

Spring 4-16-2012

Invitation

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“INVITATION”

by

IN KYOUNG CHUN

Under the Direction of Craig Dongoski

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a statement about a series of paintings based on an invented dollhouse object that conveys the artist’s identity and placement in the world. Through this essay, the artist represents the home as a space that fosters the recovery and rebirth of invisible energy, *ki* and examines ideas of transience, interconnection, and rebirth in the mysterious flow of *ki* in the home. Also the artist will explain her own view about being an artist, the methodologies and specific techniques of her paintings, and her artistic direction for the future.

INDEX WORDS: Bubbles, Invisible energies, Saekdong colors, *Ki* flow, House, Home, Table, Invitation, Watercolor, Oil painting, Empty area

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IN KYOUNG CHUN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

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May 2012

DEDICATION

To my loving Thomas, Kevin and Erin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply thankful to all my professors, Cheryl Goldsleger, Matthew Sugarman, Tim Flower, Craig Dongoski, Pam Longobardi, Joe Peragine and Anthony Craig Drennen and classmates in the drawing and painting department at Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design for their wonderful support. Especially, the tremendous help from my thesis committee members, Craig Dongoski, Pam Longobardi, Joe Peragine and Anthony Craig Drennen will be indelibly inscribed in my artistic development.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 THEN AND NOW	3
3. ARTIST AS A <i>KI</i> GIVER.....	4
3-1. The Definition of an Artist in Korean Traditional Sense	5
3-2. <i>Ki</i> Giver	7
4. THE MEANING OF HOUSE: THE ORIGIN OF <i>KI</i>.....	9
5. PAINTING METHODOLOGY AND EMPTY AREA.....	12
5. CONCLUSION	14

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1, In Kyoung Chun, <i>Untitled</i>, oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches, 2011.....	3
Figure 2, Jeong Seon, <i>Geumgang jeondo</i>(<i>General view of Mt. Geumgang</i>), ink and oriental watercolor on paper, 51.5 x 37 inches, 1734.....	7
Figure 3, In Kyoung Chun, <i>Invitation</i>, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches, 2010.....	5
Figure 4, In Kyoung Chun, <i>dollhouse play</i>, found dollhouse, styrofoams, beads dollhouse furniture, 23 x 12 x 18 inches, 2011.....	11
Figure 5, In Kyoung Chun, <i>July</i>, mixed media on canvas, 30" x 24", 2011.....	15
Figure 6, In Kyoung Chun, <i>Wellbeing</i>, Installation View from MFA Exhibition, 2012.....	17

1. INTRODUCTION

“The days of my existence light up and then darken again in the twinkling of an eye. They resemble those iridescent bubbles of foam on the seashore which are annihilated as soon as they blossom, but whose short life is sufficient to mirror the sun in a hurry-scurry way for one infinite instant. Afterwards who cares if they die? What they accomplished is extraordinary. Despite the brevity of their existence, each one succeeded momentarily in incorporating into itself every particle of the immense, immortal orb.”

--'Life in the Tomb' by Stratis Myrivilis

When I was a child, one of my favorite activities was blowing bubbles. They were beautiful and could be created instantly. Looking at them float up in the air, I wished they lasted longer but their existence was momentary. I kept blowing bubbles, thinking that their brief transience made them somehow more beautiful. Now as an adult I realize that I am my artwork as a way to create and then capture the brilliantly living moment of those original bubbles. They signify the life forces called *ki* in my art. After years of utilizing the shape and images of bubbles, I realized that I was striving to express the hidden power of every living and non-living thing. I center my subject matter and processes on the revitalizing energy force known as *ki* and my thesis exhibition is an opportunity to explore this hidden but fundamental force through drawings, paintings and objects.

Specifically, I want to think about the flow of *ki* around the house. Home is ideally a place where we recover a true sense of ourselves. We hide and rest in the house. It is a private space where we are taken care of and re-energized in the physical and psychological sense.—A French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard talked about the concept of the home in a more profound way, “ The house, quite obviously, is a privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate values of inside space, provided, of course, that we take it in both its unity and its complexity, and endeavor to integrate all the special values in one

fundamental value.¹ House is one of the great powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.”² Therefore, I believe that one’s house is a place filled with mysterious energy, *ki*. Trying to visualize the movement of *ki* in the house, I will closely examine ‘being home’ in my paintings, drawings, and sculpture. Then I will describe the character of the house that I create within my social and cultural context. Next I will discuss the importance of empty area, true *ki* around the house. Finally, I will explain how I handled the painting materials to talk about my subject matter and why I chose the specific medium for these works. To begin, I will reveal how my background is key to understanding why I have chosen *ki* of the house as the subject of my art.



Figure 1, In Kyoung Chun, *Untitled*, oil on Canvas, 24 x 20 inches, 2011.

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, with a new foreword by John R. StilGoe, (Beacon Press, 1994), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

2. THEN AND NOW

“The Artist is responsible for his history and his nature. His history is part of his nature.”

--Ad Reinhardt

As an immigrant from Korea, adapting myself to a new life in America was a tough experience. First, I started life as a newly married wife without a career. In Korea, I was a graduate student studying psychology in a university and a part time teacher in a middle school. But these experiences were worthless in United States. My college degree didn't transfer. Without proper preparations for my career, I had to stay home as a housewife. Secondly, since my English was limited, I shied away from social gatherings and involvement. Also, the general cultural differences between Korea and United States in daily life were challenging for me to adjust properly. After spending years isolated and destabilized, I felt that being hermitic was problematic to myself and to my family. I wanted to find a solution. I wanted to find a better way to live. I remembered the word 'biophilia', my favorite term when I was studying Psychology in Korea. 'Biophilia' literally means love of life.³ Erich Fromm, a German-American social psychologist frequently used this term 'biophilia' as a description of a productive psychological orientation and "state of being". Fromm postulated eight basic needs to reach biophilia. They are relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, sense of identity, frame of orientation, excitation and stimulation, unity, and effectiveness.⁴ As I felt increasingly marginalized in American society, I was thinking about the basic needs of biophilia to survive. Specifically four categories of them are meaningful to me. They are

1. relatedness(relationships with others, care, respect, knowledge);
- 2.transcendence(be-

³ Erich Fromm, *On Being Human* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 1997), 101.

⁴ "Erich Fromm & Humanistic Psychoanalysis," *The Glaring Facts*, November 12, 2011, <http://www.theglaringsfacts.com/erich-fromm-humanistic-psychoanalysis/>.

ing thrown into the world without their consent, humans have to transcend their nature by destroying or creating people or things. Humans can destroy through malignant aggression, or they can also create and care about their creations.); 3.sense of identity (the drive for a sense of identity is expressed nonproductively as conformity to a group and productively as an individuality); and 4.excitation and stimulation (actively striving for a goal rather than simply responding). I wanted to act on these ideas. How could I be released from my solitary confinement? To be an active member of the community, I sought a creative way to express my existence in a way that would make my daily life exciting and stimulating. I searched for a method that would allow me to achieve biophilia. Since painting had fascinated me for a long time, I chose to become an artist. I was truly focused and enjoyed the moment when I drew on the white space of the paper. I painted to communicate with myself and understand who I was. And I thought that using a visual medium as a transmitting tool would help me to become an active member in a foreign community. Through art, I hoped I could fully express what I thought and compensate for my limited English. I always believed that visual language is universal and more powerful and more embracing than any verbal one. I believed the act of art-making itself had a healing power, and becoming an artist could lead to self-satisfaction and establishing my identity. Art provided me with self-respect and the ability to live passionately. While my confidence as an artist to grow along the way, it was necessary for me to define what an artist is in my own terms.

3. ARTIST AS A KI GIVER

“All art is, in some sense, didactic; every artist is, in some way, setting out to instruct. For, by instruction, we mean to give direction, and that is precisely what all great art does. Art shapes life. It is a force; only the aesthete makes a refuge of it. Through his/her work, the art-

ist learns to understand his/her existence. Through the culture it informs, art becomes a force for change in society.”⁵

--Roy Ascott

As Roy Ascott mentioned, an artist is someone who gives something meaningful to the world. An artist creates a kind of the energy that lets the artist herself and others live in a more desirable way. That is, an artist is an energy (*ki*) provider to the world.

3-1. The Definition of an Artist in Korean Traditional Sense

Traditionally Korean artists were people who were highly disciplined in physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects. To express righteous *ki* in their art, they were expected to be perfect in every way. They were not supposed to pursue any fame or wealth; they were only to pursue constant academic study and artistic practice with modesty. They believed they could achieve artistic enlightenment in their works merely by continuing to push themselves as described above. When people acquired a work from an artist, they considered they had gotten good *ki* from the artist in Korean tradition. Good *ki* means a power to be true, positive, and sustainable at any negative and challenging moment in life.

⁵ Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace*, (University of California Press, 2003), 98.



Figure 2, Jeong Seon, *Geumgang jeondo* (General view of Mt. Geumgang),
Ink and Oriental watercolor on paper, 51.5 x 37 inches, 1734

I adopt this approach in my artistic life. By creating good *ki*, I believe an artist can save herself and also contribute to her society.

3-2. *Ki* Giver

For the last a couple of years, I have been focusing on picturing bubbles as my secret power source of *ki*. These energies embrace all sorts of unfiltered memories, feelings, and characters. They can be positive and useful or sometimes negative and harmful. I began to draw or paint all different shapes and colors of bubbles randomly without any specific plan to show the spontaneity of the dynamic nature of the bubbles and chose what to paint behind them later. For the background, I selected the familiar Korean domestic images, which were rice cakes, crocks of soy sauce and soybean paste, and traditional architectural shapes. Since I grew up with these in my country, they brought me the intimate stories and comforts that also could be transformed to a fundamental power in my life. I was visiting my past and confirming with who I was through this process. In relation to it, the other crucial process was connecting the energy from the past to the one in my present life. The energy found in my past in Korea was brought up in the current space and moment to assure myself.

Through this process I produced a painting series that included a dinner table with bubbles. The dinner table in my kitchen was an important object that explained my role and status. Since I started the American life as a housewife, the dinner table with a Korean meal in the Western kitchen was a symbolic image that held a great amount of hidden energy and conveyed social and cultural meanings of my existence in Atlanta, Georgia.



Figure 3, In Kyoung Chun, *Invitation*, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 inches, 2010.

There is also an indication of my Catholic background in this series. The dinner table image metaphorically relates to the idea of the Eucharist consecrating Jesus' Last Supper. The mass in Catholicism is a celebration of people's daily labor as an essence in life as well as an invitation to share God's power and love to provide spiritual energy for people's daily lives. Additionally, I want to honor traditional women's domestic labor in the eastern and western world. Preparing meals for the family everyday is the most fundamental act of creating *ki* in a feminist sense. Therefore my work expresses the role of the artist as *ki* giver in personal, cultural and social realms. I am using a statement from Roy Ascott's *Telematic Embrace* to support my description of an artist as a *ki* giver.

It seems to me that one should be highly conscious of the didactic and social role of one's art today. The artist functions socially on a symbolic level. He acts out the role the free man par excellence. Having chosen the symbolic field within which he will act, and setting material limitations for himself with which he is familiar, he sets out to discover the unknown. He stakes everything on finding the unfamiliar, the unpredictable. His intellectual audacity is matched only by the vital originality of the forms and structures he creates. Symbolically, he takes on responsibility for absolute power and freedom to shape and create his world. He demonstrates, perhaps ritualistically, man's "capacity to create what is to be..."⁶

The recent sculptural work of a house with a table depicts the essentials of all the ideas stated above. It is an abstraction representing my past and present reality and my offerings as an artist. Wanting to express the energy that it takes for me to live, and wanting to share it with people, I have created a home where the fundamental force is kept and constantly renewed.

4. THE MEANING OF HOUSE: THE ORIGIN OF KI

*"For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of world."*⁷

--Gaston Bachelard

The house has been my long time favorite object in my art. I always began my childhood drawings with a house. Because a house was a symbol of protection to me, I had to make sure that I had a house to enter and then drew another objects like trees, flowers, animals and people on paper. No matter what was happening outside, I believed everything would be fine once I entered the house. It symbolized a place of refuge and relief. This idea has become more solid since I have been living in America as an immigrant.

⁶ Roy Ascott, *Telematic Embrace*, (University of California Press, 2003), 98.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, with a new foreword by John R. StilGoe, (Beacon Press, 1994), 4.

Though I love to be an active member of the community where I currently live, it is a fact that I am not originally from here. Unfamiliar and unnatural elements of cultural and social aspect still exist in my daily life. After I spend hours speaking English and being surrounded by a deep American thoughts and behaviors, I get ready to go home to take a break and recover my own sense of being. In this sense, my house provides physical shelter and a place where I can become my true self and regain my own *ki*. That's why a house is a significant topic in my work.



Figure 4. In Kyoung Chun, *dollhouse play*, found dollhouse, styrofoams, beads, dollhouse furniture, 23 x 12 x 18 inches, 2011.

He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really “lived,” nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in a new house.⁸

In my thesis exhibition, I want to express a house where my past and present are connected, so that where my true *ki* is found and grows. I used a found dollhouse as the basis for a sculpture that became a model for the paintings. Symbolically, a table with a bowl of rice in an American dollhouse represents my reality. It represents a Korean artist and housewife who lives in a traditional American old house and cooks Korean meals to produce her own *ki* in a literal sense. In a broader sense, it also represents the life of an artist of two different cultural backgrounds, Korean and American ones.

I also emphasize a connection between a bowl of rice and a house in this series. Having a bowl of rice is essential for a house to be a true home in Korean culture. A bowl of rice, the symbol of energy source is a core of the existence of a house. The house doesn't function fully without the bowl of rice, the essence of *ki*. Because there is a bowl of rice: the symbol of love in the house, the house becomes a place filled with *ki*.

When the bowl of rice is presented with the rainbow colors of beads, they can be regarded in various ways. First, the colorful beads in a bowl mean that a bowl of rice (or any food) is the accumulation of all different labors of people. The labors could be the ones of the farmers, shippers and mothers. When I use the rainbow colored beads, it represents the traditional Korean color stripes, saekdong. Koreans believe that the saekdong colors

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics Of Space*, with a new foreword by John R. StilGoe, (Beacon Press, 1994), 5.

chase out evil spirits and bring blessings. In this sense, I think about the home filled with the positive 'ki' and hope to share the good nature of the 'ki' with viewers.

Metaphorically, I believe that the home full of 'ki' can be anything that needs sustainable strength to exist as a whole being that includes our own body as well as architectural shelter.

5. PAINTING METHODOLOGY AND EMPTY AREA: THE ROLE OF NEGATIVE SPACE

*"Empty area is a true god; true freedom."*⁹

-- Kim Ji Ha

When I produced a body of work for the dollhouse series, I didn't have any preference for the choice of medium. By relating my attitude to the one of my Korean artist ancestors, I see myself as a student artist who has to continue learning and developing her skills and ideas diligently throughout her entire life. It is impossible for me to stay on one specific medium or style at this point. Yet, since I have been using watercolor and oil painting for years and feel comfortable dealing with them, they were the main mediums for my dollhouse series paintings. Even though I used both materials alternately from one painting to the next one and chose intuitively each specific medium for the particular content, I realize these two mediums signifies two different cultural backgrounds. Watercolor points out my eastern background and oil painting admits my western influence.

As for the content of the paintings, once I projected the house into one bubble or *ki*: a living organic energy unit that contains many smaller energy units, I painted the house

⁹ Ji Ha Kim, *Kim Ji Ha Collection 3: The Esthetics*, (Seoul: Seelchun Moonhak Press, 2002), 239.

from the various angles and light sources in order to show the different aspects of the character of one *ki*. I photographed the house and made paintings from the photo images. Some of them are white and bright to indicate the quality of daytime, light and yang. Others are shady and blue black to state the quality of night, darkness, and ying. Some are partial images like a corner of interior or a rooftop while some are the images of the entire house seen from various angles.

In all the paintings, there is one common element: the so-called empty area devoid of imagery. When the colorful bubbles are expressed as the visualized invisible energy, *ki*, I also want to visualize the invisible *ki* as it is. The only way to show the invisibility is leaving some blank areas on the canvas. Therefore *ki* is expressed as the forms of colorful bubbles in most cases. Yet the bubbly, indescribable, organic shape of the empty area is truly signifying the most fundamental *ki* force. Because the nature of *ki* is originally invisible, showing the negative space by painting the positive space and leaving negative space as unpainted suggests that the hidden and secret energy, *ki*, is residing in the visible objects everywhere in daily life.

The concept of empty area is one of the most important philosophical thoughts in Asia. An artist paints or writes to honor or emphasize the empty area that is the symbol of the entire universe (truth), expressing the awareness that one is only a tiny part of nature/truth in an attempt to harmonize with the unknown totality of universe.



Figure 5, In Kyoung Chun, *July*, Mixed Media on Canvas, 30 x 24 inches, 2011.

5. CONCLUSION

“By this I mean to touch on the simple fact that art is the opposite of war – that we need art, that for this very reason I believe it’s our highest form of hope.”¹⁰

--Gerhard Richter

In the dollhouse series ‘Invitation’, I consider the home as a space that brings up the recovery and regrowth of *ki*. By being abstracted, duplicated images of houses and bubbles that float within the open spaces of the paintings, I reflect upon the ephemeral nature

¹⁰ Gerhard Richter, *Gerhard Richter Writings 1961-2007*, edited by Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, (Distributed Art Publishers, 2009), 128.

of *ki*, which at times projects itself with brilliant force, only to fade or disappear moments later. For me, the home acts as a metaphor for the interconnected, transient self as it gathers *ki* from its surroundings and transfers its energy with a pop of diaphanous color.

I discover ideas of transience, interconnection, and rebirth in the mysterious flow of *ki* in the house. With an effervescent color palette that gives my paintings a celebratory, ethereal lightness, I work through a process of visually proving this invigorating energy force. While it has the power to enliven and animate the entities it resides within and comes in contact with, *ki* also requires cultivation and renewal constantly as my art and life does from now on.



Figure 6, In Kyoung Chun, *Wellbeing*, Installation View from MFA Exhibition, 2012

(Photographed by Christina Price Washington)

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