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ArtSeen

Kyoung eun Kang: 1402 Seok-Dong

By [Jonathan Goodman](#)



Kyoung eun Kang is a Korean-born artist who took her BFA (2003) and MFA (2005) at Hong-Ik University in Seoul before coming to New York, where she received her second MFA from Parsons in 2009. That same year she participated in the Skowhegan program. Since then she has been teaching art to children and working on her own art, which culminated in her current show, *1402 Seok-Dong*. This exhibition, for which she built a new floor and half wall, consisted of objects, photos, and texts that relate to her family, which remains in Korea. Kang is in close contact with family members, who helped with several works in the show. By concentrating on her immediate relations, Kang supports the commonplace that Asian families are close-knit. At the same time, she is participating in Western art practice, which has been asserting the primacy of the personal—for women especially—for some time. Contemporary art has been obsessed with conflating the personal with the political, likely in the hope that the two might be merged in a way that would convey the importance of private life. Unfortunately, our obsession with the personal has been repeated to the point of absurdity, with the result that the artwork loses its ability to convincingly convey actual insight.



Installation shot. Courtesy of the Artist.

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Kang is after something different; she is eager to convey the texture of her home life. As a result, the show includes a chamber pot with overlapping sounds of various family members urinating into it; text pieces consisting of random phrases taken from casual conversations; a photograph of a care package sent by Kang’s mother; and two pictures of the same bonsai tree, kept in the family for decades, held by the mother and father. By themselves, these images might seem eccentric or arbitrary, but in tandem they add up to a portrait of family life. The intuitive intelligence working behind the individual works and their relations to each other is clear, but it is possible to query exhibition’s overall design. Sometimes artists working with identity issues feel that they must first explain and then transmit information that is specific to their culture. The problem is that the art often feels like an anthropology exhibit rather than an artwork.



Kyoung eun Kang, *A skin ball (exfoliated skin collected from my mother and me while scrubbing our backs)*, 2012, Archival inkjet print, 10x10 inches. Courtesy the Artist.

At the same time, though, global art is now something of a parenthesis, although the psychological pressures behind it remain strong. Still, Kang has a dilemma in that even if we don’t recognize the objects she is presenting, we may generally understand the emotional tenor of what we see. Actually, Kang’s decision to relay intimacies having to do with herself and her parents is bold enough, and the art original enough, that the show succeeds. One framed work has the following four sentences, listed vertically: “Moon River is an international song.” “Yes it is.” “I am going out.” “Record well.” The staleness of the assertions underscores every family’s informal conversation; thus, the piece suggests that Kang’s immediate relatives—the sentences were taken from talks in Korea—are not different from members of any other family. Another photo records the contents of a care package, which includes a bag of sardines, a package of soap powder for lingerie, and several vials and a bottle that can’t be identified. Here the materials are linked to the show of affection and close communication; now in her late thirties, Kang continues to be a needy daughter in her mother’s eyes!

Kang does skirt, if not cross over, the boundaries of good taste with *River* (2017), a green chamber pot from which sounds of urination issue forth. This is an intimacy taken to a more or less disconcerting level. *Skin Ball* (2012), a photo of an egg-like mass of exfoliated skin, manages to discomfit just as much. Viewers to the exhibition might have felt that these personal matters, recorded in such a matter-of-fact way, pushed Kang’s revelations of family into a place where good taste no longer mattered. But that is likely the point—the intimacies of any family are inherently private. And revealing them, as happens in this very interesting show, demonstrates a willingness to reveal personal detail, no matter how unsettling. None of the items in the exhibition can be separated from revelations of private life. As a result, it makes no sense to comment on or judge their facture. Kang is here a manager of information, not an artist who works with her hands (except for the linoleum floor she used to cover the floor). In a number of ways, this work comes close to relational art, which posits familiarity as an esthetic value in its own right. More than most working in this manner, Kang completes her task of disclosure, entertaining us along the way.



Kyoung eun Kang, *River (Chamber pot detail)*, 2017, Sound installation, a traditional Korean chamber pot, audio, 3:43min loop, 12x12x10 inches. Courtesy the Artist.

Contributor

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