

Y. David Chung



CCA LAGOS ARCHIVE

Turtle Boat Head

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Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris

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This brochure accompanies Y. David Chung's installation *Turtle Boat Head*, organized by Thelma Golden, branch director. Included is an essay by curator, writer, and video producer Philip Brookman.

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Exhibition Assistance:

<i>Videography</i>	Matt Dibble
<i>Construction Design</i>	Luke Mandle
<i>Sound</i>	Pooh Johnston
<i>Voices</i>	ACT Coalition, Washington, D.C.
<i>Studio</i>	Patrick Daughters

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945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

Introduction

Thelma Golden

The recognition of the depth of misunderstanding between cultures in this country rose like a phoenix out of the ashes of the Los Angeles riots. Shattered dreams and broken promises created an environment where tensions and rage between ethnic groups ran deep. The conflicts that accompany transculturation for new immigrant groups anger those who want an end to this influx, who are displaced by cheaper immigrant labor, or who envy new arrivals with greater economic access. Today, urban America is rife with contradictions and ironies: Pakistani immigrants own southern fried chicken joints in the barrio; Indians operate gas stations; Koreans operate convenience stores; Arab merchants sell South African gold in ghettos; Africans hawk Italian and French bags made in Hong Kong; Mexicans wash dishes in nouvelle cuisine restaurants. People who left countries devastated by the senseless violence of civil wars recreate that same violence on city streets.

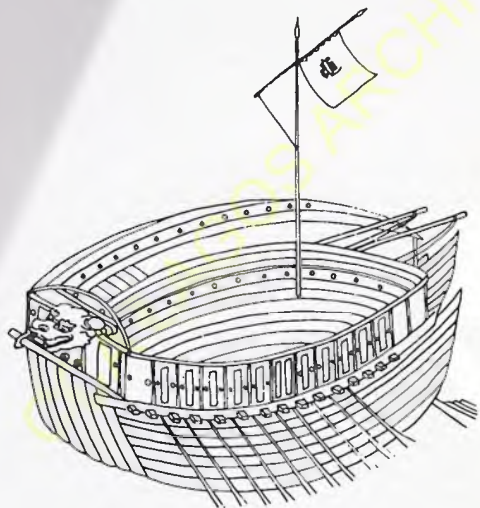
These immigrants come to America in search of freedom and the economic opportunity that capitalism offers. They are not very different from earlier waves of immigrants except in skin color(s). Yet this one distinction seems to make it impossible to fully assimilate into the mythic melting pot. Although we eat one another's food and listen to one another's music, acclimate our ears to other languages, and offer the same prayer to different gods, we remain separate and incredibly unequal. It is out of this complex matrix that Y. David Chung's *Turtle Boat Head* emerges.

Chung creates a narrative out of personal experience and the larger epic of immigration that defines America's history. While there are two sides to every story there often are not two willing storytellers. Y. David Chung's art, which investigates this collision of cultures, offers a visual narrative that begins to recount never-told stories. It was very easy for the media to mistakenly identify the Korean immigrant merchants in Los Angeles as part of the problem rather than as necessary participants in the search for a solution. This media coverage presented a monolithic, often one-sided vision of the Korean immigrant experience, stressing their successes in the vacuum of the present with no concrete reference to their past. In this installation, Chung examines the present as well as the past in a Korean immigrant's life. The viewer is offered the immigrant's reflections, milieu, dreams, and a perspective on the complex multi-ethnic matrix in which he exists. With its interrelated stream of visual vignettes, *Turtle Boat Head* fills in the missing chapters of this new history of America as it is being written by those who continue, at all cost, to pursue the American dream.

From World Wars to Convenience Stores:

Dreams of History in Y. David Chung's Turtle Boat Head

Philip Brookman



Seoul fell within two weeks of the beginning of the invasion, and Japanese contingents promptly set off for P'yongan and Hamgyong Provinces to complete the subjugation of the country. . . . Meanwhile, Korean naval forces were having rather more success than the army. Under the leadership of admiral Yi Sun-sin . . . they had developed the "turtle ship," probably the first iron clad in history. This was a galley decked over with iron plates to protect the rowers and armed with a large iron ram in the shape of a turtle's head. These ships were pretty much impervious to any weapons the Japanese could muster, and so sank large numbers of troop and supply ships, seriously hampering Japanese operations in Korea.¹

In 1992, a resourceful Korean admiral repelled the invading Japanese navy by constructing boats in the image of nature. These boats looked like huge fighting turtles, and thunder echoed from their lips. Protected by this shell of ingenuity, archers shot flaming arrows from the decks of Admiral Yi's armada, and the invasion was turned back.

Four hundred years later, in 1992, the flickering images of racial and political violence were again reflected from our eyes. Beatings, burning buildings, looters, gun-running vigilantes, and the military occupation of a riot-torn urban landscape have barely dimmed from our consciousness. In Los Angeles, some eighteen hundred Korean-American businesses were destroyed during the riots ignited by the broadcast visuals of police beating motorist Rodney King and the subsequent acquittal of the perpetrators following a jury trial. Lost in this political drama are the burning dreams of the Korean immigrants and the African-American community, set aflame by the gulf between cultures. New mythologies are written from histories left behind in this land of immigrant vision.

The juxtaposition of Korean history with the life and dreams of the Korean immigrants living in the United States forms the central metaphor of Y. David Chung's multimedia installation *Turtle Boat Head*. In this complex narrative, turtle boats and flaming arrows, images of a faraway culture hurling through time and space, ignite the imagination of a Korean youth who has recently arrived with a dream for a better life. He lands in the middle of decaying urban streets, abandoned

buildings, protests, and the riots of an American inner city. In the center of all this chaos stands the *Hi-Sence*, a small convenience store, a family enterprise run by a Korean businessman. The store owner is daydreaming behind bulletproof glass, his memories projected across the screen of American consumerism. He recalls his childhood growing up in the twenties and thirties, during the Japanese occupation of Korea.

"Entering the installation is like a walk through the mind of a young Korean person," says Chung. "You see murals on all three walls and at the center is the structure which is like a store. You go into a Korean store and see the store owner there and he's behind the plexiglass window and you see what's going on in his mind and in his life."² The image of the store owner is a short videotape, projected on a translucent window, and charcoal drawings on the walls stand in for well-stocked shelves. The video, produced by Chung and videographer Matt Dibble, reveals a series of layered images that flash back and forth between the present and the past. It superimposes the store owner against a chroma-key background that transports him back in time to the Korean War. The frame of reference dissolves between images of war refugees moving south from their northern homes into Seoul and war planes bombing the countryside. As bombs fall, the businessman turns to hit a golf ball, mimicking the arc of the projectiles. He then goes home to the suburbs after closing his store. Archival images are piled one on top of another. The flames of bombed out buildings in Seoul during the war fuse



with a familiar TV portrayal of South Central Los Angeles burning, as Korean entrepreneurs fire at looters to protect their livelihood. American planes drop propaganda leaflets across a Korean village and the background abruptly shifts to reveal money raining from the sky into the store. "I wanted to show that even though he does have thoughts about childhood, he's also thinking about stuff like money and golf and going to the suburbs," says Chung. "I wanted to interject elements of this crazy American lifestyle."³

The grocer is snapped back to the present from his daydreams by the voice of a customer entering the store. "Hey Papa-san. . . . How's things going? Yeah. . . . Pack of Newport and a tall one." The bulletproof barrier between the store owner and his customers serves as a reminder that his relationship with the African-American community in which he works is both strained and tenuous. Groceries and money are exchanged through a revolving door in the plexiglass screen. He is both metaphorically and literally separated from his customers, who in turn have little understanding of Korean culture and

history. "Little is known, not only about Korea's past, but also how Korea's modern identity has been dramatically shaped by influences from the West," Chung states. "There is a constant ebb and flow, as new ideas are embraced and old memories submerged."⁴

The unsettled deliberations of a young Korean immigrant, wandering the streets of the city, are represented in Chung's mural, which surrounds three sides of the central structure. This character in *Turtle Boat Head* stands in for the artist himself. His exploded visions depict some of the major crossroads in the history of Korean immigration that have transported him into the Hi-Sence neighborhood.



The mural is divided into three distinct sections. The first includes historical scenes of modern Korea: the Empress of Korea set aflame by Japanese soldiers at Kyong Bok Palace in 1885; the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1905 to 1945; the Korean resistance movement leader Yu Kwan Sun; the political division of the country and war following World War II. The second panel reveals the points of contact between the Korean immigrants to the United States and the residents of their new communities. Students demonstrate against government oppression in the streets of Seoul during the 1970s; the statue of Admiral Yi towers over the American city, like one that looks down on the city of Seoul. The final panel reveals the young immigrant's hallucinations about his cultural past, a history superimposed on the landscape of decay amid the derelict structure of his new home. Turtle boats enter a modern harbor, lined with stalls from which oarsmen row, recast in contemporary history to deliver the young man back through time to recapture his past.

Born in Bonn, and now working in Washington, D.C., Y. David Chung is best known for his large charcoal drawings, watercolors, and woodcuts

that are sometimes combined with elaborate experimental theater. He is a facile draftsman whose careening images of urban carnivals depict people lost in vast crowds or in alienating, lonely spaces. His murals in *Turtle Boat Head*, like those from his 1987 rap opera *Seoul House* or the 1990 *Angulas*, are larger-than-life charcoal drawings on paper. Their fragmented, expressionist intensity pushes the temporal, fast-paced feelings of city streets and historic visions right into the viewer's space, energizing the setting and placing the audience in the center of a surreal spectacle that exists outside of real time. The sidewalks are teeming with the visage of prodigal struggle, and Chung's figures are often pictured in the exaggerated style of masks worn by the performers in traditional Korean theater. His drawings represent a fusion of many diverse elements, including Mexican muralism, billboard advertising, television graphics, and comic book styles. "I put them all into a blender," says Chung. "I like to do all the drawing in one mural or one segment all in one go. . . . I do it to keep things flowing."⁵ His installation art has always combined multiple levels of complex imagery that mirror and comment on his own experience.



In this way his drawing style is closely linked to the layering of fragmented images and sounds in the videotape.

As an expression of cultural memory, *Turtle Boat Head* mimics Chung's own life and that of his family. Like some of his previous work, it is autobiographical in nature. "My father was forced to learn Japanese in school during the occupation of Korea," relates Chung. "Both my parents were from the northern part of Korea and they moved south after the country was partitioned following World War II. My father was a naval officer and a diplomat. After he retired from the foreign service, we moved to the United States and started a business. I also worked in my father's grocery store. . . . So it is very closely linked to my family's experience. What I wanted to show is that when you hear

about Korean people in the media, these Korean store owners, no one knows that many were born and raised during the Japanese occupation and lived through two wars, World War II and the Korean War, and then came to this country. This work is not a metaphor for the whole Korean community. It's from my family's experience."⁶ By revealing the dreams and fantasies of a young immigrant, gleaned from his own memories, Y. David Chung is humanizing the one-dimensional image given to these figures by the media, making their history and its complexity newly comprehensible. Chung's work dispels existing stereotypes and creates a greater understanding of Korean culture and history and of the roles of immigrants in our society.

Notes:

1. Han Woo-Kuen, *The History of Korea* (Seoul: Eul-Yoo Publishing Company, 1970), p. 271.
2. Y. David Chung, interview with the author, June 6, 1992.
3. Ibid.
4. Y. David Chung, unpublished artist's statement, 1992.
5. Y. David Chung, interview.
6. Ibid.

All illustrations are details of the installation *Turtle Boat Head*



Y. David Chung

Born in Bonn, Germany, 1959

Studied at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville (1976–80), and the Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C. (BFA, 1988)

Lives in Washington, D.C.

One-Artist Exhibitions

1987

Gallery K, Washington, D.C.

1990

Gallery K, Washington, D.C.

1991

Mural installation, First American Bank, METRO Art II Project, Huntington Metro Station, North Kings Highway, Virginia

Selected Group Exhibitions

1988

"Festival of American Folklife," Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

"Impressions," Brody's Gallery, Washington, D.C.

"Invented Selves: Images of Asian-American Identity," Asian American Arts Centre, New York

"New Works," Gallery K, Washington, D.C.

"Recollections," Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1989

"Asian Pacific American Images '89," The District Building, Washington, D.C.

"Review and Preview," Gallery K, Washington, D.C.

1990

"Angulas: Street of Gold" (with Claudio Vazquez), Jamaica Arts Center, New York (traveled to Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, and McLean Project for the Arts, Emerson Gallery, McLean, Virginia)

"Drawings," Gallery K, Washington, D.C.

"Drawings," Montpelier Cultural Arts Center, Laurel, Maryland

"Images '90: Asian Pacific Americans in the Visual Arts," The Charles Sumner School Museum, Washington, D.C.

1991

"Back to Basics I. Landscapes and Still Lifes: A Group Exhibition," Gallery K, Washington, D.C.

"A Celebration of Asian Art," Strathmore Hall, North Bethesda, Maryland

"The Corcoran and the Community," The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

"Drawings," Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Operas

"Seoul House (Korean Outpost): An Electronic Rap Opera," book by Y. David Chung and Pooh Johnston, mural by Y. David Chung, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1988

"Sites of Recollection: Four Altars and a Rap Opera," performance by Y. David Chung, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts, 1992

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

Park Avenue at 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017

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