

Seven questions: Joo Yeon Woo

The USF arts professor — and talented painter — talks about Gyopo, Beyond Tradition and what she says when people ask her "Where are you from?"



Have you ever heard the word Gyopo? [Joo Yeon Woo](#), an assistant professor at USF, lives it. Think of it as a Korean diaspora, and to hear her describe her experiences, it's incredibly heartbreaking. She's also co-curating *Beyond Tradition: Contemporary Reflections in East Asia*, the latest exhibit at USF Tampa that has Asian-American and Asian artists re-interpreting traditional Asian art with their contemporary talents and skill sets. We asked her to answer seven questions — about being a professor, about being an artist and about being a Gyopo. Here's what she told us (and, PS, check out the exhibit!):

How did you land at USF?

For academics working in universities, job choices are often limited. Both my husband and I have been working as university professors past 10 years. He had taught engineering in Buffalo, NY and I was in Boulder, Colorado. We had to manage two separate lives. This is a challenging problem for many academic couples, known as the two-body problem. After struggling with the two-body problem for several years, we luckily found that USF offers two jobs in our expertise. We are delightful as a family in a nice and warm city in Florida, working in the welcoming and active university.

When did you know you wanted to teach?

After my MFA degree from Penn State, I wanted to be a full-time artist. Soon I realized, however, that it is almost impossible because of my VISA status. As a foreigner I had very limited opportunities. I decided to apply to several teaching positions here and there in the U.S. Luckily, I was able to find a one-year teaching position at the Oklahoma State University. While teaching several courses as a visiting assistant professor at OSU, I found teaching can also be fun and rewarding. Of course, I had many errors and mistakes, but I enjoyed. I observed cultural differences in my own art education and training from Korea and my students' training from US education systems. I based my teaching — and my artwork as well — on this experience to help my students expand their perspective. After spending a challenging but joyful year in Stillwater, OK, I wanted to continue my teaching career and became a tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

What are the expectations of your position — are you expected to create work as well as instruct?

In my position, like many other tenure-track professor positions in research-oriented universities, I am expected to excel in both creative artworks and

teaching. I teach four regular courses each year with graduate and undergraduate student mentoring duties through independent studies. I mostly teach courses in drawing and painting.

Successful professors in fine arts regularly exhibit locally, nationally and internationally. In my case, I exhibit my artworks not only in US cities like Tampa and New York City, but also in many international cities in Korea, Philippines, Palestine, Colombia, Mexico and China.

Your work involves cultural displacement. Do you consider yourself part of the Gyopo, and how does that affect your daily life?

Gyopo means the Korean diaspora or Korean people living outside the Korean Peninsula. I am definitely one of Gyopo. When I visit my *home* country Korea, I no longer feel the strong sense of *home*.

Recently, I participated in an artist-in-residence program in Beijing, China. For exhibitions and other activities, I had to fill out some forms, which ask my origin. At that point, I was confused. Should I say Korea or U.S.? I don't feel comfortable to say Korea as my origin, especially for my professional activities. My professional home has always been in the U.S.

When I make new friends in the U.S., a similar situation happens. People often ask, "Where are you from?" In my first years in the U.S. my answer was Korea. After spending a third of my life in the U.S, my answer is different. Before coming to Tampa, I had lived in Colorado, Oklahoma, New York, and Pennsylvania. I am most comfortable to say Colorado, where I lived the longest. But is it the answer people would have expected? Some might have been curious if I am from Korea, China, or Japan.

Being Gyopo means living in a border.

***Traveler's Cup* and *Drink Your Surroundings* have not only artistic value but also an everyday charm. How long did each set take you, from inception to completion, and how did you accomplish the work — was each image entirely digitally manipulated or, for example, did you place the objects in the cup before shooting the image and manipulate the finer points digitally later?**

I started my *Drink Your Surroundings* series in 2004 and *Traveler's Cup* in 2012. It is a never-ending journey to “complete” these series. Whenever I travel new places and found culturally stimulating scenes or buildings, I start thinking of making an artwork. I first take pictures of objects and print them in a paper. I cut objects from the pictures. In early morning the next day, I return to the same place and put a half-filled water cup in front of the scene with those pictures submerged in the cup. I take pictures of the water cup, paper objects, and real objects together. Early morning is the best time, since not many people are around and the lighting from the sun is perfect for my work. I post-process images digitally in my laptop and send them out for printing later.



***Beyond Tradition: Contemporary Reflections in East Asia*, currently on exhibit through Feb. 1 at USF's Carolyn M. Wilson Gallery, will have modern Asian and Asian-American artists interpreting traditional Asian art with a modern eye, and you've co-curated it. What can people expect to see in the exhibit?**

The current exhibition is by a group of East Asian artists who innovatively use traditional Asian art and craft methods. As new technology and the Western techniques emerge, many artists in East Asia have adopted new forms of media and techniques for their artworks. Traditional art still, however, is active in East Asia. Some artists have experimented and adopted new Western-style methods and media in their work. For some Asian artists who live in the West, Asian traditional methods have become unique ways of incorporating their Eastern identities in their creative works.

In *Beyond Tradition*, people can see a wide range of media from Chinese traditional paper-cutting, to Korean coloring techniques on rice paper, to digital projection mapping. Practitioners from China, Japan, and Korea present their work that interpret traditional Asian art techniques with modern, fresh perspectives.



On Feb. 1, Enrico Oyama, who lives in Tokyo, will offer a live painting performance in the gallery. What will that be like?

Enrico Oyama was born in Tokyo from an Italian father and a Japanese mother. While he grew up in Tokyo, he visited Italy often and had lived in Italy for a year. He moved to New York in 2012. Oyama's unique style was influenced by the visual language of Aerosol Writing from Italy that he

encountered in around 2000.

Watch a video clip of Oyama's previous live painting is available at the link [here](#).

Enrico Oyama coined the term *FFIGURATI*, a portmanteau of *graffiti* and *figùrati* ("figure it out yourself" in Italian). He uses large-scale pieces that combine various media from sumi ink (traditional Japanese black ink) to aerosol and latex paints on unstretched canvas, panels, and bare walls. During his live painting performance, he will create FFIGURATI with hard-edged interlocking angles.