

Debbie Han's *Graces*:
Hybridity and Universality
데비 한의 <그레이스> 시리즈:
혼종성과 보편성

Kyunghee Pyun (Associate Professor, FIT, State University of New York)

변경희 (뉴욕주립대학교 FIT 부교수)

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I. Introduction

II. Genealogy of Debbie Han's *Graces*:

Return to Homeland and Instrumental Value

III. Debbie Han's *Graces*: High Art or Popular Culture?

IV. Conclusion: Hybridity and Universality

I. Introduction

Debbie Han is a visual artist who grew up and is based in Los Angeles. Many in the contemporary art world are familiar with her *Graces* series, created in 2004 (Figure 1). Earlier in Han's career, her Venus-inspired busts and drawings were shown in Seoul, South Korea in exhibitions entitled *Idealistic Oddity* at the Brain Factory in 2004 and *Terms of Beauty* at Gallery Ssamzie in 2005. It was Han's works in the *Korean Eye* catalog in 2010 that drew much attention from the international audiences.¹

Having taught a survey of art history from the ancient periods to modern times for more than two decades, I have frequently shown and have constantly searched for contemporary art works inspired by Masterpieces of Western Art to the delight of my students, many of whom have been bewildered yet aspiring artists themselves

1. Serenella Ciclintra, et al., *Korean Eye: Contemporary Korean Art* (Milan: Skira; New York: Rizzoli, 2010), pp. 46-59.

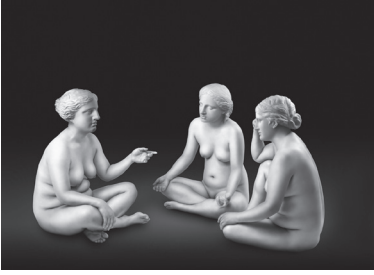


Fig. 1. Debbie Han, *Seated Three Graces*, 2009, LightJet Print, 160×235cm, Collection: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Photograph by Sung Hun Ju © Debbie Han



Fig. 2. Debbie Han, *Color Graces: Seasons of Being I*, 2014, LightJet Print, 150×228,6cm, Collection: Courtesy of Artist, Photograph by Sung Hun Ju © Debbie Han

in art and design colleges in the New York area. Debbie Han's replica heads of *Venus de Milo* in drawing, ceramics, and photography with a subtle modification in physiognomy, were so powerful that I invited Han to give an artist talk in my class of Asian American art at Parsons School of Design in 2012 and have been able to observe the evolution of her *Graces* series from a monochrome drawing to the most recent *Color Graces: Seasons of Being* (Figure 2). Since 2014, Debbie Han has moved back to the realm of painting, a medium of her young adulthood, and she is creating several project series entitled *Now*, *Together*, and *Days of Life*. This is a crucial time to review her oeuvre of the past ten years, which tackled the troublesome subject of beauty and desire in a transnational context before she recently delved into a new, yet related to body, quest of women, food, and desire.

In this essay, I aim to elucidate the meaning of her *Graces* photo series in the context of hybridity and multiculturalism of contemporary art. In my reading of her works, Han's experience as a 1.5-generation Korean-American growing up in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s is a crucial component when comparing her works with those of other immigrant women artists in the U.S.² Her *Graces* series can be

2. "1.5 generation" or *Iljeom ose* is a common term to denominate a group of Korean immigrants who were born outside the U.S. (mostly in Korea) but immigrated to the U.S. at a young age as a child. Their parents are first-generation immigrants while children born in the United States by these immigrant parents usually identify themselves as second-generation. It is known that "1.5ers" have been socialized in both Korean and American cultures and thus express the cultural values and beliefs of each. This labeling is also by choice rather than by moniker. There are various degrees of cultural assimilation within the 1.5 generation group. For the social construction of this ethnic identity, refer to a case study by Mary Y. Danico, *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). This

read as cultural icons of contemporary Asian society's predilection for the Western standard of beauty forcefully imposed on its women—and gradually accepted as desirable values internalized by women themselves. Han's works tactfully and sometimes humorously commented on this pan-Asian phenomenon of corrected or improved beauty; by means of surgical interventions on the one hand and by the visual language of her rediscovered heritage on the other.

Han's *Graces* series was also pioneering, before popular culture and media started to pour literature on K-pop and its influence on South Korea's position as a popular destination for medical tourism for plastic surgery patients. As many remember, 2003 was the time when *Yeoseong Minwoohoe* (known as "Korean Womanlink" in English) in South Korea started a Korean-version "Love Your Body campaign", taking a page out of the original campaign operated by the National Organization of Women (NOW) in the United States since 1999.³ It was also when Dove, a global brand of beauty products manufactured by Unilever, launched a massive marketing project called "Campaign for Real Beauty. It coincided with a photography exhibition funded by Dove Soap titled *Beyond Compare: Women Photographers on Beauty*, which included works by celebrated photographers such as Annie Leibovitz and Ellen von Unwerth. Facebook debuted in 2004 and Instagram in 2010. Cyworld, launched in 1999 in South Korea long before Facebook became widespread, was a social network forum in the early 2000s, but uploading manipulated photos of an individual was not yet pervasive. It is in this nexus of popular culture and uncanny contemporary art that Debbie Han's hybrid concoction of the goddess of beauty merged with Asian women's body contours emerged in the discovery of Han's homeland.

concept of 1.5 generation is also applicable to other immigrant groups. Tom Finkelpearl, Valérie Smith, and Jennifer Liese (eds.), *Generation 1.5* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2009) is an exhibition catalogue for *Generation 1.5: Ellen Harvey, Pablo Helguera, Emily Jacir, Lee Mingwei, Shirin Neshat, Seher Shah, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Nari Ward*, held at the Queens Museum of Art, June 19–December 2, 2007.

3. Sharon Heijin Lee, "Beauty Between Empires: Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-Esteem," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1–31; reprinted in S. Heijin Lee, Christina H. Moon, and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (eds.), *Fashion and Beauty in the Time of Asia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), pp. 69–102.

II. Genealogy of Debbie Han's *Graces*: Return to Homeland and Instrumental Value

Born in South Korea, Han immigrated to the U.S. with her family and grew up in Los Angeles in the 1980s. She attended University of California, Los Angeles for her B.F.A. and lived in New York in the mid-1990s to earn her M.F.A. from the Pratt Institute. After graduate school, she moved back to Los Angeles and then left for an encounter with Korea during her residency programs in that country in 2003 and 2004 that became the catalyst for her *Three Graces* series.

Before leaving for Korea, Han had been experimenting with found or fabricated objects in Los Angeles. Like many artists of her generation, she temporarily abandoned her passion for painting and created a series of installations reminiscent of Pop Art and Dada. For example, *Hard Condom Series* (2001-2003) is composed of colorful condoms of various sizes. Her choice of candy-like colors and glossy surface is intentional. Much like her replica food objects made of dog's stool called *Chocolate*, her condoms resemble innocent, nostalgia-inviting, candy wrappers or fruit roll-ups. This is uncanny in combining desire for desire, sexuality, and sensual pleasure with the memory for good old times, childhood indulgences, and innocent sensory stimulation. Han then went to Korea for an encounter with her other half-identity as a Korean.

Han's journey to Korea is a common ritual for global immigrants as a way to find their imagined homeland as shown in research by anthropologists or literary critics.⁴ Han's homeland in South Korea was not the same country her parents left some twenty years ago. After the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988, South Korea rapidly joined globalization with freedom to travel to foreign countries and consumption of imported luxuries. Some infrastructures including the courts, the police, schools, and the law, however, maintained the legacy of the Colonial Government-General of Japan. Art education based on the French academy of the nineteenth century was one of these lingering legacies.⁵ Radical art movements had existed since the 1960s in

4. There has been robust research on transnationalism and homeland since the mid-1990s. The following essay summarizes types of homeland imagined or experienced by the second-generation immigrants: Russel King and Anastasia Christou, "Diaspora, Migration and Transnationalism: Insights from the Study of Second-generation 'Returnees'," Bauböck Rainer and Faist Thomas (eds.), *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 167-184.

5. Ok-Hee Jeong, "An Autoethnographical Study of Culture, Power, and Identity and Art Education in Post-

South Korea, but the kind of art education taught in Korea's K-12 school system and required for college admissions was based on the tradition of Ecole des Beaux-Arts. This left a deep impression on Han during her rekindled discovery of her homeland, South Korea.

Disembodied by academic art education, Korean contemporary art went through radical transformations seeking for diversity and inclusion in the 1990s. The early 1990s also experienced the advent of conceptual and object-oriented arts in South Korea.⁶ In terms of feminist artists in South Korea, one must note Kang-ja Chung, the performance artist who had participated a series of art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her work *Transparent Balloons and Nude* was a sensation in the Korean art world when it was first shown at C'est Si Bon, a music cafe in Seoul, on May 30, 1968. Collaborating with Chan-seung Chung and Kuk-jin Kang, Chung appeared in semi-nudity and invited the audiences to adhere balloons onto her body. Since the late 1980s there had been a series of Bul Lee's performance art, which attracted much attention in the Korean Art world.⁷ Lee's performances, *Abortion [Naktae]* shown at the Dong Soong Art Center and *Cravings [Galmang]*, both in 1989, were deeply rooted in women's experiences. Hybridity itself was a common subject in Lee's works, as shown in the monster-human masquerade in *Sorry for Suffering-You Think I'm a Puppy on a Picnic? [Sunan Yugam]*, a twelve-day performance staged in Gimpo Airport, Korea, and various sites in Tokyo, Japan in 1990. In all these performances, Lee's ambition and visual imagination were shocking and impressive to the art world nationally and internationally. In 1999, the Women's Art Festival 99 *Patjis on Parade*, curated by Honghee Kim, included not only artistic experimentations, but also curatorial statements related to hybridity and critical consciousness against gender norms.⁸ The term *Patjis* is derived from the nasty and spiteful antagonist character Patji in the story of Kongji, a dutiful daughter in tune with patriarchal values. The disobedient Patji, who ignores filial duties and domestic labor, is punished while Kongji is rewarded with a life full of happiness and recognition in a patriarchal household. A reverse order presented by this curatorial statement was refreshing and

Colonial South Korea," *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, no. 36 (2017), pp. 12–14.

6. Sooran Choi, "The South Korean "Meta-Avant-Garde," 1961–1993: Subterfuge as Radical Agency," Phd diss., New York: City University of New York, Graduate Center, 2018.

7. James B. Lee, "Yi Bul: The Korean Installation Artist," *Asian Women Artists* (Roseville East, NSW, Australia: Craftsman House in association with G+B Arts International, 1996), pp. 68–80.

8. Honghee Kim, "Sex and Sensibility: Women's Art and Feminism in Korea," *Asian Women Artists* (Roseville East, NSW, Australia: Craftsman House in association with G+B Arts International, 1996), pp. 25–39.

provocative to many in the art world at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In this pro-feminist environment and progressive social outlook at the turn of 2000, Han's encounter with South Korean art with her *Graces* series was well-timed and mutually constructive. In the United States, the first decade of the twenty-first century coincided with many celebrations of feminist art. *Bad Girls (Part I)* and *Bad Girl (Part II)* were a 1994 pair of exhibitions at New Museum in New York, curated by Marcia Tucker. *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* was re-exhibited at the University of California, Los Angeles, Hammer Art Museum in 1996 followed by the foundation of Feminist Art Project, a website and information portal established at the Rutgers University in 2006. After the inaugural paper "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" by Linda Nochlin in 1971, feminist art was diversifying its themes and concerns during a three-decade empowerment of women and art.

In 2004 Han created her first drawings of Greco-Roman heads entirely and solely out of eraser rubbings. Her first shock in Korea had been the amount of effort by a young art student in repetitively or sometimes mechanically copying models of *Agrippa* at the Louvre, *Venus de Milo* also at the Louvre, or *Giuliano de Medici* by Michelangelo in San Lorenzo, Florence.⁹ Han's drawing of a monochrome palette is deceptive. It is not made by pencil or charcoal drawing. By collecting all her eraser rubbings and painstakingly gluing them on paper, Han reconstructed the lost time and effort of an art student laboriously sketching and erasing over several hours to capture the ideal beauty and proportion of a Roman bust. As an artist who emerged from the American art program emphasizing creativity and conceptual process of art making, Han deemed the arduous training of an old academy system futile. This type of training is mimicry of an archaic process with ambition to replicate the rigor of academic tradition of fine arts. Nonetheless, Han's *Eraser Drawing* was a visualization of by-products from that repetitive action of penciling and erasing.

A similar undertaking was her *Graces* series. In fact, many viewers at the time simply called her works "Venus" even though Han did not like to be referred to

9. There are several busts of Agrippa, Agrippa or Marcus Vispanius Agrippa (63–12 BCE) was the husband of Julia, daughter of Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE). As a close friend of Augustus, he was a general, architect, and also statesman in the Roman Empire. Among various public monuments built in honor of Agrippa, it is said that the large bronze erected in the Roman Pantheon (circa 25 BC) seems the most likely to be the model of this marble head at the Louvre. It was originally found in a property belonging to Prince Camillo Borghese in 1792 as decoration for the prince's villa in Rome, before being acquired by Napoleon in 1807.

as the “Venus artist.”¹⁰ From her eraser drawing of Greco-Roman heads, she then naturally moved to modified images of *Venus of Milo*. Han worked with a variety of materials such as photography, lacquer, and bronze. Her works of Venus figures are created in two genres: sculpture and photography. In sculpture, she reproduces three-dimensional busts of Venus in lacquer with inlaid mother-of-pearl (*Sport Venus*, 2008), busts out of bronze cast (*Terms of Beauty*, 2004-2011), busts created in Korean celadon porcelain (*Battle of Conception*, 2010), and porcelain busts in Joseon-dynasty white porcelain technique (*Mass of Conception*, 2012).

A notable series out of four is called *Terms of Beauty* (2004-2011). In a group of Venus heads, rather than in a single object, Han creates a hybrid image of Venus with the nose or the eye slightly different from those in the original head of the *Venus de Milo* at the Louvre. Over centuries in Europe, North America, and then East Asia, Venus has been associated with the ideal model of beauty among high-brow and low-brow cultures alike. At a glance, anyone can recognize this iconic symbol of beauty. In Korea, a panty hose manufacturer called “Venus” still uses the head of *Venus de Milo* for its logo.¹¹ (Figure 3) However, Han made a quirky twist with the well-known head by applying slight exaggeration in the nose, in the eye, or in the mouth. A bust has double eyelids while another has a nose job. One can also find full lips injected with Botox. Or the Caucasian face of Venus has Mongolian eye folds or African lips. At a second glance, a viewer can discover modifications of the Venus resulting from a surgical procedure-like exaggeration. Upon careful examination, one might read such a hybrid composite of physiognomic traits taken from different racial groups. In Han’s own words, the nine bronze heads in *Terms of Beauty VII* (2014), demonstrate an arbitrary concept of beauty torn between the Western ideal and the inherent or



Fig. 3. Foundation Underwear and Pantyhose Brand “Venus” and its Logo by Shinyoung Wacoal, Inc. founded in 1954.

10. Debbie Han, interview with Kyunghee Pyun (August 29, 2015).

11. Shinyoung Stocking Inc. established a stocking manufacturing facility in 1977. The use of Venus as the product symbol coincides with the economic development of South Korea in the 1970s. Shinyoung Wacoal, the holding company of Shinyoung Stocking, was founded in 1954 and merged with the Japanese company Wacoal in 1970. It has been a large company manufacturing and exporting underwear garment since the 1970s. Its competitor, Namyoung, founded in 1957, started manufacturing stockings in 1963 and bras in 1965. Its stocking brand has called Vivien since 1977.

biological traits (Figure 4).

The arbitrary mixing of racially diverse features on the faces of these icons of beauty subversively implies a standard of beauty as a social construct rather than an inherent state of being. After casting in bronze, the surfaces of the sculptures have been severely corroded to impart an aged appearance, resulting in earthy colors and textures. The contrast between the organic material of the work and its unrealistic combinations of exaggerated features further intensifies a sense of dissonance that simultaneously triggers familiarity and strangeness. The subversive and humorous staging of dissonance ultimately alludes to the construct of perception as a social condition.¹²



Fig. 4. Debbie Han, *Terms of Beauty VII*, 2010, Bronze, each 60×25×28cm, Collection: Daegu Art Museum, Photograph by Sung Hun Ju © Debbie Han.

In order to set a tone of uncanniness to viewers, Han intentionally imitated a look of ancient statues corroded throughout thousands of years until excavated in an archaeological expedition. This process of artificial aging is reminiscent of Dukhyeon Cho's *Gurim Village Project* (2000) series, in which he cast dogs in a famous folk tale of Korea, buried them before the performance, and then earthed

them together with the audience during a live performance.¹³ By creating fictional authenticity, both Han and Cho force viewers to be subject to a sense of intensifying dissonance between familiarity and strangeness.

Cho was an influential artist in the early 2000s. Korean artists of Han's generation were also simultaneously commenting on artificial transformations of the human body. Hyungkoo Lee grappled with the issue of deformation of human bodies. In his *Homo Species* (2007) shown at the Korean pavilion of the Venice Biennale, photographic images of men and women with exaggerated teeth or eyes presented the artist's perception of an obsession with the altered human body by a radical measure like plastic surgery. Bul Lee's *Cyborg* series visualizes a similarly disturbing

12. Debbie Han, Artist Statement, <https://curiator.com/art/debbie-han/terms-of-beauty-vii-series> (accessed November 21, 2019).

13. This series of a pack of dogs buried and excavated in a series was also shown as *From An Alien Past* at Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2000–2001 and *Leaning Forward Looking Back* at Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 2003.

form, a hybrid creature between a plant and a human body. *Transhuman? Cyborg W1-W4* (1998) visualizes a common perception of robots in science fiction animation with slender arms and voluptuous torsos, which insinuates a dystopia where bioengineered anthropomorphic forms may replace human organs and perhaps humanity itself.

In Han's works, however, deformation is introduced in a less dystopian manner. Using the Venus statue as visual trope of beauty, alterations to this familiar face look even laughable and amusing. This subversive or humorous experience of dissonance then indicates an ambivalent attitude toward ideal beauty in South Korea. One cannot avoid a familiar cityscape full of clinics of plastic surgery at major shopping streets or glitzy salons dedicated to accommodate the desire for ideal beauty as commodities of modern life. In the current state of transnationalism and racial hierarchy, standards of ideal beauty are also influenced by a hierarchical order. Edouardo Bonilla-Silva, a sociologist who has observed the racial politics of the United States of America, hypothesized three categories of racial hierarchy in whites, honorary whites, and collective blacks by summarizing this opinion as follows:

the white group will include 'traditional' whites, new 'white' immigrants and, in the near future, totally assimilated white Latinos, lighter-skinned multiracials, and other sub-groups; the intermediate racial group or honorary whites will comprise most light-skinned Latinos, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, Filipinos, and most Middle Eastern Americans; and finally the collective black group will include blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians.¹⁴

Han's trope of ideal beauty in the *Terms of Beauty* series comments on stereotypes of racial physiognomy



Fig. 5. Debbie Han, *The Survival of the Fittest No. 3*, 2006, LightJet Print, 50x60 cm, Collection: Courtesy of Artist, Photograph by Sung Hun Ju © Debbie Han

14. Edouardo Bonilla-Silva, "From Bi-Racial to Tri-Racial: Towards a New System of Racial Stratification in the USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 27 (2004), pp. 931-950; quotations are from pp. 932-933.

in the context of internalized standards of Eurocentric ideal beauty in the form of Hellenistic sculpture. Moreover, Han's bold critique of a hybridity of ideal beauty problematizes the innate exclusivity of Korean society known for its ethnonationalism.

A more futuristic version of this hybridity is found in Han's *The Survival of the Fittest* series (Figure 5). *The Survival of the Fittest* No. 3 (2006) presents a scanned image of the stucco head with modified lines for a sunken eye, full lips, and a higher nose contour by means of an implant. This was one of her first attempts to digitally manipulate an image and to print with a LightJet printer. In fact, she liked the experience of "brushing" with a mouse instead of a paint brush, and this prompts her to work on her full-length body images in digital printing. The manipulation of photographic images by innumerable clicks of a mouse in photo editing software is a triumphant gesture overruling the standard of beauty established in patriarchal ethnonationalism. A possibility of reproduction in large quantities questions the current practice of venerating works of ancient classical art as one of a kind. In the Roman Empire, marble statues of goddesses, athletes, heroes, emperors, and other idols were voluminously copied and placed around its territory, including the capital and colonies alike. A marble statue was not an object of aesthetic experience as a rare antique but a replaceable tool with instrumental value to fulfill their religious goals. Han's uncanny hybrid images of *Graces* and variations of Venus de Milo are thus intentionally reproduceable, which direct the audience to discover instrumental values of Venus statues. They are desirable or presented as desirable objects, strictly conditional on their anticipated consequences as signs of socially acceptable, desirable beauty, instead of focusing on intrinsic values—ideal beauty and aesthetic perfection—that were original intentions of creating a prototype of Venus as goddess of beauty in the ancient Hellenistic art.

III. Debbie Han's *Graces*: High Art or Popular Culture?

Han's next attempt to disquiet the concept of ideal beauty was the *Graces* series with Asian or Korean feminine bodies. *Graces* or *Three Graces* is an iconic group of three goddesses in the Greco-Roman tradition. In *Walking Three Graces* (2007) (Figure 6), three goddesses are walking arm-in-arm much like Korean school girls on the way home. They are talking to one another in a jovial manner. Han explains the

rationale behind *Graces* as follows:

The appropriation of female imagery in my work functions as a symbolic metaphor that addresses contemporary cultural dynamics and global social relations. In the black and white 'Graces' series the dissonance of Asian women's bodies hybridized with western classical goddess heads allegorically captures contemporary socio-cultural and political dynamics within the global context. It raises critical issues from art history, social values, and interracial relations in contemporary societies. These 'Graces' further challenge the stereotypical standardization of female beauty throughout high art to mass culture. Eschewing from the staged, idealized poses often seen in classical arts or the trendy silhouettes of contemporary mass media, the series depicts ordinary female nudes in everyday acts of life. They simultaneously embrace all the implications of human and sculpture, Asian and European, and past and present, ultimately transforming into a heterotopic reflection as perceived by the viewer.¹⁵



Fig. 6. Debbie Han, *Walking Three Graces*, 2007, LightJet Print, 220x150cm, Collection: The Museum of Photography, Seoul [한미사진미술관 (Hanmi Sajin Misulgwan)], Museum of Santa Barbara, and Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, Photograph by Sung Hun Ju © Debbie Han

The full-length images of three *Graces* are digitally created painting. According to Han, her mouse became her brush. She clicked it several million times to create the best quality of tones and shades, shadows and highlights, in black and white. *Seated Three Graces* in 2009 still presents issues of women's body in public and private space. It is my personal favorite. As Venus was often portrayed in her birth out of sea foams—shown in Botticelli or in Canova—Han's goddesses are depicted in the context of water—a public bathhouse in South Korea, a leisurely pastime for middle-aged women hanging out with friends and family members of the same gender. Unlike the Birth of Venus iconography or the Bath of Venus iconography where Venus is shown refreshing, an unwary creature in a private moment, three ladies in Han's *Seated Three Graces* are shown in an awkward place between public and private space where women became unguarded and comfortable with fellow women.

Han made a long journey over ten years with her goddess series in order to pursue

15. Debbie Han, Artist Statement, unpublished, 2015.

her question of how an individual's perception of self is transformed and influenced by social standards and premises. In her position as a minority citizen growing up in a diverse community of Los Angeles, she naturally assimilated into the mainstream Euro-American culture. When she arrived in Korea as an adult, she expected to experience the authentic culture and tradition of Korea, which is called "return to the homeland."¹⁶ Instead of encountering a pre-industrial, nature-loving, agrarian community as shown in traditional folk stories, Han observed the rigid system of art education and the prevalence of the westernized standard of beauty throughout the Korean society and Asian societies at large.

To transform one's own physical self into a model dictated by a social consensus is a global phenomenon. Certain ethnic communities follow their own model of beauty, but overall a Westernized look serves as the standard of beauty in most contemporary Asian countries. I would call it "Beauty in Trouble". In a world of virtual reality, anything can be manufactured and digitally manipulated. Manipulation of physical beauty is an obsession in modern society. Marina Abramovic's 1975 performance is entitled *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled* series have shown how arbitrary and unsettling the notion of physical beauty could be and also how brutal it is to impose an idea of conformity on women. Her masterpiece series mocks the old belief that eternal beauty is innate. Instead, beauty is copied, fabricated, appropriated, and often manufactured.

The entire world is obsessed with the idea of beauty, however this beauty is socially constructed. This statement may sound exaggerated, perhaps too generalized. According to sociologist, Heijin S. Lee, and other researchers of cultural studies, contemporary consumerist-oriented culture has prompted society and culture to be obsessed with standardized beauty.¹⁷ In visual and cultural studies of East Asia in general and Korea in particular, there are numerous studies about South Korean popular culture that adopted yet-developed plastic surgeries; the rise of idol and

16. William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1 no. 1 (1991), pp. 83–99.

17. Lee, "Beauty Between Empires," *Fashion and Beauty in the Time of Asia*. See also Yan Yan & Kim Bissell, "The Globalization of Beauty: How is Ideal Beauty Influenced by Globally Published Fashion and Beauty Magazines?" *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2014), pp. 194–214. Miya Elise Mizuta Lippit discusses the construction of a Japanese beauty, *bijin* in the Meiji period of Japan and the production of a national discourse on standards of Japanese beauty and art in *Aesthetic Life: Beauty and Art in Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: London Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), pp. 3–15. Korean society's discourse on "Mi-in" has become noticeable in the print culture of the 1980s and afterwards.

animation-manga culture imported from Japan has been expanded into the creation of highly artificial image of men and women in South Korea, particularly in popular culture.¹⁸

What Han brings up with her goddess series is that South Korean society's consensus of beauty has been influenced much by its powerful ally across the Pacific. A hybrid culture of Asian identity under the influence of American cultural hegemony is undeniably strong in Asian countries. As an artist with a bi-cultural background, Han reacted to this hybridity with a strong sensitivity and a critical voice after many years of living abroad in India, China, Japan, and Korea. As noted by many scholars of sociology and cultural studies, Asian American people tended to exist apart from the discourse of race. The 1992 L.A. Riots completely changed this attitude of racial exclusion of Korean Americans. Artists like Han who suffered from this tragedy of racial struggles have further developed sensitivity to racial differences within the U.S. and in their homelands. Sociologist Rubin Patterson explains this politico-economic system in the following manner¹⁹:

With color-blind policies in America today, school and residential segregation and white-black wealth gap are as great as they were during the days when raw Jim Crow laws and policies were conspicuously formulated and expressly implemented. A parallel exists at the international level. Wealth and technology inequality between the West and the South are greater today than in the early 1960s, [...]. While being "race-neutral", international financial and trade regimes that determine the global economy [...] have served to reproduce a national hierarchy for the global system. Due primarily to this parallel, the hierarchical status of racial-ethnic groups in America tends to correspond to the hierarchical status of nations in the global system. One may note the elevated status in past decades of South Korea-Korean Americans and in more recent years the status elevation of India-Asian Indian Americans.

In this regard, Han's perspective of questioning Asian identity and the current standard of ideal beauty could be put in the context of identity politics of racial-ethnic groups. In the nineteenth century, Charles Cordier (1827-1905) and other ethnographic sculptors were working on representation of non-European tribes and

18. For Korean popular culture and obsession with idols, young entertainers, see Ruth Holliday, Olive Cheung, Ji Hyun Cho, and David Bell, "Trading Faces: The 'Korean Look' and Medical Nationalism in South Korean Cosmetic Surgery Tourism," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2017), pp. 190–202; Youjeong Oh, "Cosme Road: K-beauty and the globalization of Myeong-dong," *Pop City: Korean Popular Culture and the Selling of Place* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 197–216.

19. Rubin Patterson, "Transnationalism: Diaspora–Homeland Development," *Social Forces*, vol. 84 (2006), pp. 1891–1907: quotations are from p. 1894.

groups.²⁰ In the tradition of ethnographic sculpture, non-European ethnic groups were shown at The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London and other world fairs. These exhibitions of human species laid out foundations of how to alienate Asian races as exotic others in the context of increasing imperial power of Britain.²¹ During this period, the study of indigenous physiognomy was praised as scientific progress and led to the national foundations of research centers in the form of museums and institutes.²² Meanwhile, literary imaginations often fortified scandalous images of indigenous peoples as depicted in magazines such as *Popular Science*.²³ The Musée de l'Homme was founded in 1937 by Paul Rivet. Its precedent, Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero, was conceived in 1878 for the Paris World Exposition. The American Museum of Natural History was established in 1869 with the support of Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., J. Pierpont Morgan, Joseph Choate, and William E. Dodge, Jr. Its golden age of expeditions in the 1890s included major field trips to the Pacific Northwest, Siberia, Outer Mongolia and the Gobi Desert, as well as to the North Pole by Franz Boas (1858-1942), Assistant Curator in the Department of Ethnology.

This attitude of examining the physiques of non-European races is also related to the understanding of human variations in the form of disabled or deformed bodies within European communities. Rosemarie G. Thomson has elaborated on the harsh examinations of physiognomic abnormalities in differing attitudes from ancient to modern times.²⁴ Juxtaposition of Asian physique with European counterparts was often meant to exude the superiority of the latter and to impose imperial rules on the subjects. It is important that this attitude about Asian peoples was not much different from attitudes towards animals from Asia or Africa.²⁵ "Ethnographic sculpture

20. For ethnographic artists, see Laure de Margerie, Édouard Papet et al., *Facing the Other: Charles Cordier (1827–1905), Ethnographic Sculptor* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004) for an exhibition held at the Musée d'Orsay on 15 March–12 June 1994.

21. Francesca Vanke, "Degrees of Otherness: The Ottoman Empire and China at the Great Exhibition of 1851," *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, edited by Jeffrey A. Auerbach and Peter H. Hoffenberg (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 191–206.

22. Jonathan R. Topham (ed.), "Focus: Historicizing 'Popular Science,'" *Isis*, vol. 100 (2009), pp. 310–368.

23. Graeme Tyler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

24. Rosemarie G. Thomson, "From Wonder to Error: Monsters from Antiquity to Modernity," *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Empire*, Pascal Blanchard et al. (eds.), (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), pp. 52–61; see also Rosemarie G. Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

25. Joseph Sramek, "Face Him Like a Briton": Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800–1875," *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48 (2006), pp. 659–680; For France, see Bernard Smith, *European*

introduced art into a new field, in the field of science and therefore of ideas ... it shows the beautiful in all its aspects and under all its climates,” wrote Gérard de Rialle in 1863.²⁶

South Korea is no longer a nation of a homogeneous ethnic group, but society of multi-races. As posited by Draudt, the imagination of a one-nation state called *dan-il minjok* is not sustained with a growing number of labor-based non-Korean immigrants and members of the marriage-based multiethnic families(*damunhwagajok*).²⁷ Han’s works challenges the ideal view of Korea’s ethno-racial purity. With artificial modifications of physiognomy voluntarily imposed on themselves through a surgical process, Korean citizens now bear a range of biogenic hierarchy: those conforming to the Westernized standard of beauty and those with unaltered body parts.

Do-ho Suh’s *Uniform* series grapples with the issue of social conformity. In *High School Uniform* (1997), one can see a row of the dark-colored, tailored jackets. There are ten types of uniforms from the artist’s kindergarten to secondary schools to military service in *Uni-form/s: Self-Portrait/s: My 39 Years* (2006). Thousands and thousands of students wore the same style of uniforms throughout childhood and young adulthood. The societal system in Korea put a heavy burden of conformity on citizens, men and women alike, by the society. In Suh’s works, the heads were intentionally omitted so that one can imagine numerous, distinctive, human figures in those uniforms. However, one can also imagine that the faces and the very thoughts within the head might be “uniform as results of wearing the same clothes, like anyone else you know, for critical school years. Likewise, the Pakistani artist Rashid Rana created an anonymous portrait of a Muslim woman properly covered with a burqa. But he defiantly constructed an ordinary image of a veiled woman with numerous photographs taken from pornographic magazines so that the sacred and the profane coexist in the least expected place. In that sense, an odd cohabitation of the sanctity and profanity is found in Han’s *Graces* series and Rashid Rana’s *Veil* series. Both artists keep their standards by their painstaking process of art making. Moreover, they

Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1860: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960); E. C. Spary, *Utopia’s Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

26, Margerie, Papet, et al., *Facing the Other*, p. 4.

27, Darcie Draudt, “South Korea’s National Identity Crisis in the Face of Emerging Multiculturalism,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2016), pp. 12–19.

retain a sense of humor in diverse cultural gestures such as Han's three goddesses seated in a public bath house in Korea (Figure 1).

A number of Korean artists have commented on the influence of Eurocentric heritage and authenticity of a cultural tradition. Mikyung Shin in London creates masterpiece vases from Korea, China, Japan, and European chinoiserie. However seductive and exquisite, nonetheless, they are carved of humble, impermanent soap. Mikyung Shin's Greek statues made of soap, ephemeral and vulnerable, would complement Han's goddess series of hybrid women—the fittest survivors.

Recently, the high demand of plastic surgery in South Korea was featured in the *New Yorker*. Patricia Marx called Seoul the “World-Capital of Plastic Surgery”.²⁸ *The New York Times* often features Korea as a destination of plastic surgery tourism.²⁹ *The Washington Post* carried another article on plastic surgery in Korea with a case study of Ji Yeo, a New York-based photographer who documented her plastic surgery experience in Seoul for an exhibition called “It Will Hurt A Little.”³⁰ Yeol Jung, on the other hand, approaches the issue of modified physiognomy using sutured body parts repositioned on a pig's head. *The Doctor* (2014) is a photograph of the artist as a plastic surgeon wearing a pig's head. *The Mask* (2014) is a single-channel video showing a staged process of plastic surgery on a pig's head. Younger artists like Ji Yeo or Yeol Jung considers the social phenomenon of plastic surgery as sources of creative projects. In Han's case, her approach with porcelain busts, bronze sculpture, and manipulated photographic images is much more laborious, ambitious, and deliberate. The painful issues of social conformity, ideology of a dominant group on minority groups, representation of power and inequality through forms of physical beauty, idealization of ethnic values are all mingled together in her goddess series journey. The artist has moved on to new projects of painting, but Han could resume the series at the point when these artificial Venuses start their family, foster children

28. Patricia Marx, “About Face: Why is South Korea the World's Plastic-Surgery Capital?” *The New Yorker*, (March 23, 2015), www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/23/about-face (accessed September 12, 2015).

29. Sang-hun Choe, “South Korea, Plastic Surgery Comes out of the Closet,” *The New York Times* (November 3, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/04/world/asia/in-south-korea-plastic-surgery-comes-out-of-the-closet.html> (accessed September 12, 2015); Alexandra Stevenson, “Plastic Surgery Tourism Brings Chinese to South Korea,” *The New York Times* (December 23, 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/24/business/international/plastic-surgery-tourism-brings-chinese-to-south-korea.html> (accessed September 12, 2015).

30. Ana Swanson, “Stunning Photos Show Why S. Korea Is the Plastic Surgery Capital of the World,” *Washington Post* (May 16, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wnk/wp/2015/05/16/stunning-photos-show-why-south-korea-is-the-plastic-surgery-capital-of-the-world/> (accessed September 12, 2015).

and soon become grandmothers, perhaps.

IV. Conclusion: Hybridity and Universality

In the historiography of art history, the appropriation of classical art for an ethnic issue is not strange. Hellenistic sculptors interacted with a new iconography of Buddhist statues in the Gandhara region in Central Asia. Renaissance painters and Old Masters were aware of citizens of the “other” parts of the globe.

Roman sculptors observed and created heroic figures of Germanic tribes in the late Roman Empire. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, painters encountered African traders or servants in European courts and recorded their images in the manner of Old Masters like Michelangelo, Rubens, or Velazquez. For example, in the portraiture of Juan de Pareja, Velazquez painted his own assistant who was an ethnic Moor in a grand-manner portraiture with enormous dignity and authority. Instead of being faithful to the examples of classical art, however, Debbie Han completely transformed the trope of *Graces* or *Venus de Milo* for the vernacular experience of women from different parts of the world. She recreated a group of unprecedented, dark-skinned, brown-skinned, or pale-skinned goddesses with physiognomic details and bodily gestures specific to a sitter’s own racial and ethnic identity. Han’s very action of intervention in historiography of classical art is audacious and rebellious. She intervened the master narrative of classical art, an epitome of the Western civilization derived from the Hellenistic tradition with her own celebration of hybridity and manipulation, both in content and form. Nonetheless, the hybridity Han sought and accomplished is not subject to deviation or periphery in the discourse of classical art. Han created new classics, a vision for multi-ethnic, multi-racial communities in the age of diaspora and reverse migration.

In the history of contemporary South Korean art, many feminist artists of that era examined the relationship between the body and gender norms. For Asian American artists, Nikki S. Lee has also worked with her own image as Korean American artists in New York in her series of the Yuppie Project, the Lesbian Project, the Punk Project, and several others from 1997-2001.³¹ Most importantly, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Permutations* (1976), a 10-minute silent film can be alluded to Han’s *Three*

31. Jessica Rachel Gustafson, “Face to Face: Personification, Identity, and Self-Portraiture in the Early Work of Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee,” MA thesis (Washington DC, American University, 2014).

Graces.³² In the flickering images of Theresa and her sister, Bernadette, one perceives a combination of male and female bodies with heads of these two sisters. As permutation connotes a way of rearranging a set of things—primarily rearrangement of existent elements, Han’s hybridity in *Graces* series depends on existent and familiar elements—familiar body types and physiognomic features of Asian women. They are not model of enhanced, artificial beauty on glossy digital screens. With emphasis on manipulated bodies of women, Han’s works are part of the development of feminist and other bodily representation by Korean women artists and artists of non-western ethnic origins. South Korean critics’ reception of Han’s work also related her practices to the development of discourse about feminist arts in South Korea. However, the strive for seeking beauty as documented in Han’s works is not confined to any single culture or ethnic group. Her hybrid figures in *Graces* are examples of synecdoche referring to the contemporary obsession with likeness and photography (any manipulated imagery) as vehicles to explore constructions of human identity, which is universal and pervasive beyond geographic boundaries.

■ Keywords(주제어)

hybridity(혼종성), universality(보편성), ethnic sculpture(에스닉 조각), homeland(홈랜드), diaspora(디아스포라), standard of beauty(미적기준), masterpiece(걸작품)

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32. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (South Korean, 1951–1982), *Permutations*, 1976, black and white, 16 mm film on video, silent; 10 min., Collection of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation, Copyright: Regents of the University of California, Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York, A recent viewing event, *Theresa Hak kyung Cha: Displacements* was held at the Cleveland Museum of Art from January 30 to April 8, 2018 in the Video Project Room | Gallery 224B.

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Abstract

Debbie Han is a contemporary artist based in Los Angeles. In this essay, I would like to elucidate the meaning of her photo series *Graces*, created in 2004, in the context of the hybridity and multiculturalism of contemporary art. In my reading, Han's own life experience as a "1.5-generation" Korean-American growing up in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s plays a crucial role when comparing her works with those of other immigrant women artists in the U.S. Her *Graces* series can be read as cultural icons of contemporary Asian societies' predilection for the Western standard of beauty forcefully imposed on Asian women—and gradually accepted as desirable values internalized by women themselves. By contextualizing Han's works in the tradition of Korean avant-garde art, concepts of manipulated beauty and conformity, and Korean feminist art, this paper posits that Han's works tactfully—or sometimes humorously—comment on this pan-Asian phenomenon of corrected beauty, by means of surgical interventions on the one hand, and by the visual language of her rediscovered heritage of the homeland on the other.

데비 한은 로스엔젤레스에서 활동하는 시각미술 작가이다. 2004년부터 만들어 온 고대 그리스-로마 미술의 여신, 비너스 혹은 삼미의 여신(Graces) 시리즈를 분석하여 현대미술의 혼종성과 다문화주의의 맥락에서 데비 한의 작품이 주장하는 의미와 상징성에 대해서 밝혀 보고자 한다. 데비 한은 한국에서 나고 자란 한국적 페미니스트 미술 작가와는 달리 소위 1.5세대라고 일컬어지는 재미한인 이주민으로 1980년대와 1990년대 다문화주의에 대한 욕구가 높아지는 미국의 로스엔젤레스에서 성장하였다. 이런 감수성을 기반으로 데비 한의 작품은 미국에서 활동 중인 다른 트랜스내셔널 여성 미술 작가들의 작품과 비교해 볼 수 있다. 데비 한의 작품, 미의 여신 시리즈는 아시아 사회가 서구화된 미의 기준을 편향적으로 선호하는 태도를 상징적으로 보여주는 문화의 아이콘이라고 볼 수 있다. 처음에는 서구화된 미의 기준이 외부에서 주어지는 자극이나 원칙으로 다가오지만 점차 아시아의 여성들은 제2차 세계대전 이후 대중문화, 미국식 문화 헤게모니의 전파 등으로 인해서 서구화된 미의 기준을 내재화하고 욕망의 대상으로 생각하게 되었다. 심지어는 성형수술과 같은 인위적인 방법으로 신체 일부를 수정하여 미의 기준에 맞도록 스스로를 재창조하였는데 데비 한의 작품들은 역설적으로 아시아인의 신체 특성을 갖추거나 과장적인 눈, 코, 입을 가진 미의 여신들을 청동조각, 청자, 백자, 나전칠기, 그리고 드로잉 같은 사진 작품 등으로 표현하였다. 향상된 미적 기준 혹은 수정되어야 하는 미적 기준 등의 현상에 관한 데비 한의 비판적 관점이 스스로 재발견한 홈랜드(고국)의 전통적인 미술 기법을 통해서 시각화되었다고 볼 수 있다.