Floating Around

By

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Abstract

This text explains the journey to find *ansigcheo*, which became the foundation of DaYae Kim's MFA project "Floating Around." *Ansigcheo* is Korean for a place between reality and utopia where one can relax and rest comfortably. Kim recalls the old village she used to live in with her grandmother, studies how childhood memories affect art, and expresses the process of finding her *ansigcheo* through her work.

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In the early morning, I wake up to the sound of my grandma going back and forth between the kitchen and the storage room. I watch her shadow glimmering through the paper door and fall asleep again with the blanket pulled over my head. Then my grandma comes in and takes my blanket away, letting me know that breakfast is ready. I eat my breakfast and the day begins as I go out to play with friends. There is a large oval rice paddy in the middle of the neighborhood. We would get yelled at if we entered the field after the seasonal spring sowing. But we do not really care because it is a perfect playground for us anyways. We play tag running up and down through the maze-like narrow dirt paths. Then we play slap-match games and fly kites.

Around lunch time, we hear the parents and grandparents calling us. Hearing the lunch-break alarm, I go home and have lunch with my grandma, then help her peel the potatoes and corn, steam them, and bring them to the river. I play with my friends who have already gathered along the riverbank and my grandma chats with other adults in the gazebo (palgakjeong) nearby. After playing in the water for a while, we eat snacks in the gazebo and take a nap feeling the cool breezy wind. Once the sun sets, we go back home and eat dinner. My grandma reads me a book and we watch her favorite shows such as drama about the Joseon Dynasty and Korean trot music concert. We then sit on the front porch munching on watermelon while looking at the stars. I curl up and fall asleep as my eyelids get heavier. Then my grandmother takes me to my room so I do not catch a cold overnight. This is how I spent my typical childhood days.

Neither of my parents had much time to take care of me because they worked and had frequent night shifts and business trips. Therefore, my grandmother took care of me when I was a child. My parents had an apartment near my grandmother's house about 15-minute walk away, but the atmosphere there was quite different. I would spend my weekends at the

apartment with my parents, but when I think back on these times, I hardly remember anything about this apartment. My memories go back all the way to when I was about five years old, and all these memories are of my grandmother's home and neighborhoods nearby. Chungju, which was a small countryside town when I was living there, has since been developed into a city. Driving down the unpaved road, I saw the river on one side and the mountain on the other. Inside the village, there were houses built along an oval circuit. Grandmother's house was the third one from the entrance. Her house was a *hanok*, a traditional Korean house where my family had lived for generations. At the front of the house, there was a wooden porch with a sliding door. As I entered the house, there was a long hallway that led to the kitchen, the bedrooms, and the storage area. These memories have been foundational to my work because it is the time I miss the most and it always comes to mind when I think of home.

Right before coming to Canada, I went around telling people that I would just try living there and decide whether I want to stay or not. People around me saw that I traveled a lot and was unable to settle in one place and said that I have wanderlust and I will never be able to settle down in one place. While doing my project, I asked myself why I made certain choices in the past and what I want in the future. It was my parents' decisions to move from Choongju to Seoul and head off to study abroad in America. After that, all the wanderings were consequences of my own choices. I have always searched for somewhere that feels like home though I have yet to find the right place. "안식처(ansigcheo)" is a Korean word for a place where I can rest comfortably and feel calm without any disturbance or interruption. I want to settle down somewhere that truly feels like ansigcheo to me.

When I was moving to Seoul with my parents, everyone was jealous of the big city life I was about to get. Chungju is a countryside town far away from the capital Seoul. People there naturally had a longing for Seoul and the big city life and so did I. However, the life I

was dreaming of turned out to be an illusion. Unfamiliar roads with no river to splash around and play in, unfamiliar neighborhoods, and unfamiliar people. Everything was different. The people I used to run into in my grandmother's town were mostly her neighbors or relatives. Everyone knew each other, so it was common to have short chats on the street. In contrast, people in Seoul were busy just going about their own business. School life in Seoul did not meet my expectations either. Being merely a transfer student who was not originally from Seoul, I was bullied by my classmates. The bullying was not too obvious, yet it involved pinching my elbow, scratching, and kicking the chair I was sitting on. As years passed by, I made new friends and the bullying faded away. However, the feeling of being a stranger persisted. My life as a foreigner in the other parts of the world wasn't so different. Remembering one of my oldest memories in which I lived with my grandmother at her home, my childhood *ansigcheo*, I wanted to create an art piece that reminds me of a time and place that I can no longer go back to and illustrates my wandering self at the same time.

Searching through childhood memories

Many artists and writers use childhood memories as the subject of their creative works. Childhood memories greatly influence one's life, and an artist reflects personal experience through reminiscence. Gyungsook Choi mentions that memories are not the exact replica of reality, and that incoming information is understood and interpreted based on past experience and pre-existing knowledge. Even the same experience you share with someone else can be remembered differently depending on who you are and which part you decide to highlight. Therefore, each individual memory is saved in discrete forms and end up having different meanings (Choi 7~9).

The memory you want to remember eventually gets forgotten and the memory you want to forget constantly comes to mind. Memory doesn't work the way you want it to. Forgotten memories suddenly come to the surface when you face certain situations (Draaisma 1~2). As I searched for *ansigcheo* in the current unstable and unsatisfying situation, I realized that the conditions of my imagined ansigcheo matched my childhood in my grandmother's neighborhood. In Sigmund Freud's view, an adult's subconscious mind desires to return to the forgotten world of his/her childhood. In fact, they regress to that childhood state in their dreams, and pathologies, and predilections. One of the latter is art, which provides a passageway to back to the childhood experience and allows the viewer to embody past memory (Spector 83). Also, E.C. Relph says that place is not only a space, but it is identified by what people feel and experience in it. Once people get used to a place, they feel safe inside and homesick outside (Hubbard, Rob, and Valentine 44~45). My grandmother's home in Chungiu, gives me both a sense of stability and a sense of longing at the same time. Hearing my grandmother's favorite song while walking down the street, watching a kite-flying competition on TV, playing in the water, eating watermelon, watching the pouring rain outside the window in the summer, doing things that used to be part of my daily routine back there, are fragments of my childhood memories that flash through my mind from time to time. My heart aches on some days knowing I can never go back. My childhood memories are full of my grandmother's town and time spent with my family, friends, and neighbors there which no longer exists.

Do Ho Suh's memory of home

Do Ho Suh's world of artwork started from a very personal space – home. Suh spent his childhood in a traditional hanok located in Sungbook-dong, Seoul. In the 70's and 80's

during South Korea's modernization period. His Sungbook hanok was in contrast to the newly built westernized houses around it, which created a very strange village scene. Growing up amid such culture clashes, Suh started his journey of seeking himself through home after moving to America (Leeum). Suh constantly explored the space through Seoul, New York, and London. He said that life is the process of going through a series of spaces, "Home is everywhere and nowhere (Kang)." Constantly wandering between cultures, he projected his wanderer's stance by making the houses, firmly planted on the ground, to float in the air. Houses made of clothes that audiences can see into. "In a physically way it's this light fabric thing that can recreate this ambiance of a space, I didn't want to sit down and cry for home. I wanted to more actively deal with these issues of longing... At some point in life, you have to leave your home. When you go back, it's not the same home any more... I had to make something that's light and transportable (Suh)." Feeling a constant yearning for home, Suh wanted to bring his home with him anywhere he goes. The houses he lived in became his home and that home became his ansigcheo. Unlike Suh's piece, my work is not very portable. My childhood is a stable ansigcheo to me and I would like to recall that sense of stability to the gallery.



Source: Suh, Do Ho. *Home Within Home Within Home Within Home Within Home.* 2013. *Phaidon*, ca.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/november/19/do-suh-ho-creates-life-sized-models-of-his-homes/.

In *Home Within Home Within Home Within Home Within Home*, Suh shows the Korean *hanok* he used to live in floating within the three-story house in Rhode Island where he studied abroad. Through this piece, the artist explains his one identity as an immigrant and other identity as a Korean having experiences with traditional culture (Vázquez-Concepción). His journey away from home to discover his true self all started within his childhood memories in Korea. *Floating around* is also based on longing for my childhood. As Suh exhibited his craving towards his early days he can never relive it again, I expressed my yearning and desire of a resting place by portraying my grandmother's home and *Palgakjung*

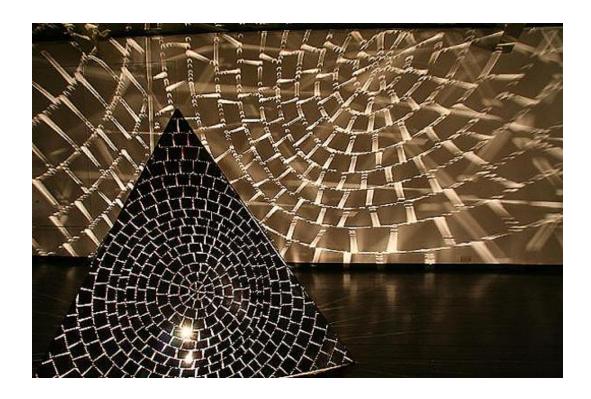
by the river where I spent most of my childhood.

Blue, the color of my childhood memory

English painter David Hockney said "[water] can be anything – it can be any colour, it's movable" (The David Hockney Foundation). Like this quote, water flows and alters its shape, color, and temperature depending on the outer circumstances. These changes are constantly happening and there is no definite outcome. Similarly, I have travelled and lived in different countries, and felt myself changing in order to adjust to the new environment every time. While travelling, I lost the sense of home, a place where I belong and where I want to stay. When I had lived only in Chungju, I never felt that way. I had lived in the same town for almost 10 years and I grew up around the same people. Without having to think whether I belonged there or not, I was part of the community for sure. After spending more than three years in California, I decided that I did not belong there. The different culture, language, and environment in California made me feel adrift. I thought these feelings stemmed from the U.S. not being my home country. However, when I returned to Korea, the country where I was born and raised in for the most of my life, I felt that I did not belong there either. While being immersed in California's environment and culture, my ways of thinking and values shifted, and those changes became a stumbling block from reintegrating home in Korea. Even though I returned to the country I so desperately missed and considered 'home' for my entire life, I still didn't feel like I wanted to be there. I felt as if I was just floating with no ability to establish roots anywhere.

Korean artist Choong-Heum Park, when studying art in France, had similar feelings. Park was exhausted from his life in Paris and the busy lifestyle, so he escaped to a rural French village to rest. During his stay, Park saw the sun shining through the leaves and felt the beauty of nature, ultimately finding peace of mind. Ever since, Park has created works inspired by such scenery, filling up the gallery room with the comforting ambience coming from the beauty of light (Park). Instead of using regular color lighting, I decided to use blue. Blue is often associated with sadness and depression, but at the same time, blue can represent future and hope. In English speaking countries, blue implies sadness and melancholy. But at the same time, the word "blueprint" means future plans, and as shown in the fairytale book named *The Blue Bird*, blue also symbolizes future and hope.

The color theorist Eva Heller expresses blue as the color of dreams. Blue, therefore, is the color of ideology far from realization but also is the color of distant places and longings (Heller 78 ~ 79). In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky stated that blue awakens the feelings of longing within ourselves. Blue is known to give a sense of static, quiet, and rest (Kandinsky 181 ~ 182). This representation is closely related to my childhood memories that always make me feel relaxed and comfortable. I love playing in the water, especially floating along the gentle current while watching the sky or splashing with friends. When I close my eyes, I hear nothing but my breaths and the sound of waves. I loved the coldness and tenderness of small waves touching my sunburnt body. So, whenever I think about that time, I feel at peace as if am drifting with the current.



Park, Choong-Heum. *Untitled*. 24 July 2011. 제주도민일보, m.jejudomin.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=18319.

Ansigcheo

For Choong-Heum Park, finding the place that gives relief and embodying it into a physical art form meant creating his own utopia. However, the word 'utopia' seemed too broad for me, so when I came across the Korean word "안식처(ansigcheo)". It seemed to fit best. Google translates ansigcheo as "home, refuge, or sanctuary." It is a place where one can rest and feel comfortable. For me, ansigcheo is a space between reality and utopia. It definitely exists somewhere but it is not where I am now. Thinking about where I want to be and what time I want to be in, I know the place and the time that I miss the most.

Do Ho Suh said that while looking closely examining the house in which he used to

live in order to find inspiration for his art, he discovered things he had never noticed before. Suh said "[Finding] little marks that you did when you were a kid, and that brings all the memories of your childhood (lalululaTV 3:52~4:01)." The house where I spent time with my grandmother is no longer there, it was demolished due to make way for new developments, so there is no way I can look at physical traces in detail, but there are traces that remain in my memory. For example, the blade-cut I made on the wooden floor that I made while trying to cut a hard radish for my grandmother when she was not looking because I wanted her compliments; The smooth threshold that my grandmother sanded because I would strike my toes all the time; A white wall with the stain that I made by spilling soybean paste while playing hide-and-seek with friends; A window with a puppy sticker my grandmother put up because I wanted to have a puppy so I would not be scared to sleep alone with the window in my room facing the mountain. These are the things that only exist in the house my grandmother and I lived in.

My memory of grandmother's town

I did not know back then, but my grandmother's town was a very traditional one. A *Jangseung*, wooden totem pole with a tough-looking face, stood near the entrance of the neighborhood to scare off evil spirits and bad fortunes. In the middle of the town, there was a place where people prayed for good luck and their family's well-being by stacking stones around a large, sacred tree called "Seonangdang." Moreover, especially during the New Year, all the people in the village gathered on a large flat ground on the small mountain behind the town to play traditional games and share New Year foods. One of the most memorable games was flying kites made out of bamboo sticks and traditional Korean paper, *Hanji*. There was a man in the neighborhood who made good traditional kites, and people would ask him to make

their kites too. When people flew kites, sometimes the kite threads would tangle and tear apart in kite fights or mistakes. The torn kite would fly away into the sky and I wondered where the kite would eventually reach. When night time came and the sun was setting, we wrote our New Year's wishes on a small piece of paper, folded it into a boat, and let it float away on the river.

A few years later, my grandmother's town was developed so her house was torn down and tall apartments were built instead. When I first heard the news, I was not deeply sad about it. I was a high school student at that time preparing for college admissions so I could not afford to care about other things. After moving to Seoul, we only went to see my grandmother once or twice a month. Also, being a typical high school student in Korea, I stayed at school from 7 in the morning to 11 at night on weekdays. I had to go to tutoring centers during the weekends so I, consequently, stopped visiting my grandmother. My life was all about pushing forward and therefore, I did not take time to reminisce about my childhood. My friends in Chungju left one by one and the village became quieter and quieter, losing its liveliness. In the end, only the old people like my grandmother who refused to leave their hometown stayed behind. There were people who did not want the urban redevelopment, but most of them wanted to get rid of their old houses and get compensation. I thought it was a good idea as it means convenient transportation system and fancy apartments. Back then, I did not know what it meant to lose a home that holds generations of memories, the riverside where I played all the time with friends, the octagonal pavilion where we rested, and the mountain where everyone in the village gathered to hang out. I can never again return to the environment that I miss the most.

How my memories work in my art

My grandmother always went to bed early and got up early in the morning, so she always prepared breakfast even before I got up. The sound of my grandmother going back and forth between the hallway and the kitchen while preparing breakfast would briefly wake me up around dawn. I would fall asleep again watching grandmother's shadow glimmering through the wooden-framed paper door. Though I could not see her in a clear shape, I could presume that it was my grandmother behind the door by her silhouette. From time to time, I would feel overwhelmed by the feeling that it was someone impersonating my grandmother, but I would tell myself not to worry and go back to sleep. The shadow I saw through the door gave me feelings of security and relief but also uneasiness. Ironically my *ansigcheo* reminds me of both relief and anxiety at the same time. The word itself puts me at ease but it also gives me a sense of fear that I might not be able to find my *ansigcheo* during my lifetime. The lighting of the sculpture shines through several paper doors. The farther it is from the center of the piece, where it symbolizes *ansigcheo*, the lower the brightness of the light, which leads to gradation towards darker colors.

I express myself floating around by creating a work using wood and paper instead of iron or concrete to give the feeling of weightlessness. Wood and paper are also the main materials that made up the structure of my grandmother's *hanok*. Korean ancestors emphasized harmony with nature so they built houses using natural resources such as soil and trees. It was their only option because there was no architectural technology involving glass, concrete, or iron. The octagonal pavilion, *Palgakjung* that I relaxed on after playing in the river was made of wood, and the kites flown by people were also made of wood and paper. I have applied the design of the octagonal pavilion, as well as the doors and windows that comprise the *hanok* to my work. The front side of the *hanok* is mainly occupied by doors and windows. The interior and exterior of the soil walls are painted

white. Compared to the white walls without any pattern, the windows and doors have various designs. The design of the windows and doors generally consist of vertical and horizontal lines but each house uses a unique pattern (Gang 495~ 497). The windows of my grandmother's house where my family had lived for generations - had a unique pattern as well. It is just a dim memory now and I do not seem able to rebuild the exact design because I do not have a photograph of my grandmother's house for reference. Though I cannot recall the specific pattern, I remember something my grandmother told at me. She told me not to touch or splash liquid onto the paper part of the door or window because the oil in my hand would be absorbed by the paper and would eventually leave a stain. The windows were still very intriguing to me because unlike glass windows, they changed shape over time while keeping all the stains so I always splashed water. Eventually, my grandmother let me have fun as the paper could be replaced with new ones. So my grandmother's home is more than just a concrete structure. It is home with these little memories stacked up that I want to revisit. In my piece, I have splashed water onto the screen representing windows and doors with a general hanok pattern attached, which represents the uniqueness of my grandmother's house.

In a long aisle in the gallery, a kite and an octagon are installed based on the grid system. Entering into my exhibition space, the audience faces two screens. Two kites installed at the entrance, lead the audience in. Since the path past the entrance is not straight and is partly blocked off with other screens, the audience member must find their way through to central source of light as if they are in a maze. By placing screens hung up at different heights, I portray a journey towards *ansigcheo* through jumbled memories.

The octagon installation representing *ansigcheo* in the middle of the space exists for now but there is no way in and it will be torn down after the exhibition. Audiences stay at this

ansigcheo for a while and go on another journey towards a different ansigcheo. It is still a journey that is not firmly rooted in the ground, and it is not an open road all the time, but I can walk more calmly just by having a haven that I remember. As audiences walk past the evenly hung screens, the last two screens lead the audiences to the way out and the journey continues.

Conclusion

"[M]emory brings the past into the present and opens it up to the future (Muntean, Plate, and Smelik i)." Artists use memories in the past as the basis for their artistic activities. Reflecting on the past, an artist rediscovers his/her present identity. And through what subliminally arise from past experiences, the artist can project his/her past experience into art work (Spector 83 ~ 85). Thus, reflecting on the places I have been and my memories deepens my understanding of myself in the present.

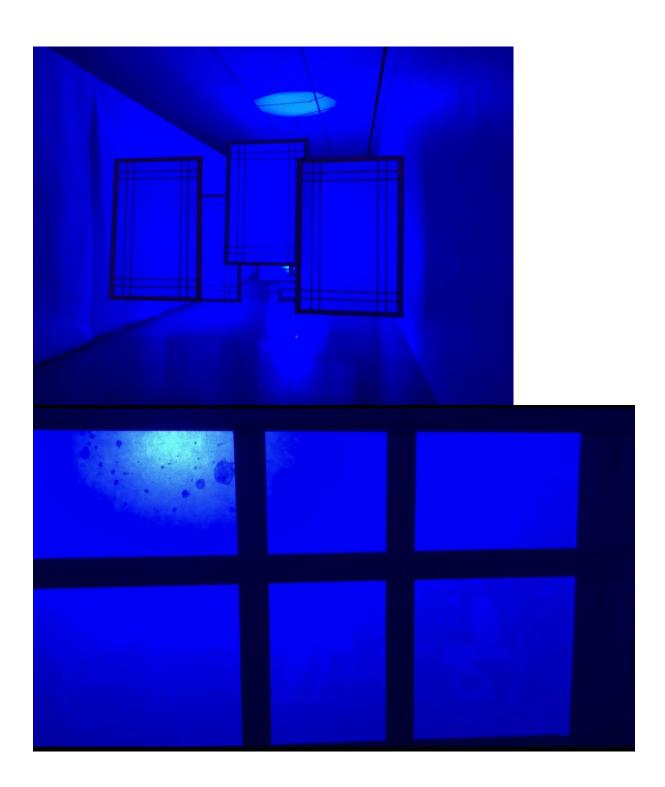
Thinking about the place of *ansigcheo* and my grandmother's house, I realized why I was so distracted and constantly in need of searching for new places - from Korea to California, back to Korea, and then to Canada. I want to return to the happy time when my grandmother, friends, and the other villagers welcomed me and I had no worries and no one said any hateful words. In a few months, perhaps I will be gone searching for a new place to live. There have been many short trips in between, such as Chile, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, etc. These come down as one whole journey to find a place where I could settle down for the rest of my life. As I give shape to my feelings of floating around, and my longing for my grandmother's house where I spent my childhood and remember as my *ansigcheo*, these wanderings may be the first steps to laying down small roots.

Thesis Exhibition



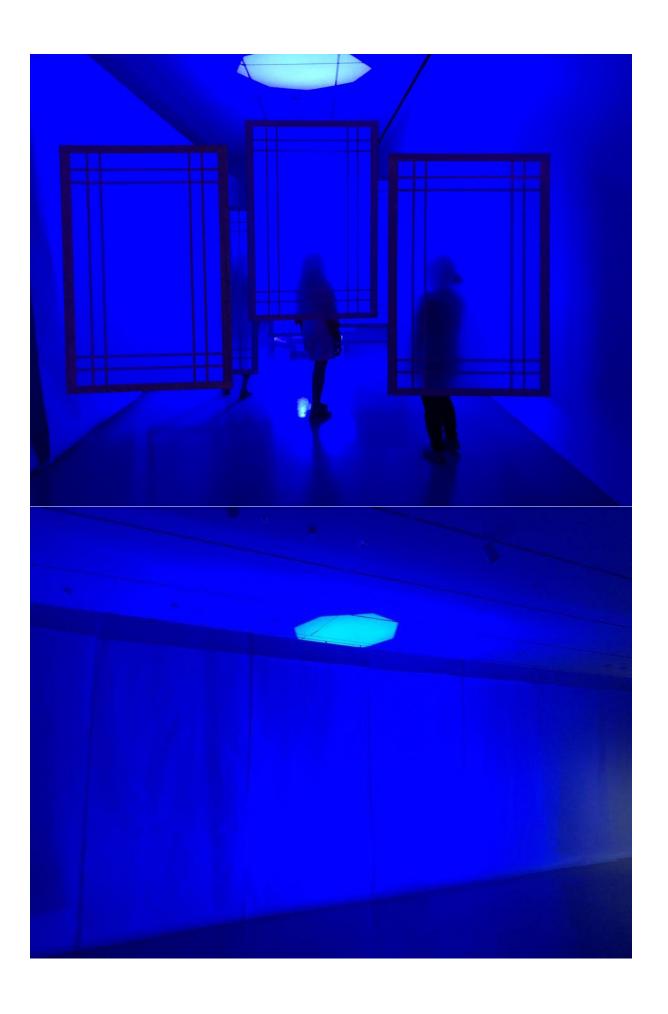


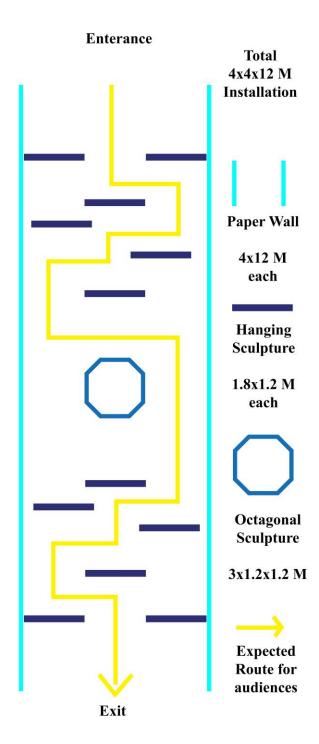












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