

UNRAVELING PLACE: OH HAJI'S TEXTILE WORK NAUTICAL MAP

Soo-Min Shim

The latest census in Australia in 2016 recorded 98,776 South Korea-born people in Australia. These numbers would be even greater if accounting for those individuals like myself who were born in Australia or elsewhere but have Korean ancestry. Indeed, seven million Koreans currently live outside the Korean peninsula, making them the fifth largest overseas population. As more Korean artists settle and practice in Australia today there is a growing consciousness around the term 'Korean-Australian'.

My research began with this question of defining Korean-Australian art and finding a framework within which to situate Korean-Australian artists, only to realise the fraught and problematic implications of such a term. However, it is precisely in their problematisation of the term that I have found the strength and significance of artists who engage with the categories of Korea and Australia. One such artist is Oh Haji, a third generation Zainichi Korean artist born and raised in Japan, now practicing in Australia using traditional textile techniques from Korea, Japan, Guatemala and Indonesia. Her transnational approach to her textile work demonstrates an existence and practice beyond the binary of Asia/Australia. Her movements across the Pacific Ocean have engendered a perspective that encompasses multiple sites and locations, expanding the conventionally limited gamut associated with such a term as 'Korean-Australian'.

In 2004 Oh Haji made her first trip to Jeju Island off the southwestern tip of the Korean peninsula. Her grandmother was forcibly transplanted to Osaka, Japan from Jeju Island during the Japanese colonial era (1910-1945). Whilst 'Zainichi Koreans' refers broadly to the mass migration of Koreans to Japan, the term usually refers specifically to Koreans who moved to Japan during or after Japanese colonisation and their descendants (Jang 2021). Based on these personal experiences and histories, Oh's practice investigates the ongoing cultural implications of living in the imperial metropole as a post-colonial subject, navigating a sense of liminality between Japan and Korea.

In 2004 Oh 'imagined [Jeju Island] without seeing a map' and this trip would later inspire her 2017 installation *Nautical Map*, the first of her three-part series *Grand-mother Island*

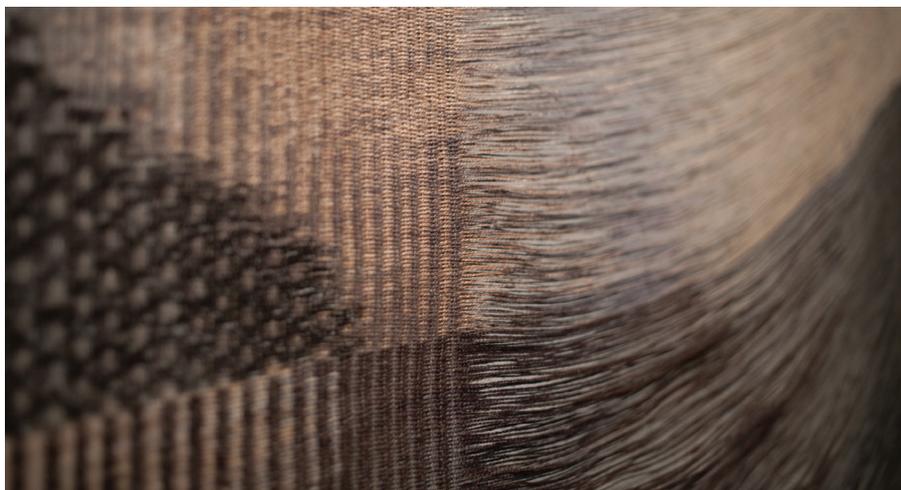
NAUTICAL MAP (2017) PART OF THE GRANDMOTHER ISLAND PROJECT SERIES, OH HAJI, LINEN, LEAD HOOK, WOVEN CLOTH. INSTALLATION SHOT AT MATSUO MEGUMI + VOICE GALLERY PFS/W (KYOTO, JAPAN). PHOTO: KAZUMA MAKINO



Project (Oh 2017:163). The work was part of the *Shadow Worlds* exhibition at the University of Wollongong in 2017 and the Matsuo Megumi+Voice Gallery pfs/w in Kyoto.

In *Nautical Map* (2017) three textiles are suspended in space and woven into each is an image of an island. Given the series title *Grand-mother Island Project* a viewer might infer that these are representations of Jeju Island. In a limited sense Oh's photographic image does concretely reference the specific journey of Koreans from Jeju Island to Osaka. Osaka was a major city for Koreans as there was a direct ferry service between the two cities that operated from as early as 1928 (Ryang 2014:526). Hence, by 1964 out of the 86,500 Zainichi Koreans estimated to be in Japan nation-wide, 61,000 were Jeju Island Zainichi Koreans (Ryang 2014:526).

The San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952 saw the end of Japanese colonisation and the guarantee of Korea's independence from Japan. However the treaty rendered the nearly 2.4 million Koreans living in Japan at the time of Japan's surrender stateless as they were denied Japanese citizenship (Morita 1996). Korea had been partitioned at the end of World War II with the North under Soviet administration and the South under US military administration. As a divided country, Japan did not recognise Korea as a country in the San Francisco Treaty leaving Koreans unable to identify as Korean in Japan. Recognised as neither Japanese nor Korean, for 40 years Zainichi Koreans were denied social rights, required to be fingerprinted and to carry registration documentation at all times in the form of a certificate. It was not until 1992, once Japan



NAUTICAL MAP (2017) PART OF THE GRANDMOTHER ISLAND PROJECT SERIES (DETAIL), OH HAJI, LINEN, LEAD HOOK, WOVEN CLOTH. INSTALLATION SHOT AT MATSUO MEGUMI + VOICE GALLERY PFS/W (KYOTO, JAPAN). PHOTO: KAZUMA MAKINO



ratified the 1982 UN Refugee Convention, that Korean permanent residents in Japan were unified under the category of 'special permanent resident'.

Oh's installation may be mimetic of the precarious status of Zainichi residents: unmoored, stateless, undocumented and subject to the push and pull of government policy. There are moments of tension and fragility within the installation of *Nautical Map* - a fishhook precariously suspends the textiles in space, held by a single thread pulled taut by the weight. Oh's textiles are not only at the risk of falling but also being ripped irreparably. In these details it may be said that Oh considers histories of partition, division and precarity in a specific time of Cold War politics in the Pacific region. In contradistinction to the dogma of the nation-state often prescribed by fixed borders, these details in *Nautical Map* are informed by a decolonial logic that undoes normative frameworks of mainstream belonging and citizenship in favour of a transient and transformative state of being.

In one sense the island imagery suggests the 839 kilometre distance between Jeju and Osaka. However, in another sense the nautical imagery also references the oceanic distance southwards to the island of Australia.

Hanging in space, folds of fabric obscure the image which is already blurred by Oh's particular use of the traditional Japanese technique hogushi-gasuri. Broadly speaking this method creates a patterned fabric by application of an image onto warp threads which are then woven into cloth. Using her version of this technique Oh first weaves a length of white fabric onto which she prints the photographic image. She then replaces the fabric back onto the loom after which the horizontal weft thread is removed before the warp is rewoven with a second weft. The resulting fabric misconfigures the original image and the pattern is misaligned. An effect of bleeding colours is achieved creating a palimpsest where boundaries and borders are visually porous. Hence, there is an ambiguity about whether viewers are shown Jeju Island from different perspectives or if Oh depicts different islands altogether. In fact, Oh has woven two different islands, Jeju in Korea and Mount Keira in the Illawarra region of Wollongong where she is currently based.

Whilst for many Mount Keira is simply a popular tourist destination, for First Nations communities, the Wadi Wadi people of the Dharawal nation, it is a site of cultural significance. As told by Wadi Wadi women, Mount Keira (or Geera in Dharawal), is a women's mountain. Based on Indigenous perspectives Mount Keira is named after

Geera, a sister who waited for the return of her family and in so doing turned to stone (Elder Aunty Lorraine Brown 2020). In depicting both islands as 'grand-mother islands' Oh recognises the colonial histories in both places and reinstates their origin stories, moving towards a politics of place.

Oh brings Jeju Island into a conversation with Mount Keira and the erased women's oral histories of both sites, embodied by her use of the hogushi-gasuri technique. The term hogushi derives from the verb meaning to unravel, hogusu, and the process involves very sparsely weaving long warp threads. Oh writes:

The act of unravelling found in the process of hogushi-gasuri loosens up fixed weave and generates a space between threads. The fabric is flat but once unraveled, a three-dimensional space inflated with air emerges. Exploring this space suggests what exists, existed and can exist between threads. In other words untwining fabric exposes what was woven in and invisible... thus I came to think that what exists inside the woven structure but is invisible can give expression to silent memory that has never been verbally represented (Oh 2019:20).

Looking at Korea and Australia through a decolonial lens, it is possible to argue that

NAUTICAL MAP (2017) PART OF THE GRANDMOTHER ISLAND PROJECT SERIES, OH HAJI, LINEN, LEAD HOOK, WOVEN CLOTH. INSTALLATION SHOT AT OYAMA CITY KURUMAYA MUSEUM OF ART (TOCHIGI, JAPAN). PHOTO: SHINYA KOGURE



the island for Oh is a visual metaphor. Art historian Margo Machida has written that the works of Asian-American artists using the metaphor of islands ‘attest that islands exist as geographic sites and human environments with distinctive traits and particular histories, even as they equally function as imaginative constructs’ (Machida 2017:12). Machida argues that these artworks proceed ‘along transnational, transoceanic, regional and island-to-island axes’ (Machida 2017:13). This in turn references Godfrey Baldacchino’s scholarship on the optics of the island as a ‘floating signifier’ (Baldacchino 2005:247) - represented by Oh’s decision to hang her textiles so that they hover.

The textiles in *Nautical Map* are not attached to any stable fixture but to taut, hanging strings. The suspension of her works may represent the wandering and drifting associated with transnational movement. The threads that Oh casts across space may represent migratory routes, in particular tracing movements across the Pacific Ocean that mirror her own journey southwards to Australia eight years ago from Osaka.

Oh uses a traditional Guatemalan weaving technique first learnt during her PhD at the Kyoto City University of Arts whereby the threads she weaves are actually attached to her own body rather than an external wooden loom. Whilst Oh was initially drawn to this technique for the practical reason that she could not transport her large loom from Japan to Australia, conceptually it also operates as a metaphor for mobility. Whilst in traditional weaving techniques the threads are cut, in the Guatemalan weaving technique no threads are cut so a circular structure is created, representing a continuous connection in time and space.

Here the history of the hogushi-gasuri technique is also relevant. Kasuri is the Japanese method for ikat, a Malay/Indonesian word for the dyeing technique which was historically used in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Central Asia (Tomita 1982). In Japan, kasuri production began in the Ryukyu Kingdom Era (1429-1879) through trading in the Ryukyu Kingdom (present day Okinawa) (Tomita 1982). Hence, the techniques Oh uses are not fixed to any set location but like her own experiences are mobile and nomadic.

By creating a constellation of connections in her installations Oh moves beyond dualities such as ‘East-West’. Now based in Australia, Oh’s interest in looking at the Pacific as an amalgamation of multiple movements disrupts the fixed rigidity of the Asia/Australia or Korea/Australia binary, characterising the Pacific region as a zone of ongoing exchange, interchange and transit. In so doing Oh triangulates Japan, Australia and Korea, demonstrating a profound understanding of nations as ‘imagined communities’ whilst simultaneously creating new ‘imagined communities’ by forging transnational solidarity through gender politics with women across the Pacific (Anderson (1983) 2006). Oh uses textiles, a traditionally gendered form, as a tactic against masculinist histories. Oh herself recognises handcraft ‘as a way of linking people who are involved in women’s work’ (Oh 2019:53).

Oh’s *Nautical Map* investigates local histories of migration surrounding Jeju Island but also of Wollongong where she is now based. She looks laterally at countries that are bound in legacies of colonial projects thereby exposing the existence of multiple histories in a single location. Being a Korean artist in Australia today may engender an understanding of the

ability to exist in a multiplicity of spaces and locations, unraveling the meaning of Korea, Australia and place altogether.

Soo-Min Shim is an arts writer living and working on stolen Nggunawal and Ngambri land. She received her Bachelor of Art History and Theory (First Class Honours) from the University of Sydney and is currently a PhD Candidate in Art History and Theory at the Australian National University.

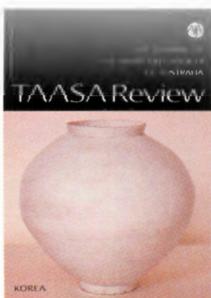
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