

Images Beyond Sound and Words: on Joo Yeon Woo's *Gyopo Portraits* and *Sound Words*

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Born and raised in South Korea, Joo Yeon Woo has lived in the U.S. for over a decade, creating vigorous works in diverse media that explore immigrants' lived experiences of displacement and alienation in both physical and psychological terms. The *Gyopo Portraits* and *Sound Words* series represent her most recent works in this continuous line of investigation.

The embossed print series entitled *Gyopo Portraits* ("Gyopo" meaning "the Korean diaspora" in Korean), begun in 2017, depict Korean immigrants at various stations in life. Thus far, Woo has completed eleven individual portraits; the five newest pieces of the series are showcased in the current exhibition at the A.I.R. Gallery. Each subject presented—a music professor, a Taekwondo master, a teacher in a Korean school, an engineer, and a Wall Street fund manager—is dressed and posed with dignity, standing amidst various flower arrangements and vegetation. At first glance, the sitters of these portraits are difficult to discern, nearly invisible in fact, as they are raised relief images on white wove paper. While artists such as Robert Rauschenberg employed the embossing technique purely for its novel decorative possibilities in order to enhance surface variation, Woo taps into its metaphorical potential in visualizing the sociopolitical and cultural invisibility that citizens of the Korean diaspora frequently experience. Through the reduction of the compositions into embossed shapes and patterns, the artist also maximizes the notions of void and space, and the beauty of simplicity, all of which are quintessential to traditional Asian aesthetics. Her subtle, yet meticulously executed prints portray, and pay homage to, hardworking immigrant men and women. Furthermore, these tender renditions make viewers more keenly aware of the issue of invisibility through the attentive act of looking.

Woo's newest sumi-ink drawing series, *Sound Words*, is shown to the public for the first time in the eponymously titled exhibition. This dynamic, exploratory body of work exemplifies her attempts to register the cognitive dissonance experienced by non-English speakers when learning onomatopoeic words and interjections. Onomatopoeic words—that is, words that imitate the sounds of things or actions, like bang and pow—are encountered everywhere in everyday life, in both spoken and written forms, ranging from children's books and cartoons to commercial advertisements and mail flyers. Yet, despite their seeming simplicity, their fixed meanings and proper nuances cannot always be easily or intuitively grasped by non-native English speakers. As the field of poststructuralist linguists has shown, the connection between the signified and the signifier is both culturally specific and inherently arbitrary. Turning instances of her linguistic border crossing into an opportunity to illuminate cross-cultural differences, Woo attempts to illustrate her mindscape by translating the subjective feelings and sensations that onomatopoeic words and interjections conjure up into a visual language.

The artist carefully draws and paints such sound word-texts as *Bang*, *Shush*, *Ahchoo*, and *Pop* with stencils and incorporates them into abstract arrangements, composed of smeared blobs and muddy patches of black sumi ink, as well as various scribbled or ruled lines. In drawings such as *Phew*, *Yipe*, and *Bang*, we find both Korean and English alphabets, which are juxtaposed, stacked, or overlapped with each other. In other drawings, like *Ding Ding Ding*, *Pop!*, and *Splash!*, Woo writes the words out only in English, but then adds dashes of colors. The expressive mark-making and brushwork that the artist employs vary in translucency, tonality, rhythm, and movement, as she tries to mimic the audible sounds of the words and evoke their meanings and nuances. A certain sense of dynamic tension in her abstract compositions should also be understood as the results of her mental wrestling with clashing words. Thus, the *Sound Words* works document the artist's efforts to collapse the emotional distance and lexical disjuncture between her native and adopted languages, thereby diminishing feelings of alienation resulting from cognitive dissonance.

Simultaneously, Woo is interested in the lettering styles of printed matter. The artist finds particular inspiration in Sister Corita Kent's silkscreens, printed with typographic and calligraphic lettering, which playfully probe various sociopolitical issues. According to Woo, she is equally indebted to the abstract idiom of the unbridled mark-makings found in James Rosenquist's ink drawings. Her usage of such onomatopoeic words as *Pop!* and *Pow!* also recalls American Pop Art. She combines such influences, transforming the legacy of Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism into a 21st-century art that is infused with references to multicultural America, including experiences of displacement and alienation. It is noteworthy that Woo employs sumi ink as her primary medium, which is associated not only with traditional Asian painting but also with the avant-gardism in Asian modern art. It offers the artist a means of claiming and maintaining her identity while creating abstract work.

Woo is invested in making her own mark and abstract style among artists who have explored similar interests, such as Suzanne McClelland and Julie Mehretu. Her experience of living in two worlds contributes to her distinctive approach to abstraction, with an emphasis on the expressive qualities of mark-making. Like much of her earlier work, in these two seemingly disparate series, *Gyopo Portraits* and *Sound Words*, Woo distills aspects of her diasporic life in America—sociocultural, linguistic, and psychological—and maintains her artistic preoccupation with exploring the notion of liminality—the in-between.

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