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Art as a form of cultural expression: the work of Asian-American Artist Yong Soon Min

HUM 103: Connections and Conflicts I

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Yong Soon Min has established herself as a prominent Asian-American artist by reflecting her cultural identity through the work of various engaging art forms such as photography. A first-generation Korean-American immigrant escaping civil war, Min uses her experiences of the underlying pain and suffering caused by war, violence and conflict to show the effect this has on the development of the human condition. Trying to overcome the social barriers and normalities American society pushes onto individuals such as migrants, was a struggle for her and critics view this as a defining mark of her artworks as a whole. The conversation surrounding Min's work states two main points her art delivers to society, that portraying images of violence, war and conflict can in itself be considered the work of an "intellectual terrorist"<sup>1</sup> and additionally, the power Min holds in representing the views of minority groups in America.

The expression of self-identity and cultural experiences form the foundation from which Min creates all her works. Reading the magazine article "Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York"<sup>2</sup> further draws the significant connections between her background as a migrant and medium of artistic delivery at the Art in General exhibition in New York. Jane Nicol, in writing this text views Min's work as "an artful use of language and distancing strategies mixed with measured intimacy."<sup>3</sup> This theme is one often discussed in relation to Asian-American artists, where individuals are often interpreted as unleashing their political and

<sup>1</sup> "Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York: EBSCOhost," accessed November 1, 2019, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=883f6e75-6651-4700-ae1b-f5900f8d8a57%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=505759638&db=ofm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

cultural influences upon a specific audience. Being part of an Asian immigrant minority population, Min has been able to express that creating a self-identity in effect “distancing”<sup>4</sup> herself from the negative stereotypes pushed forward by society, which lead to racial and social tension and fallacies. This “distancing and measured intimacy”<sup>5</sup> is essential for creating an identity can be viewed as the “dynamic process”<sup>6</sup> of “self-exploring and seeking”<sup>7</sup> life.

Similarly, Hwa Young Choi Caruso’s journal “Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity and Gender”<sup>8</sup> states that “psychological and sociological reason”<sup>9</sup> allow for culturally-influenced work to have “deeper meaning”<sup>10</sup> than art created purely for the purpose of sensory pleasure. Caruso poses a question which encourages constructive dialogue on the idea of expressionist modern art: “Given that art can be constructed out of different layers of experiences and influences, to what extent [has the] dimension of cultural identity [influenced] Korean/Korean American artists?”<sup>11</sup> This question suitably aligns with Jane Nicol’s idea of

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York: EBSCOhost,” accessed November 1, 2019, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=883f6e75-6651-4700-ae1b-f5900f8d8a57%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=505759638&db=ofm>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hwa Young Choi Caruso, “Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity, and Gender by Suk Nam Yun and Yong Soon Min,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 3 (2005): 71–87.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

“[distance]”<sup>12</sup> and “measured intimacy”<sup>13</sup> by highlighting the inextricable link between culture and artistic expression. Both writers show art is an expressionistic form, which facilitates modern societal discourse, placing Yong Soon Min as the centerpiece of minority artwork in present-day America.

Furthermore, the concept of Min being an “intellectual terrorist”<sup>14</sup> in the realm of modern American art, through her use of confronting and challenging violent concepts, is heavily discussed in relation to her level of public success. Jane Nicol agrees with this definition upon reviewing Min’s work in 1998 “Min worries, she will be known as a political or ethnic artist, but why? She is an intellectual terrorist.”<sup>15</sup> Politics and violence often connected to human experience, especially in Asia, which is why Min’s cultural reflection of art is a provocation of brutality. Upon consulting Margaret Mitchell’s thesis “Art and terrorism: Transformations of trauma”<sup>16</sup> one can see the underlying factors which relate to the definition of terrorism Nicol is quick to create, yet hesitant to define. Who then is an intellectual terrorist? One who terrorizes

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York: EBSCOhost,” accessed November 1, 2019, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=883f6e75-6651-4700-ae1b-f5900f8d8a57%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtGjI2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=505759638&db=ofm>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Black Mitchell, “Art and Terrorism: Transformations of Trauma – Introduction to Papers by Billie Pivnick, PhD, Ian Miller, PhD, and Donna Bassin, PhD,” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 26, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 233–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2017.1342868>.

another in what ways? Someone who manipulates the cogitation of others? Mitchell explains that “artistic representation of the human experience....often [overwhelms] our capacities to organize and verbally encode experience.”<sup>17</sup> In a sense such artwork, as Min’s 1992 work ‘Defining Moments’ (pictured below) unleash our animalistic instincts of “human trauma”<sup>18</sup> when we are faced with the realization of Mitchell’s concept of “omnipresent terrorism.”<sup>19</sup> Publications will however continually debate this idea, especially as our definitions of terrorism both internationally and domestically fueled by a stigma of stereotypes Min has been influenced by growing up in a divided United States.

Additionally, further adding to the intellectual discussion of Min’s work is the struggles faced by Asian immigrants living in America due a variety of cultural differences and social barriers. To see how this influenced received we can again consult Jane Nicol’s “Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York.”<sup>20</sup> One line which emphasizes this point is “In America, Korean immigrants face different definitions of family values, beliefs and ideals.”<sup>21</sup> Listening to Min speak at Davidson College it becomes clearer the true nature of these struggles and how art has been an avenue for Min to flood her ideas through to society. Margaret Mitchell

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York: EBSCOhost,” accessed November 1, 2019, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=883f6e75-6651-4700-ae1b-f5900f8d8a57%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=505759638&db=ofm>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

along with other intellectuals, however would argue that Min's work is too heavily conceptualized on a political and cultural level as ethnically influenced art as "we [as an audience] need to face the traumas of our patients."<sup>22</sup> In Min's work "DMZ Xing" (pictured below) this idea shines through as the use of visual medium overshadows the insignificant writing in the background. Understanding alternate perspectives and life experiences, especially those reflected in art, is an essential part of humanistic recognition that sometimes "words fail"<sup>23</sup> to uncover truly.

The discussion surrounding the visual art of Yong Soon Min, is one which tries to explore the link between human experience and expression through the artistic form. This inextricable connection between art and culture is most clear through Margaret Mitchell's concept of "cultural trauma"<sup>24</sup> and Jane Nicol's "intellectual terrorism."<sup>25</sup> Despite my findings, I was surprised to find out very little academic conversation was put into discussing the visual techniques specifically used to draw attention to certain components of her work such as vectors and close-up imagery, in "Defining Moments". Especially after hearing Yong Soon Min herself speak at Davidson College, that much of her artistic intention was placed on visual and audio

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Black Mitchell, "Art and Terrorism: Transformations of Trauma – Introduction to Papers by Billie Pivnick, PhD, Ian Miller, PhD, and Donna Bassin, PhD," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 26, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 233–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2017.1342868>.

<sup>25</sup> "Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York: EBSCOhost," accessed November 1, 2019, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=883f6e75-6651-4700-ae1b-f5900f8d8a57%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=505759638&db=ofm>.

techniques drawing an audience's interest through the sensory experience of both sight and sound. Although Min's creative intent is not as widely discussed as one may expect, overall Min's work is characterized in a way I expected, as being representative of the struggle's minorities face in Western culture, the generational trauma created by war and unrest and the affect this has on the human condition as a whole.

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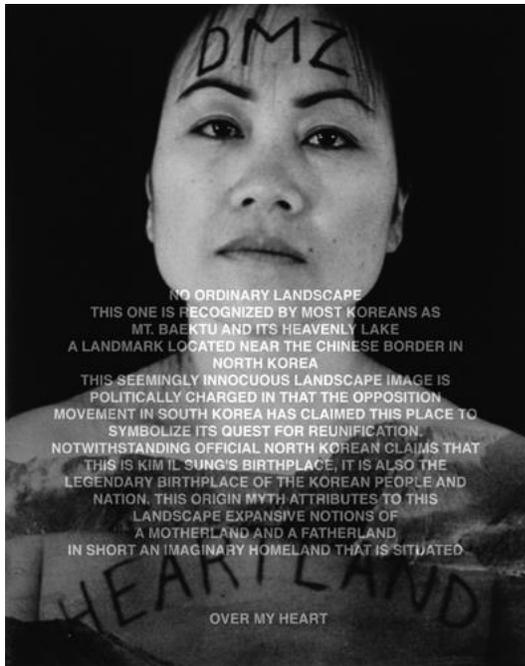
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An artwork from Yong Soon Min's "Defining Moments" collection.