

‘Exhibiting and selling images of Asian woman by an Asian woman artist: Is this a reverse Orientalism?’

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plate 1 *Bottari* with Kim Sooja, 1994, Used Korean cloths and bedcovers, Yangdong village, South Korea



plate 4 Kim Sooja, *A Mirror Woman*, 2002, Korean bedcovers, mirrors, fans, cables, cloth-pins, Peter Blum Gallery, New York

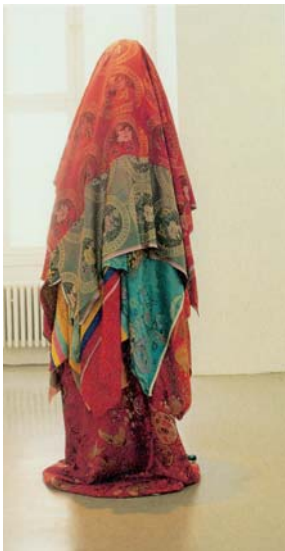


plate 2 Kim Sooja, *Encounter – Sewing into Looking*, 1998, Performance, Museum Fridericianum, Kassel

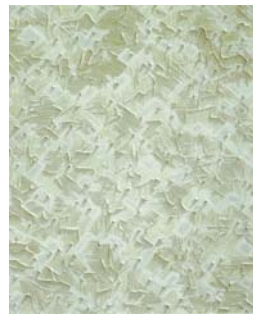


plate 5 Park Seo Bo, *Écriture: No. 910919*, 1991, Mixed media and Korean paper on canvas, 145.5 x 112 cm, Collection of the artist



plate 3 Kim Sooja, *Cities on the move – 2727 Kilometres Bottari Truck*, 1997, Video



plate 6 Kim Sooja, *Deductive Object*, 1991, Cloths and Korean door frame, 3 parts, each 157.5 x 54.8 x 2 cm, Collection of the artist



plate 7 Kim Sooja, *A Needle Woman*, 1999, 8 channel video projection, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 2001



plate 9 Kim Sooja, *A Needle Woman*, 2000, Single channel video, Part of *A Needle Woman* exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 2001



plate 10 Kim Sooja, *A Needle Woman*, 1999, Part of *A Needle Woman* exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 2001



plate 8 Kim Sooja, *A Needle Woman – Yamuna River*, 2000, Part of *A Needle Woman* exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, 2001



plate 11 Yasu Sōtarō, *Kisaeng*, 1936, Oil on canvas, Sotheby's New York



plate 12 Yi K'wae Dae, *Dancer at Rest*, 1937, Oil on canvas, 91 x 117 cm, Private Collection, South Korea

Since the late 1980s, in the USA and Europe the interest in, and curiosity about, contemporary Asian art has increased.¹ Today, Asian artists from the so-called marginalised places are increasingly receiving exposure in the major centres of the international art world. This phenomenon raises the following questions. What is ‘contemporary Asian’ art? How is it different from international contemporary art? Is it really necessary to differentiate contemporary arts in Asia from the ones in the West?

What is hidden underneath these questions is the Western centric view of contemporary art, within which ‘contemporary’ art is seen as the extension of the ‘modern’ art that is defined as a particular art historical style originating in Europe. That Western centric view of contemporary art also supposes that all ‘modern’ arts in Asia have developed out of the one-way directional contact of Asian artists with Western art, and all recent burgeoning ‘contemporary’ arts in Asia are a result of the global expansion of international, in fact, Western, contemporary art. The Western centric definition of contemporary art is reinforced by the current globalisation in which Western cultural hegemony is re-structured by a global control of information technologies and industries. Through instantaneous, boundless electronic media, the images, knowledge, and values of Western culture and art are disseminated throughout the world.

Within the structure of this new global cultural hegemony, a desire to plug into the prestigious centres of an expanding global art circuit is often coupled with a reaction to the Western centric view of the world, ‘us’/‘others’. This has produced a kind of Orientalist exoticism which I call ‘reverse Orientalism’. It is not always Westerners, but sometimes Asian themselves who have ‘exoticised’ certain ethnic traditions and cultural characteristics as the unique qualities of Asian art. This has often become, perhaps unknowingly, a replication of ‘Orientalist’ representations of the exotic Asian ‘Other’.

An earlier example of a reverse Orientalism is *Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptures*, co-organised in 1990 by Howard Fox, curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Hara Toshio, director of the Hara Museum. This travelling exhibition of contemporary Japanese art was designed to show Americans and the world how much of contemporary Japanese art, despite its apparently Western-influenced look, was rooted in its past, reaching back to Buddhist ideas and the ancient indigenous Shinto tradition.² The ‘Asian spirit’ or Asian aesthetics exemplified in *Primal Spirit* romanticised the tradition and past of Asia, a unity conceived as one of the West’s ‘others’, wherein homogenous Asians supposedly lived in harmony. Such a romantic view of Asia belies the complex realities of historically, culturally, socially diverse individual lives in rapidly changing industrialising Asian societies.

There is always a danger of exoticising the ‘other’, in representing other cultures to outsiders. However, to move beyond the issue of the exoticisation of the ‘other’ that has been discussed by numerous critics since the seminal 1979 work of Said, this paper will explore the dynamic role of the ‘exotic’ in presenting an ‘other’ culture, increasingly complicated by the current globalisation from which various

trans-national identities have emerged. To do so, I will focus on a particular example of reverse Orientalism emerging from Asian women artists' struggles to gain access to the still male and white dominated contemporary international art world.

The example that I have chosen is the Korean-American installation, performance and video artist Kim Sooja and her work (plate 1). Kim Sooja has significantly incorporated her gender and ethnic background into her work and this has helped her to gain her artistic importance in national and international contexts. Kim's work deploys easily recognisable images or conceptions of Korean/Asian and female identity (plate 2). There is a careful yet indeterminate play between her identifying herself and allowing herself to be identified as either an Asian/Korean, Asian/Korean woman, or a woman. Her work unsettles the abstract formulations of the binary categories of self/other, insider/outsider, and indigenous/foreign through which conventional national and cultural identity has been generated. She does this through the ambivalent positioning of herself as both the subject (producer) and object of her work (product).

Kim Sooja was born in 1957 in Korea. She has lived in both New York and Seoul since 1998, and has travelled and exhibited her performance and installation work globally. Since 1992 Kim has produced what she calls her *Bottari series* (plate 3). In this work, she has used her own body and the vibrantly coloured Korean *bottari* or bundles of cloth. From 1992 on she has installed versions of the *Bottari series* all over the world. She is, of course, not the only woman artist who uses elements of textile and needlework, obviously associated with women's work, or who uses her own female body as a medium for commentary on various women's issues and concerns. Her art in fact emerged as part of the Korean artistic development in the early 1990s which popularised women's art in Korea. This popularity was promoted by the Korean discussion of Postmodernism which culminated in the mid 1980s to early 1990s. Kim Sooja exploited the fashionable recognition of historically marginalised women's art in designing and selling her work in markets controlled by the male dominated professional networks. Yet, she carefully resists being categorised as a feminist. 'Feminism is part of my nature as a woman artist, but I never wanted this to be my only intention,' says Kim Sooja.³

In the eyes of some Korean and foreign critics, Kim Sooja indeed appears simply to have reproduced the Western feminist trends of the 1970s, with her apparent emphasis on uniquely female experiences and her use of domestic materials (for example cloth) and skills (for example needlework), while at the same time, conceptual film and video art, and performance were chosen to challenge the notions of mainstream high art. Kim is well aware of such a view. In order to reject that view, she has explained that her use of cloth and needlecraft emerged from her own experiences and cultural backgrounds. According to Kim, she first discovered fabric as an artistic material in 1983 when she was sewing a traditional Korean bedcover with her mother.⁴

Kim Sooja has suggested to the Korean and foreign writers of her exhibition catalogues and reviews that Korean fabrics used in her art are intrinsically related to Korean tradition. She has spoken about the cultural, spiritual and emotional meanings of cloth in the following ways:

‘In Korea, ceremonies like birth, marriage, death and ancestral worship were ‘wrapped’ in symbolic clothes, which transcended their status as objects and were sometimes identified with the body, for example, the burning of the dead person’s clothes symbolised the liberation of spirit from body, helping the deceased to make his or her journey to the other world’.⁵

Kim usually uses colourful traditional Korean bedcovers to make her *Bottari* pieces. *Bottari* is a parcel or bundle wrapped up with a cloth. In Korea, big bundles are often tied up with the bedcover simply because it is usually the biggest piece of cloth in the house. However, according to Kim, bed covers are traditionally associated with the woman, the realm of the night, privacy, and sexuality.⁶ The patterns and colours of Kim’s fabrics (plate 4) are designed to evoke nostalgic images of the lives and the labour of mothers and grandmothers in Korea’s bygone times. They are manufactured fabrics. Yet, according to Kim Sooja, these textiles, rich in memory and implicit narratives, provided an artistic medium for a kind of communication with her audiences.⁷ Kim has suggested to Korean and foreign critics that she used these Korean textiles in order to recall the forgotten stories of anonymous Korean women, particularly those who endured in the harsh, male dominated Confucian Korean society which restricted female creative activities largely to sewing and embroidery.⁸

Kim Sooja has also explained her preferences for installation, performance and video art as a natural and necessary result of the male dominant Korean artistic environment of the late 1970s and early 1980s. She has often said that her awareness of the male dominance in the field of painting led her to choose installation and performance.⁹ Kim has reminded her critics of the fact that she studied art when the so-called Korean Monochromism (plate 5), mainly practised by male artists, dominated art circles.¹⁰ Kim’s strikingly colourful installation work of the early 1990s (plate 6) appears to reject the male authority based on the formalism and the minimalist asceticism of Korean Monochromism.

Kim Sooja has frequently said her work aims to communicate with others through bundling up everything, indeed the whole world, in her colourful *bottari*, stitching separated times, geographies, places and races, or separate people, together—patching them all up into her imagined gigantic fabric.¹¹ Such a global ambition, the artist claims, emerged from her discovery of her own body as both a *bottari* or bundle and a needle.¹²

Her imagining of her body as a *bottari* or bundle, according to Kim, is illustrated in her *Cities on the Move-2727 kilometres Bottari truck* (plate 3) performed and filmed in Korea in 1997.¹³ In this work, a video tape shows an Asian woman sitting still on the colourful bundles loaded in the back of truck and travelling extensively across various cities and country scenes in Korea. This woman is the artist herself.

According to the artist, her *bottari* or bundle represents a body, and the human body, especially the human body in motion, is the most complicated bundle.¹⁴

Kim Sooja claimed that her idea of using her body as a needle has been developed into her recent work, *A Needle Woman* series. According to Kim, imagining her own body as a needle is partly inspired by traditional Korean philosophy.¹⁵ Koreans traditionally have imagined human beings as mediating between heaven and earth, as they stand between them. In this specifically Korean field of referentiality, the artist has suggested that her performance, involving a particular representation of her own body as a needle, is as an act of sewing humanity together, or connecting different cultural dimensions or spheres: for example, male and female, or public and private.¹⁶

A Needle Woman which was shown in 2001 at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York consisted of eight video works (plate 7), performed and recorded in different cities in different countries at different times in 1999-2001. The video projections in the main part of *A Needle Woman* show an Asian woman dressed in an austere grey garb, her long hair tied loosely, and standing still in the middle of the crowded streets of Tokyo, New York, London, Mexico City, Cairo, Delhi, Shanghai and Lagos. Two other large projections in separate rooms shifted the setting from the busy city to the contrastingly quiet country. In one projection (plate 8), the same enigmatic female figure stands on the banks of the river Yamuna in Delhi, again with her back to the viewers facing a dark and slowly flowing river. In the other video (plate 9), the same woman reclines her side on the rocky summit of a hill remaining still while clouds drift slowly by. The woman standing in the middle of all the video screens with her back to the camera is the artist herself. She is alone in monochrome and also alone in motionlessness.

By portraying herself as an immobile and mute Asian woman, Kim Sooja seems to present herself as an egoless void. However, she also places carefully calculated images of herself in the centre of her work (plate 10). The strange stillness and silence evoked by the images of this enigmatic presence of an Asian woman intensifies the viewer's sense of her presence.

The design of Kim Sooja's work is, on the surface, simple in conception yet reasonably rich in substance. She simply handles and arranges the fabrics or stands motionless within various urban environments. However, on entering her installations, the viewers are enveloped by an intricate web of colours and patterns of textiles, and the complex resonances of Kim's seductively exotic work.

Kim Sooja has masterfully deployed the immediate and exotic visual appeal of Korean textiles which inevitably have many deep cultural meanings and significance for Korean viewers, and at the same time seem to suggest certain cultural resonances to non-Koreans. Kim has bundled up the Koreanness of her textiles in her colourful work, and then she has shipped them away to many different countries. Her practice can be compared to that of *bottari changsu* or the nomadic merchant who sells exotic goods, presenting herself as authentically exotic in order to sell them. Like any cross-cultural trader, she speaks the buyer's language and presents herself as speaking across languages and cultures. Kim Sooja is fluent in English and French. She is also acutely aware of the current concerns and interests of influential

international curators and art critics. This facilitates Kim's international marketing of the otherness of her products or works.

Kim's work and practice prompt critical questions about issues of gender and cultural identity within various global contexts. When Kim Sooja exhibited the ethnicised and gendered images of an Asian/Korean woman internationally, this invited a critical examination and critique of the commonplace concepts of national, cultural and sexual identity. For her domestic audiences, Kim has shown examples of her multiple constructions of female and Korean identity which, in fact, resist the homogeneity of Korean identity as formulated by the dominant socio-politics of identity. Yet this is not shown explicitly and directly but implicitly.

She is well aware of her audience's interpretations of the ethnicity and femininity of her Korean textiles. In fact, she has deployed the powerful resonances of her textiles as a strong identity marker of a potentially 'exotic other' culture in her work. To both Korean and foreign audiences, her Korean textiles evoke images that are usually associated with Korean women in their traditional costume. The carefully constructed images of her own body in her work are delicately erotic. For foreign, particularly white, male viewers, Kim's images seem to trigger the exotic and erotic attitudes towards Asian women in traditional ethnic costume which are usually identified with a romanticised exotic land, unspoiled by modernisation, and which they can gaze upon with a nostalgic sentimentality, and a peculiar desire to 'know' or possess.

A similar visual consumption of representations of sexuality and ethnicity was exemplified in the 1930s' paintings of exotic and erotic Korean women in their colourfully elaborate embroidered traditional costumes with backdrops of picturesque ancient buildings and ruins, rustic or rural sceneries and historical sites of Korea. In those earlier visual arrangements, Korean women became a central metaphor of Japan's colony and a sexual object for Japanese tourists who wanted to explore the exotica of their new and expanding empire.¹⁷ These paintings were in fact produced not only by Japanese but also by Korean male artists. It is interesting to note that in many of these paintings by both the artists of the coloniser (plate 11) and the colonised (plate 12), important representations of Koreanness were focussed and based on images of women, particularly *kisaeng* (whose images were strongly reminiscent of *geisha*) and female shamans. These were, in fact, the most despised social groups in Korea.

However, the Koreanness and femininity of Kim Sooja's work are expressed in highly sophisticated ways so that this Korean woman artist, and her work, both invite and resist any simple erotic-exotic expectations. Some aspects of her work and its 'packaging' are often more cosmopolitan and, interestingly, effectively opposed to many stereotyped image of Asian women. This contrast is subtly played out in the overall representational strategies of her work which use most current forms of art such as video and internet art, and are accompanied by the artist's own knowing and enigmatic statements which inform viewers of her understanding of modern Western art history and contemporary art criticism. Even so, Kim's work can be seen as a calculated form of what I call 'reverse Orientalism'?

Despite her ambivalent position on these issues, Kim Sooja's work has been variously praised and valued by different international critics and curators according to their concerns with postmodern and postcolonial theories, or with exhibition themes such as 'feminism', 'Asian or Korean women's art', 'Asian or Korean tradition and modernisation', 'criticism of patriarchal oppression', or 'diaspora'.¹⁸ In other words, her work has been remarkably adaptable to a range of theories and markets. She is arguably aware of these terms and their implied meanings. In fact, she has accepted the foreign and domestic critics' accounts of her work and herself, although they were often naive and wrong, to gain access to the mainstream international contemporary art world. This is evident in the inclusion of her work in numerous prestigious international biennales, art fairs and exhibitions such as *Migration*, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, 2003; *Art through the Eye of Needle*, Henie Onstad Kunstcenter, Hovikedden, Norway, 2001; *Partage d'exotismes: The 5th Lyon Biennale*, 2000; *Human-Being and Gender: The 3rd Kwangju Biennale*, 2000, South Korea; *dAPERTutto: The 48th Venice Biennale*, 1999; *On Life, Beauty, Translations and Other Difficulties: the 5th Istanbul Biennale*, 1997, and the Asia Society's exhibition *Traditions/Tensions*, Queen's Museum of Art, New York, 1996.¹⁹

¹ This paper was presented to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June-2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

² See the essays by the curators in Fox, Howard, and others. *A Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors*. Exhibition catalogue. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990.

³ Quoted in Barbara Pollack, 'The New Look of Feminism', *ART News*, September 2001, p. 134.

⁴ See Tae Hyunsun, 'Kim Sooja: A Needle Woman', in a catalogue to the exhibition *Kim Sooja: A Needle Woman*, Rodin Gallery, Seoul, 2000, p. 20.

⁵ From an interview by this author in Seoul in 1995.

⁶ See Tae Hyunsun, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁷ See Von Robert C. Morgan, 'The Persistence of the Void', in the catalogue of exhibition *Kim Sooja: A Needle Woman*, Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, 2001, p. 54.

⁸ See Airyung Kim, 'Bottari: A wrapping view of art and life', in *Jeannette Christensen and KIM SOO-Ja*, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle Feldbach, 1999, pp. 28-39. She also mentioned this in the interviews by this author in 1995 and again in 2000.

⁹ See Tae Hyunsun, *idem*.

¹⁰ *Idem*.

¹¹ See Nakamura Keiji, 'Kim Sooja's A Needle Woman', in the catalogue of exhibition *Kim Sooja: A Needle Woman*, Kunsthalle Bern, p. 12.

¹² See Tae Hyunsun, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

¹³ See *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁴ See Kim Sun-jung, 'Baubles, Bangles and Beads: Interviews with four Korean women artists', *Art Asia Pacific*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1996, p. 60.

¹⁵ She mentioned this in an interview with this author in New York in February 2000.

¹⁶ See Airyung Kim, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁷ This touristic consumption of exotic and erotic images of Korean women, which became a metaphor of the colonisation of Korea, may have immunised the Japanese moral conscience in exploiting more than the quarter million Korean woman as sex slaves for Japanese military personnel from the early 1930 until the conclusion of the Second World War. It should be remembered that the Japanese used women from other ethnic groups in similar ways.

¹⁸ Nakamura Keiji, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ The exhibition *Traditions/Tensions* was also shown elsewhere including the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth in 1998.