



Jung in his studio in Seoul.

Magical Realist

Chance encounters with strangers are what inspire South Korean artist Yeondoo Jung to blur, and at other times define, the line between reality and illusion in his experimentation with photography, animated images, and beyond **By Lee Hyo-won**

YEONDOO JUNG HAS TWO MAJOR solo exhibitions next year to prepare for, including one at Japan's Art Tower Mito—a rare honor hitherto bestowed only to Lee Bul among South Korean artists. But his more immediate concern is brainstorming ways to work with some 230 actors, dancers, and musicians of the Gyeonggi provincial art troupes for a photography project. "When else will I have the opportunity to meet 230 performance artists?" said Jung. "Yesterday I hung out with the theater actors, and next week I'll be

seeing the *gugak* [traditional Korean music] artists."

We met in his studio, which, located on the top story of a small arcade building in Seoul, looks like your average photography workshop. The artist is best known for ethereal still images and videos with strong narrative qualities, and there is a blue screen and camera equipment in one corner and a cluster of computers in the middle. Strewn along the walls—which are covered with photos, notes, and collages—are a random collection of what could be stage props, ranging from

a wooden cross to a mounted deer head. His pets greet visitors and then stick around. It was my first time conducting an interview with a dog nestled in my lap.

The Gyeonggi Arts Center commission presents a new challenge, but Jung is not unfamiliar with meeting strangers and allowing each individual to become the lead on the larger stage of life. His 2006 solo exhibition in Seoul was titled "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" after the Elvis Presley tune that croons, "You know someone said that the world's a stage / And each must play a part," and his 2010 video *Six Points* employs a three-kilowatt light to illuminate each and every pedestrian in six street scenes shot in different New York City districts.

"I was inspired by Japanese curator Yuki Kamiya," he said about the latter piece, referring to an analysis by the chief curator of the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art that read, "Jung invites the people he encounters to play the role of heroes and heroines and, in a very charming way, draws out their secret beauty by shining a spotlight on their individual existences."

Such efforts are more markedly manifested in his 2001 "Bewitched" series. Through the magic of costumes and props, he allows, for example, a waiter to realize his dreams of becoming a chef. For *Boname Dance Hall*, created the same year, he actually took dance classes with the waltzing middle-aged men and women he photographed. "I was able to shoot the climactic moments of dance sequences once I was able to understand the music and the rhythm involved," he said. "You can't cross a stream without getting your feet wet."

For Jung, it is not so much about the resulting *mise-en-scène* as it is about the actual "documentation process" of the encounter with strangers itself. "I believe that art is ultimately a form of communication," said the 44-year-old.

"An artist such as myself and ordinary individuals can come together under this umbrella called art and create something together in an intriguing way, to use art in an amusing way."

Yet Jung also casts individuals with the idea of staging a specific narrative. *The Birds—B Camera*, shown earlier this year at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, imitates a scene from the Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. One of Jung's works in progress reenacts a scene from *The Graduate*. But like his 2007 series "Locations," these film tributes are juxtaposed with an image that reveals the entire set of the production, with the camera and lighting crew and props all visible in the frame.

"My works include strictly documentary-like projects as well as those that embody my efforts for control," he said, when asked about the idea of control in terms of presenting more theatrical pieces. His practice stems from his belief that "there is no perfect documentary in this world" and, furthermore, that the genre is in many ways not much

different from feature films. "Depending on the choice of score, script, and editing—and more importantly the producer's intentions—a given documentary could be a hundred different versions," he said.

Documentary Nostalgia, a 2007 video shown at New York's MoMA, blurs the line between documentary and feature. The title itself is an oxymoron, as "one cannot document nostalgia," Jung said. The piece was inspired by how he tried, and failed, to relocate a breathtaking view of the Taebaek Mountains that captivated him as a 20-year-old. The landscape was no longer the same because of manmade structures but also perhaps because he was no longer able to discern beauty the way he did when he was younger.

The video is nevertheless a very strict form of documentation of the non-stop 84-minute performance that took place at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea—which named him the youngest ever recipient of the Artist of the Year title in 2007—as well as that of his own memories of the hike.

"People today are accustomed to watching mainstream films and accepting the fantasy world that unfolds before them as something real," he said. In *Documentary Nostalgia*, members of the production team enter the frame and begin rolling up the grass of what seconds ago had been part of a beautiful natural landscape. "I am constantly reminding the viewer that what you are seeing is not real," Jung explains. But the element of control also rests with the viewer. "In the end the viewer completes the process of defining the meaning of a given artwork."

His time-based artwork may have launched him into the international spotlight, but he is not limited to the medium. Jung majored in sculpture at Seoul National University and eventually went on to study under the auspices of David Annesley at Central Saint Martins College of Art, where a postgraduate program was created for him and he earned a diploma in sculpture. It was not until he mingled with photographers for the first time while pursuing an MFA at the Goldsmiths College, University of London, that he discovered a new form of artistic expression through photography.

Jung's upcoming solo shows at Seoul's Plateau exhibition space in March 2014 and at Art Tower Mito, in Mito, Japan, the following November will mark a return to sculpture. Jung's pieces will be presented in a fashion that offers a unique encounter between art and viewer: In addition to the works installed in the space, virtual sculptures will be visible when the exhibition is seen through a head-mounted display of the kind usually worn for video games.

More importantly, the artist was once again inspired by a meaningful chance encounter. He met a visually impaired masseur in Mito with a penchant for taking photos, pointing his beat-up digital camera toward whatever sound intrigued him on his way to work. "I was completely fascinated by him and the idea of relating to something you couldn't see," Jung said. He gave the masseur a new camera as a gift, and the man has since shared his photos—over 8,000 in one month—which Jung will use in his exhibition. The artist is currently meeting with scientists to discuss the technical aspect of the production, which he hopes will be "more than an amusing, high-tech experience, which new media art so often is limited to being," and rather a kind of stimulus for us all to contemplate the limits of our perception. ☐