

# Soon Yul's Journey To Infinity: The Art Of Soon Yul Kang

by Paul O'Kane July 2010

For London's Artspace gallery, South Korean artist Soon Yul Kang exhibits a display of tapestries along with some paintings and collages. The works date from the mid-1990s to the present. The Artspace gallery has two rectangular floors, upstairs and downstairs, and on each of these Soon Yul and her curator have lined the walls with a procession of images. Upstairs the audience is greeted with pale, bright works, appropriate to the summer sun peering in from Maddox Street W1, while downstairs, where only artificial light is available, some of Soon Yul's works are a little older, deeper and darker.

The new works on the ground floor are mostly tapestries. Soon Yul utilises this traditional craft while adapting it to current purposes, keeping its value and relevance alive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The word 'tapestry' may conjure for some, a sense of grand scale, a medieval castle wall, or *Bayeux*, but Soon Yul's works are closer to the scale of modern paintings, most of them less than a meter square. Within this modest space the artist skilfully wields her craft to produce pale eye-scapes of subtly shifting colours, intricately woven to approximate the nuances of paint mixed in flecks and dabs. Using soft gradations of hue and tone Soon Yul patiently builds up a surface that invites more than it asserts, leaving the audience with an opportunity to contemplate, even meditate in response. And if the audience is led into a meditative state, this would only echo or reflect the mind into which the artist herself is drawn by her repetitious, thoughtful and gentle art.

Like a Romantic landscape (perhaps the wide skies and shorelines of Caspar David Friedrich) an absence of figures and man-made forms here offers only a horizon or field of colour into which we can gaze. This might well turn our mind to thoughts of the infinite or possibly divine; thoughts of scales and forces over which we can have no control. Into these minimal panoramas -which sometimes invoke a strip of grassland or beach- the artist occasionally inserts the line of a large circle which reveals itself only by a slight difference in tone or texture, so we might, from a certain distance or angle, not even notice its presence. The line of the circle, like the line of the horizon, also eludes any desire the viewer might have to recognise, to 'grasp', to point-out, claim and evaluate. Like the horizon, the circle invokes another infinity, and by asking us to contemplate both horizon and circle Soon Yul seems to ask us to meditate on the mind-boggling equation 'infinity multiplied by infinity', leaving us with a kind of vertigo. If so then surely this is the aim of art, to communicate possibilities beyond, behind and within the practical surface of our everyday reality as other worlds emerge mysteriously from the artist's manipulation of materials which, in themselves are not extraordinary.

Perhaps it is appropriate that as you leave behind the sun-lit ground-floor space and descend into the basement you are confronted by a huge ornate mirror dominating the wall of the Artspace staircase, because the upstairs and downstairs galleries give a sense of following the artist's journey to increasing familiarity with her medium's potential, interwoven with her own life and developing identity. The slightly dimmer, artificially-lit space below harbours some history. Here we find one or two larger, bulkier tapestries,

hung less like paintings and more like skins or rugs, and robust enough to shun the glass and frames that protect most of the works here. They remind us briefly of tapestry's traditional function in offering protection or comfort as well as being decorative. There are also small collages into which we now peer rather than gaze, finding evidence there of experiments involving destruction and re-composition, where the artist has manipulated torn sandpaper and paint to arrive at a textured form. The sublime, soft and elusive circle we encountered upstairs is evident again here but sometimes asserts itself more forcefully and often has a dark centre, like an un-erasable stain that the artist somehow managed to remove in her later works.

If pressed, Soon Yul will confess that some of the works downstairs are indeed more figurative and autobiographical, more subjective, and motivated by a slightly more traumatic dialogue between conscious and subconscious mind. She also tells us that the dark heart within the circles downstairs could invoke a particularly Korean cultural memory as they recall the intuitive traditional medicine of a Korean mothers' hands, softly rubbing away pains in children's bellies while chanting reassuring words.

Downstairs we do encounter darker tones, cavernous forms and evocations of disruptive forces, all of which nevertheless promotes the graceful thought that the artist is here revealing her own hopeful journey, as a struggling stage of life and practice visibly matures into the more clarified and objective imagery we see upstairs.

At Artspace 2010, Soon Yul Kang's private discoveries are shared, and we can see some catharsis set aside, giving way to a more clarified channelling of gifts; a greater

symbiosis between artist and medium, and a language that now speaks to all as clearly as the light passing through, on and beyond the gallery's windows.

**END**