

Contemporary South Korean art in search of national

During the XXth century South Koreans art has being developing under the influence of Western art movements, first modernism and later postmodernism. Korean artists began to study western avant guard mevements in 1950s on a full scale. In 1960s they started to face the need to resolve the issue of finding national in arts, they started to combine traditional aesthetics with Western technology.

In the 1990s, after Koreans were allowed to visit foreigh contries, some artists went to study in the West, where they were swept by the wave of conceptual art and the ideas of postmodernism. This generation has brought Korean art to the world level. Over the past two decades, South Korea has made a breakthrough in the field of contemporary art, the country became one of the centers of Asian contemporary art. South Korean art is successfully integrated into the global art world. Artists speak on the general topics of the world art, such as, for example, the criticism of the consumer society and the prevailing stereotypes and people in today's global world. In this paper, taking as example ouvre of the most influential Korean artists we will see how today an issue expressing national ideas and aesthetics in arts is solved and what are the distinctive features of contemporary South Korean art.

Keywords: contemporary art, South Korea, globalization, national identity

The purpose of this research it to understand whether contemporary South Korean artists who have gained international recognition are concerned with the question of national artistic identity and also whether they try to create "Korean art" which would demonstrate their national identity. The question of finding and expressing national identity in art is one of the most discussed topics in the South Korean art world. Especially the need to find national identity in art started to preoccupy Korean artists and experts after enviable success of Chinese art and breathtaking sales results.

During the XXth century defenition of Korean art's characteristics and the question of national identity in art has varied depending on historical situation. In the 1970s goverment tasked South Korean artists to be culturally original. From that time Korean artists began to search for the way to express national identity in art. They took up the question of how to go beyond the imitation of the Western art and attract attention of the international art community

and market. Artists of *dansaekhwa* (Korean monochrome painting movement) has formulated the characteristics of Korean traditional aesthetics. (fig. 1) In their opinion, they were naturalness, simplicity, stemming from the desire to live in harmony with nature. This idea of national aesthetics was expressed in monochrome canvases mostly often black, white or beige. The artists have successfully coped with the task of creating a Korean abstract painting as opposed to Western. Let's recall the words of the chief artist of the movement of Park Seobo: "I paint in order to show that I am different from the rest."¹ The art was really different. Paintings have received recognition in Japan and the United States.



fig. 1. Park Seobo. *16-78-81*. 1981. Oil on canvas. 130x162 cm.

In the 1980s *minjung misul* (the people's art) movement was born as a response to the incomprehensible, according to supporters of this trend, to the usual audience monochrome painting. Artists insisted that art should respond to the social issues of modern society. They openly criticized government corruption and its policies, which led not only to political and economic, but also cultural dependence on the USA. The *minjung misul* artists rejected pictorial traditions of western schools and sought to combine tradition and modernity. Genre scenes about the issues of the day they painted in the manner of Buddhist and folk painting. (fig. 2)

¹ 장병욱. 서양화가 박서보. *한국일보*. 2008.11.18. URL: <http://media.daum.net/breakingnews/view.html?cateid=1026&newsid=20081118025210583&p=hankooki> (15.11.2015).



fig. 2. Oh Yoon. *Marketing*. 1980. Oil on canvas. 131×162 cm.

Until the early 1990s concept of art and paintings were synonymous in South Korea. Artists were been divided into two camps: those who supported *dansaekhwa* and those who defended *minjung misul*. In the 1990s the situation has changed radically. Before art was controlled by respectable artists who have received public recognition. But since the beginning of the 1990s young artists represent Korean art. Most of those who are considered stars of Korean art now have been educated in Europe or the United States. Korean art now is a diversity, a variety of themes and forms.

By the end of 1980s despite the fact that contemporary art in the Republic of Korea was developing actively, it remained to be a local phenomenon. Artists rarely traveled out of the country, almost did not participate in the international exhibitions. Since the 1990s artists started to go international. In search of an answer to the question «What is contemporary art?» the younger generation of artists went to the West, where they were swept away by the wave of conceptual art and ideas of postmodernism. Since the early 1990s artists, particularly those who were abroad, started to feel the unlimited freedom of expression. The era of experiment began. A number of South Korean artists gained international recognition and are international artists now.

Kimsooja (1957-) was the first of the young generation of the turn of the century, who went to the West and gained international recognition. She studied in Paris and New York. For her creativity is somekind of religious experience, emotional discovery is the goal of her art. The author uses her body and soul in order to awake people's souls and unite people of different cultures. A striking example is the series of performances entitled «*A Needle Woman*» (2005). (fig. 3) The author documented her personal experiences and video gives the viewer the opportunity to share the author's experience, or experience an emotional breakthrough of his own. Initially Kimsooja attracted Western experts by her strange but attractive ideas and

perception of the world, but gradually she became an international artist. But there is no doubt that for the Western art community she is still a wonder with a strange but appealing ideas.



fig. 3. Kimsooja. *A needle woman*. Video, 2005.

Suh Do-ho (1962-) became famous in the 2000s, he studied in New York. He is known for stitched fabric houses hanging in the air. His work is closely linked to the personal experience, he describes his reaction to the outside world and events of his life. When the artist lived in USA it was difficult for him to adapt to the new life and the new culture. Then he started to think about the concept of a house, what meaning it has. And the idea to create a house that one can carry in a suitcase was born. First Suh Do-ho sewed his fabric Korean house, after New York apartment. And the adaptation process was completed by the coexistence of the two cultures, which is clearly shown in the «*Home within Home*» (2012), the Korean house is located inside the american one. (fig. 4) Living abroad also provided an opportunity to rethink the existing rules of his native society and free to some extent from imposed restrictions. It should be noted that Soh's art talks to a international audience; his work is connected with the home country, it is born out of a rethinking of the realities of his native country and the society, but at the same time the artist expresses his ideas in a way that a resident of the Republic of Korea or any other country can understand. Suh Do-ho is Korean artist but he is not making simply "Korean Art", his art is obviously international.



fig. 4. Suh Do-ho. *Home within Home*. 2012

Lee Bul (1954-) is a global artist but studied only in Korea. Since the late 1990s, she began to discuss the topic of human aspiration to the ideal existence, a kind of utopia, which is doomed to inevitable failure, but despite this continues to make a person strive for the realization of the dream. This theme was most revealed in a series of *Cyborgs*. *Cyborgs* are hanging in the air colored silicone sculptures created under the influence of anime and classical Greek sculpture. (fig. 5) They are beautiful and terrible at the same time. Lee Bul does not allow them to be perfect in order to show how untenable the dream of the perfect human body and super strong immortal man is. Today the author creates a complex architectural composition, which reveal the theme of utopia and its inaccessibility. All Lee Bul's works also reflect her personal experience, visualize her dilemmas.



fig. 5. Lee Bul. *Cyborg W1*. Silicone, 1998.

Haegue Yang (1971-) studied in Germany for a long time, her works were unknown in Korea. In her work the author suggests that modern man must restore the basic values that he lost while living in terms of systems and societal norms. The artist is concerned about the

possibility of restoring a sincere dialogue between people. She uses objects of daily life such as blinds, hangers, hair dryers, fans, light bulbs, as well as smells, light, wind and sounds. (fig. 6) Haegue Yang's installations occupy separate rooms, affect the viewer's feelings.²



fig. 6. Haegue Yang. *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements—Voice and Wind*. 2009. Aluminum frame, aluminum venetian blinds, industrial electric fans, scent emitters. Dimensions variable.

Lee Yongbaek (1966-) was educated in Korea, then in Germany, he works in various media, video, photo, installation, performance. Lee's art reflects the political social issues in Korean society, but the author's ideas are relevant not only to the Korean society. For example, in the series «*Angel-Soldier*» (2005), he expressed the desire of a society to hide the inconvenient truth. (fig. 7) Lee Yongbaek insists that he is working without preset ideas, because he believes that art should not be limited by one idea or form. He seeks to create an art that can speak and find an echo in the soul of a viewer from any country. To do this Lee chooses motives familiar to anyone, for example flowers, weapons, mirrors, Mary and Jesus. The artist believes that the value of art is not to express an idea, but to give a viewer the right read the art freely.³

² 장승연. 미술가 양혜규. URL: http://navercast.naver.com/contents.nhn?rid=5&contents_id=293#1 (15.11.2015).

³ Yun Cheagab. The love is gone but the Scar will heal. Catalogue of Korean Pavilion The 54th International Art Exhibition la Biennale di Venezia. URL: http://www.korean-pavilion.or.kr/11pavilion/INTRODUCTION_eng.html (15.11.2015).



fig . 7. Lee Yongbaek. *Angel-Soldier*. 1.2011. C-print, 225x180 cm.

ChoiJeonghwa (1955-) is undoubtedly one of the most prominent contemporary South Korean artists. He was educated in Korea and is known for his installations made of garbage, household items and housewares. (fig. 8) ChoiJeonghwa believes that any item of mass consumption, a bowl, basket or balloon can become art. The artist finds ideas and inspiration in the chaos and harmony of the urban environment, because he believes that ordinary people often create much better installations than the professional artists do. The author seeks to create art that can awaken people's souls. He says that we must feel first and after try to understand art. ChoiJeonghwa wants to erase the boundaries between fake and genuine things, art and consumer goods, art and everyday life. He addresses the audience with a question, «Who decides what is worthy to be called art, and what is not?» and gives us an opportunity to answer. There is always a hidden meaning in his works, the desire to break down stereotypes of modern society.⁴



fig. 8. ChoiJeonghwa. *KIASMA*. Helsinki, 2016.

⁴ Suzanne Muchnic. 'Your Bright Future' spotlights Korean artists at LACMA. Los Angeles Times. URL: <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-korea21-2009jun21-story.html> (15.11.2015).

South Korean artists discuss universal issues. This shows how well the art of the Republic of Korea was integrated into the global world. Let's highlight the differences of contemporary South Korean art. First of all, it is reverent attitude to the form. It is known that in conceptual art the form plays a secondary form. However, despite this the Korean art is mostly brought to perfection. The artists use the latest materials and achievements of computer technology. Also, these artists share the desire to make the viewer feel, not to try to understand the product but to feel it first. They ask the viewer to react to what they see unconsciously. Perhaps they are trying to awaken in people the memory of the human, natural. Korean artists are trying to create the conditions in which the audience gets out of mind control, and awaken people's sensitivity.

As to the question of national identity. In the 1990s artists ended up in other social settings than previous generations. They discovered freedom to create, they do not feel the need to prove that South Korean art differs from western or Japanese, as did artists *dansaekhwa* movement. They do not try to change the situation in the society, to solve social problems, as did the followers of *minjung misul*. Today in Korean art there is no single direction, the artists do not want to work together, to create a single universal or movement, as it was in the 1970s or 1980s. South Korean art of turn of the century is the variety of directions, forms, techniques, themes.

Some artists and experts still insist on the need for national expression, connected with the traditional aesthetics and worldview of Koreans. They believe that this could be the way to protect Korean art against dissolution in global art world. Many would like to create a "brand of Korean Art" in the world. The Japanese and the Chinese before the Koreans understand that cultural identity can be profitable and began to actively promote those artists, whose works are understood as a national Korean. But at the same time in a Chinese and Japanese art bulges no external signs that are considered traditional, but reflects the characteristics of the time and society. Because of the global competition and the success of the neighbors Koreans try to find the way to manifest themselves no less, if not more.

Today more and more experts believe that the desire to repeat the success of the Chinese contemporary art makes Korean artists find (or create) national identity. Artists who want to create a «Korean Art» often see their task in as reflection of aesthetics of old Korea, and the creation of works, which are read in the context of traditional aesthetic identity and worldview. Such kind of art is popular in Korea. This can be explained by the desire of collectors to buy art that turns them into admirers of tradition and traditional worldview, which is very popular.

Such artists are gain recognition within the country. But in their works global versatility is reflected to a lesser extent, and using national color some outward symbols and signs that are considered traditional are not enough to enter the international world of art. Therefore all the artists who whose works were exhibited in Korean pavilion at the Venice Biennale over the last decade, are not narrowly national, in their art national character is not not bulged, they are largely globalized and talk on universal themes. The artists we discussed above prove that Korean artists do not need to express national identity tends to receive worldwide recognition and become international authors included in the rating of the most influential artists of the world. South Korean art today is a part of the global process and more and more artists refuse to seek out ways to make it a "Korean".