist**

Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985) graduated from Seoul Arts High School in 1959 and the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University in 1963. Choi then moved to the United States where she continued to pursue her studies at Cranbrook Academy of Art and Brooklyn Museum Art School. After receiving her degrees, she was offered a position as an Assistant Professor at Franklin Pierce University from 1968 to 1971. Upon returning to Korea in 1978, Choi became an Associate Professor in the Painting Department at Yeungnam University and went on to become a Professor in the Western Painting Department at Duksung Women’s University in 1984, devoting herself to mentoring subsequent generations of artists along with developing her own practice. Wook-kyung Choi held solo exhibitions at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon (2021, 1987); the American Center Korea, Seoul (1978); Roswell Art Museum and Art Center, New Mexico (1977); Upstairs Gallery, Winnipeg (1974); Shinsegae Gallery, Seoul (1971); Cornell University, New York (1965), among others. She also participated in important group exhibitions including *Action, Gesture, Paint* at Fondation Vincent Van Gogh, Arles (2023) and Whitechapel Gallery, London (2023); Sharjah Biennial 15 (2023); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2021); Cranbrook Museum, Michigan (2021); Bilbao Guggenheim (2021); Seoul Museum of Art (2018); Seoul National University Museum of Art (2016, 2004); Brooklyn Museum, New York (1981); the 16th São Paulo Biennale (1981); and the annual Invitational Exhibition in New York sponsored by the Skowhegan School Foundation (1967-1968). She received third place at the 8th Paris Biennale Competition in 1972. Her works are housed in the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon; Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul; the Guggenheim, New York; the Pompidou Center, Paris; and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, New York.

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**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Untitled*

c. 1960s

Conté on paper

33.3 x 51.6 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Experiment*

c. 1960s

Chinese ink on paper

46 x 61 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*experiment A*

c. 1960s

Chinese ink (or black paint) on paper  
27 x 19.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery





**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Untitled*

c. 1960s

Pencil on paper

21 x 15.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Untitled (When the Time Comes)*

1969

Ink on shiny paper

42.5 x 56 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery





**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Untitled (AM I AMERICAN)*

c. 1960s

Ink on paper

46 x 31 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery





**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Saddly snowing*

1965

Ink on shiny paper

33 x 25 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Wook-kyung Choi (1940-1985)**

*Untitled*

c. 1960s

Charcoal and conté on paper

60 x 44 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery