

## OLIVIA SAND, CONTEMPORARY VOICES FROM THE WORLDS OF ASIAN AND ISLAMIC ART SKIRA, 2018

This interview with MIN JUNG-YEON, from Olivia Sand's book, was first published in the January 2012 edition of the Asian Art Newspaper.

With some contemporary artists determined to confront us in radical and sometimes brutal fashion with the various phenomena of our time, we cannot help but feel drawn to Min Jung-Yeon's universe. Although complex, her world evolves around the thin line dividing the real and the unreal and ultimately her world and her surroundings become ours too. Trying to define where we precisely stand and for what purpose is irrelevant: we become literally absorbed by the work, about to experience an adventure similar to that of Alice in Wonderland.

Born in 1979 in Korea, and presently based in Paris, Min Jung-Yeon belongs to a very talented young generation of artists equally at ease with painting and drawing. With her first museum solo show in preparation at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint Etienne in the spring, she discusses her work with the Asian Art Newspaper.

**Asian Art Newspaper:** *I understand you have a long-standing interest in art.*

**Min Jung-Yeon:** Indeed, I have been interested in painting since I was little. Apparently, when I was three years old, I drew a fan, but from a 3D angle. My father thought I was gifted at painting, and subsequently, he arranged for some art lessons. I have been drawing and painting on a daily basis every since.

**AAN:** *You came to Europe after graduating from art school in Korea. Why did you specifically choose Paris over London, or New York?*

**MJY:** After graduation, I was eager to see and experience something else. Of course, I could have relied on the internet and various publications allowing me to see what was happening in other parts of the world, but I truly wanted to experience something else, and be in a different surrounding. I was simply curious. I was actually debating between New York, London or Germany, but I felt more drawn towards Paris, a fascinating city. Before deciding on France, I had traveled a little in Korea, and realized that Seoul for example, was a big city, but that everything ancient had been destroyed after the war. Therefore, our entire mentality was based upon capitalism, and everything was new and modern. Within our daily lives, there were no natural remnants of the past. Of course, there are some traditional palaces remaining, but these were turned into museums, and are not buildings that are part of our daily life. In France, and more particularly in Paris, I could find there was a past coexisting simultaneously with the present. I thought it would be marvelous to live in such a city. I think communicating with the past is very important because if there is no past, there is no real, proper present. Historically, in New York, everything was new, even their psychology was new. Therefore, Paris, a city building on its past with an accumulation of culture was the perfect place for me. There is also an interesting mix of people from all over the world. Approximately sixty percent of the population in Paris is foreign. There is a broad culture, allowing you as a foreigner to be integrated, but still be yourself and keep your origins. Being myself instead of being a piece of the wheel of a large country was a crucial aspect. To me, Paris equals the liberation of yourself.

**AAN:** *As you had already graduated in Korea, why embark on a new curriculum at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris?*

**MJY:** The curriculum in Korea does not allow you to thoroughly examine theory and practice. They are two very distinct fields. Therefore, I knew about theory, about art history, but I was unable to establish a connection with my own work. Everything was kept separate, with the result that we did not know where we were going, and felt lost. Technically, we were desperately searching for something to paint. As I came to France, there were curricula where the practical and theoretical aspects were very much connected. I learned a lot of things, especially in regard to new theories, like Deleuze to Nietzsche. This forced me to include new and different aspects into my work. Then, I began to think about why I was painting, about what I was painting, and if my work should stand as a reaction to the movements happening in the world around me. The first question was how, and the second question was what, which is an important difference. It was a rather vivid experience at this

stage of my life. It seemed to me that simply transposing the studio from Seoul to Paris was not a true experience, but changing the way I saw things was a real experience. Therefore, constant displacement was not a necessity and I thought that remaining in Paris was a perfect solution for me.

**AAN: *Before coming to Paris, were your paintings and drawings very different from what you do now?***

**MJY:** I think that's technically when I was in Korea, I was doing well, but what has changed after my arrival in France is the subject matter. The container is the same but the content is different. The little dots for example remained, but the shapes, the images, their perspective, the composition have all evolved dramatically.

**AAN: *Your titles are very specific. Are they linked to precise events, and how do you get to them?***

**MJY:** For example, there is a piece entitled "Enlarge our Territories" which is a life experience. I moved here to France, but I still have not understood the territory. One day, I realised that I may have had an idea of the territory, but that I needed to enlarge the concept. With that idea in mind, I began to draw and paint about it. Also, there is one called "Four Minutes", relating to the many things crossing my mind while I was getting my hair done at the beauty parlour. Within four minutes, one can think about great many things. It was a simple, but telling experience linked to my ordinary life.

**AAN: *Perspective seems to be an important component within your work. Do you have a certain affinity towards architecture?***

**MJY:** Yes, absolutely. I am also fascinated with trying to reconcile the rational and irrational. The rational is what can be read and can be seen, where one can recognise what it is, be this a landscape, a prison, the architecture where the perspective is rational. At the same time, I include some elements where the irrational comes straight from my head, and does not exist anywhere. This irrational element may come in the form of energy around us : it may be invisible, yet it always exists. My goal is to try to show all this in a rational manner. Even if something does not exist, I create it in my imagination, work on it in terms of perspective, and subsequently, it somehow becomes rational. For me, everything irrational is integrated in my pieces in order for it to live rationally. I mix both and I want both to coexist, what can be seen and what cannot be seen.

**AAN: *You mentioned earlier that while studying in France, you became acquainted with the views of certain philosophers. Which ones do you feel particularly close to?***

**MJY:** this is precisely what I am trying to integrate: time, space, and the material, which mainly Einstein talked about. I became very interested in the philosophy of Deleuze, and Nietzsche who turned his back on all earlier philosophies. Nietzsche marks the beginning of my work until today. I find Nietzsche's influence as important as Einstein's theory of relativity. I believe that everything from the past (Deleuze, Nietzsche, Derrida) is linked to the present I am living in. This is essential within my work : time, space, material. One sees not only the visible, but also the invisible (cells, air, interior of a destiny, etc.)

**AAN: *The universe you portray seems to be between two worlds, the real and the unreal.***

**MJY:** If I work on perspective, it is to get through the strangeness of something. To me, what happens in my imagination is normal, banal, and I subsequently paint it. It may seem strange because I am trying to do something bizarre, but the word "strangeness" is something very subtle. For example, in horror films, if there is a monster appearing and spreading a lot of blood, there is no subtlety. In these horror movies, one doesn't really see what happens. We only get the ambience of fear, and similarly, that is what leads me to do this strangeness. I do not really do strange things : I simply try to integrate reality into perspective so that it becomes subtly strange.

**AAN: *"Strange", however, seems to have a slightly negative connotation***

**MJY:** In my opinion and in present times, "strange" also means to think differently. It is not necessarily something negative. Perhaps, I should rather say "peculiarity" or "oddness". It is peculiar, but it is still subtle. That is what I am trying to do. My oddness should not be vulgar or violent. It should be subtle. When you look

at a plant, the form is strange - a shape you never see on a daily basis -, but it still exists. It is not because it is bizarre that it does not exist. What is bizarre, exists, is hallucinating, and fascinating. That is not negative or mean. It is singular, yet beautiful and natural.

**AAN: *Most of your pieces featuring a human character (you), but in a very small scale. Why do you never invert the proportions?***

**MJY:** Simply because to me, humans represent a minuscule particle in the cosmos, and that is what I want to show. In my work, I represent a universe, a space, and for me, the shape is huge in comparison to a human being like me. As the size of the space on my canvas is limited, how can I enlarge the universe if not by showing the human being on a very small scale? In my work, the human presence also serves as a message to measure the space. Space can best be apprehended in comparison to the size of humans. For example, if there were no landscape, one could not imagine such a huge space. In adding the landscape, I can provide the sensation of immensity of space. That is the justification for having the characters in such a small scale.

**AAN: *You are frequently quoted as an artist determined to do something new and different. When you say different, how would you define "different"?***

**MJY:** I would tend to say that today creation no longer really exists because everything has already been created in nature. The difference may come from one's own interpretation. I have lived with a different experience, and anybody could have something similar happening to them. The "new" does not emerge through people interpreting your work. The new comes from me, from within, and how I articulate it towards the outside makes the difference. However, I am not looking specifically after creating the "new" towards the outside world.

**AAN: *Among the painters you were interested in at the various stages of your career, which ones have had a strong impact?***

**MJY:** In the beginning, I was influenced by Hieronymus Bosch, whose ideas I found fascinating because at the time, the type of paintings he did were very unusual. His images have not really influenced me, but his ideas have. At the time, people said he was crazy, but he did put on canvas episodes he saw in his head. Also, Francis Bacon had a great influence on me. Contrary to many people, I do not consider his work being about blood, and being ugly. He brought flesh to life as if it were something beautiful. I kept thinking along that avenue that everything that was inside was a kind of cell, and nothing repulsive. When you look at it carefully, it is actually beautiful, but usually, you tend to associate it with a specific situation.

**AAN: *And with that, we get back to interpretation.***

**MJY:** Exactly!

**AAN: *And among the Surrealists?***

**MJY:** My idea was not really influenced by the Surrealist, but in my work, there is indeed a continuous juxtaposition of the real and the unreal. Of course, one can assimilate it with Surrealism, but initially, I am not looking for something surreal. The line between the real and unreal is very thin. Consider my experience when I was still based in Korea and for one year, I lived in a cyber-café in Seoul. Now, I am putting forward the question whether a cyber-café is rational or irrational? I can see that after having experienced it, it is very real. Therefore and in my opinion, the limit between reality and fiction is useless because one can actually fully live in an unreal world. For me, this is not fiction, and everything is real. What I am showing is not on the basis of Surrealism. The image may be similar, but the basic idea is not.

**AAN: *You are equally proficient at painting and drawing. Are they linked, or do they represent two distinct worlds?***

**MJY:** They actually build one universe, and there is no difference. In my paintings, I frequently rely on drawing techniques, using brushes, and using them as I would use a pen. In my drawings, in addition to using brushes, I also sometimes use watercolor or acrylic. To me, there is no difference between the media, only the tools are

different. However in terms of ideas, of procedure, it is the same. Both media require an enormous time investment. The sole difference is that with painting, one can work more easily with the colours. All my drawings can be appreciated independently from one another and from the paintings. To me as an artist, it is interesting to be in a dual position, to be at the same time independent and connected, similarly to a virus. A virus may exist independently, but it can also exist in connection to my body and integrate itself in my body. It lives and it is contained in my body, but it does not probably belong to me. It is the same with my work : the pieces all exist independently, but there is always a certain connection.

**AAN: *Some of your works carry a three-dimensional component. As a next step, would you be tempted to explore sculpture?***

**MJY:** For the moment, I find that I am able to complete my ideas in a two-dimensional way. In the three-dimensional works, I keep building the piece, relying on two-dimensional panels. If I carry on with these works, it will be a long that same avenue.

**AAN: *Among the young artists from Korea known internationally, we are mainly exposed to installation and video artists, as well as photographers. As a painter, you seem to be an exception.***

**MJY:** There are some painters in Korea, but they are less visible abroad. In the 1980's and 1990's, there was a movement proclaiming the end of painting because it had existed for centuries, and there was nothing new to be said. Consequently, artists began seeking for new materials. For a while, painting was less appreciated in Korea similarly in other parts of the world. There are presently some painters in Korea, but they are not that many visible painters. During that period, I said to myself that I would continue painting, all the more as by doing so, I did not have the feeling that I was old-fashioned. Of course, I use the same tools as painters have done before me centuries ago, but I would tend to assume that the ideas are different. In addition, I guess that people finally understand that new media (video, installation, etc.) did not necessarily promote new ideas. In my opinion, even with old tools, you can always present your ideas, like with classical music, which still exists and that people still enjoy. Although the score is the same as before, if the resonances or the interpretation are different, then the entire piece can be presented in a new angle. Therefore, I did not find painting old-fashioned, and firmly believe it can always present new features. I work with new ideas and concepts involving space and time, but using ancient tools. The tools are actually of no importance and I think that today, people understand that.