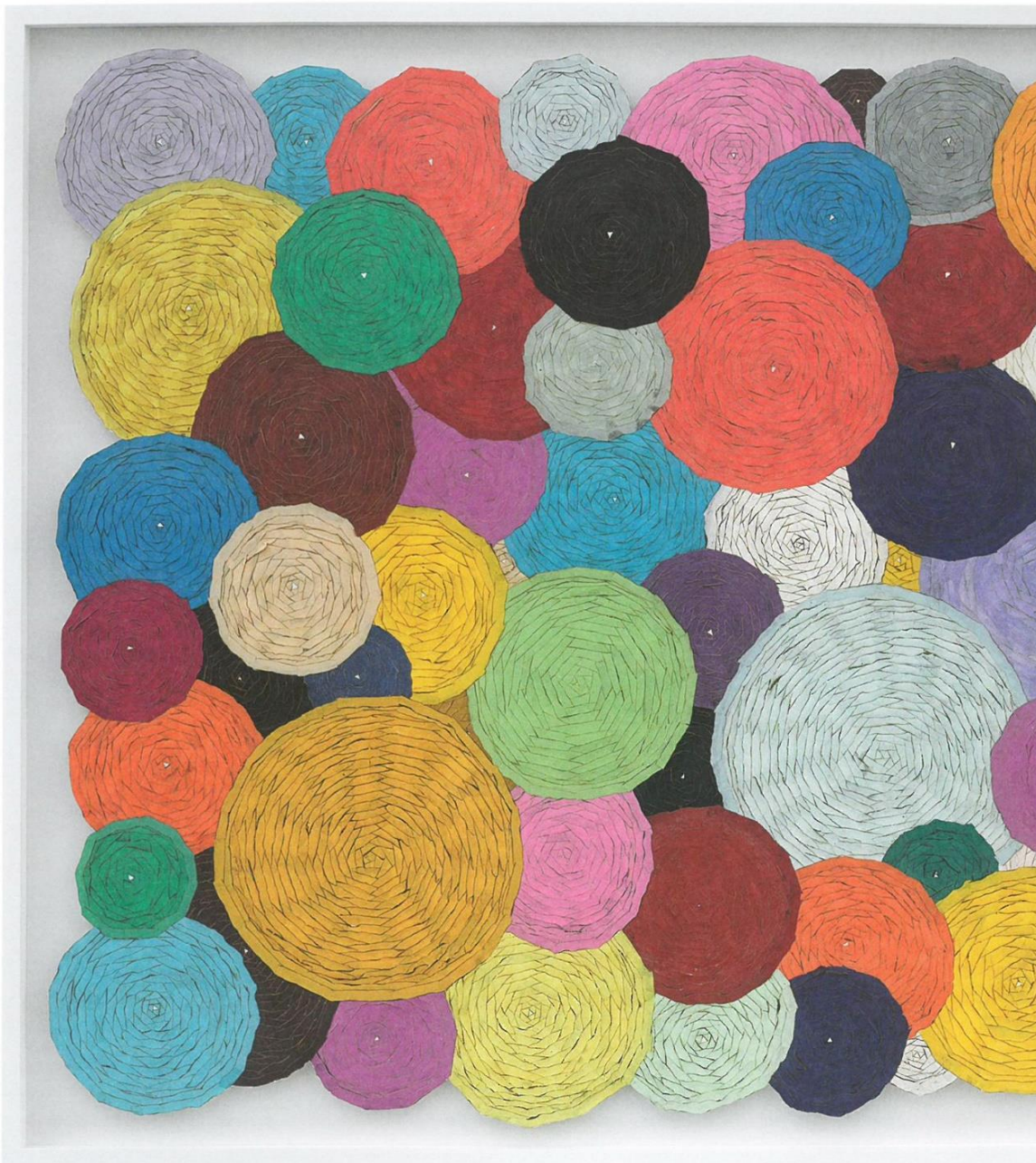


More than Monochrome

June/July, 2018 | By Editorial

page 1 of 10

[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]



Minjung Kim,
The Street, 2010

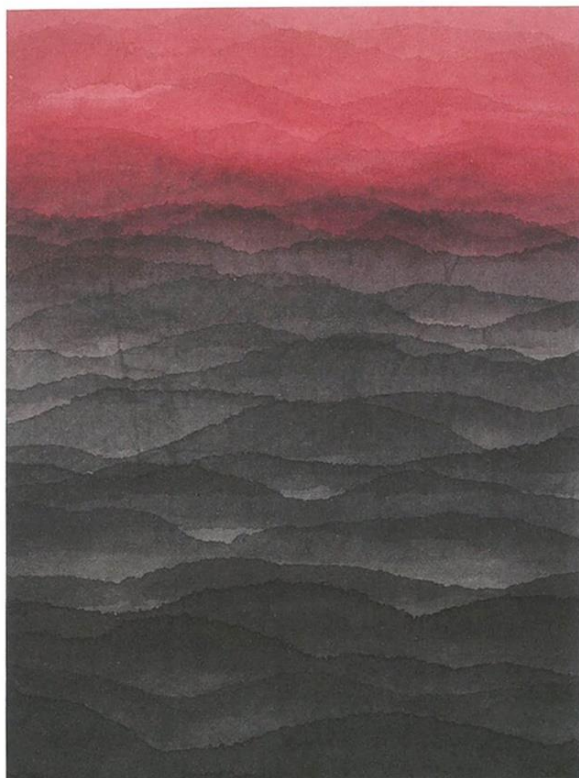


More than monochrome

The minimalist art of the 1970s exerts a powerful influence on some South Korean artists, while others create work that is a riot of colour. Claire Wrathall chooses four of the country's most distinctive talents

In November 2015, Christie's held its first group exhibition of work by South Korean artists. Entitled *Forming Nature*, it opened in New York before travelling to Hong Kong, and showcased works by figures associated with the Dansaekhwa movement. Lee Ufan, Kim Whan-Ki, Rhee Seundja, Park Seo-Bo, Chung Sang-Hwa, Yun Hyong-Keun, Chung Chang-Sup and Ha Chong-Hyun, all born between 1913 and 1936, avoided any reference to Western realism and made meditative, minimalist, monochrome paintings instead. Demand for these restrained and refined abstract works, mostly made in the 1970s, had been soaring, as had their prices: earlier that year, Christie's had sold Kim Whan-Ki's *Montagne Bleue* for US\$1.8 million. And they continue to increase.

It's no surprise, then, that Dansaekhwa should have inspired the generation of artists born in the late 1960s, such as Minjung Kim (see overleaf). But South Korea's vibrant art scene embraces artists who work in a host of media and in markedly different styles, too – including Yeondoo Jung, who works principally in photography, but also in performance, video and virtual reality; Kyungah Ham, whose practice embraces embroidery and video; and Lee Bul, arguably the best-known Korean artist of her generation, who began her career with performance pieces and is now making delicate collages on silk velvet. »



From top: Minjung Kim, *Mountain*, 2017 (detail); the artist with *The Room*, 2006 (detail), from Minjung Kim:

The Memory of Process at White Cube Mason's Yard, London, in 2018. Opposite, *The Street*, 2016 (detail)

Minjung Kim

Born Gwangju, 1962

The daughter of a printer, Minjung Kim grew up in a world of paper and ink, and this is reflected in the materials she tends to use: handcrafted hanji paper (made from the inner bark of a mulberry tree) and ink or watercolour ('Winsor & Newton is the best!' she told Jean-Christophe Ammann when he curated her Venice Biennale show for Luxembourg & Dayan in 2015). She also uses fire, burning or singeing the edge of the paper with a candle or incense stick.

Her elegant, spare paintings and collages suggest she is an heir to the great artists of the Dansaekwha movement, notably Park Seo-Bo with whom she studied at Hongik University in Seoul. But her early influences were catholic. As a child, she met the figurative watercolourist Kang Yeon-Gyun (born 1941), who became a mentor, and although she has studied and practised calligraphy, and her master's degree focused on ink painting, she completed her education in Europe, enrolling at Milan's Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, in order to study 20th-century Western artists – she singles out Paul Klee and Franz Kline – who took an interest in oriental art.

She now works in St Paul de Vence in the South of France as well as in New York, but the traditional materials and skills she grew up with are integral to her practice. The deliberate gestures evident in the way she applies ink to paper – for example, in her *Mutation* series – and the many works incorporating multiple dots, recall her training in calligraphy. Watch her at work, seated on the floor, often cross-legged, and you cannot fail to be struck by the deft, intense control with which she handles her brushes.

Kim leaves nothing to chance. Her recent series *Phasing* may at first glance appear to consist of loose, curving brushstrokes; in reality, the marks are made by superimposing one sheet of paper onto another on which the initial lines have been painted, enabling Kim to trace their outlines, which she then carves out with an incense stick. Or take her *Street* collages: from a distance, the repeated motifs might look like drawings of flowers, leaves or the gills on mushrooms. But each circle is actually a rosette of pleated paper, the black lines and centres made with a flame. 'I can feel the power of nature in using fire,' she has said. 'But also a different sense of control.'

Not all her work is abstract, however. Her most classically Korean watercolours, the *Mountain* series, are delicate monochrome (red, as well as black-and-white) landscapes of craggy ranges receding into the mist. She creates the subtle gradations in tone by manipulating the rate at which the colour is absorbed by the paper. It is a meditative, intensely physical process. 'I have to wait for the right moment to draw some lines,' she has said. 'Sometimes it takes days and weeks to find the right state of mind. My breathing needs to be absolutely under control.'

www.galleryhyundai.com.whitecube.com

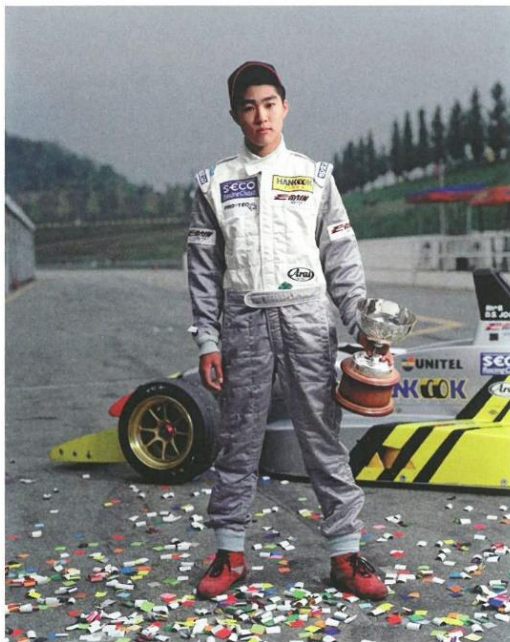
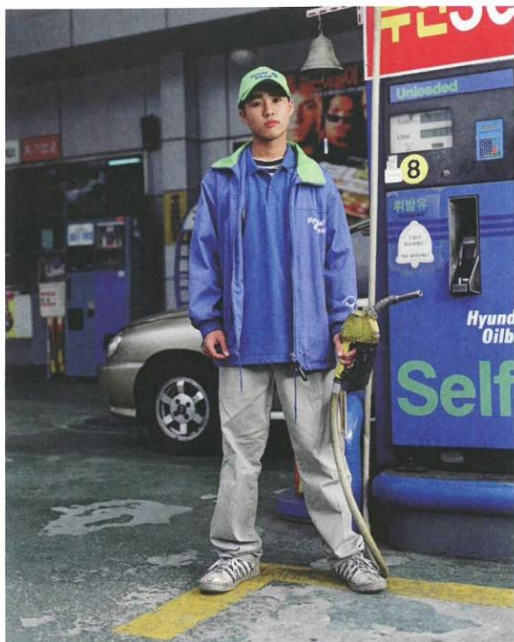
[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]

This paper, Minjung Kim, *The Street*, 2016 (detail). Mixed media on mulberry Hanji paper. 51 3/16 x 74 13/16 in. (130 x 190 cm). 56 5/16 x 79 15/16 x 2 3/4 in. (143 x 203 x 7 cm) (framed) © the artist. Photo © White Cube (George Davelli). Opposite: Minjung Kim, *Mountain*, 2017 (detail). Watercolour on mulberry Hanji paper. 75 9/16 x 52 3/4 in. (192 x 134 cm). 80 1/16 x 57 1/2 x 2 3/4 in. (203 x 146 x 7 cm) (framed) © the artist. Photo © White Cube (George Davelli). Forrait photo: © White Cube (Sally Hammond). Minjung Kim, *The Room*, 2008. Mixed media on mulberry Hanji paper. 83 1/16 x 57 1/2 in. (211 x 146 cm). 86 5/8 x 63 7/8 x 2 3/4 in. (220 x 163 x 7 cm) (framed) © the artist. Previous paper: Minjung Kim, *The Street*, 2016. Mixed media on mulberry Hanji paper. 49 3/16 x 74 13/16 in. (125 x 190 cm). 53 39/16 x 79 19/16 x 2 29/64 in. (138 x 201 x 7 cm) (framed) © the artist. Photo © White Cube (George Davelli).



[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]

Below, Yeondoo Jung,
Bewitched, 2001.
 Opposite, *Evergreen
 Tower*, 2001



Yeondoo Jung

Born Seoul, 1969

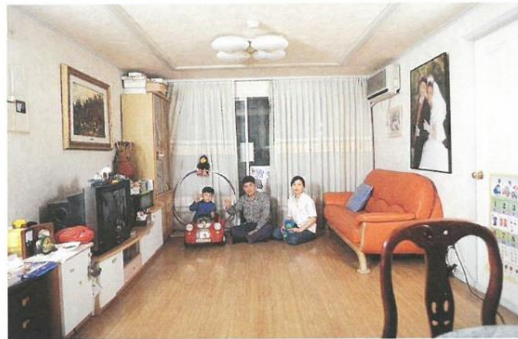
Yeondoo Jung's work explores the coexistence of dreams with reality, raising questions about how each of us actually sees and understands the world and to what extent real life relates to an individual's perception of reality. In his words, he creates 'art inspired by other people's lives [as] a way of looking at myself, like a mirror'.

His breakthrough series, *Bewitched* (begun in 2001), came about as a result of a chance encounter in a petrol station, where a girl on roller skates, dressed in a miniskirt, had been hired to promote windscreen wipers. She caught his eye (which was, after all, what she'd been hired to do). 'Normally I would just have put gas in the tank, paid the money and gone,' he has said. 'But I lowered the window and said: "Hey, what's your dream?"' That fleeting exchange inspired a work for which he went on to photograph 40 young people at work, in their day-to-day clothes or uniform, and also dressed up for the life they wish they led. (The title of the series comes from the 1960s American TV show of the same name, in which a suburban

housewife leads a double life as a witch.) So a waiter with a love of Johnny Cash morphs into a musician in a cowboy hat strumming a guitar in an American speakeasy, a server in an ice-cream parlour becomes a polar adventurer, another waiter turns into a chef, a petrol-pump attendant becomes a trophy-carrying Formula 1 driver, and so on.

'I started this project with an artist's curiosity about wanting to know about the lives of people you just pass every day,' he has said. 'It's not about a happy perspective or a negative perspective... It is more about [my] attempts as an artist to communicate with someone else.' This curiosity about people also informed his series *Evergreen Tower*, for which he photographed 32 families in their more-or-less identical, if differently decorated, apartments in an outwardly alienating housing project in Seoul.

If those portraits have a documentary quality, his series *Wonderland* is strikingly fantastical. He took a series of drawings by five-year-old children and recreated them, using props and costumes, as



photographs. 'I always see photography as a realistic medium,' he said. 'But children's drawing has a lack of reality. The perspective is wrong. Perhaps the colours are wrong.' It's practically impossible to realise that in a photograph. 'And I really love that kind of impossibility.'

In short, he relishes a challenge. Indeed, to win the confidence of the subjects of his project *Borame Dance Hall*, he took ballroom-dancing lessons. Western-style dancing was still frowned upon by some sections of society, so a group of middle-aged enthusiasts would gather on a former US Air Force base to waltz, foxtrot and cha-cha-cha. The resulting images were printed on wallpaper,

and he then used it to decorate rooms in which people were invited to dance.

Perhaps his most ambitious project to date has been *Blind Perspective*, made in response to the nuclear disaster at Fukushima for an exhibition in Tokyo's Art Tower Mito. To the naked eye, it is a scene of devastation, a massive walk-through installation of twisted metal, rubbish and rags. Put on the virtual-reality headset, however, and it becomes a sunlit woodland filled with butterflies, a waterfall and mountains beyond. It's a powerful statement, succinctly encapsulating Jung's belief that 'Reality without fantasy can be very dry.' www.kukjegallery.com

[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]

Kyungah Ham

Born Seoul, 1966

North Korea's decision to send a team to this year's Winter Olympics in South Korea may have signalled a first step towards a rapprochement between the two nations, but Kyungah Ham has been collaborating with makers north of the border for some time – in an effort, she says, 'to communicate across the border in an artistic way'. First, she makes a sketch of the work; next she makes a digital template; then, using Russian or Chinese intermediaries, she has a copy of it sent to North Korea, where the work is fabricated in silk on cotton canvas by a team of anonymous embroiderers – an undertaking that can take four people up to 2,000 hours to complete – after which it is exported back to Seoul.

She never communicates directly with the artisans, as it might put them – and her – in danger. Her first, more obviously subversive efforts were intercepted and confiscated, and those that have made it back tend to be abstract. The colourful,

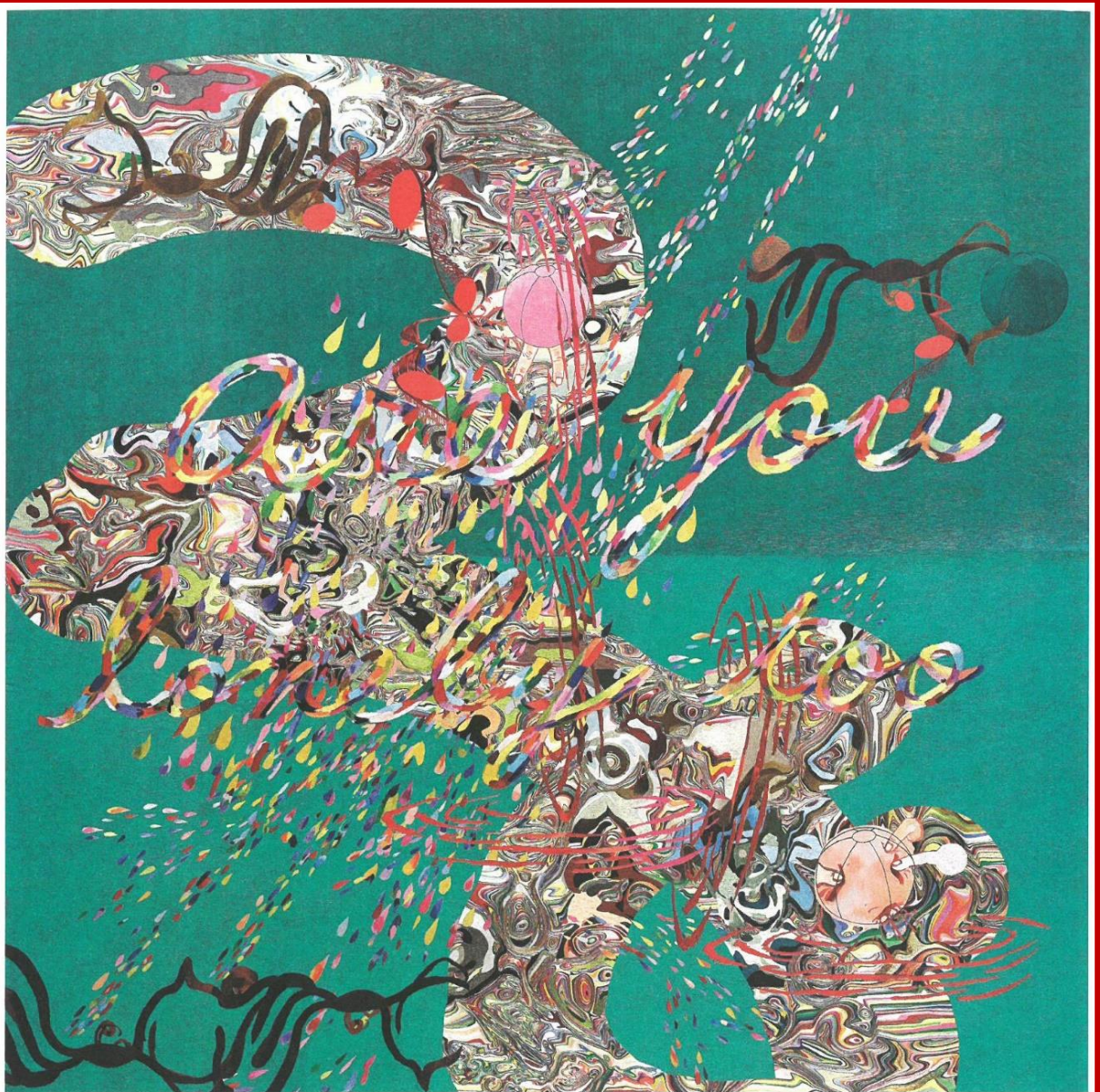
elaborate patterns, evocative of marbled paper, in her series *Needling Whisper, Needle Country/SMS Series in Camouflage* conceal anodyne messages: *Big Smile; I am sorry; I am hurt; Money never sleeps; and Are you lonely, too?* And the list of media involved in their creation includes the words 'middle man', 'anxiety', 'censorship' and 'ideology'.

'There have been so many miscommunications... and I have had to change intermediary a couple of times as they disappeared or were even executed,' she told the journalist Emmy So. 'This was not because of my works, of course, as they were smuggling drugs, too! But you can see how chaotic it can be. I can never really tell if I will see the final work or not... And sometimes the blueprints are lost, so the work comes back completely different to what I intended.'

Her figurative works tend to feature giant chandeliers, usually askew, sometimes fallen, which she sees as a metaphor for and 'mute witness to'



This page: Kyungah Ham, *Needling Whisper, Needle Country/SMS Series in Camouflage/Thou, If you are like me*, BC 01-001-01, 2014-2015, North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 2200hrs/2persons, 198(h) x 200 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery. Opposite: Kyungah Ham, *Needling Whisper, Needle Country/SMS Series in Camouflage/Are you lonely, too?*, BC 02-001-01, 2014-2015, North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 2200hrs/2persons, 202(h) x 199 cm, Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery.



Above, Kyungah Ham, *Needling Whisper*, *Needle Country/SMS Series in Camouflage/ Are you lonely, too? BC 02-001-01*, 2014–15. Opposite, a self-portrait with another work from the same series

many of the most seminal events in modern history, because of their presence in the sort of rooms where decisions such as the division of Korea were made.

Other works are more subversive. *Mona Lisa and the Others from the North*, for example, made for the Guangzhou Triennial, is an installation incorporating 11 subtly different copies of Leonardo's painting rendered in needlepoint, accompanied by video interviews with North Koreans who have defected and settled in the south. Dressed in Renaissance costumes, they talk about the painting and about life

in 'the other Korea'. One says that a reproduction hung in Pyongyang University of Fine Art in the 1950s and 1960s, until Kim Jong-il saw it and demanded its removal and destruction. (By the 1980s, however, the *Mona Lisa* had appeared on a North Korean stamp.) In any case, says another, it was impossible to suppress: the nation relied on imports from China, and her image would turn up printed on imported goods. As Ham herself has put it, 'Art has the power to enable humans to see through lies.' www.kukjegallery.com

Lee Bul

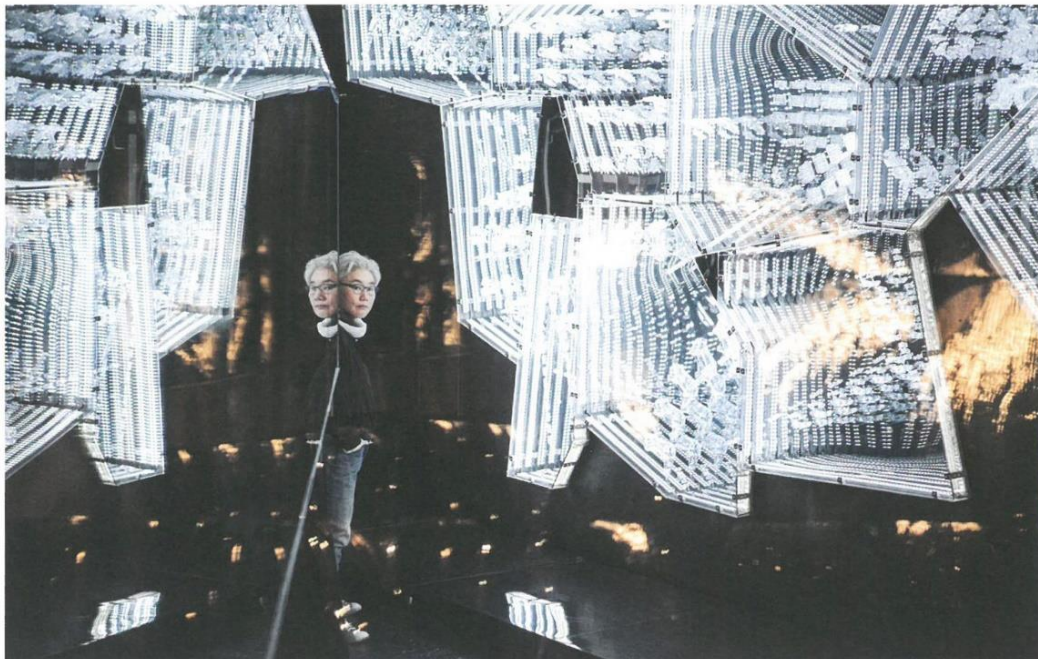
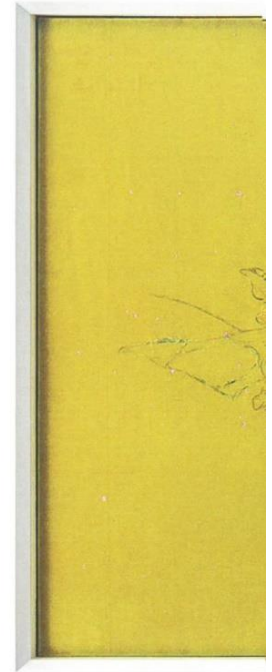
Born Gangwon province, 1964

Looking at the large-format yet delicately wrought abstracts, subtitled *Mekamelencolia*, that Lee Bul was making last year, it seems a stretch at first to connect them with the works that made her name. They are inscribed in acrylic paint and ink on silk velvet, incorporating human hair, mother of pearl and dried flowers. The same might be said of her collages from 2016, also on velvet or leather, with mother of pearl, crystal and shards of reflective PVC panel and PET film. Their delicate beauty and luxurious materials seem a world away from the stinking, rotting fish (embellished with sequins, beads and flowers) of *Majestic Splendor*, with which she began to garner international attention at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1997, or the disquieting performances with which she established herself after graduating in sculpture at Hongik University in Seoul in her youth. Yet her recent works speak of themes that recur in her art, notably decay (hence the use of organic matter) and gender. For despite their scale – and the monumental dimensions of the installations for which she is best known – there

remains an essentially feminine quality, not to mention a beguiling beauty, to her work.

Born during the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee to dissident parents who, she has said, 'were in and out of prison', she had a hard, unhappy childhood. 'Back then there was a crime called guilt by association,' she recalled in a filmed interview in 2015. 'Dissidents and their families were not allowed to participate in social activities with more than 10 people. I realised I had to find an activity I could do on my own. I had this idea that to survive the oppressive censorship of ideology, artistic expression would be the only way out for me.'

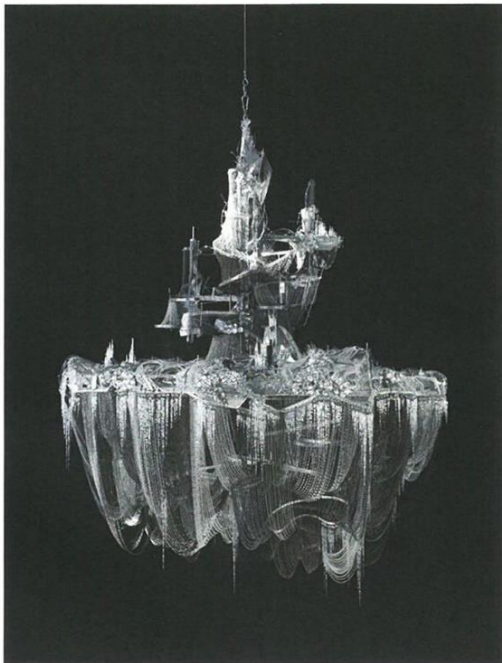
Perhaps inevitably, failed ideals are another recurrent theme in her work, notably those of the Weimar-era German architect Bruno Taut. In 1917, Taut produced a series of watercolour drawings of an idealised city in the Alps – published in a book, *Alpine Architecture* – for which all the buildings would be made from crystal so as to be transparent and to reflect sunlight and the landscape, so seeming to disappear into it. Lee has used this idea as the basis for a series of chandelier-like sculptures made



[ARTISTS IN FOCUS]



Above, Lee Bul, *Untitled (Mekamelencolia - Yellow Velvet #1)*, 2016.
Left, *Untitled (After Bruno Taut)*, 2010. Opposite, the artist with an installation of her work in 2014–15



Portrait photo: Antonino Campanella. Lee Bul, *Untitled (Mekamelencolia - Yellow Velvet #1)*, 2016, human hair, acrylic, dried flower, and water-based ink pen on silk velvet triptich, 53.15 x 115.75 x 4.72 inches (framed) 135 x 294 x 12 cm. Photo by: Max Yawney. Photo of artist: Lee Bul, *Untitled (After Bruno Taut)*, 2010, steel, PVC, steel band, acrylic, 99.81 x 98.48 x 26.77 inches, 253 x 245 x 185 cm. Photo: Jeon Byung-choel. Photo courtesy: Studio Lee Bul and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

from crystal and mirror, swagged with strings of glass beads and silvery chains, which evoke nothing so much as castles in the air. Taut hoped his imaginings would come true; Lee knows they won't.

'What interests me is how people in the past envisioned their future. I'm interested in how such utopian ideals have persisted or failed to persist,' she has said, observing that architecture is the discipline that tends best to 'embody all the idealistic visions' of an era. Mirrors play an important role in her work too, notably in the discombobulating, labyrinthine installations that viewers are encouraged to lose themselves in, structures that play on people's instinctive need to follow a path and find a way out the other side, a way to go on. In some ways they are a metaphor for our continued existence. Art, she says, is what enables her to 'endure life'. ♦ www.lehmannmaupin.com