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Asian American Art Oral History Project

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## Andrew Bae Interview

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**Interviewer: Richard Park**

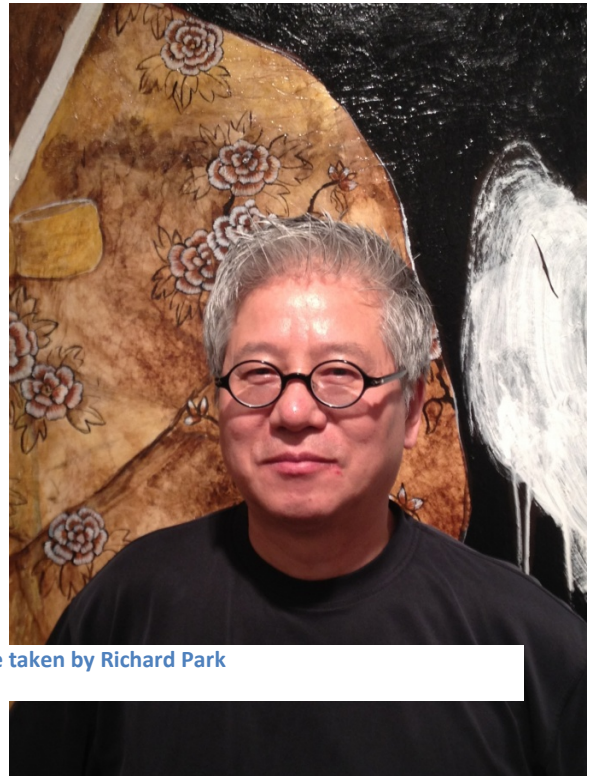
**Artist: Andrew Bae**

**In-Person Interview: Andrew Bae Gallery, Chicago IL**

**Date: 5/3/2012 4:00 PM**

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts/Culture during the 2012 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Art, Media, & Design.*

**Bio:** While Andrew Bae is situated in Chicago, he has clients from all over the globe. Born and raised in Seoul, South Korea, Andrew Bae picked up on the business of galleries after attending school and studying chemistry and worked as a chemist for several years. Although his gallery is in one of the more desirable locations of River North, he doesn't seem to carry that many artists. He prefers a limited selection of artists (around 10) as he feels there is more personal connection with his artists especially as a gallery owner. Though the business is changing, Andrew Bae has not sat on the leeway. With the recent economic downturn, many gallery owners have been forced to close their business. Showing his ability to adapt, he recently modified his business model to act as an intermediary and cater to the art collectors in Korea as well.



Picture taken by Richard Park

Bio by Richard Park

**Interview Transcript:**

**Richard Park:** Can you briefly tell me about yourself?

**Andrew Bae:** Well, I've been in Chicago for the last 22 years. I came here to open this gallery business with a focus on contemporary Asian artists; they are mainly Korean artists, and there are some Chinese and Japanese artists. Our focuses are contemporary art. They differ a great deal from traditional art. We also focus on few artists that we chose and represent them on exclusive basis most of time.

**RP:** What part of Korea are you from?

**AB:** From Seoul, like everyone else. Everybody is from Seoul if they are from Korea. Ha ha.

**RP:** How would you define or categorize your gallery or yourself?

**AB:** Well I never studied art myself. I majored in chemistry in college before I came to America, and I was working as a chemist for several years in US. To most people, it was totally a crazy idea trying to make a living out of selling unknown Korean artists in Chicago. Some adventurous Americans happened to like something very unusual. I did see the business opportunity in Asian contemporary art. My clients are not necessarily Asian, they just happen to like the artist's works we chose. And this is only a small fraction of the artworks from Asia, not necessarily representing what's going on in the art scene all over Asia. These are simply my personal choices of art works for American collectors in mind.

**RP:** When you were studying chemistry, did you set out to be a curator first and then a gallery owner or did you just want to be a gallery owner?

**AB:** There was a period of time I engaged in other import business after quitting my chemistry career. It was a gradual process to becoming an art dealer eventually but not to be a curator first.

**RP:** How has the gallery changed over the past twenty years since the day that it started and to how it is now?

**AB:** It has changed a great deal. After I got out of chemistry job, I thought about what do I really wanted to do next. I was determined that I like myself two things for sure. One is traveling and the other one is a beautiful object. I created a new job from these. I travel to any place I wanted to go in the world and import most beautiful artifacts I like from each country. Thus my first prototype store "f.o.b. Kansas City" was born in 1983. Eventually my interest has changed to focus in contemporary Asian arts in 1990. It began with prints media at the beginning and gradually changed over to other medium such as painting, sculpture and photography as my confidence grew.



Leeah Joo's Korean old folk tale stories, oil and marker on wooden board.

**RP:** Can you tell me about the type of artists that you show and is there a particular aesthetic or style you are interested in?

**AB:** Many people asked me how do I select the artists and artworks. I usually answer them by saying "how do you find your friends?" I think it is about the same analogy. It's not something I am particularly looking for with a set of rules. I was not looking for particular style or genre of

work. You can see from the samples of these artists, figure 1, 2 and 3. They're quite different each other by the subject matter or by the medium.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

They are different personalities and aesthetics, and yet have something in common I cannot easily explain in words.

**RP:** It's sort of like if the opportunity arises

**AB:** Yeah, it's REALLY like how you find your friends. You don't look for somebody taller than 170cm or certain color of complexion etc. But I do constantly looking for art works that would caught my eyes and heart. When I found a nice guy, do I really want to be friend with him? That is actually another question. You still need to go thru certain process until he really becomes one of my artists I want to represent. It is a subjective decision on the top of objective one. It is exactly same mental process take place when collector faces these unfamiliar art works to make their decision. Without this process and the confidence afterward they would not take this art work to their home.

**RP:** You've been in this business for over 20 years and I noticed that you have a very limited selection of artists. What are some of the advantages of limiting the number of artists that you have?

**AB:** To convince other people I have to be convinced myself first. Focusing on just a few artists I get to spend more of my time and energy to each of these artists. That is the advantage. I am thoroughly prepared when people has question about the artists and the art works. People will acknowledge my confidence and commitment, which will eventually help them to trust on my artists. Art business cannot sustain without building this trust between the people and the gallery. Chicago Tribune did not pay much attention on these unknown Asian artists until they got curious after so many years of persistent showing in my gallery.



**RP:** So there must be some reason behind choosing the artists.

**AB:** Yes, I believe each of the artists I represent will eventually represent my gallery. Relationship with artists is extremely important element for the life of a gallery. Discretion of choosing artist has to be objective as well as being personal. I don't test the artist to see whether their work will sell or not. If I am convinced I will try to promote them at least for certain length of time. I will give plenty of time for the artists to prove themselves. Senior art critic at Chicago Tribune eventually wrote many wonderful reviews of almost all of my artists.

**RP:** Do you provide feedback to your artists as well?

**AB:** Only to a certain point. I never suggest or imply to the artist what to paint. That absolutely has to come from the artist, not from my idea. They are the artists and I am not. It is absurd if I have to tell them what to do. I believe my artistic opinion will only confuse them rather than helping them for long run.

**RP:** So it's important to give them that freedom?

**AB:** In this art industry, arguably, one is classified as commercial art and the other type is acknowledged as fine art. Artist's mind-set makes the choice. It is entirely up to the artist what the artist chose to paint. I can only choose the artist I feel most suitable for this gallery.

**RP:** Yours is a fine art gallery ?

**AB:** Yes, you cannot try both in a same space.

**RP:** Okay. What are some of the advantages or disadvantages of having your gallery in the River North area?

**AB:** I lived in Chicago for the last 20 plus years but my clients are not always Chicago resident. About 25% of my clients are based in Chicago metropolitan area. I have clients in all 50 states and some in European and Asian countries as well. And people are starting to come



Young June Lew's "Ordinary Saint" oil bar and acrylic on paper



Everyday Saints by Young June Lew

from as far as Korea and South Africa now. As art markets expand to global, my location needs to be right place to cater to visitors from all over the world. In Chicago, River North is the perfect location for that purpose.

**RP:** Are your clients more interested in Asian art, or Asian American art, or does this even matter?

**AB:** No, it does not matter. People have diverse interest particularly in arts. It is subjective to an individual taste. Some people prefer western art and the very same person could attract to the work from my gallery. I am yet to find someone only interested in Asian art in my gallery.

**RP:** Do you see an aesthetic particular to Asian art, or Asian American art, or would you argue that there isn't an Asian American aesthetic at all?

**AB:** To me every art was contemporary at the time when it was produced. At this particular time period it is interpreted as an expression of individual no matter what medium was used or no matter what nationality of an artist is. It is the artistic creativity that counts. It is intelligence and sensible expression that counts. We learn from each other in all corners of the world. I think the true globalization is taking place in art. It is not important to distinguish what ethnic group this artist belongs. But it is only natural if we find some sort of Asian aesthetics from an Asian artist during the procession of this self-expression.

**RP:** You recently showcased paintings by Young June Lew. Can you tell me specifically about this piece (figure 4)?



Figure 4

**AB:** Do you feel this work has been done by an Asian artist?

**RP:** Not at all.

**AB:** To Young June Lew, in her works, it is not about East or the West. It is a celebration for the human nature contributed to the betterment of mankind. All corners of the world there are small

heroes hidden everywhere and in every time period. This positive energy from ordinary people collectively imbued our world as good as they are now. Albeit it is far from perfect, the world would be much less desirable place to live without them. She is 64 years old, Korean-American who is based in San Francisco. She's been in USA over 40 years. Her philosophy is deeply rooted in Asia and yet her vision has always been in universal term. I discourage people from their effort trying to find what is the Asianness of this work. It is not relevant.

**RP:** I see. So this shows how the artist is changing.

**AB:** Yes, this is a good example. Her subjects have changed drastically over the years even though I still consider her as an abstract artist. Last year, she completely surprised me and other patrons of her again with her "Ordinary Saints". After 15 years of her dedication to the empty cloth, it was a big surprise to everyone. She said once how poisonous for an artist when he or she wishes to settle down in a comfort zone. I also heard once she said to a young artist how dangerous an artist fall into a trap where she feels so comfortable and easy. All her life she pursued for the next, unknown world she needs to challenge. This is a life she chose as an artist, which I admire . . . doesn't matter you are Asian or American.

**RP:** With the economic downturn and the recent recession, many galleries weren't able to weather the storm. How did you and your gallery get through the crisis?

**AB:** It's definitely a rough time for art businesses in general. The world is changing and the art world is changing. You know a lot of mom and pop stores were forced to close down and I think the same effect is coming to the art business. People are too busy to learn about an artist how they grow and mature. People don't have time any more developing a long-term relationship with an artist they are attracted to. They instantly pick up an art work caught their eyes in huge art fairs. It's becoming a commodity. Have you been to one of those big art fairs?

**RP:** No, I haven't.

**AB:** They're in Chicago, San Francisco, New York or Miami; they're all over the place in US and in the world. I've been to these art fairs many times and they became extremely risky business. It is all about business. That's all every galleries could care about. It became very commercialized. Now, some of my potential clients head to the art fairs instead of coming here. They look around thousands of artists in matter of hours and see who's popular and ask around which pieces are going to go up in value. They try to be a savvy buyer instantly. Of course we still have clients, but business is definitely down, along with the housing market.



JUNGIN LEE, thing 04-20, 55" x 77", photography on mulberry paper

**RP:** Where do you see your consulting department five years from now?

**AB:** It's interesting that you mention that. I recently changed my website with this changing culture of art business. I want to help inexperienced Asian clients to buy art. Generally speaking, there are less number of experienced art collectors in Asia compared to America. Their experiences are short lists when it comes to collecting particularly in contemporary art. Koreans have interest in contemporary art and they know it is something they wants to do but when they get to purchase something, most people don't know where

to begin. An art work by a famous artist that sold for \$30,000 in 1950's went on auction and sold for \$120 million. I am sure you have read stories like that. This collector was not the smartest person in the world to know all this in advance. He just bought it for his enjoyment and hold onto it for more than 50 years. The value of the piece went up and he got lucky. The best investors in art are not the investment-minded type. The best investors are happens to be those who buy for their own enjoyment. It has been proven from the history. So there are these people in Korea who don't want to make a mistake in investing their money in art and are confused where to begin. I am writing a book right now and my book targets these people. My book helps to guide these people to make better judgment.

**RP:** Do you have any advice for local artists in Chicagoland?

**AB:** I have only one advise for artists, no matter where they are, there are no shortcuts to success in this industry. Most professions are like that. Many young artists are confused by the media and their sensational success stories. They want to find a fast track to the stardom. There are explosion of various medium and genre of works available for the artists to choose in recent times. But the quality of the work matters the most. If you produce a good piece, trust me, people will find you no matter where you are. Tens of thousands of people like me trying constantly to find good works all over the world. You cannot hide from this antenna with terribly good art works you had produced. A good news travels fast now a days. An artist should concentrate on how to improve their works and it will find its own road to success.

**END.**





YOUNG JUNE LEW, 16 violins 80" x 132" mixed media on canvas, 2010



JUNGIN LEE, Wind 07-106, 39" x 80", photography on mulberry paper 2007



JUNGJIN LEE, wind 07-78, 29" x 56", photography on Mulberry paper, 2007



JUNGJIN LEE, pagoda 98-25, 74" x 26" photography on mulberry paper 1998