

art

Chang & Jang

Two artists, separated by continent and generation, make connections.

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU pair an older, respected South Korean sculptor who has been pushing the boundaries of minimalist art for 30 years, with a younger, Los Angeles-based Korean American artist known to occasionally employ a blow torch? A stimulating conversation on craft and art philosophy that revealed some surprising connections between artists Sik W. Chang, 65, and David B. Jang, 35, despite three decades' and an ocean's worth of separation.

Though the artists had never met prior to a roundtable discussion on July 13 at the Lois Lambert Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif.—where both have separate exhibitions currently showing—they displayed an intuitive understanding of each other's work. Even the seemingly basic topic of circles could spark an inspired back-and-forth.

Jang likes to use consumer waste as source material, taking bottles and aluminum cans, using power tools to flatten them, and manipulating them into spiraling patterns. His work explores the continuum of the object from its original to a "developed" state. Chang has long had an interest in the concept of entropy. He first got noticed for his "Footstep" series, for which he cast footprints in aluminum for example and placed them in surprising contexts. More recently, he has been influenced by a sabbatical in Africa, and he creates tableaux of tiny figures around bronze casts of everyday objects from the continent, including bowls, scoops and ladles. An example: a tiny bronze figure in a boat is suspended in a silicon-filled glass to create a three-dimensional collage.

When their commonalities were pointed out by moderator Jae Yang, a local art consultant, Chang joked that he and his fellow artist do share the same Korean surname, just Romanized differently. "Like SeRi Pak and Chan Ho Park," he ribbed.

Following the more than hourlong conversation between artists, one sensed these two had not seen the last of each other. Chang jotted down his phone number in a book of his artwork that he gifted to Jang after the event. —Julie Ha

Here are highlights from the artists' chat. (Chang's comments were translated from Korean.)

Jae Yang: When you choose materials for art making, what is that process like? Is it a visceral process, in which you are just kind of drawn to certain materials, or is it a very calculated process?

David Jang: I don't pin down anything from the beginning, but I have a sense of direction. I like to construct certain materials and discover what the strength of the material is. From there

I'll slowly, gradually narrow it down. At the end, my work may look like it's very calculated, but during the process, it's very natural. I try my best to stay flexible to see more possibilities. I utilize both the conscious and unconscious mind. As a human being, I don't believe I have all the answers, so happy accidents—that's what I'm looking for.

Sik Chang: First of all, I'm not that interested in materials. When I

was in graduate school, I tried using footprints. I played with footprints on paper, in clay, even sand. When I went to the seaside, I would put the footprints in the sand. Water was coming in on all sides, and over time it would empty the footprints. [Artist] Robert Smithson made something like that in Utah. Smithson is interested in the concept of entropy. Concepts like entropy and time, which were very new in the 1970s, are present also in my work. (Chang flips through a book featuring his art from 1971 to 1998 to show Jang examples of his "Footstep" series.) Most sculpture is three-dimensional, but with time, it's possible to add a fourth dimension.

JY: Is there anything you artists want to ask each other about your respective work?

DJ: What I find interesting in Sik Chang's [artwork] is his bronze casting. I used to start with clay and make molds from there, but he's actually beginning with a wood carving first. How did that come about?

SC: In 2000 to 2001, I took a six-month sabbatical to Africa and witnessed so many people doing wood carving. After that, I visited San Diego, California, to study and explore how, when cast, carved wood forms might translate into a bronze medium. I wondered how they might differ from one another aesthetically. In this process, the designated function of everyday objects disappears and the only thing that remains is the form.

JY: So you are both trying to make everyday objects without everyday functionality.

SC: I noticed in his art that David utilizes circular shapes. I think the shape of a circle is the foundation of molding or sculpting. The circle is the foundation of so many different forms. I'm not too sure whether I am right or not about this, though.

DJ: Well, that's true. The circle

culture [etc.]



PHOTO BY CATHERINE LEE

Sik Chang (right) listens as fellow artist David Jang explains his approach to his craft, during a dialogue at the Lois Lambert Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif.

itself is not a presentation of subject matter. There are two basic movements on this earth: either circular spinning, or expanding, moving forward. Everything we do has a circular movement involved. Even your arms and legs—when you walk, you make partial circles as you move forward.

JY: That whole circular movement, physical and visual, is so heavily embedded in your work.

DJ: I just want to be clear on this: I don't purposely try to make circles because I love circles, but it just comes out that way.

SC: The circle is a type of form where the beginning point eventually leads back to the same spot. But the spiral shape is a very primitive and

organic one—even a cucumber's stem has this form. With the spiral, you can see movement. This shape signifies the movement very well. I imagine that David may move on from the circle to the spiral form.

DJ: You're absolutely right. These works were done in 2007 to 2008, and back then it was just circles. Now when I do wood panels, it looks more like a sling.

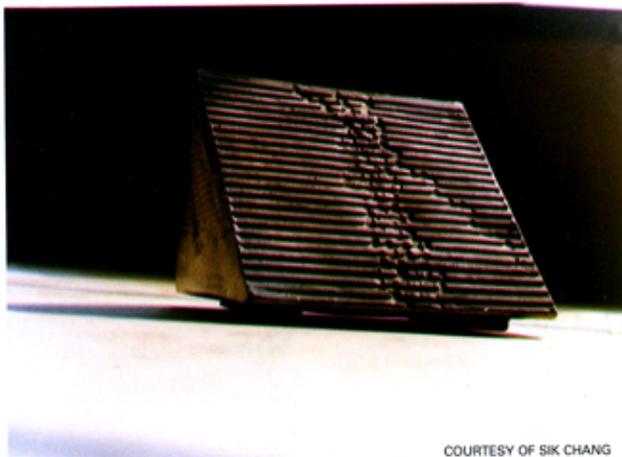
SC: Yes, simple circles ... two circles are tiresome, they make you think of riding a bicycle. The circular form is a very Korean thing to do. And it is very fundamental. The circle is something that even primitive man will draw, and I like that element of David's work. I wonder whether you have been

influenced by the prehistoric circular shapes carved into the rocks in the Ulsan sub-continent.

DJ: That's an interesting concept. I've never thought that my work has a strong Korean flavor, but I have heard a few people talk about the philosophical aspects of the circular movement. I think that, as an artist, I understand things through principles. So that basic aspect of understanding principles—and where I get those principles from—must have that intuition, that subconscious influence. I think that's the best part about looking at art—people have different opinions and perspectives. As much as I'm the creator of the work, I don't think I know the whole truth about my work either.

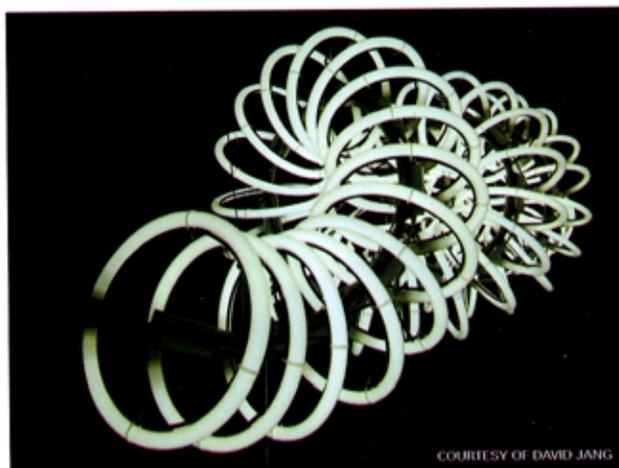
art

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COURTESY OF SIK CHANG

Untitled, aluminum casting, by Sik Chang, 1984



COURTESY OF DAVID JANG

Correlation Circles, circline fluorescent light bulbs and steel, by David Jang, 2010

JY: We've been talking about the technical side, but I'd like to lift it into a philosophical conversation. How do you think art affects people? What is its significance in society?

SC: I want people to see the educational aspect of art—to develop an intelligent knowledge or respect for art. Art is not a fad or a trend. It isn't always something that hits you immediately. It is something to be absorbed and realized, slowly and repeatedly. And that is why an artist must work over a long period of time—to repeat and emphasize whatever it is that he or she is doing. In Korean entertainment, a singer like Bi (Rain) just with one or two songs becomes a huge deal, but I've been an artist for 30 years and am still not that well known!

I have no regrets that I'm not a pop star because there are benefits to being a visual artist. I can do art for a long period of time. There's no burden on me to be a trendsetter.

DJ: He seems to have a similar concept as I do. I'll put it more like a chain reaction. One thing leads to another. We're not going to precisely know the path of influence that art is going to take. Someone creates something. Another person is influenced, and that person utilizes that influence, and it then becomes their own life experience.

It's a constant reaction, just like how the economy works. When things become disturbed, civilians become

emotionally unstable. They don't want to spend money. It's not that there isn't enough money out there, but people get scared. That whole circulation becomes imbalanced, causing retail stores to slow down, manufacturers to lay off people, causing more unstable emotions for people.

That impacts art as well. Art provides people on a conscious, intellectual level a look at their possibilities, to let them see beyond what they would regularly experience.

JY: How do you see Korean art changing recently?

SC: Korean contemporary art is changing so fast these days because there are so many different ways to produce it—with computers and graphics—while 20 to 30 years ago, art changed much more slowly. I'm constantly trying to adapt. I have assistants to help me with the computer and tools like Photoshop.

DJ: The way I look at it, everyone is influencing each other these days, which eventually makes Korean contemporary art look more like American art, but the Korean roots are still there ... But American artists are also influenced by Asian art. Even abstract expression is somewhat influenced by Asian paintings. There is overlap.

SC: With technology now, you can get news from around the world in a matter of hours. The difference between countries and cultures—and I think the

influence of nationality and culture on the arts and artists—isn't going to be as great as it was in the past.

JY: Do you have any wishes for how Korean contemporary art will play a role in the global art world?

SC: It will still take a lot of work for Korean artists to be recognized in the international art community.

DJ: The way I look at it, while art is important, also the person and his or her nationality matters. Being Korean, I'm sure there's a reason for it. I didn't choose to be Korean, but because I am, Korean people will look at me and identify with me. Hopefully my work can influence people and encourage more Korean artists. There will be people who are more inspired and think, "He's a Korean. Oh yeah, I'm a Korean. I can go down the path that he's walked." ☺

Sik Chang's "Transposed Images" and the associated group show "Jang, Kang and Woo," of which David Jang is a part, are on display through Sept. 4 at the Lois Lambert Gallery in Santa Monica, Calif.



PHOTO BY CATHERINE LEE