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## *Han*

**Curated by:** Julia Chon and He-myong Woo

**Exhibition schedule:** Culture House, Washington, DC, September 2–30, 2023

**Reviewed by:** Ashley E. Kim Duffey

Founded during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Korean American Artist Collective (KAAC) finally opened their inaugural exhibition in September 2023, titled *Han*, at Culture House, a relatively new venue dedicated to varied expressions of art and culture within the repurposed 1886 Friendship Baptist Church in Southwest Washington, DC. Founded as “a group of artists dedicated to supporting, building, and amplifying works that are politically, socially, and culturally engaged, and rooted in the Korean American experience,” KAAC grounded their first group show in the Korean word *han* to indicate a defining aspect within the lives of both Korean citizens and Koreans in diaspora.<sup>1</sup> As the introductory panel states, “Han has been described as feelings of sorrow from oppression, from an atrocity experienced by a people or a nation, a feeling inherited and multi-generational.” The curators recognize that *han* is not only a negative energy but that “the specificity of *han* within Korean culture gives rise to an essence that shimmers with poetic potentiality and reparative imaginings.”<sup>2</sup> Tied to these definitions and valences of *han*, the exhibition consisted of work from the more than twenty artists who currently comprise the KAAC and deal in themes of exile, abandonment, colonization, gender, and the interplay of modernity and totalitarianism.

The history of the Korean diaspora in the United States is one marked by the latter’s political, economic, and military presence in the peninsula. In 1945, the United States and the USSR freed Korea from thirty-five years of Japanese occupation and divided the peninsula between the two nations’ oversight along the 38th parallel. While there was some migration from Korea to North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the first period of mass migration occurred following the Korean War when millions of Koreans were displaced and six thousand Korean women emigrated with their US servicemen husbands and fiancés. At this time, the practice of transnational adoption from Korea to the United States began in response to the postwar crisis of mixed-race babies born to Korean women and American GIs. Immigration from South Korea continued to increase after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act reversed national-origin quotas that limited the number of Asian immigrants allowed into the United States. These changes shifted Korean relationships with their *gohyang* (homeland), as not just where one *is* but where one *is from* and to where one remains tethered. As part of these shifts, *han* also became a more expansive term to include the particular melancholy of living apart from the homeland.<sup>3</sup> In her prose poem “American Han,” E. J. Koh considers the contested

possession of han between Korean nationals and diasporic Koreans, writing, “It’s not a word but a war.”<sup>4</sup> KAAC’s use of the term therefore is a strong statement about its flexibility and willingness to reflect and describe the experience of a diaspora rather than a clear-cut nationalism.

It is against and within this context of diaspora that KAAC offered *Han*. I was able to attend the show’s opening night, where the tone of the evening was celebratory, not only of the merit of the art on view but also of this group of artists, their kinship, and their experiences of diaspora. Visitors gathered in the gallery space for a sound performance by cocurator He-myong Woo. Between his sculptures and underneath the installation of a work in mulberry paper titled *HANgang* by Robert Choe-Henderson, Woo performed his sound piece “[Cohyang](#).” Woo’s sculptures (fig. 1) are large twisting, organic forms, made of decaying remnants of trees wrapped in mulberry paper and dipped in indigo. “I’m holding the long passages that many of our elders had to take in order to arrive here,” Woo began, narrating his grandmother’s migration thirty years ago that led her to the United States. Over recordings of train bells, Woo vocalized a note recalling a foghorn, a ghostly ship in the night. He looped this sound with another, his voice reaching a higher pitch to denote deeper anguish. The last of his vocals was a guttural yell into his microphone, sung over the earlier two loops. He played these sounds through a modulator, creating a staccato effect akin to a strobe light for the ears. Finally, he ended the loop and breathed into his microphone. For twelve minutes, the room was captivated by Woo’s performance.



Fig. 1. Installation view, *Han*, Culture House, Washington, DC, September 2–30, 2023. Photo by author

This performance, fleeting as it was powerful, situated the exhibition both aesthetically and ideologically. Choe-Henderson’s *HANgang*, draped and backlit from the ceiling, was titled after the river Han and evokes the ebbs and flows of the water over which migrants traveled. Woo appeared adrift in the sea above him as he performed, the blue of the paper casting an aquatic light on the room. Within the context of diaspora, han, after all, is a condition predicated on migration and the consequence of decades of being colonized and displaced subjects. Woo’s evocation of the trains and ships, the water that carried these subjects, served as a rich opportunity for the artists and supporters of KAAC to gather around the question of han.

The exhibition space was small, comprising only two main sections, a small corridor containing the curators’ statement, and a room centered around two three-dimensional works. In these spaces hung twenty-three works by twenty members of the collective in a wide range of media—painting, works on paper, installation, sculpture, multimedia, textile—intermixed throughout the space. Though materials of the works varied, the idea of materials themselves as tools and evidence of migration recurs throughout. This is especially true of textiles and Korean paper (*hanji*), represented in two and three

dimensions. While there were obvious examples—anchor works suspended from the ceiling in two of the corners and in the antechamber off the main gallery—textiles were also represented in two dimensions in painting and embroidery. The anchor works consisted of Cho-Henderson’s *HANgang* and Andre Lee Bassuet’s *Baring Han*, a hanbok-shaped sculpture made of reclaimed household linens printed with cyanotype. These works faced one another along the back wall of the gallery space, creating an expanse of blue and casting long shadows. *Baring Han* was suspended in a cruciform shape, its arms extended and its skirt hanging below. The form’s interior pockets were lined with text inscribed by the sun and the chemical fixity of cyanotype—reflections on the artist’s relationship to han. The use of domestic textiles to evoke a wearable garment suggests, as the artist has written, “a vessel of personal biographies holding intimate memories and repairing a fragmented past.”<sup>5</sup> The use of cyanotype implies the impressionability of fabric, not only chromatically but also spiritually and sensorially.

Fabrics functioned as a thread conveying han throughout this exhibition. Mary Laube’s three paintings use oil and acrylic richly to bring to mind the textured surface of quilted surfaces and the silky textures of hanbok. Jonie Breoker’s *Entanglement* features embroidery to evoke the form of a woman sitting in a chair next to an empty one, rendered in outline using squares of embroidered color. The warp and weft of fabric surfaces are topographical, materially evident regardless of how fine the texture. Fabric’s thread is something that defines and marks distance, from one end to the other, the ties that bind. Is that not han? As the curators write in their statement, “[Han’s] burden has been carried by



Fig. 2. Installation view, *Han*, Culture House, Washington, DC, September 2–30, 2023. In the rear: Aaron Chung, *Distant Memories*, 2023, printed and cut *hanji* on nylon strings; at center: Jeffrey Yoo Warren, *Mechanism for Healing Oneself with Water*, 2020–23, douglas fir, oak, glass vessel, brass singing bowl, ceramic vessel, brass, repurposed tiki torch, hair ties, rubber mallet, enamel cup, 30 x 12 x 27 in. Photo by author

our grandparents and parents through colonization, war, extreme poverty, and immigration . . . it exists in Korean blood.” Though textiles are material, surely they also convey the liminality of han, flexible in their wear, changing through time, holding space and defining it. Like water, it changes, it carries, it bears.

The antechamber displayed Jeffrey Yoo Warren’s *Mechanism for Healing Oneself with Water*, surrounded by Aaron Chung’s site-specific *Distant Memories*, photographs of interior and exterior spaces printed on *hanji* and suspended to evoke the architecture its surfaces bear; other panels were intricately carved with repeating patterns (fig. 2). With the sink-and-faucet-like *Mechanism* and the warmth of light from the backlit panels, the room felt like the interior of a home, a space to live in, to think in. While itself an interior, it also inspired a kind of interiority. I felt myself antsy in the space as if I would find it occupied, sure that I was interrupting its inhabitants’ communion with the work and with themselves. When I found myself alone at last in it, contemplating what han is to me, what diaspora is to me, what it is we can and cannot carry, another person entered. I found myself self-conscious, trying to play it cool and exiting as though I was ready to go.

I thought about the weight of the water in the room, sitting hopeful in Yoo Warren's *Mechanism*. What does water bear for those of us displaced from a peninsula colonized and recolonized, war-torn and Westernized? Essential to the conditions of migration and diaspora on which han is predicated, water is represented throughout the exhibition. From Choe-Henderson's *HANgang* reproducing the surface of a river above the viewers to Julia Chon's water-bearing woman in *The Home I Carry*, the aquatic is akin to life, to home. Indeed, Chon's titular "home" appears to be the jug of water held aloft by her central figure, the water of the seas that Woo evoked in his sound performance. Chon's work gives hope in the flexibility, portability, of a home, with its bright yellow ground and her figure's quiet smile. Water takes on a sorrowful meaning in Kaela Han's oil painting *Hold*, which suggests the idea of water both as surface and as depth, depicting the stylized hold of a ship carrying cargo or migrants, underneath a black sky.

In addition to those materials that transmit the particular kind of han marking the space of diaspora, the Korean War runs through the exhibition as an originating event of these phenomena. Michelle S. Cho's *Untitled* is a roughly hewn wheel of pewter suspended as a circle flat against the wall, evoking the wheel of a jeep or other military vehicle. The work *Bound by Struggle* by Jason Chang (artist name RFX1) is perhaps the most self-conscious grappling with the war. On a custom birch panel carved to the shape of a television is a photograph of a street corner, one building edifice decorated with an American flag and a portrait of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Against this ground sits a rendering of a woman posed as a newscaster, cast in two shadows closely but imperfectly stacked atop one another as though to be viewed through 3D glasses. The top layer of the piece is a resin pouring of crimson, dripping down like blood covering the figure and the scene on which she reports. The work calls upon the innovations in telecommunications that marked the experience of the spectacle of the Korean War in the United States, which linked Korean subjects as victims of the struggle with Americans as spectators. Dave Young Kim's *Wish You Were Here* more subtly evokes American occupation, affixing a stretch of barbed-wire fencing above a painting of two storks engaged in a dance, their heads forming a heart. An LED sign below projects messages in Hangul. Eunsoo Jeong's *Hell Hath No Fury Like a Woman Scorned* shows a small figurine of a woman set in a kind of pantry featuring Bibles, jars of cigarettes, American and Korean money, and military foodstuffs, like Spam and Hershey's chocolate, along with an American Army helmet and knife. The scene recalls the burden of women at military bases during and after the Korean War.

The exhibition's weight came not only from its serious reckoning with the trauma that produced the conditions of diaspora, migration, and han but also from the joyous potentiality of these same factors. Dan-ah Kim's *Indomitable Spirit* is a mixed-media rendering of a girl, fists up, under a persimmon tree, caught in a gust of flower petals (collaged with real pressed flowers) in the inky blue of night. Chris Yi Suh's central figure in *나비 (Nabi) | Butterfly* raises her arms behind her head, a gesture either of satisfaction or humility, and grins widely as her form indicates flight.

The exhibition marked a powerful entrée for the KAAC into the rapidly changing Asian/American arts scene, a movement comprehensively recounted in Marci Kwon's introduction to her essay "[Asian American Art, Pasts and Futures](#)."<sup>6</sup> The show seems to answer Susette Min's call for "recasting the categorical imperatives of Asian American art as more than a historical recovery and conservation project" to consider instead "how it

can forge conditions for a politics to come.”<sup>7</sup> By reflecting on the theme of han, a concept inherently tied both to history and futurity, the curators and artists offered their ideas on how to utilize its resonance for creative expression. The show worked both because of its breadth of materials, subjects, and interpretations of the theme and because of the cohesion among this collective in their adoption of these ideas and ideals. In these ways, KAAC answers many of the questions Eunyong Park asks in her article “[Beyond Conflict, Toward Collaboration: The Korean American Arts Community in New York, 1980s–1992](#),” especially concerning how Korean American artists communicate with one another to organize collective activities around their shared ethnic heritage and the social and cultural events they use for collective action.<sup>8</sup> *Han* was a strong exhibition that contributed to and helped shape current trends in Asian and American art history and exhibition.

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<sup>1</sup> Korean American Artist Collective, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://www.kaacollective.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Chon and He-myong Woo, curators’ statement, *Han*, Culture House, Washington, DC, September 2–30, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> To understand the historical and cultural valences of han, the curators and I draw from Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, “Korean *Han* and the Postcolonial Afterlives of ‘The Beauty of Sorrow,’” in *Korean Studies* 41 (2017): 253–79.

<sup>4</sup> E. J. Koh, “American Han,” Poetry Foundation, 2021, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/156413/american-han>.

<sup>5</sup> Andre Lee Bassuet, Instagram caption, March 8, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C4RbCh\\_sklw](https://www.instagram.com/p/C4RbCh_sklw).

<sup>6</sup> Marci Kwon, introduction to “Asian American Art, Pasts and Futures,” in *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), <https://journalpanorama.org/article/asian-american-art>.

<sup>7</sup> Susette Min, *Unnamable: The Ends of Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Eunyong Park, “Beyond Conflict, Toward Collaboration: The Korean American Arts Community in New York, 1980s–1990s,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), <https://journalpanorama.org/article/beyond-conflict>.