The Politics of Identity for Korean Women Artists Living in Britain

Beccy Kennedy

The construction of a new identity is a vital process for immigrants given that establishing themselves in a new country and starting a new life always implies a redefinition of their position with respect to other social groups. Consequently the immigrant’s sense of self takes new directions in relation to the circumstances in which they find themselves and the new roles that they need to adopt.¹

Identity is not about certainty, whether of nation, gender, race, or the other. It is the way we choose to place ourselves in relation to how others choose to place us, at certain times, in given places and spaces. Rather than focusing on identity politics it is useful to address the politics of identity as a force driving the way we think about culture and the manner in which culture becomes manifested in our lives. Culture is always in flux and different constants reach out and intersect with others, creating fresher fusions of imagination and experience. In a globalized world we often observe these intersections as products of migration. This article aims to explore some of the consequences and manifestations of migration in respect to Korean artists’ oeuvres within Britain. I try to avoid canonizing these artworks in terms of their specific national identity, their Koreanness. I do nevertheless explore the relevance of identity as a grounding force, arguing that issues that have been categorized as Identity Politics are still of particular relevance to artists from South Korea, a nation which was preoccupied with a move towards democratization until 1989. However, I also suggest that the Western-centred discourse of identity politics cannot be neatly transposed to discussions of Korean identity and that this reality is relevant to artists’ awareness and explorations of their own identity as individuals in a globalized world.

Contemporary art by South Korean artists has been noticed in London, and it has become almost ubiquitous. In the past five years, two Korean art specialist galleries have opened and a number of smaller and larger commercial and public institutions have held exhibitions of Korean art, perhaps most notably ‘Korean Eye’ at the Saatchi Gallery. Some of these exhibitions, such as the annual ‘4482’ recently held at Bargehouse on the South Bank, are specifically focused on the theme of Korean art in Britain where Korean art becomes a British import, a Korean export, a transporter and ultimately a transposer of cultural ideas. Previous exhibitions, such as ‘Eo ulim’ at Arts Depot, and ‘Entry Forms’ and the recent ‘Invisible Bonds’ at the Korean Cultural Centre UK, explore these ideas. They ask questions such as: Where do the Britishness and the Koreanness of artistic endeavour lie, and to what extent are these endeavours driven by nation-specific attitudes or by other issues?

THE STUDY

This article draws on recent research that focused on ten Korean artists living and working within the ethnoscape of Britain. One of the main research aims was to examine the extent to which Korean artists living in Britain are influenced both by their new cultural landscapes and those of their homeland. However, whilst issues of migrant identity formation proved central to some of the
new artworks, an unanticipated outcome of the research was the recurring issue of identity politics in relation to gender that arose from interviews with four of the female Korean artists. It is important to note that the artists who were interviewed have now moved on to other projects that do not always address identity in any manifest way. This demonstrates the shifting nature of all artists’ corpuses and of the ways that they reflect upon their art. It also places the art critic in a precarious position.

The interviews with the three female Korean migrant artists – and the additional social media data provided by Jaeran Won – inform the greater part of this article and raise themes concerning identity politics, but from different perspectives. These interviews, alongside the artworks themselves, indicate that the polemics of identity politics, more than those concerning national identity, were of notable importance to these Korean artists and this interest can be contextualized more specifically around the circumstances of their migration to Britain. Taking into consideration the issues explored by Korean artists abroad today, as set against the backdrop of post-World-War-II socio-political Korean history, I suggest that their migration experience enabled them more readily to address issues concerning their identity. However, this aspect of identity politics is not always focused around the representation of minority identities; rather, sometimes it deals with the notion and the performative process of identification itself as an individualist endeavour.

IDENTIFYING KOREA’S HISTORY

South Korea began democratization in 1987 under Chun Doo-hwan. After a coup d’état in 1961, Korea was governed by a military regime closely supervised by the US, whose leaders maintained tight security in order to guard against the ‘threat’ of Communism from the North. This in turn led to the suppression of dissent and possible reform in the South. Chang-sik describes how during the postwar period art classes focused on graphic design, in particular on the principles and production of anti-Communist propaganda posters. As Korea industrialized rapidly in the postwar(s) period, the capitalist ethos became paramount to the identity construction of the nation, which in the pre-war era was still largely an agricultural economy and where gender roles would be considered inflexible by post-industrial standards. The rapid move towards industrialization, modelled on Western production techniques, resulted in tough working conditions and poor living standards in the developing cities.

EMANCIPATORY POLITICAL ART IN SOUTH KOREA

A number of protest movements emerged in South Korea during its period of military rule. The overriding concern was the undemocratic and oppressive way that Korea was being governed under Chun Doo-hwan in relation to basic human rights – in particular the right to protest. In 1980, during mass student protests in the city of Gwangju, the military used physical force to intervene, allegedly with the approval of the American government. Hundreds of protesters were killed and many more injured. The formal death toll is 230 but some estimates claim the actual number was probably nearer 2,000 civilian deaths. The Minjung ‘mass people’ art movement emerged as a response to precisely this brutal mistreatment of ordinary people. Additionally, these artists tended to illustrate discontent with respect to the division of Korea between North and South, the anti-Communist and pro-global capitalist propaganda of the government, the abandonment of traditional ways of life, the presence of the American military in the demilitarized zone and the general pressure of American political and economic ideology. All these political issues were focused upon the civil rights of the general public in the context of processes of economic and social change.

Anthony Giddens refers to this kind of dissent as ‘emancipatory politics’, common to societies during times of rapid economic transition from feudal to capitalist modes of production when democracy becomes increasingly relevant to citizens’ lives. The notion of emancipation is also relevant to people during times of political unrest, as in Korea during the period of military rule.
Giddens argues that once basic civil liberties, such as the right to vote or to speak freely regarding working conditions, are addressed by governments, later forms of protest then focus around more individual or community-based concerns. He labels these ‘Life Politics’ and parallels can be drawn here with identity politics through issues relating to choices in lifestyles and ecology and the discussion and negotiation of sexual, racial and gender orientations.

**POLITICS OF LIFE AND IDENTITY**

Weena Perry defined ‘identity politics’ in relation to art as constituting a

… shorthand for art produced after 1970 that foregrounds the connection of racial, class and sexual subjectivity to the institutions and processes of power: when we think of work informed by a politics of identity we typically think of passionate declaration of the personal or scathing socio-political critique.

Arguably, since the 1968 protest movements around the Western world, artists have been interrogating the politics of identity in a self-conscious way (see, for example, the work of eminent gender-focused artists such as Ana Mendieta or Cindy Sherman). Yet such discussions and definitions of identity politics tend to centre on the Northern hemisphere. Alternatively, gender-related issues outside of the North tend to become labelled ‘postcolonial feminism’. These categories do not always translate readily into investigations of nations outside of British and European colonialist histories. Korea was colonized by Japan between 1910 and 1945, and while there is a separate literature concerning the mistreatment of Korean women by Japanese exploitation, the experiences of Korean women in the twenty-first century tend not to be discussed in relation to key academic discourses on gender.

It is also worth noting that during the period of 1968 to 1970 there were protests taking place across Korea that challenged the military government’s curbing of civil liberties as well as their inauguration of American economic policy. In the art world, the then predominant Korean Informel movement was based on the stylistic polemics of European (mainly French) post-Impressionism or tended to greater abstraction and was, arguably, politically silent. It was not until the 1990s – with artists such as Lee Bul, who examines the female form in terms of impossible media expectations, and Oh Ihnwan, who addresses homophobia in Korea – that there appears to be a broaching of issues of identity politics, if that label can in fact be applied. Giddens’ category of Life Politics is perhaps more appropriate a term, throwing genuine light on the types of issues being addressed not only by Korean artists but artists across the globe who choose to tackle a range of issues other than emancipation, irrespective of whether they engage with the politics of identity, ecology or other more micro concerns.

**IDENTITY AND KOREAN WOMANHOOD**

During 2006–2008 I noticed certain strands relating to identity running through the case studies I undertook with Korean artists living and working in Britain. It became apparent through interviews that an issue frequently addressed by female Korean artists – for example, Meekyoung Shin, Bada Song and Jaeran Won, who will be the focus of the next part of this article – concerned their position as women growing up in a society steeped in Confucian philosophy. The teachings of Confucianism applied strict rules to the duties of women and their role in society. John Duncan’s study of Queen Sohye’s *Naehun (Instructions for Women)* written in 1475 in the language of the Chosun dynasty of Confucian Korea indicates what was expected of women during this period. Whilst Duncan suggests that the *Naehun* can be viewed as positive because it was written by a woman – and, he argues, to some degree women were allowed a certain space in which to express themselves outside this doctrine – he also demonstrates that female duties were primarily domestic and monitored by men. Married women were under the complete control of their in-laws and
allowed little or no contact with their own friends and family. Duncan describes how the doctrine of the ‘Faithful Women’, Yollyo, written as a Confucian handbook, dictated that women must stay chaste and faithful to their husbands, even if widowed. In the nineteenth century, with the advent of Christianity and the Kabo Kyongjang Reform of 1894, followed by the era of Japanese colonialism and then the modernization of the workforce, Confucian teachings were contested and diluted. Nevertheless, remnants of the teachings persist in contemporary Korean society. Attitudes concerning the socialization of women filter through from generation to generation. Thus, whilst the position of the female in contemporary Korea may be one of greater equality than in previous centuries, certain norms of gender difference are still in play.

As a female traveller in Korea I noticed obvious differences between the habitus of women and that of men. Here, I employ the term ‘habitus’ as originally used by Pierre Bourdieu and others to indicate not only the physical environment of a group or individual, but also their dispositions to behave in certain ways due to the social conditions, experiences, tastes and expectations to which they have been exposed within their accustomed social niches. Until very recently in Korea women, unlike men, whatever their upbringing, did not smoke in public places, and it is still rare for a woman to dine alone. As a tourist eating alone in a Korean barbecue café in 2007 I was ignored by staff until I agreed to join a table of hospitable Koreans (who happened to be men). By 2011 it seemed that Koreans had grown accustomed to single female tourists or migrants (mainly English teachers) dining in restaurants, and it was much easier to find places that would accommodate me. However, in three weeks of travel to Gwangju and Seoul I did not see a single Korean woman dining alone. These cultural norms highlight obvious differences between expectations of how women should behave in public spaces in Korea compared to Britain where a woman’s command over her habitus (at least since the 1960s) has become far more equalized and autonomous. As a ‘Western’ observer, it is problematic to locate these gender-related norms within the writings of Western-based gender discourse. On the other hand, seemingly, an analysis which takes account of postcolonialist disparities would be more appropriate in relation to Korean womanhood. Yet the female artists in this study do not articulate reflections concerning a postcolonialist feminist struggle. This could be because they feel that racial and gender inequalities are inherent within society and within their artworks, but they do not wish to be categorized in relation to a particular ‘theoretical’ standpoint.

Moreover, since it is impossible to assert that women and men in Britain have completely equal opportunities in situations of work, leisure and culture, it is possible that Korean female artists perceive the differences in the evolution of gender equality overall and believe that any differences between Korea and Britain are actually rather negligible.

**JAERAN WON ON THE EVERYDAY AND EMPTINESS**

Jaeran Won aims to ‘make meaning’ via her art by positioning herself as a recurring anonymous character, signifying her sense of herself as a ‘bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning’. Won faces and appears to acknowledge the plight of both women and (non-white) migrants simultaneously. Because the initial academic realization of identity politics focused around a Western locus, critics have since then have compared the needs of both female and ‘black’ artists to assert their social position via their art as a way of seeking equality. How equal status is defined or negotiated between dominant and subaltern groups, whilst taking into account differences, is an ongoing debate. In the 1970s Barbara Rose addressed the quandary of the representation of male/female difference in relation to race and art form:

Inferior status has stimulated both groups to assertions of pride in their ‘differences’. Black art frequently serves as propaganda for the important idea that ‘black is beautiful,’ essential in creating not only an ideology of equality, but a psychology built on the confidence that black is as good as white. To dignify female ‘difference,’ what should feminist art glorify?
Post-postcolonial and post-feminist authors suggest that glorification is not necessary or conducive to visibility, because it can advocate a form of inverted bigotry that still works to emphasize the problematics of difference. Won’s approach to femininity is not concerned with the scholarly feminist pursuit of iconological equivalence within art but rather with the need to address more indirectly women’s subjugation outside the cultural sphere in everyday situations, such as in the family domain, as seen in her painting *Korean Bride*. Won is explicit about such experiences. During interview, when asked, ‘What are the current themes in your work and how have your themes changed over the past few years?’, she volunteered the importance of womanhood and sexuality, at least in relation to her earlier works.

I painted general women. It’s the same story even if I change character. I made big dolls... She looks like a prostitute but she can do similar things in the family. They get paid by men then they can change and get power. This is maybe in the family as well. Being like a prostitute can be like an ordinary woman and vice versa. Since I move here, I paint small things – the everyday.

Won is less vocal than this when positioning herself as a ‘black’ or migrant artist. Perhaps she does not feel that this is an issue. However, there is a particular characteristic or icon in Won’s artwork which appears to be overtly a-national, namely, her recurring cartoon-style female figure who has limited facial features, no hair and is an unlikely pink in colour. This figure appears in Won’s current pieces, which she sells on her myspace site. The character has different sized legs, which Won uses to symbolize the sense of being a misfit. She draws the viewer’s attention to the presence of the body almost as if it is an encumbrance, signifying the burdens of the character’s psyche but also the place of the body lodged in space without choice or alignment to the mind. Won, perhaps unwittingly, evokes Albert Camus’ philosophy of the absurdity of life and the instinct to survive, as laid bare in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Regardless of human beings’ capacity to find meaning in life, the body chooses independently to exist for its duration: ‘We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us towards death, the body
maintains its irreparable lead.'12 Won describes the emptiness of life in a similar vein to Camus’ existentialist acceptance of life’s absurdity. Both choose to rebel against futility by accepting that life is what it is and liberating themselves as individuals through this acceptance. Camus wrote in his notebook in 1940:

More and more, when faced with the world of men, the only reaction is individualism. Man alone is an end unto himself. Everything you try to do for the common good ends in failure… Withdraw into yourself completely, and play your own game.13

Won’s unremarkable pictorial protagonist appears to be race-less, sex-less and without nationality, encouraging the viewer to project their own notions of identity upon it, whether this consists of a male/female or black/white binary form of categorization or something more composite. Her character is evocative of Donna Haraway’s cyborg who represents a ‘post-gender’ being with ‘no origin story in the Western sense’.14 Contemporary Korean artist Lee Bul encapsulates this in her cyborg series of headless sci-fi female models. Like post-structuralist feminists, Won, perhaps inadvertently, questions our understanding of identity formation and/or construction and the implications this has for everyday routine rituals. Won’s artwork character is mutant, almost redundant or otherwise embryonic as a human being. She does not imply in interview or press releases that the cyborg character’s malformation signifies the feelings of misplacement which can result from transnational identity. Instead, she describes and represents the subjugation of women in society, as well as hinting at other contemporary issues of mass consumerism and digitalization. This is illustrated by Won’s myspace website, where she defines her artworks using three main categories: womanhood in a male dominated society; the emptiness of consumerism and the way it seems to dominate today’s human beings; and the inferred monotony of what she describes as everyday life.15 Through these three topics Won gives the impression that she is not only dissatisfied with her phenomenological existence as female and as migrant but that she is sceptical of what contemporary or modern society has to offer more objectively. For example, she does not take the view that online shopping simply promotes ease of choice for the contemporary consumer but that in the critical sense it fosters unfamiliarity and creates uncertainties for human rights in terms of the protection of online personal data. The following extract describes Won’s three phases of artistic stimulation. After her description of female and male sexuality in the first paragraph, the other two can be read more allegorically as concerning the monotonies of everyday life in the powerful grip of information technology. They also reveal Won’s own feelings of a certain loss of control.

I usually paint a female figure in different situations. While attending university, the subjects of my paintings were prostitutes living in a male dominated world but who possessed certain powers to change men’s lives... Through it all, I continually attempt to express my discontent with a male dominated society... In the second phase of my work, I describe the emptiness of human lives by painting dolls without thoughts controlled by a master. Men controlled female prostitutes in the previous phase, now the Master controls the dolls. There is always a concern about control and domination and sympathy for the subdued... Currently my work is in a third phase, which describes the daily life of the character. This daily life is monotonous, ordinary and empty. The character itself has only eyes on her face and legs of different sizes, which can never add up... My art is often biographical and is based on my feelings of powerlessness and emptiness in respect to everyday life.16

Won refers to the everyday almost as if it is located beyond her grasp. In contrast to Michel de Certeau’s seminal writings on everyday life, which allow that through ‘tactics’ individuals do attain some control over their position within the institutional structures of power (‘strategies’), Won’s summations appear to say the opposite.17 Her cyborg-like character’s everyday life is described as monotonous, ordinary and empty. Won apparently feels encompassed or defined by structures. She does not provide many examples of these structures in her interviews or press releases, although
some of her paintings represent domestic scenes in which her character is taking a shower, applying makeup or drying her hair. In the earlier quote taken from an interview, she juxtaposes her present subject matter of ‘the everyday’ with her previous subject matter of female sexuality in Korea. She asserts that the everyday is ‘about small things’. In her statement on myspace she describes a second phase of her work, which occurred between her focus on female sexuality and the everyday, and which concentrates on a fictional cybernetic omnipotence known as ‘the master’. Won mentions the word ‘emptiness’ in relation to both the second and third ‘phases’ of her corpus. Her first phase is more concerned with what she describes as her ‘discontent’ as a woman in a society orientated towards male needs and desires.


What all three phases of her oeuvre show is that as an individual Won feels constrained by her habitus and frustrated enough by these constraints to express her relationship to them through her artworks. It appears that given her negative feelings towards her environment, Won has made a consciously outward shift in focus from her first to her second/third phases of work, with the latter referring to her time in Britain. Her ‘habitus’ is now a different space to the one to which she had originally grown accustomed. The family and occupational structures and choices available to a woman in London may be different from what they were in Seoul. Won may feel less ‘discontent’ as a woman in London but rather than feeling more contented, her discontent has become without content, a-content, or, in her own words, characterized by ‘emptiness’.

Won ultimately insinuates her unease in her surroundings in terms of her unequal position as a woman and a migrant, but since moving to Britain the latter has become more predominant both in her own considerations and in her artworks. However, whereas she consciously chooses to describe her inequality as a woman in relation to her earlier works, she does not announce or, perhaps, even consider her possible inequality as a migrant. It is possible that Won is able to locate her earlier works in relation to more specific feminist issues because she is distanced both from the habitus where she originally produced them and the process of producing them, and is able to visualize them more clearly in relation to this (retroactive) context. In relation to her current works she may feel numb or void in her ability to respond to manifest pressures and unable to articulate their origin as she creates from within them. It is also possible that this blurry uncertainty which has resulted from her dislocation has produced a new kind of certainty based on the value of questioning; she is now able to contest and perhaps transcend the linguistic and kyriarchal categories of womanhood, gender and race and see their signifieds as unsatisfactorily represented subjects of pre-Structuralist and Structuralist ways of thinking. As a post-structuralist feminist Judith Butler challenges the
simplistic, historicized binary categories of gender and sexuality, which, like notions of East and West or black and white, work to stunt the intrinsic inequalities within the concept of difference. This suggests the presence of a dominant force within the dichotomy which dictates the parameters of the binarity itself.

If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably induced and maintained.18

It is quite possible that Won’s thinking and reasoning in respect to her creations is unconsciously influenced by such Western feminist and/or Existentialist thinking, the two philosophies being not entirely incompatible with each other, as Simone de Beauvoir illustrated.19 It is only possible to speculate on the unconscious causes of an artist’s creative process, but here I base myself on the artist’s own fashioned data. In her myspace.com statement she describes her character as being ‘unable to think’. Then in the following paragraph she states that her art is biographical, based on her sense of ‘powerlessness’ in relation to ‘everyday life’. I suggest that this is partly indicative of her status as a non-European migrant as a result of which she is unable to exercise her right to vote in addition to her more general feelings of discontent towards the binary categories of gender and race outlined above. In both senses, the structures or ‘strategies’ that make up the everyday are beyond her grasp as an agent. She may observe everyday life as an outsider, without the available fundamental, or at least metaphorical, right to employ ‘tactics’. Further to this, unless she marries a British person or attains a well-paid job, the immigration laws applying to immigrants from outside Europe mean that she is powerless in her decision to stay in Britain.

Won’s emphasis has changed since moving to Britain but she still addresses her subjection and alienation as an individual through the subject matter of her art by creating an eccentric protagonist who is the sole focus of her paintings and dolls. Stylistically, with the exception of her character who wears traditional Korean costume, her figures appear bare or rudimentary and self-aware in their minimalism. Without her direct and more specific conversational or written input, which could tackle issues of gender, migrancy or even race, it is difficult to locate the reasons for her feelings of powerlessness. Like the existentialists, Won appears to have an acute awareness of her role and responsibilities as an individual, particularly since moving away from her homeland. She chooses not to contextualize these responsibilities beyond her consignment as a sentient being on a planet among other sentient beings. In terms of her place or space as a migrant she chooses to absent herself from both societies and situations. Won does not latently orient herself as a migrant or diasporic artist, nor as a Feminist or Black artist, yet in oblique ways she broaches all these concerns. Rather than being a Korean artist who is interested in identity issues, Won engages with the politics of identity itself in a globalizing world or in a world with which we all identify.

BADA SONG: BEYOND IDENTITY POLITICS AND INDIVIDUALIZATION

I asked Bada Song in 2007 and again in 2010 in what ways her art relates to identity, if at all, in terms of specific minority issues such as gender and race. Her earlier artworks Pollock, Wig, Wig Piece and Chaplin appeared to broach the challenges and contradictions of representing both gendered and ‘raced’ bodies, particularly coming from the position of a non-Western female. In Chaplin Song made a papier maché cast of her own body and made a Chaplin figure with East Asian facial features.

In the performance Pollock, Song pays recognition to Jackson Pollock’s action painting, signalling perhaps the art critical infiltration of the Western-focused, male-dominated Abstract Expressionism. However, in her performance she mimics the gesturing of paint by wearing a red
hairpiece, the long strands of which are attached, at first, to a walking stick on the wall – again a possible reference to Chaplin or a symbol of Britishness – and which forms a temporary roof-like structure, with her body replacing a pillar or post. The notion of the temporary shelter is a common theme in Song’s work; an earlier piece, *Chinbung*, used a papier maché roof to refer to childhood memories of a typhoon. These shelters can be interpreted as signifiers of her unrest as a Korean migrant who, although now settled in Britain, navigates her sense of home in relation to her position as a female artist whose career takes precedence over the domestic sphere. In parts of the performance Song takes her headpiece away from the wall, moving around the performance space, shaking her head and dragging the headpiece, perhaps defiantly (a gesture against the masculinity of Action Painting) and with a sense of ritual that may allude to Korean Shamanism, in which the shaman, *mudang*, is typically female.

Similarly, in *Wig* she shaved her hair in front of an audience before donning the wigs. The performative process enacted in these artworks involving the use of her head adds a sense of urgency and intimacy to Song’s creations, yet at the same time their exact message was ambiguous. Song’s iconography and the text-based descriptions of her work do not provide an explicit narrative or theme, so her artworks cannot be labelled ‘Identity Political’. It is interesting to observe however that she chose white males as her twentieth century icons: Chaplin and Pollock. She re-enacted these male icons by presenting a counter-position, as it were, between the audience’s expectations and to her representations of race and gender. She enigmatically and gracefully moves between categories of race and gender without making them the main focus of the artwork. In doing this, she highlights the necessity for post-identity politics to challenge or move beyond categorizations. Similarly, she makes references to black people and black struggles in her *Wig Piece*, but she has never addressed race as a usable or as an overtly contestable term for describing her artworks. When I asked her this year whether her artworks relate to issues of race, she replied:

I am quite concerned with race in reality, but I don’t think any of my work deals with this explicitly. For me art is a way of working through and beyond painful political divisions and finding alternative images and possibilities.”

Bada Song, *Pollock*, 2007, live performance
When asked the same question in relation to gender, Song highlights changes in her approach to gender:

I think I deal with this matter [gender] with my twentieth-century icon project like the Pollock, Chaplin and perhaps Wig Piece. In Pollock, my intention of making a nineteenth-century Korean woman’s wig has become a heavy headpiece that leaks colour down through gravity to the studio floor. In Chaplin [2005] my face takes the place of another famous man in classic male suit of clothes. Perhaps there is a kind of envy motivating these earlier works, but I have gone beyond that now and trust more in processes which have no gendered division.

Song suggests that there was a time when she was mindful of gender inequalities in terms of cultural and/or professional achievement. However, she states that she has ‘gone beyond’ such issues of lexica and its limitations to our understanding of phenomena. Whilst she has transcended identity as applied to particular groups of people, Song now explores identity in more micro terms.

My current works are in a way very much related to identity, but a rather different kind of identity from that which I had thought I might have dealt with a few years ago. For instance, the latest piece you saw at KCC, Match (2010), shows my strong current interest in the ‘blubby’ concept, i.e. the way in which I try to explore small differences that define individual modules (like the way we really live outside the names and terms applied to us). This was also apparent in my Cornflake piece in my previous exhibition.

Her focus on ‘small differences’ and ‘individual modules’ can be seen in relation to the theory of individualization, proposed by sociologists Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash and Ulrich Beck, which examines the conditions of the individual in relation to a postmodernized and globalized world, forcing individuals to pick up their own pieces from the ‘ruins of traditions’. Beck argues that the place of the individual has changed and opened up in relation to its social, religious and
vocational functions and roles, creating a desire and necessity to live ‘a life of one’s own’, pursuing an ‘ethic of individual self-fulfillment’.26

Song’s recent piece Matches reflects on her day-to-day movements through local surroundings where she collects twigs to draw later. These drawings can be seen to represent her individual footsteps through public land and her engagement with nature, which is unpredictable and unstructured. This work of art is therefore ‘individualized’ but also indicative of lifestyle or ‘life politics’, rather than identity politics, which aspires to address and redress particular enclosed notions of identity, such as gender, race and nationality. When asked about her own nationality, Song highlighted the complexities of the category itself, which can be viewed in terms of nations and nationalities intersecting in a globalized world:

I am interested in current theories like… Nicolas Bourriaud’s where we don’t search for authentic origins – what is really Korean – but rather explore and enjoy the uncertainties of translation and transnationality.27

MEEKYOUNG SHIN AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORICISM

Meekyoung Shin casts traditional Graeco-Roman-style statues in soap based on her own ‘Korean’ body type or shapes Graeco-Roman vases decorated with Korean designs and icons.28 From a distance, Shin’s sculptures look identical to the type of Greek or Roman artefacts on which they are modelled. Their presence at the large-scale contemporary Korean art exhibition ‘Through the Looking Glass’ at Asia House appeared to be a strategic move. Asia House is archetypically British with its Georgian architecture and grandiose interior. Shin’s apparently classical vases, displayed on plinths, at first appear to be permanent elements of decor in that setting rather than pieces in a contemporary Korean art exhibition (in which a large number of installation pieces using audio-visual or contemporary materials were displayed). However, this assumption was undermined by another of Shin’s soap sculptures in the form of a gold Buddha placed in the lavatory. The curator and artist had decided to display this interactive and, indeed, utilitarian object in the toilet. This had an effect of drawing the viewer’s reconsidered attention to Shin’s other works in the exhibition. If the viewer had, like myself, thought that the vases were part of Asia House’s permanent collection, it now became clear that they were ironically different from the types of objects that they appeared to imitate and were made not of durable china or marble but soap. Significantly too, some of Shin’s sculptures, like Song’s work, also refer to elements of Eastern iconography through the use of casts of her own body.
Shin is interested in Greek and Roman archaeological artefacts conveyed historically to the Korean education system by Japanese colonizers who were appreciative of Western learning. Shin commented in interview on her interest in Western-centric learning in Korea and, on our first meeting at the Asia House preview, referred to the ‘Orientalism’ of the female form. Shin creates a hybrid of two art historically perpetuated ideal forms, from both ‘East’ and ‘West’, thus interrogating a tradition of possible underlying Western imperialist and patriarchal power relations. Shin adheres to a different type of traditionalism to that which is stereotypically ‘British’, as compared to, for instance, Bada Song’s Chaplin, but she is interested in symbolizing Western concepts more generally and for political purposes.

**AWARENESS AND AMBIGUITY TOWARDS THE ART MARKET IN RELATION TO IDENTITY POLITICS**

This section highlights another aspect of the current relevance of identity and post-identity politics resulting from my broader research conducted among all ten Korean artists. Interviews with two of the ten – whom I shall keep anonymous – demonstrate their awareness of demands emanating from the international art market on Korean contemporary art. One artist intimated that the marketability of an artwork might depend on its possible niche ‘Asian’ status. I suggest that this awareness is indicative of the artist’s long-term distancing from Korea and their ability to be more objective about their homeland.

One artist critiqued the situation of being a Korean producing art outside Korea in light of how art is financed. I asked, ‘Why do you think Korean artists come to London?’ The artist replied:

> If you are black or Asian it’s easier to get funding now – and people want the money. Some people even play tricks; they say their background’s Irish when it’s English. Now with the Arts Council too. Certainly it’s easier if you’re young and not white.

The artist’s comment cannot be taken completely literally here, as it is based on incidental anecdotes and value judgements, stating, regardless of whether there is any personal experience to back it up, that it is easier to receive money from Arts Council funding if you are not ethnically Caucasian. However, it implies that the artist quoted is well-versed in the problematics of the representation of multiculturalism in Britain, as discussed by such critics such as Rasheed Araeen and Nikos Papastergiadis in his discussion of ‘New Internationalism’, and made evident by Arts Council England’s own decibel initiative.

Another artist also acknowledged that Korean artists are money-focused and tend to address Korean traditional identity or ‘Korean-ness’ because there is a market for nostalgia.

> I feel that the whole country is completely Americanized. We will never have that freedom. It is very much about money and your social status. Korea and America are all about money, Capitalism... Korean art outside Korea is more about Korean-ness. Very sentimental, such as Kim Sooja – a nostalgic thing is going on.

The number of Korean artists relocating to Britain to study art and curating indicates how conscious they are of Britain as a site for artistic prosperity, and, not least, an awareness of Britain’s equal opportunities regulations with regard to arts funding. The comments also demonstrate, on a more general level, that the issue of funding can take precedence in an artist’s considerations when producing art. The artists signal ambiguity towards the art market, inferring that the market is to some extent driven by current political ideology with the artists responding to this. This preoccupation can be defined as post identity politics, the awareness that identity politics itself carries with it certain inverted prejudices. In this sense, it is interesting that Korean migrant artists in Britain are exposed to and become aware concurrently of both identity politics, in terms of gender and race, as well as the residues left by identity politics. However, while the artists
sometimes choose to engage with these issues, they do not equate their art oeuvre to such polemics, nor do they appear to use their art as a politicized gesture towards institutional reform.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Since migrating to Britain, it appears that these female Korean artists have become more aware of their place as individuals in contrast to their former ‘role as a woman’. This issue is less overt in the works of Jaeran Won, but with Meeyoung Shin and Bada Song the new visibility of the issue of gender equality appears to urge the need to engage with it. They also may feel more at liberty to do so in Britain. I suggest that Korean migrant artists, after moving to Britain, are more likely than not to feel a need or desire to address issues of cultural difference in their artworks, as is shown in their verbal and written statements. Shin, Song and Won engage in different ways with a combination of broader issues. When it comes to gender concerns, their work expresses what can be defined as ‘Identity Politics’; in the case of their awareness of the contemporary/global everyday environment, a form of ‘Life Politics’ seems more prevalent; whereas ‘Post-Identity Politics’ surfaces when artists verbally discuss the issues of race equality in Britain. These indications of more macro concerns are underpinned by a consideration of their personal plight as individuals being in the world. Themes of relocation and cultural difference brought about by migration are not always explicitly tackled either in their artworks or in their statements to the art press.

The artists addressed in this article are long-term migrants in Britain; they had lived here for seven years or more at the time of writing. Their outlook on life stands out from the other Korean artists who informed my study of Korean migrant art in Britain. Bada Song does not appear to want openly to confront her identity either as a Korean female artist in Britain or, more generally, as a migrant. She explores a range of individual and political issues, but without the intention of being defined as an artist by these themes. To some extent all artists, Korean or not, are likely to desire and intend for their artworks to be interpreted flexibly. However, some artists identify with particular concepts over extended or concentrated periods of time, and sometimes these concepts relate to their environment at that time. Shin’s soap sculptures, from the ever-growing *Translation* series, have dealt consistently with the notion of female representation in contrasting Western and Eastern histories of art. It is possible that her presence as a non-Western woman in Britain maintains and keeps fresh her interest in historical approaches to difference. In a similar way, Won’s experience as an outsider has kept her interested in exploring what can be described as existentialist issues in her cartoons. However, she does not describe explicitly whether she is inspired by specifically Western-focused existentialist philosophies. Of the three artists, Won is most unequivocal in tackling gender issues in her artwork, although all artists during interviews referred to their experiences as women who have lived in Korea and experienced the remnants of Confucianism.

As a result of their migration to Britain, these artists now view their everyday possibilities as female actors differently. With their abandonment of Korean family ties and everyday life, they are able to reposition themselves as individuals. Part of this individualist approach may be to broach issues of gender and race from a different Korean national perspective; or to consider the remaining ideological consequences available to Britain, which exhausted Identity Politics in the 1960s and 1970s. What appears to be important to these artists is that the politics of their own identity is relevant to their position as migrant artists and as individuals who want to be heard, not herded.

---

3 James Fowler, ‘United States and South Korean Democratization’, *Political Science Quarterly*, vol 114, no 2, pp 265–288, summer 1999, p 270
8 Kim-Renaud, ‘Introduction’ in *Creative Women*, op cit, p 17
10 Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, vol 16, no 3, autumn 1975, pp 6–18
15 Jaeran’s page is currently available at https://myspace.com/jaeran, although the information on it has changed since this article was written.
20 Interview with Bada Song via email, October 2010
21 Ibid
26 Ibid, p 22
27 Interview with Song, op cit
28 Shin described her body type and facial features as Korean. Interview with Shin Meekyoung, Shin’s studio, London, January 2007
29 Meekyoung Shin during an interview in her studio, January 2007
30 Foucault’s work on discourses of power is relevant to issues of institutional art historical acquisition, representation or manipulation of art and artefacts. Michel Foucault, *The History of
31 Interview with an artist who wished to remain anonymous, 2007
33 Interview with a second artist who wished to remain anonymous, 2007

Beccy Kennedy is lecturer in Art History at Manchester Metropolitan University and works as a curator, co-ordinator and researcher for Asia Triennial Manchester. She is co-editor of the forthcoming anthology Triennial City: Localising Asian Art, and is on the editorial board of the Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art.

© Published Creative Commons License CC BY-NC-ND 3.0