

# Contemporary Visual Arts

## Rain Doesn't Fall for Nothing

Monday 3 to Wednesday 12 August (11.00am - 4.00pm)

Penny School Gallery, Creative Industries Centre, Kingston College  
Richmond Road, Kingston KT2 5BP

**ADMISSION FREE**

A thousand drops  
hanging from a dead branch  
The rain did not fall for nothing.

-Ko Un-

Two billion years ago, cyanobacteria oxygenated the atmosphere and powerfully disrupted life on Earth. But they didn't know it. Two thousand years ago, Romans aggravated soil erosion and flooding by cutting forests to build ships to fight Carthaginians. They didn't know it either. Quite unintentionally, changes in human ways often affect nonhuman nature. The arrival of the automobile, for instance, eliminated huge flocks of sparrows that once fed on the horse manure littering every street. To create a world means to destroy one or many, to transform the cosmological dimensions of being-in-the-world.

We are the first species that has become a planet-scale influence and is aware of that reality. We have learnt that the historically accumulated, global environmental effects of a growing human population, technological innovation, and economic development have become inseparable from the Earth's geoprocesses. We have entered an epoch unlike any in human history, say scientists – the Anthropocene, where the climate is tipping out of control due to mining, deforestation and the burning of oil, gas and coal. We have begun to understand our influence upon nature but we now need to learn how to restore our balance with nature.

What are the roots of our environmental crisis? Are we aware that human ecology is primarily conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny - that is, by religion? Are we, subsequently, prepared to radically rethink our deeply inbuilt spiritual axioms and explore alternative paradigms? Taking its title from a poem by South Korea's most cherished poet Ko Un, described by Allen Ginsberg as "a force of nature, a combination of Buddhist cognoscente, passionate political libertarian, and naturalist historian", the present exhibition invites us to consider pivotal questions about our global impact as a species, whilst reflecting on how today's world-building processes can be re-imagined by employing non-aggressive, life-affirming values and ways of co-existence derived from Buddhist and Eastern spirituality. Using different media, Korean artists **HaYoung Kim, Sangjin Kim, Sea Hyun Lee, Sejin Park** and **Meekyoung Shin** probe and question the problems inherent to the Western perception of reality, as well as its interpretation and representation through their different sensibility and otherness, which can be a valued source of renewal for our understanding of being-with-the-world and being-on-earth.

In his seminal paper *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis* (1975), Lynn White denounced Christianity, especially in its Western form, as the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of linear, cumulative and progressive time, but also a remarkable story of creation, with God creating light and darkness, the heavenly bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes, then Adam and Eve. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his supremacy over them. God planned all of this overtly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any other purpose but to serve man's purposes. And, even if man's body is made of clay, he is not part of nature: he is



made in God's image. Christianity, in contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends. Furthermore, in Antiquity every tree, every spring, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit: centaurs, fauns, and mermaids. Before cutting a tree, mining a mountain, or damming a stream, man had to pacify the spirit in charge. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature without any concern for its reactions. Of course, we live now in the post-Christian age, but the essence of our acts and thinking often remains incredibly similar to that of the past. Our daily habits of action, for example, are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which was unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity, or to the Orient. It is rooted in the Judeo-Christian theology, which proves that we continue to live today mostly in a context of Christian axioms. Our science and technology have also developed out of Christian attitudes toward man's understanding of nature, from Roger Bacon and Galileo, to Leibniz and Newton. Therefore more science and more technology is not necessarily the answer to the global crisis facing humanity now; rather we have to (re)sensitize ourselves to the ground beneath our feet, the things around us, the cosmos above - and look for a more holistic worldview that can address the interconnected problems of the current age.

Buddhism, shamanism and Eastern spirituality in general may be the answer. From its origins in India about 500 years before the birth of Christ, Buddhism spread throughout Asia and is now exerting an ever-increasing influence on Western culture. Idealists such as Schopenhauer, Romantics like Thoreau, the composer Wagner, architect and social reformer Rudolf Steiner and the artist Joseph Beyus – all acknowledged the influence of Buddhism upon their work and thought.


According to Buddhist philosophy, the sense of separation between nature and humans (matter and mind), promoted by the traditional approaches to science and the pervasive Cartesian worldview in the West, manifests itself in the form of the Three Poisons: greed, ill will, and delusion. Examples of these poisons can be seen everywhere in the current ecological crisis. Greed rooted in untrammelled economic growth and consumerism is the secular religion of advanced industrial societies. Similarly, the military-industrial complex promotes ill will, fear, and terror, while propaganda and advertising systems are well known for deceiving the public about everything under the sun.

Two other concepts form the bedrock of Buddhist thinking are interdependence and impermanence. Interdependence refers to the idea of 'oneness of nature', with every being and every aspect of reality reflecting and containing all others within it. The concept is vividly conveyed through the well-known image of Indra's Net with a jewel at each node, metaphorically portraying the universe as an infinite relational field of phenomena and entities. As the author of the term 'interbeing', the Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh said: "When we look at a flower, we may think it is different from non-flower things. But when we look more deeply, we see that everything in the cosmos is in that flower. Without all of the non-flower elements - sunshine, clouds, earth, minerals, heat, rivers and consciousness - a flower cannot be." Organisms are just configurations of energy, moments in a network of relationships, knots in a web of life.

The doctrine of impermanence affirms the transience of all phenomena and, implicitly, as contemporary ecologists and philosophers agree, the nature's state of constant flux rather than stable equilibrium. Since Darwin, it has been understood that flexibility and receptivity to change define all natural beings and that all species are subject to mutation at any time. This applies to systems at all levels of the natural hierarchy, all the way from the smallest unit of life, genes, right up to the higher systems, communities, and ecosystems. Moreover, there is also an analogy between natural and spiritual evolution. According to early Buddhist teachings, there is a close relationship between the progressive degradation of the natural world and the deterioration in conduct and psychological makeup of its inhabitants. Dharma, the cosmic law and order, is linked with social prosperity through water.

The appearance of Buddha and his teachings is also described as "dharma rain...that showers moisture upon all the dry and withered beings". When rains are abundant there is prosperity on Earth, and this enables people to follow Dharma - moral and lawful life. When uncontrolled lust, unjustifiable greed and wrong values become widespread in society, timely rain does not fall. In times of drought and distress, everything suffers including relations between humans and the human ability to live according to Dharma - the order that makes life and universe possible. Rain doesn't fall for nothing.





**HaYoung Kim**'s interests lie at the confluence of science, technology and consumerism. Working primarily with painting on polyester canvas and drafting film, often incorporated into animation and installation, Kim aims to explore how the ubiquitous forces of digital technologies and the ever-expanding consumption of goods are affecting the human brain, subjecting our minds and bodies to changes that we do not yet fully understand. Her subjects are playfully portrayed with vibrant rainbow colours of fun and humour, inspired from advertising, yet the dark effects of the excesses of capitalism are evident in the metamorphosis of human bodies, with the organs under attack by outside forces and the shell insidiously occupied by passing intensities. The artist is asking: what is happening, are we about to lose our identity, sensitivity and sense of balance? Is this the future of human evolution?

**Sangjin Kim** uses Eastern symbols, sound and time to explore the act of meditation, difference in its various dimensions and the infinite process of cognition involving continuing reassessment of values and readjustment to cosmic cycles. Meditation is a kinetic and sound installation consisting of a series of 'moktaks' (wooden fish) - a Buddhist meditation tool used by monks usually involving the recitation of sutras and mantras. Kim displaces the human element of monks with a mechanical device which taps on the wooden percussion instrument repeatedly. The wooden fish symbolizes wakeful attention, wealth and abundance, and sometimes it is also used in prayers for rain.

**Sea Hyun Lee** paints mesmerizing landscapes entirely in red on white. Mountains, islands, trees, waterfalls and pagodas painted in crimson red emerge from blank oceans of white as scenes from a high-fantasy novel or an everlasting utopia. They resemble Chinese landscapes painted on silk scrolls on which Korean landscape painting was once based. However, Lee skilfully incorporates the Asian tradition of flat landscape with traditional Western perspective, thus bringing an uncanny effect congruent with the real subject of his work - the Demilitarized Zone, known as the DMZ, one of the most symbolically loaded landscapes in the world. Sometimes referred to as the last front of the Cold War, the buffer zone between South and North Korea could be described as the most natural and the most denaturalized landscape imaginable. The land is scarred by landmines and abandoned tunnels, and although there are quiet signs of life, people are not visible anywhere. Drawn from Lee's memories of military service, when he surveyed the Korean DMZ at night through infrared goggles, these paintings invoke a lost natural world, untouched by urban development, and speak about the pervasive consequences of economics and war.

Drawn to the notion of transcendence and time, **Sejin Park** is captivated by the existential questions posed by Paul Gauguin: "Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going?" Her works appear as an Eden of history where motives are seen to be pure, actions are seen to remain innocent of evil consequence, and freely thinking, moving (or floating) and dreaming men and women thrive amidst luxuriant nature. However, the artist's vantage point is in a disquieting present that turns the painting into a vehicle of a nostalgia for innocence, raising yet another question: "Where Are We Now?" The ruins are conspicuous reminders of lost civilisations, whilst old fashion objects and traditional artefacts speak of memory and legacy that we may not be able to pass on to future generations. Park also uses Buddhist symbols and Mandala designs to express this more burning than ever aspiration for cosmic harmony and connection with the consciousness of the universe.

**Meekyoung Shin** is renowned for her recreation of Eastern and Western reliefs in soap, constantly expressing translations of the religious, historical and cultural differences between



the East and the West. In the West, the notion of permanence, the defiance of change and death are highly-praised values, both in life and art; in the East, the leading traditional value has been transience. Shin remodels precious Chinese porcelain vases, vaunted classical Greek sculptures and Buddha statuettes out of soap, showing us the pure beauty of this impermanent material that evokes the elision of meaning across time and space: it is slippery and vulnerable, yet a telling reminder of our hubris, of the fact that our history could easily be washed away. The contrast between the astonishing skill, work and value contained within Shin's precious objects and the fragile and transient nature of soap addresses issues of authenticity, authority and de-contextualisation, whilst revealing hidden layers of modern politics and ideologies in the global context.

### **Simona Nastac, Exhibition Curator**

Simona Nastac is a London-based curator and critic. She is committed to socio-critical art and context responsive practices, forever looking for unexpected outcomes able to shake the world. In a gentle way. She has curated high-level exhibitions for biennials, festivals and galleries in London, New York, Seoul, Saint, Petersburg, Prague and Bucharest, working with leading contemporary artists Hito Steyerl, Guy Ben-Ner, Jordan Wolfson, Victor Man and Dan Perjovschi amongst others. From 2006 to 2013, she was Head of Arts at the Romanian Cultural Institute in London, where she managed a wide range of art projects in collaboration with Tate Modern and Britain, Victoria and Albert Museum, Camden Arts Centre and the Royal Academy of Arts.

## **Artists**



### **HaYoung Kim**

#### **Porridge Cyborg 1 , 2014**

Acrylic on polyester canvas  
86 x 81 cm

Image courtesy of the artist

**HaYoung Kim** (b. 1983) graduated from the Royal Academy in 2010 and has reached international critical acclaim winning the major Jerwood Prize and the Solomon J Solomon Prize in 2010, and The Dunoyer de Segonzac Award in 2011. Selected solo exhibitions: Characterless Characters, Gallery Absinthe, Seoul (2014), New Paintings, 43 Inverness Street Gallery, London (2014), Virtualium,

Gallery Hyundai, Seoul (2013), Eat All You Can, Hoxton Art Gallery, London (2012). Recent group exhibitions include: Dimension(s) Variable, The Waiting Room, London (2015); New Visions New Voices, National Museum of Contemporary Art Korea, Seoul (2014); Ironic Mythologies, Amelia Johnson Contemporary, Hong Kong (2012) and Pleasure Principle, Hoxton Art Gallery, London (2012). HaYoung Kim lives and work in London.





## **Sangjin Kim**

### **Meditation, 2013**

Moktak, speaker, sitting mat, mixed media  
Image courtesy of the artist and Hanmi Gallery

### **Sangjin Kim** (b. 1979)

completed his BFA at the Seoul National University and an MA Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, London. His work has been recently featured internationally at the Dreaming Machines, Strategic Project of the

4th Moscow International Biennale for Young Art, NCCA (Moscow) and at Un Certain Regard, Kumho Museum (Seoul). Selected group exhibitions include: Robot Essay, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul (2015), Duft der Zeit, Kumho Museum, Seoul (2014), Location of Reality, Hanmi Gallery, London (2013) and Situated Senses 02:30cm of Obscurity, The Old Police Station, London (2012). The artist is represented by Hanmi Gallery in London and Seoul.



## **Sea Hyun Lee**

### **Between Red 178, 2013**

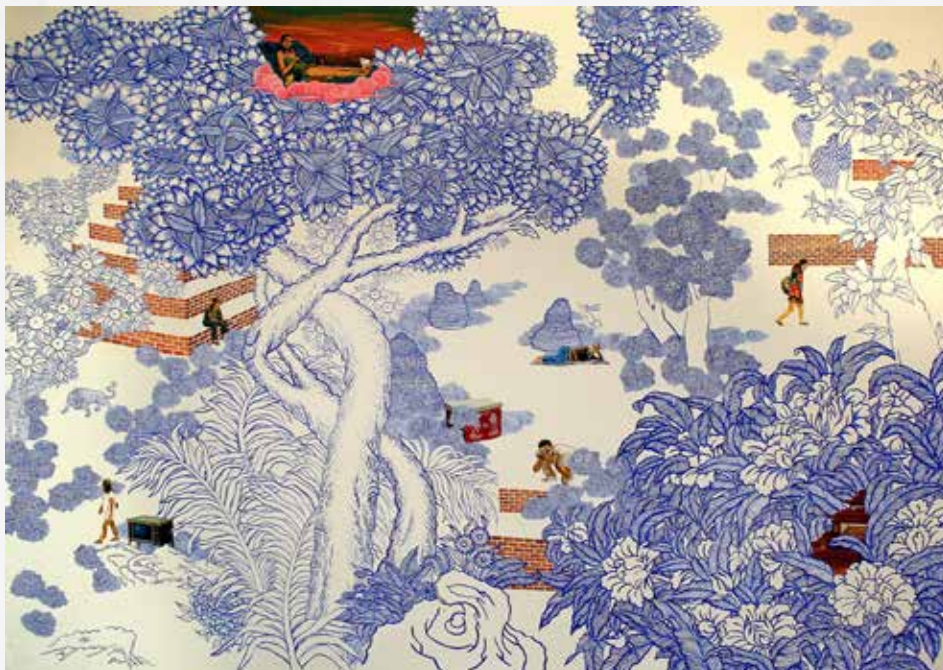
Oil on canvas, 100 x 100cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and Union Gallery

### **Sea Hyun Lee** (b.1967)

studied at Hongik University, Seoul and Chelsea College of Art and Design, London. His works have been pursued by prominent art institutions, including the Uli Sigg Collection and the Burger Collection in Zurich, All Visual Arts and Union Gallery in London, Bank of America and Seoul Museum of Art. He has recently held solo exhibitions at Nicholas Robinson Gallery, New York; Harewood

House, Leeds, UK; Aspex, Portsmouth, UK and The Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul. Selected international group exhibitions include Future Pass, National Taiwan Museum of Art (2012), Plastic Garden, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai (2010), A Different Similarity, Museum Bochum, Germany (2010) and City Net Asia, Seoul Museum of Art (2009) amongst others. The artist is represented by Union Gallery, London.





## Sejin Park

### Woods of Nostalgia, 2009

Acrylic on canvas,  
200 x 145 cm

Image courtesy of the artist

### Sejin Park (b.1974)

is a Fine Art graduate of Sungshin Women's University in Seoul and holds an MA in Printmaking from the same university. Her work was featured in over five group exhibitions in Seoul from 2001 to 2009. In 2010 she moved to London and started

to exhibit together with artists from the ongoing international touring project Circus Terminal, in established art galleries and less conventional spaces. These include Notting Hill Gallery, London; Impaktes Visuals Gallery, Barcelona; Chateau Corbin, Liverdun, France and Gallery Studio B, Philadelphia, USA. Park's paintings and drawings are in several private collections. She lives and works now in Seoul.



## Meekyoung Shin

### Buddhas, 2011

Soap, fragrance, wooden  
crates, variable dimensions

Image courtesy of the artist

### Meekyoung Shin (b.1967)

studied at Seoul National University and Slade School of Fine Art. In 2013 was nominated for the Korean Artist Prize and in 2015 won the Prudential Eye Award for sculpture. Shin has held solo exhibitions internationally, most recent including: The National Centre for Craft and Design, Lincolnshire (2014), National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul (2013) and the

large-scale equestrian sculpture titled Written in Soap, presented in Cavendish Square, London, since 2012. Selected group shows include: the Museum of Art and Design, New York, and the 2013 Asian Art Biennial in Taiwan, IKON Gallery (Birmingham), Yorkshire Sculpture Park (both 2013) and Saatchi Gallery, London. Her works are found in collections such as the British Art Council, Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the National Museum Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.