



ARTISTS

Anticipating tomorrow from the lessons of yesterday

BY JUNE PAK

June Pak is an interdisciplinary artist who was born in Seoul, South Korea and now lives and works in Toronto. Her hyphenated identity as a Korean-Canadian informs her practice, as she aims to portray ethnicity in a non-stereotypical and non-binary manner. She utilizes storytelling to showcase the intricacies of immigrant life. The images she creates reflect the complexity of ethnic representation through duplication, erasure, masking, and performance. She is currently leading a project with artists in Korea and Canada as part of a special strategy project initiated by the Canada Council for the Arts and the Art Council Korea, marking 60 years of diplomatic relationship between the two countries. She holds teaching positions at the University of Toronto (Visual Studies) and OCAD University (Cross-Disciplinary Art and Integrated Media).

In 1995, I participated in a student mural competition and created a mural titled *The Geography of Modernity*. As I look back, the title seems overly grandiose and makes me cringe at my youthful self-assurance. Recently, Professor Jean Michel Montsion from the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, where the mural is hanging, reached out to me and asked if I would write a short reflection on the work and my experience for the Robarts Centre's 40th anniversary. Without hesitation, I said yes. But now that I am sitting down to write, I am struggling more than I anticipated. Perhaps because it was so long ago or because it is a type of work I no longer practice. One thing that is clear in my memory is the impact of two professors I had in my final two years at York University—Ted Bieler and Jon Baturin. Now that I am an educator myself, I appreciate their openness, honesty, and generosity even more than I did back then.

I remember talking with Professor Bieler to seek advice on creating works for public spaces. He is well known for his public art, and he offered me several practical tips, such as using durable materials, creating the work in multiple parts for easy transportation and installation, and considering the scale in situ. Thanks to his guidance, my work has stood the test of time.

At the time, Professor Bieler was my painting professor. I was pretty conventional in art-making concerning disciplines. I believed that paintings should be done on canvas using paints and brushes. However, he introduced me to different ways to approach painting as a discipline. I can see that in this mural, with its blocks of plywood squares and traces of lines gouged with a router. I think he was the one who suggested that I look at Paterson Ewen's work. I must admit that the mural is too derivative of Ewen's technique. However, I was a young artist, still learning my painting language. As you know, mimicry is an effective way to learn a new language.

The copper plates in the mural remind me of printmaking classes with Professor Jon Baturin. I had a strange affinity for the preparatory stage of printmaking: I found it meditative while preparing the stone in lithography; I liked the marks made on copper plates more than the final prints on paper; the sound of pressing the silkscreen was more exciting than the prints themselves. I was a terrible printmaker, as you might have guessed from the fact that my focus wasn't on the precision required

to be a good printmaker. But Professor Baturin was attentive to my quirky fascination with tools rather than the result. These experiences taught me an invaluable perspective on the fluidity of boundaries between discipline and medium.

Looking back on my work 22 years later, I realize that it lacked maturity and personal voice, specifically regarding my history as a member of the Korean diaspora community and the history of Asians in Canada. This may have been due to my insecurity as an immigrant and a person of colour (if I remember correctly, I was one of the few Asian students in my department at York University back then). Luckily, my connection to the Robarts Centre didn't stop with my mural in the '90s. While pursuing my PhD and conducting practice-based research in the Department of Visual Art and Art History at York University, I presented a paper titled "Visibility | Ethnicity | Identity: Studying Through *The Invisible Transformation Project* and *Paint Job*" at the Canada: Place, Space, and the Politics of Identity Conference in 2014, organized by the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. I felt I redeemed myself nearly 20 years later. Talk about full circle, eh?

I am glad I said yes to Jean Michel's invitation. Writing this reflection has allowed me to contemplate my past and artistic journey. And I am grateful that my art piece has been part of a vibrant community of scholars at the Robarts Centre over the years. My experience with the Robarts Centre is another reminder of why centres like Robarts are so crucial in preserving diverse voices and fostering a thriving community. ■

