

Changing perceptions and the impact of culture

by

Sodam Lee

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Major: Integrated Visual Arts

Program of Study Committee:

Cindy Gould, Major professor

April Eisman

April Katz

Brent Holland

Iowa State University

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ABSTRACT

This document is the written component that accompanies the MFA thesis exhibition “Changing Perceptions and the Impact of Culture” which took place from January 23 to January 30, 2015 at the Design on Main Gallery in Ames, Iowa. The thesis exhibition explores the impact of culture on perception, as well as differences and similarities in human life-styles across the globe, with special focus on South Korea, Italy and the United States. The exhibition consists of 2-D artworks using printmaking and digital photography techniques. A few 3-D installations are paired with the 2-D digital photographs.

This thesis documents the main ideas and concepts that underlie the exhibition artworks. The artist tries to emphasize the reality behind the oftentimes superficial surface of what we see, juxtaposing contrasting lifestyles between the rich and the poor. She stresses that by changing our perception of “taking-for-granted” what we see on the surface, we can begin to understand each other, leading to positive changes of our behavior, attitudes and beliefs. This paper shows the progress and development of the artist’s work over a five year time period, including the methods, processes, artistic and cultural influences that contribute to the creation of her unique artworks.

CHAPTER 1: ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The purpose of my art is to give insight into different human experiences. I am particularly interested in issues of richness and poverty, both in material and psychological terms. I have come to realize that what really makes human beings rich is not only our material possessions, but also our cultural environment, intelligence, and spirituality.

Having grown up in South Korea, I am interested in comparing life there with where I live now, the United States. Both cultures are unique and different in their own way, each possessing strengths and weaknesses. South Korea, for example, has achieved rapid economic development at the expense of some important aspects of its cultural heritage, while the United States is the world's leading economic power but has a relatively under-developed cultural heritage due to its relatively short history. While thinking about these imbalances, I became interested in the differences, similarities, and variations in human life under different circumstances.

In 2013, I reached an artistic turning point while participating in the Venice Large Format Printmaking and Residency Project in Venice, Italy. This residency in Venice, the "City of Art," provided me with a great opportunity to explore yet another culture, its lifestyle, principles, and cultural heritage. Since then, I have expanded the cultural comparisons in my art to beyond just South Korea and the United States to include Italy.

For my art, I focus on combining and layering images, and the principles and elements of art and design in compositional spaces. My work is symbolic, narrative, and abstract. I use symbolic objects from Italy, South Korea, and the United States, and with color, design, and composition, strive to represent both visual dynamics and harmony in

each work. For example, I have used images of a magic castle from American popular culture and historic architecture from European countries to represent abundance, and images of a boy carrying water, fishing boys, and potatoes to depict poverty.

I have also combined media such as photographs, painting, pattern design, printmaking, textile design and digital printing on fabric. A wide range of traditional methods is paired with contemporary techniques and digital technology such as image processing software Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, and InDesign.

In general, I believe it is difficult for people to see beyond their own personal experiences. Through my work, I want people to realize that one united world can contain vastly different environments and circumstances. My art also attempts to inspire human values such as caring for others who struggle with hardships in a wide range of environments around the world.

CHAPTER 2: ART BEFORE ISU

As a child, I never dreamed of becoming an artist. Growing up in a poor family in Seoul, South Korea, I thought that art or music was a luxury that only rich kids could afford. In addition, it was said that artists cannot make a lot of money; they have to be poor. My rich friends wanted to learn art as a hobby, not as a career. In such an environment, I never imagined that I would end up becoming an artist.

It was not until I met my husband that I started to think about art. I met my husband when I was in my twenties. He was a college student preparing for the prestigious national civil examination, which is part of the path for becoming a high-ranking officer in the South Korean government. He had a very clear vision and goal in his life and studied so hard to accomplish it. Dating him, I saw his passion and how he managed his time in pursuing what he wanted to achieve. His goal-oriented lifestyle was impressive and inspirational to me. It was a wake-up call for me to think about my life. Before meeting him, I had no goal for my life other than to get married and settle down as soon as possible.

When I thought about my future, I did not know what I wanted to do. I struggled to figure out what I could do best. I considered writing, business, and other possibilities. One day when I saw beautiful flowers decorating the church during Sunday service, it struck me that if I could draw and paint such beautiful flowers, I might be able to honor and please God, so I enrolled in a private academy to learn how to draw. For over a year, I practiced drawing figural sculptures and met with my teacher once a week. Although I began drawing as a hobby, the teacher encouraged me to go back to school and major in art. It was not an easy decision since I already had a job, but I eventually applied to the

College of Art at Kyungwon University (later renamed Gachon University) and began studying art in 1997.

At Kyungwon University, my concentration was fiber art, which I chose because I thought it was a relatively rare major and could be easily expanded to include apparel design. Over the course of five years, I learned the major techniques related to fiber art, including dying, silk-screen printing, felting, weaving, stitching, and embroidering. Although I was much older than the other students, I was happy. I enjoyed learning about art because I was doing something I liked to do. I was strongly motivated and had clear goals, which pushed me to work hard.

Many of the works I created at Kyungwon University are thematically heavy, realistic, and dark. Through my art, I tried to show the reality behind the surfaces we see each day, a theme I continue to work with today. My artwork often shed light on the unseen dark side of contemporary society in South Korea, such as poverty, prejudice, oppression, discrimination, and inequality. *The Eye* (Figure 1), for example, represents the fact that we do not see the reality of life until we really open our eyes. This mixed media object combines yellow and dark blue threads coiled around firm foam, red wires knitted, and a central photographic collage. Hanging in front are two black plaster hands. I created this work in a weaving class.

Inside the image of the eye, there is a mixture of pictures that includes a disabled man, an old man and a manual laborer that were combine together to reveal the unpleasant realities of society in South Korea. It is unpleasant because these images represent weak, miserable, and lower-class figures, people most South Korea do not want to welcome as part of their culture.

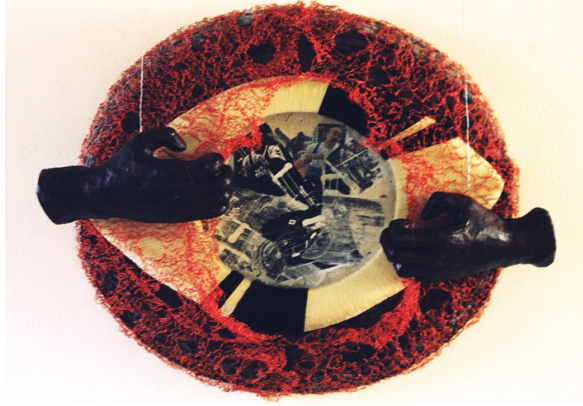


Figure 1. *The Eye*, 24" X 30," Weaving, Mixed Media, 2000

Fantasy (Figure 2) illustrates how we can easily be prejudiced by what we see. The gorgeous colors of the woman's dress look beautiful at first glance, but the design and color pattern were drawn from a variety of snakes, a creature that many people dislike. I tried to show that a heinous creature could be a beautiful subject for art when negative, prejudiced perceptions about snakes are overcome.



Figure 2. *Fantasy*, 71" x 60", Felting, Mixed Media, 2001

After graduation, I planned to go to graduate school in South Korea, but my husband had the opportunity to study abroad, so I gave up my plans and went with him to Syracuse, New York and later to Blacksburg, Virginia. It was not easy for me to adjust to our new life in the U.S. There were many problems I had to deal with, including culture shock, the language barrier, and financial hardship. But the biggest issue was my health. For several years, I suffered not only from physical pain brought on by the difficult birth of my second child, but also from psychological depression.

With time, I recovered, and after the birth of my third child, returned to my dream of going to graduate school to study art. Although I had returned to South Korea with my family, I wanted to study in the United States because I believed I could continue to do artwork there without gender or age discrimination. In 2009, I received the admission letter from Iowa State University. I deferred for a year, and then on July 30, 2010, I crossed over the Pacific Ocean with my husband (who helped me settle in before returning to his career in South Korea) and three kids to begin a new journey in a far-away foreign land.

CHAPTER 3: PAINTING AND THE KWANGJU MASSACRE

In my first semester at Iowa State, I took a painting course, my first, with Professor Brent Holland. Since I had concentrated on textiles and mixed media at Kyungwon University, I did not have any experience with painting. This was a big challenge for me because I was not familiar with basic painting skills and principles. Because I had never painted before, I lacked confidence and struggled with coming up with an idea for my first painting. Eventually I decided to paint something from my personal experience. I reviewed information about the modern history of South Korea to find out something unique and interesting. While doing this research, I learned more about a tragic incident, the Kwangju Massacre, which is remembered today as an historic turning point toward democratization and away from dictatorship in South Korea. The Kwangju Massacre was also the first major historical event that I myself witnessed, albeit mostly through the university and civilian protests that claimed that the military government was responsible for the Kwangju Massacre. As a college student, I learned about the Kwangju Massacre through videos and books and participated in student/civil protests against the military government.

The Kwangju Massacre occurred from May 18 - 27, 1980. Kwangju is one of South Korea's major cities and is located in the southwestern part of the country. It was one of several cities in which its citizens rose up against Chun Doo-hwan and his associates, a dictator who tried to take over military and political power after the assassination of President Park Jung-hee. Park, an army general who had been in office for nineteen years, had also taken power through a coup. General Chun and his soldiers tried

to oppress student/civil protests with armed force. During the protest, many innocent people were hurt, which triggered massive resistance from Kwangju citizens. Over the course of ten days, the citizens took up arms to defend themselves and fight against the military troops, but they were ultimately crushed by Chun Doo-hwan's troops. This event became known as the "5.18," a reference to the date the uprising began. In the end, 3,000 people died. During Chun Doo-hwan's reign, the incident was represented as a rebellion inspired by Communist sympathizers. But after civil rule was reinstated in 1988, the incident received recognition as an effort to defend democracy from military usurpation.



Figure 3. 22" x 28"



Figure 4. 22" x 28"



Figure 5. 28" x 27"



Figure 6. 28" x 22"

The Kwangju Massacre series, Painting, Mixed Media, 2010

My first paintings represented "5.18" as a tragedy, the dark side of South Korea's recent history. Then, during further research, I found a photo of a little boy who had lost his family in the massacre; he was holding up a picture of his dad. This photo inspired me. He must have been about ten years old at the time of the massacre. I could not imagine how sad and miserable he must have felt at that time. I wanted to comfort him. If possible, I wanted to make him smile and help him get his childhood back. Through my paintings of the Kwangju Massacre, I intended to give encouragement to all the children

who had lost their parents in the massacre. My second intent was to compare and contrast realities between today and the time of the Kwangju Massacre.

I created four paintings for the *Kwangju Massacre* series. Each incorporated acrylic paints, crayons made in Korea, transparency prints, and colored pencils. Using these various media, I created layers of abstract and conceptual imagery. For the background, I used bright colors that I thought children would like: yellow, light green, pink, and light gray, respectively. The intent was to create a soothing space. I then placed abstract symbols onto the colorful backgrounds, which made the backgrounds look like wallpaper. I used gray for the abstract symbols in the four paintings to calm the bright backgrounds a bit and to help create unity and consistency across each painting and the series. The abstract symbols also represent human emotions such as happiness, silliness, hope, and humor.

In Figures 3 and 4, I included colorful masks. These were inspired by masks from all over the world and were placed in the paintings as funny objects to make kids happy. I also incorporated two well-known works from art history, Jenny Saville's *Plan* (1993) and Gustav Klimt's *Kiss* (1909), to symbolize cultural over-abundance. Saville's heavy body in Figure 3 and Klimt's lovers in gold in Figure 4 offer a striking contrast to the reality of suffering experienced by those connected with the Kwangju Massacre. In Figure 3, a thin lady is juxtaposed next to Saville's large woman. The thin lady represents youthfulness and happiness. She is wearing makeup and has her hair tied up in a fashionable bun; she is also wearing a colorful short dress with high heeled shoes while holding a very long scarf with two hands, literally spreading happiness from her scarf filled with colorful masks.

In Figure 4, the Coke bottle has a broken bottom, which is tied to the root of the tree; each root has a different shoe at the end. The broken Coke bottle, also evident in the series of broken bottles in the lower right, symbolize children whose hearts are broken. The shoes represent the parents who died in the massacre. In this image, the broken-hearted children represented by the Coke bottle have been severed from their parents, presented by the shoes. The colorful masks escaping from the top of the bottle represent the happiness of childhood; the different masks represent the different positive emotions children can have. The masks represent what they have lost and remind them that they can be happy again.

In Figure 5, a gray mountain of machine guns refers to the weapons used in the Kwangju Massacre and is surrounded by a circle of colorful dancing clowns that I used to convey satirical humor and sadness. In Figure 6, the colorful water pot plays an important role as a giver of hope for children who survived the Kwangju Massacre. Kids in gray sitting on a shelf represent those who were hurt and damaged psychologically by the massacre. They are the ones who need re-building in hope and happiness.

With the paintings of *5.18 Kwangju Massacre*, I have brought an important historical moment from my history as a South Korean to light for an American audience. These paintings convey my belief that if we change our perception, we can change our understanding, attitude and even our behaviors significantly. In my earlier work, this focus can be seen in *Fantasy* (Figure 2), which attempted to confront people with the beauty of a snake. In *The Kwangju Massacre*, I contrast the harsh realities of the massacre, at times literally gray in my images, with bright, varied colors and children's imagery in the hope of helping these imagined children find their happiness again. If we

can perceive things in a positive way, we can help change an individual's life and also influence others in a positive manner.

CHAPTER 4: PRINTMAKING AND POVERTY

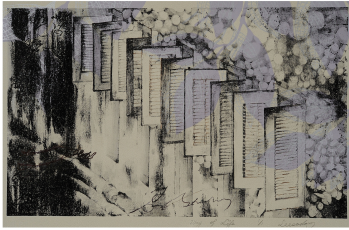


Figure 7

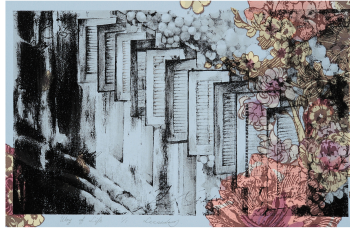


Figure 8

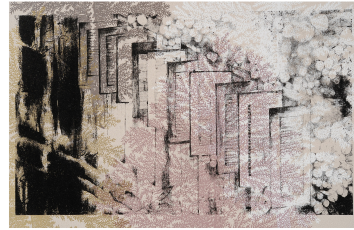


Figure 9

The Way of Life, 8" x 14" each, Lithography, 2012

In the fall of 2012, I took a printmaking class with Professor April Katz. We were presented with five themes to choose from for our semester-long project. I chose “Abstract” and used photolithography plates to create *The Way of Life* (Figures 7-9). For this print, I created five editions and more than ten monoprints.

In *The Way of Life*, I used windows to symbolize different ways of life or life experiences. The windows are open, reflecting that the weather is warm. However, when the weather is cold, the windows can be closed. I think our lives can also change depending on our circumstances. The windows thus reflect different lifestyles over time as well as individual lives. I also used shifting sunshine to represent the nature of life growth as well as change by using a dark wall on the left side of the image, contrasted with the bright opened windows. Since the sun changes location on its rotation, the sunrays shift to different windows in different time zones across the world. People’s lives look very similar until they reach adulthood. As they become adults, life is filled with endless challenges and difficulties. At one point, one may taste the sweetness of life. Others will only taste the bitterness of a tough life filled with realities like illness, accidents, wars, and disasters. This is the universal life cycle most people will experience

during his or her lifetime.

The logs in the upper right-hand corner of each print represent individual human beings living together. All of the logs are made from the same wooden material, but they come in all different shapes and sizes just as people's lives differ.

I used already-printed wallpaper for the substrate. It had a variety of beautiful images from nature such as flowers, leaves and trees. The window imagery printed on top of the wallpapers combines well, both visually and conceptually, and together they represent the deep relationship between human life and nature.



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

Day and Night series, 10" x 8" each, Lithography, 2013

In 2012-13, I created a series of lithographs titled, *Day and Night*. This series marks a turning point in my work, the moment when I developed my artistic voice and method. I found that printmaking is the medium in which I can most effectively convey my ideas and style. As April Katz once said in class, "I feel like dancing whenever I print." I, too, feel this way.

For this series, I initially created ten drawings and then transferred them onto polyester lithographic plates (Smart Plate) using a black Sharpie pen. This simple plate

enabled me to use lithography to develop the images with a variety of colors and also allowed me to register multiple plates. Altogether I created ten images on ten separate plates. Hand-made stencils, string, and thread were used to modify the plates when printing. The images were combined and integrated with varying background textures, color, and value contrast to create a related group of prints with an effective visual impact. The images were layered together and show depth and distance.

For these prints, I did research on some of the poorest countries in the world, collecting images that show people's struggles with poverty. My inspiration came from a famous photographer from my home country, Minsik Choi (1928-2013). Choi's photographs deal with poor people in South Korea from the 1950s to the 1970s. During these years, a large number of Koreans were struggling with hunger and poverty because of the Korean War (1950-1953), which had destroyed nearly everything. Choi's photographs of poor people helped broadcast the reality of life in South Korea to the rest of the world at a time when South Korea desperately needed the help of other countries.

Choi was inspired to take up the theme of poverty by Jean-Francois Millet's painting, *The Angelus*, which depicts a poor couple praying in the very early morning. Like Millet's work, Choi's photographs show the essence of human nature and dignity. They are compelling. Figure 14 shows a little girl eating noodles while squatting on a street corner. Figure 15 shows a mother who is unable to hold her baby while breast-feeding because her hands were covered with fish waste from the fish that she was selling. No water was available to wash her hands, so the older daughter assists her mom by holding the baby up to her mother's breast. Figure 16 shows an old homeless woman sleeping on the street.



Figure 14 *Untitled*

Figure 15 *Untitled*

Figure 16 *Untitled*

Whereas Choi focused solely on poor people in his photography, my prints in the *Day and Night* series juxtapose the rich and poor. This comparison stems from my own experiences after coming to the United States, a land in which wealth is more evident than in South Korea. It also reflects a particular experience I had.

In 2012, my family and I visited Walt Disney World in Florida. There was a magic castle where Cinderella danced as a princess. Many special events were held on the front stage of the castle. People and characters from other Disney stories gathered there to dance and sing. At night there was a series of huge fireworks and colorful light shows. The beautiful castle fascinated me. I asked a Disney World employee if I could see the inside or back side of the castle. He guided me to the back of the castle where there was only a dark gray wall. I was curious and confused because I was expecting something beautiful. I became frustrated when only a dark gray wall stood before me. I started to think about the two contrasting aspects of the magic castle. Everyone who has visited Disneyworld can recall the beauty of the castle accompanied by stunning fireworks and light shows, but few can imagine that the backside of the castle was a dull, dark gray wall, devoid of imagination and beauty.

This experience left a significant impression on me, helping me to develop a

comparative perspective on the notion of superficiality versus reality, and became the inspiration for the *Day and Night* series. In the series, I used the magic castle as a symbol of abundance, wealth, and happiness. The castles in these prints appear in different colors such as gray, green, and purple. To make a dramatic contrast with the castle in each print, I placed images of suffering children and babies from poor countries. In Figure 10, I depicted a Somalia child begging for bread; in Figure 11, three South Korean boys are shown transporting water for their family; and in Figure 12, the suffering workers in a wealthy country such as the U.S.A. are crammed into Cinderella's wagon. In Figure 13, I incorporated a photograph of many babies left in orphanages in Mauritania, a country ranked among one of the poorest in the world.

CHAPTER 5: PRINTMAKING AND ARTISTIC INFLUENCES



Figure 17



Figure 18

The Hands, 8" x 10" each, Relief, 2013



Figure 19

The Hands series (Figures 17-19) was inspired by my art residency experience in Venice, Italy. In Venice, there are many people who make their living by drawing the city landscape. I met one of these street artists at the Plaza Marco Polo. He was an elderly man who had been painting the scenery of the city for twenty-five years. We spoke for a long time. He seemed so proud of his country's cultural heritage. He also assumed that South Korea's cultural heritage could not compare to that of his country. Taking a quick peak at his work, I saw his hands. He was drawing various scenes of Venice in a very prompt, but masterly manner. Watching his hands at work, I was inspired. They were very old, and I could only guess how much time he must have spent to be able to draw that skillfully. Thereafter, his hands became a subject and symbol in my artwork, representing an old but proudly presented cultural heritage.

I created *The Hands* series using relief printmaking methods. After printing editions, I made monoprints, unique, one-of-a-kind prints. Relief printmaking is a process that uses carving tools to shape a block of wood, incising a design into the surface. I specifically created woodcuts for this series. Random marks and background textures were made on Plexiglas and then printed on BFK paper multiple times. Triangle stencils

were used and two or three different ink colors were blended and layered together. This process created the background's depth and ambiguous space. After the background was completed, the hands, which had been carved on a wood block, were printed on top of the background layer. Centered placement of the hands within the compositional space creates visual stability. Subdividing the space into these horizontal sections, the monoprint background and the texture of the hands are visually well blended. I chose the colors of each print from nature, such as the blue of water and sky, and the reds of a garden of flowers. The water pattern used for the background was inspired by Venice, where water is an abundant part of everyday life.

I believe that hands often reflect the nature and characteristics of a person's life. They represent the age, gender, and history of an individual. With *The Hands* series, I wanted to show how different and yet universally invaluable a person's life is.



Figure 20. *The Baby's Head on His Mother's Arm*, 1990

Figure 21. *Die Witwe I (The Widow I)* 1992-3

For *The Hands*, I was greatly influenced by Kathe Kollwitz, a German printmaker, and sculptor in the early 20th century. Kollwitz's works depict emotionally negative feelings such as concern, sadness, nervousness, and distress. Kollwitz sought to express meaning or emotional experience rather than physical realities in her artworks. Kollwitz effectively conveys the emotional concerns of her subjects through their hands.

The Baby's Head on His Mother's Arm (Figure 20) depicts a girl with closed

eyes. The mother's hands are slightly touching the child's face while the child sleeps leaning against her mother's knee. The child appears unstable. Although the child looks very weak, the hands around the face are protective, but at the same time, anxious. This work by Kollwitz was created in soft tones of gray and its background is somewhat ambiguous.

The Widow (Figure 21) employs bold contrasts between the black and white values used. The white hands crossing over the black figure, and the woman's white head leaning on her black shoulder visually express the subject's emotions. This print is an example of Expressionism. Kollwitz's strong images and concepts provided a powerful impact on the German people not only during her lifetime, but also on me, many years after her death.

Dancing Gele (Figure 22) is a very large print. To create it, I used a steamroller to print the woodblock image on fabric, which was 100 x 50 inches in size. A steamroller is a large, heavy, and slow-moving vehicle with a roller on front that is traditionally used to flatten the surfaces of roads during construction. The print is black ink on fabric that was hand-dyed in pink, yellow, gray, and purple dyes. Eight individual black shapes were juxtaposed together and an organic negative background space was created.

The photographs of J.D.Okhai Ojeikere, which I saw at the Venice Biennale, inspired me. These photographs showed women in Nigeria wearing special head wraps called "Gele." The Gele is a part of the traditional outfit worn by Yoruba women, who make up one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa. The Gele is manipulated to stand away from the head, creating an enormous headpiece. Over time, and with more wealth becoming available to commoners, the size and the quality of the workmanship

and fabrication of the Gele became a powerful symbol of a woman's socio-economic status.



Figure 22. *Dancing Gele*, 100”x 50”
Relief, 2013



Figure 23. *Hidden Faces*, 10”x 8”
Digital print, 2014



Figure 24. J.D.Okhai Ojeikere,
The 55th Venice Biennial Exhibition 2013



Figure 25. J.D.Okhai Ojeikere,
It's Never Summer

I was inspired by the beauty of Ojeikeres' photographs and of the energetic and

uplifting Gele they depicted, and decided to create a series based on them. I first printed out all the pictures that I took from the Venice Biennial Exhibition and began to draw the images and shapes based on each picture. I manipulated the design of the Gele to create an abstract pattern, finally settling on ten patterns. I then scanned the patterns into my computer and re-organized the size, location, and the direction of them using Photoshop. I transferred the design to a 100" x 50" wood board and then carved into the surface to create my design. In my steamroller print, *Dancing Gele*, eight different Gele patterns dance and float across the compositional space, creating a beautiful negative space. For me this pattern became a universal symbol of traditional culture that reflects women's status in the world.

The second piece, *Hidden Faces* (Figure 23), is small digital print that uses some of the imagery from *Dancing Gele*. It, too, reveals an image in the negative space, this time of a face. The background of *Hidden Faces* is a monotone ivory color.

In addition to *Dancing Gele* and *Hidden Faces*, I also created an *Untitled* mixed media installation, which was based on the Gele patterns. Each individual pattern created for *Dancing Gele* was repeated in a row and printed out on a thin, long strip of paper, resulting in an appearance similar to that of a roll of film. I purchased three old microscopes because these represented the idea of zooming in on something that I can't easily observe with my eyes. I placed the microscopes on three white pedestals in the front window area at the Design on Main Gallery during my thesis exhibition. The long film-like paper strip of printed Gele patterns, *Untitled*, was positioned under the lens of each microscope, looping and visually connecting each of the three microscopes together, creating beautiful movement. This mixed-media installation was located right next to the

Dancing Gele, which was also displayed in the window at Design on Main during my thesis exhibition.

CHAPTER 6: DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN VENICE AND SOUTH KOREA

While participating in the Venice Large Format Printmaking Project and Residency from July through August 2013, I took a lot of photos that later became a great resource for my artwork and, in particular, for digital works. During the Fall 2014 semester, I created seventeen digital artworks, eight of which were included in my thesis exhibition. In retrospect, it was perfect timing for my thesis exhibition: I had the Venice photos and other original artworks that were ready to be utilized and had mastered digital skills and technologies. My exploration of the digital medium was inspired, in part, by three graphic design courses I had taken with Professor Arthur Croyle, where I learned graphic design skills and techniques, including Adobe Photoshop. I also realized that digital media allowed me to experiment with combining traditional and new technology, and to work on multiple art projects at the same time.

Magic Castle and Reality (Figure 26) takes up the theme of wealth and poverty that I had explored in earlier work, most notably the *Day and Night* series. It juxtaposes Disney's Magic Castle with a spiral pattern of red and gray people. The castle is a photo that I took at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. The people are variations on a squatting figure from an earlier painting of mine and were developed from a photograph depicting slaves in a big ship. I created a pattern of these crouching figures that wraps around the Magic Castle in two gray spirals and a red S-shaped line.

20 Euros (Figure 27) shows my new interest in exploring a country's cultural heritage. This new interest was inspired, in part, by a discussion I had with a street artist

in Venice during summer of 2013. This street artist appears in *20 Euros*, which is named for the price he charges for his drawings of Venice.



Figure 26
Magic Castle and Reality, 14" x 10"
Photography, Painting, Digital, 2014

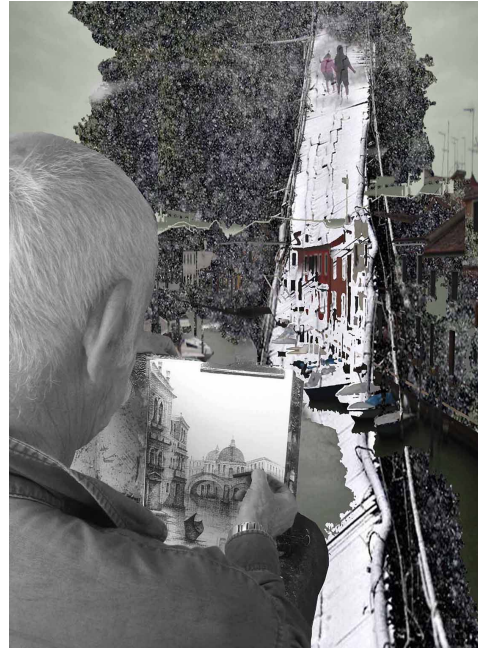


Figure 27
20 Euros. 12" x 9"
Photography, Digital, 2014

To create this digital work, which was done in Photoshop, I laid out a rough texture and a white bridge for the background. Two children walk together near the top of the bridge. The images of the old artist and the two little kids represent an older and newer generation respectively. I emphasized the bridge as a focal point to imply the connection between the old and the new. The old man is drawing a beautiful historical building on his paper, while he is looking toward the little kids to suggest that his interest in Italy's cultural heritage can be passed down to a new generation. Italy's cultural heritage can even to be shared with foreign "kids" from a faraway land such as myself.

My conversation with this artist in Venice was an eye-opening experience, and together with a course I took with Professor April Eisman the previous year, "Art and

Dictatorships,” it helped me to think about the role and importance of culture in my country. South Korea is a single-race nation and has a long-standing cultural tradition of Confucianism. Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BCE) who is called a “Master King” in Chinese history. His ideas are deeply embedded in the culture of East-Asian countries including South Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, as well as China. Confucianism emphasizes social morality and the love of humankind. It also stresses empathy for other people. As a racially homogeneous group, the people of South Korea share the same culture and philosophical ideas.

In the twentieth century, Korea encountered a number of hardships. In 1910, it was conquered by the Japanese and made into a colony. Although it restored its sovereignty in 1945 right after the end of World War II, Korea was then divided into two countries, North and South Korea. North Korea was controlled by the Soviet Union and became communist, while South Korea was controlled by the United States and became capitalist. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, starting the Korean War. After the war ended with a truce treaty in 1953, South Korea achieved rapid economic growth. It now ranks as one of the fastest developing countries in the world. North Korea, on the other hand, became one of the poorest countries in the world.

During Japan’s rule, most Korean people were forbidden to use their own language in speaking and writing and were forced to learn Japanese. They were even deprived of their Korean names. Losing their language and even their own names, Korean people had difficulty holding onto their national and cultural identity as something distinctive from that of the Japanese.

The Japanese also exploited Korean historical and cultural artworks during their rule. According to the Korean Cultural Heritage Administration's research, the Japanese plundered 61,409 pieces of Korean culture. Like language, artwork can represent a nation's identity and spirit. In history, the plundering of artworks has been strategically used as a way of destroying national identity and the cultural power of the people in the countries being invaded.

When taking Professor Eisman's "Art and Dictatorship" class in 2012, I realized that art is an important source of cultural representation and nationalism beyond personal expression or enjoyment. I began to see art not only as an aesthetic reflection of life, but also as a strong part of a country's culture that can have incredible influence in society. Part of what inspired me was *The Rape of Europa* (2007), a movie that shows how the Nazis looted many famous art museums in Europe during the course of World War II. The looted artworks were to later stock a museum in Germany that was to be built during the Third Reich. In the film, the narrator used the word "art treasure" repeatedly, drawing my attention to the term. I had seldom before thought of artwork as a public "treasure" which belongs to the world. This movie helped me to rethink the nature and value of creating art beyond the personal level.

Through this movie, I also began to understand my role as an artist for society more broadly as the creator of cultural heritage. My work reflects current cultural and historic events as well as my beliefs for the next and subsequent generations.

Adding to this new interest in the history and culture of European countries was the time I spent in Venice, Italy, during the summer of 2013 as part of the Venice Large Format Printmaking Residency and Project. This three-week residency enabled me to

experience another lifestyle and culture difference from those that I already knew, i.e. South Korea and the United States. This residency marked an artistic turning point for me.

In addition to the beautiful city of Venice, I also experienced the 55th Venice Biennale, a major exhibition of contemporary art that takes place once every two years in Venice. I was overwhelmed by the art on display as well as by the architecture of Venice. Meeting people in Venice, I discovered that Italians are very proud of their own culture and cultural heritage. However I also saw that Venice has limited economic options for its citizens, thus, most Venetians depend on tourism for their livelihood. In fact, the cost of living is so high that most people who work there cannot afford to live on the island. Instead, they commute back and forth from the mainland. Despite their cultural richness, Venice also experiences material poverty. Since my time in Venice, I have developed a comparative view on both South Korea and Italy in my artwork, and especially in a number of digital prints that were included in my thesis exhibition.

In *Fishing Boys* (Figure 28), six boys are fishing in Sri Lanka. This country is an island where fishing is an important industry both socially and economically. The boys are fishing while perched on wooden poles in the water and some of the fish are flying into the sky. I used these as a symbol of reality today. I juxtaposed the boys with nine gondolas from Italy to compare the basic lifestyles in Sri Lanka and Italy, respectively. These images play a role in conveying my idea about cultural richness and poverty. For the background of *Fishing Boys*, I used two photographs of a wall that I took while I was in Venice. After that I applied my partial drawings of fishing boys with the fish on top of the background image of the wall. The image of the gondola is also from a picture that I took while living in Venice during the art residency.



Figure 28.
Fishing Boys, 15'' x 11''
 Photography, Drawing, Digital, 2013-2014



Figure 29.
 구황작물, *Potatoes: Saving Life*. 8'' x 8''
 Photography, Digital, 2014

구황작물: Potatoes, Saving Life (Figure 29) was created from memory. My father was born in Haeju, North Korea. He escaped to South Korea during the Korean War, when he was a teenager. He lived in poverty in North and South Korea due to the war, and thus, he rarely ate rice, but instead ate potatoes, which were much cheaper. Today, he no longer eats potatoes. I learned from an American colleague that potatoes were food for the poor in the U.S. during the Great Depression. I came to believe that potatoes can be used as a symbol of poverty in many countries. To contrast poverty and richness, I juxtaposed potatoes with a building, the Santa Maria Della Salute church in Venice.

In *Marching Band* (Figure 30), I compared the cultural heritage of western and eastern cultures by juxtaposing a marching band from Disney World with China's

terracotta army. The marching band is a group of entertainers in Disney World. They use their musical talents to make their living and wear long, metallic stilts to appear taller. When I took their picture, they reminded me of the Beatle's cover album for *Sgt. Pepper*. In contrast, I used China's terracotta army, created for the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. These sculptures present the power of authority and cultural richness in China.



Figure 30.
Marching Band for Soldiers. 13" x 10.5"
Photography, Digital, 2014

CHAPTER 7: INSTALLATION WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE

For my thesis exhibition, I added three-dimensional elements to two digital prints to create two installations. *Heavy Shoulder* (Figure 31) features a young, barefoot boy in a long white T-shirt and shorts carrying two buckets of water balanced one on each end of a pole across his shoulders. He is missing an arm, presumably lost during the Korean War, and appears in black and white against an orange background. He is repeated several times in a diagonal pattern across the image. This boy represents my father's generation who lived through miserable conditions in the aftermath of the Korean War in 1950s, the same situation that Minsik Choi captured in his photographs, as discussed earlier in this thesis. In the background of the print, covering the top third, a series of modern apartment buildings represent the wealth of South Korea today. In contrast to these buildings, I placed an image from *The Royal Standard of Ur*, which is a Sumerian artifact discovered at the Royal cemetery of Ur in ancient Mesopotamia. Soldiers and wagons pulled by horses are parading in a row. These images intrigued me with their color and ambiguous shapes. I juxtaposed them with the boy carrying a water basket and used them as a symbol of cultural richness. The military figures and the apartments appear in gold to represent prosperity in comparison to the poverty of the boy.

Centered beneath the digital image, I installed a water faucet with a three-foot-long hose to represent my own childhood experience from the 1970s-80s, a time when, in comparison to the boy and my father's generation, water did not have to be carried long distances. When I was young, this kind of faucet was commonplace. I also remembered when I carried water holding small baskets on my hands for our family. The hose in the installation is transparent with elements of gold that echo the colors in the background of

the print. Usually the color of water hose that I used in my childhood was green.



Figure 31. *Heavy Shoulder*. (3D Installation) 9" x 12"
Photography, Digital, 2014

Heavy Shoulder was the first work I ever created in which I inserted direct references to my own personal life into it. The second, also an installation, was

Happiness Follows Gratitude (Figure 32), which I created for my husband, Maengjoo Lee. It tells the story of his support of me and my dreams and the sacrifices he has made so I could fulfill my dreams. Since we got married, he has been my best friend and mentor. He was the first person to recognize my artistic ability, and his endless encouragement has made me change and grow as an artist. While I was in graduate school at Iowa State, he lived alone in South Korea, working to support me and our kids in Ames. In *Happiness Follows Gratitude*, I used a blue bird as a symbol of my husband missing his family. In the print, he struggles to carry a giant house. In the small wooden birdhouse that I suspended adjacent to the print, a second blue bird represents me and the three eggs, represent our three kids. Their names are inscribed on the eggs. My children also inspire me. They made me laugh even when I was exhausted from my studies.



Figure 32. *Happiness Follows Gratitude*. (3D Installation) 5" x 7"
Digital, Painting, Drawing, 2014

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

For five years I have taken a wide range of studio courses across the disciplines of painting, drawing, textile, printmaking, mixed media, graphic design, digital photography and 3-D installation. Early on in my studies, at both Kyungwon University and in my first and second years at Iowa State University, I focused mainly on textiles. But then I discovered printmaking, which became my preferred media, and it is in printmaking that I have received professional recognition. In my prints, I like to combine the symbolic, narrative, and abstract and to do so in an assertive and creative voice. But I also discovered digital media and will continue to work in this media as well, because I believe digital art is necessary for artists to be able to keep pace with the state of art of today.

What I have learned during my five years at ISU are not only artistic techniques, but also insights into how to live as a human being. When I began my studies at ISU, I had to adjust to a new environment and struggled with culture shock, a language barrier, and a heavy workload of family responsibilities and academic studies. Every semester, I encountered many problems and challenges. Over time, however, I learned how to solve the problems and overcome the difficulties I faced. Thankfully there were many professors who were willing to help me. Because of them, I have become a well-rounded person and a successful artist.

The most important theme that I have explored during my graduate study is that art can change people's perception through positive thinking. Experiencing three different countries and cultural environments, I have become more interested in comparing different lifestyles and different people in the world.

For the thesis exhibition, I focused on the impact of the cultural environment on human life and showed how much of an impact different environments can have on one's life. For example, I was trying to give hope to children who lost their childhood because of a historical event in *The Kwangju Massacre* series and to offer insight into different lifestyles in the *Day and Night* series. I also attempted to help viewers to gain understanding and insights beyond their own experiences by showing my experiences, and those of my family, in *Heavy Shoulder* and *Happiness Follows Gratitude* with 3-D installation.

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