

## YOUR BRIGHT FUTURE

### 12 CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS FROM KOREA

by Christine Starkman and Lynn Zwlevansky, with contributions by Joan Kee and Sunjung Kim

Museum of Fine Arts Houston/ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2009 \$50.

208 pages, 159 color, 18 bw ill.

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## OUTSIDE IN: CHINESE X AMERICAN X CONTEMPORARY ART

Jerome Silbergeld with Cary Y. Liu and Dora C.Y.Ching with essays by Kim Wishart, Gregory Seiffert, and Michelle Lim

Princeton University Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2009, \$60.00

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With thoughtful perspectives by art historians as well as art critics, these two substantial exhibition catalogs from prestigious museums are valuable contributions to contemporary Asian art history. Although each is based on art from one Asian country, they emphasize the artists as individuals in the midst of intersecting cultural currents. But there is a significant difference between them: *Your Bright Future* accepts the parameters of international avant-garde art, while *Outside In* queries their validity.

*Your Bright Future* includes twelve artists born in Korea between 1957 and 1972. It analyzes the ways in which Korean art in general and these artists in particular are mediating between their own experiences and the international art scene. Joan Kee's insightful essay highlights political cross currents in key exhibitions of contemporary Korean art in the last fifty years. She concludes that "it is perhaps time to actively embrace the potential of demise, an idea that simultaneously denotes both the end of a condition as well as a transfer of authority." Kee is referring here to the demise of the ambition to represent a country based on ethnicity and national identity. Lynn Zelevansky provides useful introductory comments on the artists. Christine Starkman addresses three artists living outside Korea, Kimsooja, Do Ho Suh and Bahc Yiso (who died in 2004). The book also includes a useful political and cultural chronology.

The twelve artists included are Bahc Yiso, Choi Jeong-Hwa, Gimhongsok, Jeon Joonho, Kim Beom, Kimsooja, Koo Jeong-A, Minouk Lim, Jooyeon Park, Do Ho Suh, Haegue Yang, Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries. Each has a biography, a bibliography, full page color reproductions and intense interviews by Sunjung Kim. When closely questioned about their work, some artists responded with detailed answers, others contradicted the questions, dismissed the questions or said practically nothing. All of the Korean artists have lived abroad, gone to school abroad, or shown abroad so myriad cultural intersections are evident. The beautifully illustrated art work has a flamboyance and intelligence that speaks of the depth of continuing engagement with

both Korean traditions of contemporary art and international exhibition formats like large scale installations and three channel video. But the sensory experience of these stunning art works pieces was referenced only indirectly. The same was true of social and political contexts perhaps in a conscious effort to de-emphasize any essentialist Korean culture. For example, there is a quirky and informed conceptual art tradition in Korea, and conceptualism is still lurking in some of these works, but not mentioned. Joan Kee refers to Minjung art, the politically activist, socially engaged movement that has been both outside and inside the Korean art mainstream, but analysis of the sometimes intense political and social positions of the artists discussed here is scattered. One leitmotif of the artists' interviews is a defiance of various conventions that could have been a more prominent theme in the book.

Jerome Silbergeld, the main curator of *Outside In*, is a well-known scholar of traditional Chinese art who also follows Chinese contemporary art. In his essay "Chinese Art, Made- in-America," he identifies some of the cross currents of Chinese artists in the United States, contradicting our expectations of their experiences as simply the assimilation of Western art styles. He refers to "new Chinese" art made in America: "the best of this art is deeply engaged in a complex dialogue with the history of art, traditional and modern, Chinese and Western with visual results that are not exclusively Asian or Western, Chinese or American, but all of the above, indebted to all and different from all." But his real point is that the best known Chinese artists who have been promoted since the 1998 exhibition *Inside/ Out: New Chinese Art* form only one contingent of contemporary Chinese art (or is it American art, he asks, since it is produced in America). He queries whether "new" can include contemporary practitioners of traditional practices, that are not part of the sanctioned avant-garde approaches. He avoids essentialism, including a white Jewish artist living in China and various permutations on his theme, but his purpose is to include "other" contemporary artists from China, to shake up our exclusions and assumptions.

Cary Y. Liu's essay examines the dialectic of past and present, nationalism and internationalism, in China. She suggests that exclusions from the mainstream have been based on perspectives framed by Darwin's evolution and "survival of the fittest," whereas, in fact, according to her analysis, an accurate model would be far more complex. Again, the essay is opening the door to more possibilities than mainstream avant-garde, "the remarkable diversity and variation within contemporary art [in China] is only beginning to be recognized." Following these essays each artist has an artist statement, and two substantial analytical essays, one on the artist's development, the other directly engaging the subtleties of the art itself. Silbergeld wrote many of these essays; other contributors are Kim Wishart, Gregory Seiffert, and Michelle Lim.

But before any of this substantive content, *Outside In* begins with full immersion in the art work with one hundred pages of color reproductions of the six artists. The photographs of the paintings constitute a full seduction. We can study the work directly: Arnold Chang and Liu Dan's fascinating transformations of traditional ink painting; Michel Cherney's meditative photographic interpretations of Chinese art; Zhang Hongtu's pictorial versatility; Zhi Lin command of multiple art traditions- traditional

Chinese art, Socialist realism, European classical art, as well as abstraction, is perhaps the most intense trajectory; only Vanessa Tran fades away on the page and seems too immature for such a grand treatment.

The Asian Art Museum in Seattle (where Silbergeld taught for many years) embraces these inclusive perspectives: they display and purchase both contemporary “avant-garde” and contemporary artists altering ink painting traditions. The juxtaposition of the two types of art supports the thesis that both are equally vibrant. But there is one mystery. Why is it that as Silbergeld is so invested in expanding contemporary paradigms to include traditional styles, he barely mentions the other side of the argument, the respect for tradition among the superstar Chinese avant-garde? For example, Cai Guo Qiang commissions traditional artists as part of his performance art, and, of course, both Xu Bing and Wenda Gu are deeply immersed in the traditional art of calligraphy. By downplaying this fact, Silbergeld sets up a stronger oppositional argument than is, perhaps, necessary.