

SOUTH KOREA

PAINTING PROPOSAL

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Unification in Diversity: Assimilating Korean and Western Aesthetics

As a Korean-American artist, I aim to create works of art that embody and explore my dual identity. I have always felt a certain amount of disconnect when it came to defining my identity, as racially I am a Korean while culturally, I am an American. This issue stewed within me for most of my adolescence, and I have recently begun to address it head on. I feel that while there is still much to be said about growing up as a minority in America, I can personally explore what can be said about growing up as a Korean in a country that brackets all Asians into one racial group. Therefore, for my Fulbright project, I propose to explore the gap between my Korean heritage and American identity in an artistic manner by assimilating distinctive aesthetics and mediums from both traditions. Specifically, I will focus on various techniques found within Korean Joseon Dynasty paintings, and integrate them with mediums typical within Western art traditions. In this way, I will reconcile and investigate the Korean-American cultural gap that is present within society, and also have the opportunity to study Korean and Western aesthetics and how their unification can be expressed through art.

In dedicating most of my life to the study and practice of art, I have come to realize that the dissemination of culture is largely driven by the genesis and evolution of art works from that culture. Regarding the United States, I have made an interesting observation-while Chinese and Japanese art are admired and recognized by Americans, Korean art remains largely unacknowledged and underappreciated. As a Korean-American artist who is concerned about the representation and assimilation of my culture in America, I hope to forge a new path in encouraging stronger unification between Korean and Western aesthetics.

I have been working with this idea of integrating the two aspects of my identity since my freshman year in college. In my most recent project, I painted and collaged selected fragments from two portraits: Korean “Emperor Taejo” and “Queen Elizabeth I Coronation”. Despite how different the two portraits appeared they communicated strong similarities in composition and style to create a unified piece. This small experiment in the juxtaposition of two cultures within one space has sparked a deeper desire in me to expand upon the concept. For this Fulbright project, I want to delve even further into how art expresses a culture, and synthesize the two aesthetics to explore my duality. However, before I can fully dive into this particular concept, I need to strengthen my knowledge of the Korean culture. I must understand Korean culture in art so that the elements I extract from Korean paintings have meaning and intention behind them. In South Korea, I will have full access to the National Museum of Korea, which houses the largest collection of Joseon Dynasty paintings in the world, as well as tutelage from Do Ho Suh, an artist I truly admire. I will focus my studies on Joseon Dynasty paintings, because paintings from this period are known to reflect distinct style and aspects of Korean life most vividly.

My studies will begin at the National Museum of Korea in Seoul with Fine Arts Associate Curator Jina Chang and director Kim Youngna as my supervising hosts. My hosts have agreed to provide me access to the painting collections, conservational studios and various educational programs. Programs and workshops at the National include hands-on activities with Korean painting techniques and lectures on the painting collection. As I work at the National, my art will be an essential source of communication and interaction with the public and staff. Because the National is an institution that attracts a high volume of visitors and well-informed enthusiasts, I have a wide demographic to show my artwork to. This will provide me with an additional challenge to see what appeals to a broad spectrum of people as they encounter my fusion of Joseon Dynasty painting references and Western art. I also anticipate a response that will revolve around the clash between what is essentially “Korean” and what is essentially “Western” in order to reflect the internal struggles that I have dealt with as a Korean-American. Being in Korea, I will be able to obtain a fresh perspective on how native Koreans view the clash and melding of cultures in America, the world’s biggest melting pot. What I sincerely hope is that this kind of exposure will encourage open interpretation and relatable interest from the Korean community. As a result, I aim to translate their reactions and opinions to a more Korean-American perspective, and initiate a movement of full integration of the Korean culture with American culture.

For the second half of my research, I will work with internationally renowned Korean artist Do Ho Suh. Suh is a Painting graduate from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and someone I look up to as a role model. I admire him for his constant fervor and creativity, and for his bold stylistic references to the traditional Korean style of art. One of his most unique Korean

sculpture installation pieces is the "Fallen Star 1/5". This piece is literally the collision of a traditional Korean house and a 19th century American mansion, at one-fifth scale. Suh describes this piece as a self-portrait, and bluntly expresses the kind of cultural collision he goes through when traveling and working between Korea and America. This resonates deeply with what I am trying to express, and pursuing Suh as a mentor will provide me with invaluable insight and experience. Suh will provide his studio space to experiment with new material and techniques, and archival resources in Joseon paintings. Material study at Do Ho's studio may include wood, fabric, ceramic, paper etc. My goal is to familiarize myself with different sculptural properties, and how to utilize and creatively alter materials. At the end of my study, I plan to exhibit my projects and resulting art at his studio.

As I continue to labor over how to express a marriage of Korean and Western artistic traditions through my artwork, I have begun to conceptualize the initial ideas of my first project. The first project will unify a Korean painting from the National's collection with new Western techniques learned from Suh's studio, such as collaging with various mediums. I am still deciding exactly how to fulfill this integration in a soulful and artistic manner, but it is in this journey to unify these two very opposite styles that I hope to find my most profound revelations. I will be dealing with the very essence of diversity, and only in truly understanding what composes these apparently mutually exclusive cultures can I begin to understand what will work together.

As I delve into a culture that I have only been on the margins of, executing this project as a Fulbright Scholar in South Korea will enable me to define Korean culture and art with true conviction. I will be able to fully embrace my cultural identities as a Korean and an American, and work towards bringing out qualities within both that can be shared and integrated. Working with artworks, artists, professors, and the Korean community will provide me the most knowledgeable and growth-driven period for my art and studies. After this experience, I will continue to discuss the issues of my Korean and American identity within my art, and gear this commitment to support the Korean community and its arts within the States. In order to practice my art and concepts in the future, I intend to apply for a master's degree in painting and East Asian studies at Yale University.