

CREATIVITY

Artful objects



Artist Young June Lew is dwarfed by her 88" x 132" mixed-media-on-canvas work, "Journey 10-4," on display in a solo show at the Andrew Bae Gallery. "Comb No. 3" (above, right) draws on an item that figures into key moments in a girl's life.

Photos for the Tribune by Jill Sagers-Wijangco

Korean-born artist finds inspiration in coffee, clothing and combs

By Etelka Lehoczký
Special to the Tribune

If you can't imagine starting your day without first stopping at Starbucks, Young June Lew feels your pain.

The Korean-born artist got hooked on coffee when her children were young. She'd put them to bed and stay up most of the night to paint, drinking cup after cup, then quaff more to get through the next day's errands and chores. When stomach trouble forced her to limit her caffeine intake, she figured out another way to use her favorite beverage in her work.

"I had to cut down, but I kept the coffee in my studio just to savor its aroma. One day the idea of using the coffee as a medium struck me," she says. "The result was almost mythical. I liked the effect of the deep, permeating coffee stains on rice paper."

Some artists can be defined by their choice of drug—van Gogh had absinthe; Pollock, booze. Coffee is uniquely suited to Lew, and not just be-

cause of its ability to help a stretched-thin woman get through the day.

Coffee has a unique "cultural adaptability," Malcolm Gladwell noted in a recent *New Yorker* essay. "At one moment ... it is the drug of choice of cafe intellectuals and artists; in another, of housewives; in another, of Zen monks."

Aesthete, mother, spiritual striver, Lew fills all these roles, and her work is intimately concerned with the tensions between them. Her work was just selected for inclusion in the prestigious Kwang Ju Biennale, a prestigious Korean art show, and here in Chicago, she currently has a solo show mounted at Andrew Bae Gallery. Andrew Bae also has published a book about Lew, which is available at the gallery.

A Western awareness

Born in Seoul in 1947, Lew remembers her first artistic experience being inextricably linked with an awareness of Western culture. A sculptor who visited her 8th grade class and encouraged her to draw gave her a copy of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." Today her influences span the globe. They include Albert Camus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Confucius and the Bible.

In 1973, Lew moved to California and settled in San Francisco.

"Korea was like a greenhouse: protective but

confining," she says. "As far as I was concerned, it was a harmful climate for a developing artist. Gaining exposure to a different environment and culture was one way of discovering myself. If I had stayed in Korea, I am sure I would have been a very different artist by now."

It's perhaps inevitable that a bright, passionate girl growing up in postwar Korea would look to the West for inspiration. Korea is steeped in Confucianism, a philosophy emphasizing dutifulness and restraint, and none are more restricted than women.

"Confucianism is not intended that way, but it's been twisted to create an oppressive culture for women," Bae says. "Women have had to struggle with this for many hundreds of years. [It's] interesting that, as time went by, women [began to] set their own rules: 'This is how woman is supposed to live.' The mother taught the daughter, and the mother-in-law forced the daughter-in-law. If women went outside the boundaries, they became targets."

The Korean War made women's lot still more difficult. "It was a very harsh culture, especially for women," Bae says. "Including my own mother. We lost my father in the war, and she was left at 21 years old with two children. Her entire goal, her entire life was survival. She couldn't afford not to be strong."

Lew's devotion to her own mother, who died



in 1994, inspired the artist's clothing-painting series. The first, 1995's "A Song for Mother," depicts an array of gray gowns or robes standing freely, as if inhabited by ghosts.

Meaning in everyday items

"Clothing represents the journey of life to me," Lew says. "This was the kind of experience I had [sorting] my mother's clothes after her funeral. The [meaning of the] everyday clothes we wear throughout our life gave me a sudden, jolting realization one day. Such mundane cloth contains so much of life and history in it."

More recently Lew has used combs to express similar themes. For her, a comb is a powerful icon of a girl's coming of age, the trigger for her first experience of adult self-esteem.

"Combs gave me the experience of self-love," she says. "I think a woman's first discovery of her beauty is when she sits before a mirror and combs her hair for the first time."

It was from her mother that Lew acquired the deep Christian faith that has been a major force in her work. Although her religious experience is complex and unconventional, it has allowed her to make art that speaks to a broad audience.

Christianity has provided her with a wealth of symbols: eggs, monks' robes, bunches of grapes and candles. These objects have a deep impact on people—though they often convey different meanings than she intended. Her painting "Time," depicting candles, was purchased by a church that described it as an illustration of the famous Bible verse Matthew 5:14: "You are the light of the world." For Lew, the candle evokes a grimmer truth. "It produces light by consuming itself, [making] the utmost sacrifice to give light to others."

Putting the guilt to rest

Lew knows a lot about sacrifice, and not just because of her Korean heritage. One of her major artistic crises came during her coffee-drinking days, when she realized how much time her children took from her work.

"Being a mother was a daunting responsibility. I suffered from guilt when I felt the desire to be alone to continue my work," says Lew, who is married to a Korean-American businessman.

Lew's mother stepped in, watching the children while Lew took a monthlong trip to Europe. That trip, much of which Lew spent viewing Renaissance masterpieces, helped her resolve her guilt over pursuing her art. Still, she never lost her deep awareness of just how difficult it is for a woman to find the time to create—in any culture.

"There are stereotypes toward female artists both in Korea and America. In a universal sense, we need to recognize woman as a creator," she says. "Essentially I paint for myself. I want to express from [a place] inside of me."

Given Lew's hard-won sense of self-importance, it's no wonder many of her paintings are so large. She simply paints the biggest canvases she can fit in her studio. But even these, as she told one critic, aren't completely sufficient. "My mind," she says, "is infinite."

Young June Lew's work will be on display at Andrew Bae Gallery, 300 W. Superior St., until April 20. For more information, call 312-335-8601.