

# a reflection upon Hea R Kim's, Indecisive Valley

by emily jan, published by Eastern Edge

It is the spring of 2022. Looking back, the world has been under siege to COVID-19 for two years, almost to the day. Looking forwards, it teeters on the brink of World War III. Looking around me, many people seem frozen in anxiety and despair, as history turns on its fulcrum once again.

But that is not where, or when, the installation that you see has its origins – for that, we need to travel a couple decades back to a different place and time: to a childhood in South Korea, to a family and a society who wanted the very best for their bright young daughter, and who in order to try to ensure that future, exerted enormous pressures upon her.

Though this story occurs several thousand miles away, it has a plot that is all too familiar for so many of us first- and second-generation immigrants living on Turtle Island: a story where familial love and societal expectation transmute into a vise-grip, squeezing the open sea of youthful minutes and hours until the sparkle leaves its surface.

To counter this, the work of Hea R. Kim offers an alternate timeline, a dimensional portal to a childhood perhaps not fully lived, but very fully dreamed. Whether in a wistful animated ode to an artful lunchbox, the tangible proof of a grandmother's ingenuity and love (My Memory of Lunch Box), or in the elaborate altar of self-contained worlds that is Indecisive Valley, this work, candy-hued and cheerful as it is on its surface, is, in fact, a steely act of resistance, the triumph of imagination over expectation.

In Indecisive Valley, a profusion of colour – evoking a Sanrio-scented girlhood on the one hand, and dangerous shades of crushed pills and toxic waste on the other – spreads up the wall and across the floor, simultaneously crystalline and rhizomatic. A web of knits, like pastel snake-skins, along with cascades of exceedingly delicate laser-cut trceries of branches, leaves, and flowers, connect the vertical archipelago of Buddhas and baby heads, where sacred mountains and elephants are dwarfed by the white rabbit that stands in for the artist herself, poised as both witness and supreme creator. All are encrusted in a fur of jewel-toned drinking straws, bristling like small explosions frozen in time.

On the floor nearby, neon candy floats in pools of electric green and amber resin, a classroom science experiment that has achieved sentience and slithered out of its petri dish. Tall mushrooms wave on delicate Arduino-driven stalks, flowers in an invisible wind. The assemblage whirs to illuminated life in the presence of the viewer. Kim notes that this island, adrift in a sea of pink powder is an ode to St. John's, and each new iteration of the exhibition will bear its own site-specific representation.

Perhaps it is that I am looking through an amateur mycologist's eyes, but from my perspective, the presence of these fungal forms evokes something else – connection. In the wake of work by the likes of Suzanne Simard, Paul Stamets, and Peter Wohlleben, we know that these improbable denizens of the forest floor are only the fleeting fruiting bodies of the enormous subterranean mycelial mats which link thousands of miles of trees in the cheekily-named Wood Wide Web, the networks through which the forest

speaks to itself. That Kim has painstakingly constructed this surface world with bright single-use plastics (a material which would not exist on this earth without human ingenuity and human folly), and reconfigured them to represent a mythical world that chirrups and murmurs to itself, with or without us, is to me a beautiful irony, somehow deeply appropriate for our era.

So.

Indecisive Valley did not emerge out of the world of 2022. But it has landed here, still resolutely itself, in the way that forests and children are resolutely themselves. A yearning for a childhood deferred in South Korea may one day connect to the yearning for another childhood interrupted by war in Europe or the Middle East. Like the mycelia running silently underground, pulsing like slow electricity, so too our human minds and hearts and stories thrum, connected, invisibly, over the miles.

Above all, I believe that Kim asks us to have the courage to experience beauty, even against a backdrop of chaos and instability, because without it, we risk losing our fundamental humanity. And she reminds us to embrace joy when we see it, where we see it, even in the face of staggering loss – because ultimately that is the greatest act of defiance.



Emily Jan (b. 1977, Los Angeles) is a Canadian-American artist and writer currently based in Edmonton, AB. Her biophilic sculptures and installations combine the found with the fabricated to evoke the faraway and the

fantastical. As a wanderer, naturalist, and collector of objects and stories, she is guided in her work by the spirit of exploration, kinship, and curiosity.

Recent exhibitions include Wild at the Textile Museum of Canada, Toronto (2019), The World is Bound by Secret Knots at Art Mûr, Montreal (2020) and Eastern Edge, St. John's (2019), and

Castaways: A Climate Action Project at the Robert Bateman Centre Gallery of Nature, Victoria, BC (2020). Upcoming exhibitions include the Biennale nationale de sculpture contemporaine at l'Galerie d'art du parc, QC, and Encre Sauvage / Wild Ink at Vaste et Vague, QC (2022). Past residencies include Union House Arts, NL (2019), Artscape Gibraltar Point (2018), the Elsewhere

Museum (2017), and Denali National Park (2016).

Jan has written and illustrated three books: still life (2014), A Denali Book of Hours (2017) and

Glory of the Seas: A Shell Collector's Journey (2019, with Stephen H. Kawai).

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## Indecisive Valley: Hea R Kim

Exhibited at Eastern Edge Gallery, March 12 – April 23, 2022

*Indecisive Valley* is a whimsical installation that incorporates diverse hand-built pieces. This wall installation is an amalgamation of various layers of craft techniques and image-based components in two and three-dimensional sculptures. By considering the wall as an open space, familiar components, like the ceramic figurines and papier-mâché transform into an unfamiliar mindscape that is covered with mass-produced goods including plastics and beads.

Visually inspired by her Korean heritage, Kim's explorations share elements of childhood

recollections and imagination. Her desire is to visualize the innocent period when days are filled with infinite possibility, indulgence, and mystery.

Imagining the many possibilities of traditional genres while rethinking the notion of artistic

value, this installation is about a fusion of the past, the present, and the possible future.



Korea-born and Montreal-based visual artist, Hea R. Kim explores overlapping technical art processes within sculptures and fibers. With her formal education in her home country (South Korea) and her in-depth studies in material processes and

contemporary art in Montreal, Kim aims to challenge the philosophical limits of what craft and art are, as well as what they can encompass in the future.

Kim has exhibited her works across Canada (Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa), and Seoul, South Korea.