Yoonmi Nam

ARTIST STATEMENT

Early in my childhood I was exposed to Eastern and Western cultures having lived in both Korea and in Canada. These two worlds shaped who I am and enriched my view and understanding of both cultures, though at times it became a source of conflict and alienation. I have felt a sense of estrangement wherever I have been. I always longed for a world where I could finally feel at home, and I believed it existed, but I could not describe or define this place. My work is a persistent endeavor to create this place, in between, where different worlds co-exist.

In 2004, I was selected as one of seven international artists-in-residence for the Nagasawa Art Park Japanese woodblock printmaking program in Japan. Living in Japan was an enlightening experience for me. Korea was occupied by Japan in the early 20th century and was liberated when WWII ended. Because of Koreans’ resentment toward Japan after the occupation, everything Japanese was banned. However, because of their proximity and relationship through occupation, Korea and Japan greatly influenced each other. I think, for this reason, Japan felt extremely foreign, but oddly very familiar to me at the same time.

During my residency, I worked using a traditional Japanese woodblock technique for the first time. I also had the opportunity to closely examine traditional Asian prints and paintings. These were images that I had been surrounded by since childhood, but my relationship with these works began to change. These works were very attractive to me because they were images of worlds that were both unknown and familiar. I began to teach myself how to paint in the traditional way using an old Chinese painting manual called “The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting”. My interest is not in becoming a traditional Asian painter or printmaker, but in how this method of depiction offers me the possibility for creating the new world that I continually search for in my work. As a contemporary Asian artist living in America, I am re-exposing myself to my own traditional culture. Using this as a tool, I am shaping a new visual world that is influenced by my current surroundings. While I am teaching myself to paint using this manual, I have begun to include
references to my every day experience in the Mid-western landscape in which I live.

My work comes from my own very specific and unique experience, but I also believe in the universality of the personal experience. We live in a world where globalization breaks down boundaries and opens up cross-cultural dialogue and inter-racial existence. Information travels instantaneously and we move around the globe freely. We are creating a new culture that is a diverse hybridization of the old. It is a world that contains the distinct and the common, the universal and the regional. This is where I wish my work to be. Everywhere and here.