

Connections: establishing spiritual and cultural connections

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Connections:

Establishing spiritual and cultural connections

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Documentation**

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ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Connections: Establishing spiritual and cultural connections

This thesis and the accompanying body of work explores a means of establishing a connection with my family and the culture of Korea by interrogating the many rituals and practices which influence the daily lives of Koreans.

I migrated from Korea to Australia over ten years ago. Over that time I have experienced a sense of dislocation and a certain ‘loss of self’. This encouraged me to search for ways, through my art practice to develop lasting and continuing connections to the culture of my birth.

The culture of Korea has been influenced over centuries by three main religions; Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism. These three religions have been fundamental in creating the culture and the plethora of rituals and practices which now infiltrate all aspects of Korean life.

By recreating and re-contextualizing family and religious rituals and practices through the lens of my own experience I have attempted to create an ongoing working process which is meditative and ritualistic in its construction.

I find this research has enlightened me to practices within my family and culture which I had often overlooked or taken for granted. I feel enriched with the knowledge I have gained. Furthermore, by establishing a spiritual and intellectual methodology in the creation of my work I know that I have achieved the connection which was the aim of my research. It has left me with a legacy I can pursue in future work.

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INTRODUCTION

Through my art practice, my aim is to establish a spiritual and cultural connection with my country of birth by researching the religious rituals and practices that are fundamental and widespread in Korean life.

Korea is rich in rituals and practices which have been derived from the many religions that have been fundamental in creating the unique culture which exists today. Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism are the three main religions which have been instrumental in creating this unique culture. These religions have had a major impact on the social character, the religious beliefs and the psyche of Koreans, they have had a profound and lasting effect on Korean culture and each have left a legacy of rituals and practices which have become an integral part of Korean life.

As I am part of the Asian diaspora, coming to Australia from Korea over a decade ago, I have experienced feelings of cultural and emotional displacement. These commonly encountered feelings have encouraged me to investigate ways to connect to the culture that shaped my life before I migrated to Australia.

Hossein Valamanesh speaks of the ‘gap’ in relationship to migration and the “therapeutic work that we have to do to close up the wound opened when we migrated”.¹ This ‘gap’ for me is indefinable but I know that the stronger I develop connections with my family and culture the less important the gap becomes. This is the motivator and possibly the therapy behind my research.

My research focuses on the rituals and practices which take place within the family, as that is from where most of my experiences and memories are derived. Two periods during my research, when I travelled back to Korea, have given me further insights gathered from my parents. This has helped me understand much of the family background for my research. It is from this perspective that I attempt to construct a spiritual and cultural connection with the country that I left behind many years ago.

¹ H Valamanesh and P Carter, *Hossein Valamanesh*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1996, p. 11.

I will attempt to do this by recreating the many traditional rituals and practices that I have experienced, re-contextualizing them so that they can be experienced in a contemporary context, thus allowing me to reconnect to a traditional culture from a western viewpoint. I have framed my research around the rituals and practices with which I am most familiar and ones which have been most prevalent in my life. Certain rituals, such as the prayer ritual and lantern ceremony in the Buddhist temple are important, as are practices and rituals that exist within my family, including practices related to ancestor rites and the observance of certain rites of passage.

This paper will consist of five main chapters. In the first I begin by providing a brief personal account of my sense of displacement and my need to establish a spiritual and cultural connection, explaining my own sense of isolation and ‘loss of self’ which I experienced when I first migrated to Australia from Korea ten years ago. This chapter will document all the work that led up to my investigations and was fundamental in providing the background which enabled me to develop my research.

In chapter two I will introduce the religious history of Korea, the three main religions and belief systems, Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism that have been responsible for shaping the unique culture of contemporary Korea and how the practices and rituals that have evolved from these religions now play an important role in Korean life. What is very interesting is that the very nature of what it is that makes Koreans Korean is directly related to this culture which has developed over thousands of years. This chapter will discuss many of the rituals and practices detailing the ones which are relevant to this paper and ones which have had a strong emotional and spiritual impact on me.

In chapter three I discuss the development of my research and the journey necessary to discover a personal way to create a connection. I explain the development through many stages as well as discuss the reasoning and methodology behind my work. The research was in response to my sense of dislocation and my need to ‘connect’ but also to my involuntary desire to produce work which agreed with my sensibilities and my aesthetics.

Chapter four introduces a number of artists who have migrated or been removed from their culture. This need of connection to culture, family or place is a vital driving force with many people who have been displaced and is expressed in many uniquely diverse ways. These artists have a contemporary vision in regards to their interpretation of place, identity or the culture from where they originated. The uniqueness of their vision has been inspirational and this has encouraged me to develop work that has taken me to new levels of understanding.

In chapter five I will present the major pieces of work which have resulted from my research and which were exhibited in COFAspace in 2014. These works will be discussed in detail describing the methodology and the materials used along with an explanation of the motivation. How each of these works are related to various rituals and how they parody or empathize with these rituals, creating a spiritual and cultural connection will be explained.

Chapter 1

A Personal Journey

1.1 Identifying the Indefinable

To understand the genesis of my investigation it is necessary to understand the pathway and reasoning which has led me to this point. When I initially migrated to Australia I had a great deal of trouble adapting to a new way of life and a new culture, it was emotionally troubling to be disconnected from my life and family in Korea. I very much wanted to live in this country and to make it my permanent home but at the same time I wanted to feel at peace with myself and not constantly have a hunger for some indefinable thing that I missed about Korea. On the other hand I did not want to forget and lose touch with the country of my birth. “Between chronic nostalgia and the ideology that presumes that the migrant leaves everything behind, there must be another way...”² This other way for me is through my art practice. It has become a way for me to reconcile these disparate and conflicting emotions which have bothered me and have been central to my sense of dislocation.

My first few years in Australia were spent adapting to my new country, learning the language and attempting to culturally integrate. I did this with a great passion and joy, feeling that this new country had so much to offer me. I was very busy absorbing new information and experiencing many things that were unfamiliar to me. I simply attributed my feelings of dislocation to the fact that I was attempting to adapt to a new way of life and things would improve with time. I was also traveling back to Korea on a regular basis, which made me something of a cultural nomad and certainly didn't help me 'settle' in my adopted country. The sense of dislocation that I was feeling was only part of the story, I suspected with time I would overcome this feeling. I felt the bigger issue was a certain fear of losing my connection, emotionally and spiritually with my family and culture.

I was feeling unsettled and homesick, and there was an emptiness in part of me that I couldn't understand or fulfill. I also had a sense of 'loss of self' which undermined my confidence and my ability to appreciate my present circumstances. These feelings were in

² *ibid.*, p.12.

no way related to any loss of identity as I was comfortable with who I was, my abilities and my goals, this I knew was something different. It was the emptiness in me that I knew was directly related to the need to establish a certain 'connection' with my Korean heritage.

When I use the word connection I do not mean it in the traditional sense. I refer more to the deeper spiritual and cultural connotation of creating a connection. I knew I had to identify a means to achieve this knowing, it was fundamental in my development and emotional wellbeing.

It is easy and sometimes glib to say that 'I miss my family' or 'I miss Korean culture'.

These are obvious statements and natural with the immigrant diaspora. Exactly what it was that I missed about my family and the culture was the question I asked myself. My research towards this goal took me down many paths and developed in me a greater understanding of the uniqueness of the Korean culture and as a consequence created a deeper empathy with my family. The complexity, richness and uniqueness that exists in Korean life today is a product of thousands of years of cultural development. How that manifests itself is often expressed in the rituals and practices which pervade every aspect of Korean life. This realization focused my investigations and gave me a way to connect to my previous life so that I could reconcile the past and the present. My art practice would be the conduit that would facilitate this process.

1.2 Establishing Connections

The desire to connect to my cultural heritage and to express that connection led me to draw direct reference from my diaries as a way for me to develop a starting point for my investigations. It should be noted here that my early works produced prior to my MFA did not focus on rituals, religious beliefs or practices. They were simply a way of establishing the mechanism which would lead me to my present research and for that reason are fundamentally important.

I have always kept diaries both in Korea and Australia. But interestingly since coming to Australia the notes that I have kept are more about remembering. They contain feelings and emotions about home and many of the things that I missed and coveted. I discovered that

much of the structure of family life was intricately woven around many of the rituals and practices that we experienced throughout the year.

It was only from delving back into these diaries and the subsequent accompanying memories that I became aware of the number and importance of the many rituals and practices which are played out in Korea today. Many of these exist within the family structure while many have found their way into the broader culture from the many religions which have played fundamental roles in shaping Korean beliefs and practices. These include the early folk religions such as Shamanism through to Buddhism and Confucianism. All of these have played major roles in establishing what we have come to understand as a Korean culture and identity in the twenty first century, even if the roots and connections are sometimes subtle and obscured by the passing of time.

1.3 Developing a Language

Initially my diaries allowed me to revisit the past and opened a portal that gave me the opportunity to experience rituals and practices that in many ways I had overlooked. I realized I had a wealth of information already written about my family and events surrounding my life. I explored the idea that events and memories should be expressed in the form of paintings. Secondly I referred back to my father's calligraphy and used those memories as a way to establish a visual starting point. In the first instance I expressed specific days from my diary onto small canvases using a brush to write the words. This process eventually led me to develop my own personal script.



Fig 1: Sun Hyung Lee, (examples of my fathers calligraphy derived from Confucius sayings) 2009

As my work developed I layered the script, painting over and over so that the story would become intentionally illegible becoming "...more of a suggestive process to stimulate the imagination".³ Much as the written word or signature is often indecipherable, the obscurity of the text clouded within layers allows room for creative interpretation thus hiding the story and keeping the secret. Each canvas in this series represented a specific day. So the color and composition were a response to a particular day or event. The other source of inspiration during this time came from my father's calligraphy, ironically because I was painting text onto canvas my father's calligraphy took on a new significance.

³ D Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2010, p.156.

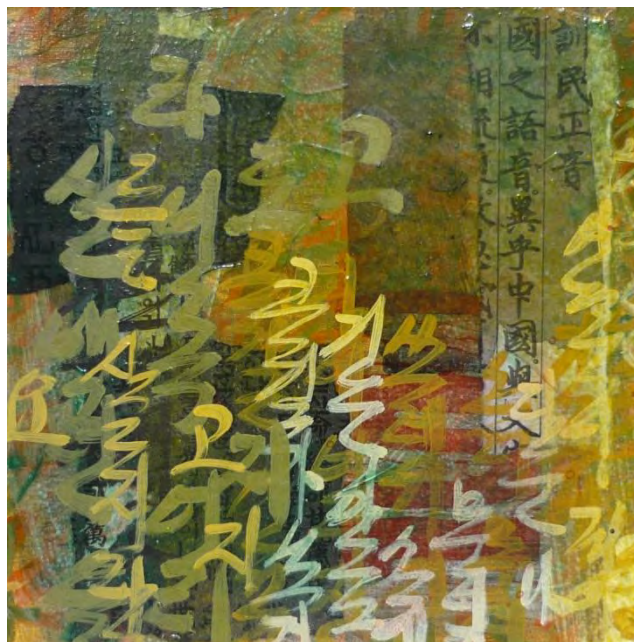


Fig 2: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Autumn 1995(4)*, 2010, acrylic, hanji on canvas, 30x30cm

The next series of paintings I embarked upon combined both these influences with larger paintings expressing the calligraphic style to a greater degree.

Because I tend to diarize my life the written language has been one of the key threads in my early work and is instrumental in the continued relationship with my culture and country.

This dedication to record my recollections and experiences has been fundamental in preserving the threads that connect me to my country of birth. By transferring my writing onto canvas I have developed a very personal script which is an adaption of the Korean language called *Hangul* but also one which is greatly influenced by *calligraphy*.⁴

⁴ J B Elliot, *The Embodied Image*, Catalogue, Art Museum, Princeton University, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, USA, 2008, p.251.

“Calligraphy was developed in China, with the passage of time authors separated the significance of the beauty of calligraphy from its function, they determined the independent artistic value of calligraphy. The step to separate form from content was a step that had to be taken before calligraphy could be perceived as a purely aesthetic phenomenon”.

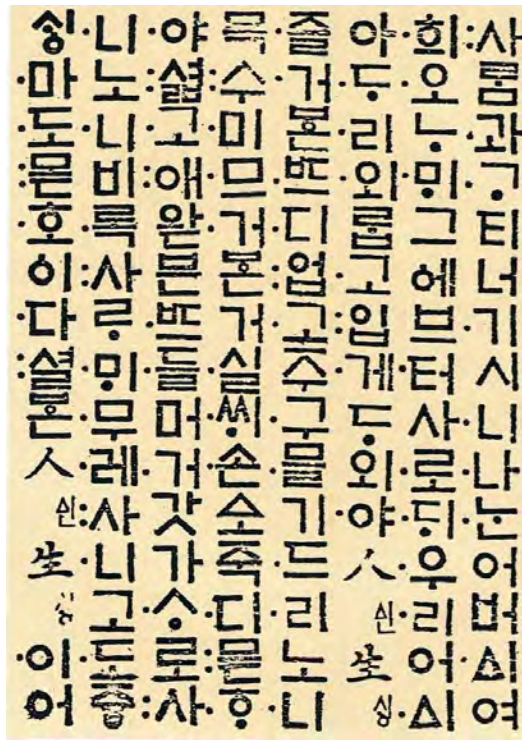


Fig3: The term Hangul refers to the Korean alphabet.

Shown here is *Sokpo Sangjol* to which the

origin of hangul can be traced. Early, Choson Dynasty.

Korean Heritage, Hollym Int Corp, 2006, Korean Overseas and Cultural and Information Service

1.4 Tradition and Memory

The practice of using ‘traditional folding screens’ in the home is widespread in Korea.

These screens are a type of free standing furniture consisting of frames or panels with either silk or paper coverings, these are usually painted with themes such as landscape, birds and flowers, mythical landscapes and calligraphy. They are used on special occasions, to divide room space offering privacy or simply for decoration. The screens usually contain images from Korean folk painting along with writings, poems or occasionally, just calligraphy. It is the memory of these screens which started to influence my work. I was still using my diaries as a starting point to recall significant memories from my life in Korea but now began to format my work to simulate the Korean screen.



Fig 4: Traditional Korean folding screen depicting landscape with text (Korean Monthly Art,2010,04,P162)

Because of my interest in the Korean screen the scale of my work increased, as did my script which took on a more calligraphic style. These paintings were very expressionistic but contained I believe, an undeniable Korean sensitivity. By using the traditional screen as the basic format for my painting I felt that I had established a means to develop connections between two different cultures.



Fig 5: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Spring Waltz*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 168x213cm

The calligraphic paintings led me onto the next stage of my development. I moved from painting onto canvas to working with paper. I continued to write but not with conventional materials, instead I 'wrote' with scissors so that I could 'cut out my words' as another way of expressing myself. The process of either cutting or using a brush provided a similar experience in the decision making and execution.

The work that developed I called '1000 Wishes'. I believe this was a seminal work for me and a point of departure in my aesthetic and working process. '1000 Wishes' reflects many of the sentiments that I had pondered over and would continue to ponder over as one who is displaced emotionally and culturally. The work is a contemporary reflection upon the Buddhist Paper Prayer Ritual and the Shaman idea of the '*Wishing Tree*'.⁵



Fig 6: Wishing Tree, 2012, installation view, *Mediator between Heaven and Earth-Shaman*, National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul

⁵ Wishing Tree; Village Ancestral Rite at Samsindang

Since ancient times, the people of the village would gather under the shade of the tree at Samsindang, hold friendly conversation, and make their wishes. They believe that if they made wishes for birth and prosperity of their children, then the tree, filled with the divine spirit, would help grant their petitions. The hundreds of pieces of paper hanging in the area around the tree are wishes written down and hung up by visitors in hopes they will come true.

<http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/CU/CU>
accessed 14th Feb 2013

The installation was composed of 1000 pieces of hanging paper to form long strings of words, each representing one wish, written and simply cut. The work in preparing this installation was extensive but the process became cathartic and meditative and I found it to be fundamental and integral in developing my working process.



Fig 7: Hyun-Hee Lee, *1000 Wishes*, 2011

Paper, cotton thread, variable dimensions

Developing these works gave me great satisfaction that I was creating lasting ways to reconnect with my family and culture. More than that these works guided me onto future works which allowed me to develop a process of working which in itself was cathartic and at the same time I felt was ritualistic. Therefore my art was not developing so as to simply create an end product, it was the process of creating my work which was becoming the underlying and fundamental imperative. It was creating the connections I never envisaged prior to commencing my research.

These initial explorations and discoveries became a revelation for me and I felt I had established a tangible connection that was visionary and rewarding.

All of these early works and investigations simply laid the groundwork and developed a background for my research. I believe they were a necessary component in establishing the direction my current research should take.

Chapter 2

Historical Connections

2.1 Powerful influences

“Shamanism cultivated enchanting vitality in the Korean psyche; Confucianism defined the social character of Koreans; and Buddhism formulated their religious beliefs”⁶

To appreciate the depth, complexity and uniqueness of Korean culture it is necessary to understand the historical circumstances which have forged the present day culture of Korea. To understand this is fundamental in identifying the many rituals and practices that weave their way through the lives of Koreans.

Historically, Koreans lived under the influences of three main religions, Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism. These religions were responsible for creating the spiritual landscape of the country for over two thousand years, leaving a mixture of religious beliefs, rituals and practices. These religions have over time melded in a symbiotic way creating this uniqueness that is present today. Park Sung-bong maintains that “Korea’s modern religious life can be likened to a religious museum where all types of gods and religions are on display”.⁷ I believe this is only part of the story, however because Korea was placed in an unusual situation. It was restricted in its development by the invasion of the Japanese in 1910 and it wasn’t until well after the Korean War in 1953 that Korea started to industrialize and connect with western civilization. This rapid development over decades as compared to centuries of western development has also helped form the unique culture of Korea. Ideas, rituals and practices which would normally evolve and change over long periods of time have been carried into a modern society creating a uniqueness which is quintessentially Korean.

⁶ J S Choi, *Buddhism, Religion in Korea*, Ewha Womans University Press, Seoul, South Korea, 2007, p.129.

⁷ S B Park, *Korean Cultural Heritage: thought and religion, Vol 2*, JW Kim, ed. Samsung Moonhwa Printing, Seoul, South Korea, 1996, p.27.

Shamanism is a primitive religion which does not have a basic systematic structure but permeates into the daily lives of Korean people through folklore and customs. This is the earliest religion in Korea and even though it is based on fear and superstition it has remained a strong contributing force in Korean culture. It includes the worship of thousands of spirits and demons that dwell in every object in the natural world. This may be best understood in the following quote by Jane Portal in her book on the art and archeology of Korea, where she describes Shamanism as “The primitive religion believing in a heavenly spirit, spirits of the moon, stars, earth, mountains, water, rock, tree, ancestor, warriors and ghosts. It has faith in the magico-religious power of the Shamans who, in states of ecstasy are capable of communicating with various spirits”.⁸

The Shaman is an intermediary who communicates between the gods and human society and mediates through the ritual known as *Gut* in which a variety of songs, dances and dramatic vignettes, as well as stories and legends, are performed.⁹



Fig 8: A Shaman performs (Gut), Korean Cultural Heritage, Volume 2, P178

⁸J Portal, *Korea, Art and Archaeology*, British Museum Press, London ,2000, p.145.

⁹ R Hwang , *Korean Cultural Heritage: thought and religion, Vol 2*, JW Kim, ed. Samsung Moonhwa Printing, Seoul, South Korea,1996, p.198.

Although the roots of Shamanism are buried deep in Korea's ancient myths it is necessary to appreciate the profound influence it still has on the arts, religion and the spiritual consciousness of modern Korea. Korean Confucianism, Buddhism and to a lesser extent Taoism and Christianity, have all been profoundly influenced by Shamanistic beliefs and rituals.

Shamanism continued to be the dominant religion until around the fourth century AD when Buddhism was introduced from China. By the time the Silla Dynasty unified the Korean peninsula in 668 AD, it had embraced Buddhism as the state religion. The philosophy of the Buddhist religion emphasizes personal salvation through rebirth in an endless cycle of reincarnation. This philosophy and the belief in a single God may sound contrary to the belief system of Shamanism. Ironically during this period Shamanism actually expanded its presence. Choi Joon-Sik maintains that "Korean Buddhism" is in fact a blend of Shamanism and Buddhism in a symbiotic way and indicates the influence that religion had on the culture of the time.¹⁰

This situation did not change until the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1914) when Confucianism was adopted as the state religion, essentially introduced as a governing philosophy supporting the family and social structure. The values laid down by Confucianism have helped underscore the culture that exists today. The family structure in Korea is still patriarchal with great importance placed on filial piety, ancestral rites and rites of passage. This has created an ongoing number of rituals that are performed throughout the year celebrating these important events.

Natalia Lebedinskaia maintains that the "Korean moral fabric, woven together by family, school, and government, has a cohesive structure of Confucianism ethics, which affects the vertical and horizontal relationships in the modern world and the fundamental tenets of Confucianism have shaped the life of most Koreans".¹¹ While ancestral worship is to a

¹⁰ Choi, 2007, p.26.

¹¹ N Lebedinskaia, *Concordia Undergraduate Journal of Art History*, Expressions of Hybrid Identity from diasporic female artists from Asia.

www.cujah.org/past-volumes/vol_1V_1V_essay-7 accessed 7/9/14

large degree universal, I believe that the Korean families extended devotion to it stems from their unique social and historical circumstances.

These three religions have had immense power in establishing the cultural base of Korea. Unlike many countries who have developed and are influenced under a single religious system, Korea has had a number of influences creating a complex cultural mix. Moreover, because Korea has experienced a certain isolation from the developing world a uniqueness has developed within the culture. Buddhism has been embraced by Koreans as a living culture and as the dominant spiritual presence. Confucianism has been fundamental in the structure of the family and the workplace. It is the dominant philosophy whilst Shamanism has been the mercurial folk religion which has had an invasive influence on both religions and has been instrumental in creating the unique culture of Korea in the twenty first century.

2.2 The Manifestation of Religious Influence

Folk beliefs and Shamanistic practices are abundant in the wider Korean community. Korean people, even if they do not recognize the historical connection, are heavily influenced by folk religion and Shamanism in their everyday life. Even today, many Koreans make visits to a Mudang (Shaman) to compare such things as the bride and groom horoscopes before weddings, auspicious dates for marriages and for moving house or traveling. These small rituals are based on deep rooted superstitions and beliefs. They are not quantifiable or provable in a modern world, but they exist none the less. What I think is surprising is that in a modern industrialized and westernized society, such as Korea, a folk religion has survived and even flourished in recent times. Choi Joon-sik maintains; “For this to be the case there must be ‘elements’ that are attuned to the Korean people and exist deep within the Korean unconscious mind”.¹²

The concept of superstition exists throughout all countries and manifests itself in a multitude of ways, but in first world countries it tends to be trivial or more of an

¹²J S Choi , *Folk Religion, The Customs of Korea*, Ewha Womens University Press, Seoul, South Korea, 2007, p.24.

entertainment. In Korea these superstitions are taken quite seriously in everyday life, with abundant rituals and practices geared around these beliefs. Whether the modern Korean believes in these, or not, is irrelevant. It is the fact that Koreans still participate in these rituals which is interesting. It must be remembered that Korea only started to enter the modern industrialized world after the Korean War and more particularly since the 1970's. I believe that because of Korea's rapid development the people have carried with them all the intangible spiritual baggage that has served them and seemingly guided them in the past. Holding on to those beliefs has given Korean people protection in the past, thus the thought process has continued as it has not had enough time to be diluted or severed in this changing world. It is interesting to observe that Korean people still consider traditional Shamanism important and have designated it an "important intangible treasure".¹³

The importance of Buddhism in Korea cannot be underestimated in the cultural fabric of today's society. Essentially Buddhism has maintained its position as a philosophy and a religion expressing ideas through teachings of meditation and the gaining of wisdom, compassion and enlightenment. These ideas and practices have retained resonance with the Korean people, making Buddhism the most practiced religion in Korea today. The rituals connected to Buddhism are performed within the home and the wider community and are not exclusive to the Buddhist temple.

Confucianism, although only adopted as a state religion in the fourteenth century has been in Korea for much longer, it was essentially used as a governing philosophy towards family and social structure. The values laid down by Confucianism, such as harmony, moral virtue and a respect for humanity have helped underscore the culture that exists in today's very modern and contemporary Korea. The family structure in Korea is still a patriarch based one with great importance placed on filial piety, ancestral rites and rites of passage. This has created an ongoing number of rituals that are performed throughout the year celebrating these important events.

¹³ Portal, 2000, p.144.

Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism have all manifested in their own ways, but what is notable is that these religions have all influenced one another creating the unique culture of Korea. All three have produced a fascinating mix of rituals and practices which are evident in Korean life.

2.3 Living Rituals and Practices

I come from a fairly large family with traditional values so I am accustomed to the many ancestral rituals and religious practices which are performed throughout the year. As I recall them I experience a great feeling of nostalgia, which is ironic for me because at the time they were simply part of my everyday life. It was not until I migrated that I realized how important they were to me and how indelibly they would be etched on my mind. My investigations have concentrated on the many rituals and practices that I have experienced within my own family and immediate cultural circle which can loosely be divided into three main categories. First and most important are the rituals attached to the family and its wellbeing, of these the observance of ancestral rites is paramount followed by many rites of passage and important occasions such as New Year and Harvest Moon Day. Second is the observance of a strong religious faith and the rituals which are observed, these include rituals within the temple and often within the community such as on the Buddha's Birthday. Thirdly there many rituals and practices that are performed in the daily lives of Koreans which have their origins in the early folk religions, these can be very subtle and varied and often are hidden within the rituals of the more accepted religions such as Buddhism.

To understand the culture of Korea it is first necessary to understand the Korean family system, which is basically a patriarchy in which the eldest male of the oldest surviving generation is the family head.

It is his responsibility and right to perform a ritual called *Jesa*¹⁴ which is traditionally held at the house of the eldest son of the eldest surviving generation of the family and only male members of the family can participate in the ritual. However this is now changing gradually, with more and more women now allowed to take part and siblings now taking turns in hosting the *Jesa*.



Fig 9: Memorial service performed on death anniversaries (*Jesa*), Korean Cultural Heritage, Volume 4, P48

These ancestral rites ceremonies are very important in Korean families. There are many rules regarding the way the ceremony is performed such as the placement of the food and the sand and the burning of the incense around the shrine. The burning incense represents the heaven whilst the sand represents the earth.

I have been honored to have participated in *Jesa* a number of times especially as this was essentially a male dominated ceremony until recent times. When I attended this ceremony with my father and uncles I felt a great deal of respect in the offering of food and drinks to our ancestors, offering prayers and asking for guidance in our lives. This ceremony ends with the sharing of the food on offering. The traditionalist nature of this ritual may seem

¹⁴Y D Kim, *Korean Cultural Heritage: traditional lifestyles, Vol 4*, JW Kim, ed. Samsung Moonhwa Printing, Seoul, South Korea, 1997, p.42.

“*Jesa* is an extension of filial piety and a means of paying respect to ancestors originally as a way of thanking ancestors and asking them to watch over their decedents. This specific ritual is held on the anniversary of the ancestors passing. A similar ritual called *Cha-Rae* is a more general ancestor ritual and is performed on either New Year Day or Harvest Moon Day”.

out of place in a modern society but this ceremony or ritual is fundamentally important in Korean families, as it shows respect for family elders and respect for the family lineage. Rites of passage rituals are also performed within the Korean family. These rituals take place throughout the year and celebrate the ‘coming of age’, ‘birth’, ‘marriage’ and ‘death’. Park Tae-sun calls these the “four formalities”¹⁵ which are fundamentally important in the Korean family structure.



Fig 10: The first birthday, the coming of age ceremony, Korean Cultural Heritage, Volume 4, P184

I have a Buddhist family background so until I left Korea my entire religious education was Buddhist, which has left me with many memories of Buddhist rituals and practices experienced in Korea. One of the rituals which interested me and one which has stayed in my memory is the Buddhist paper prayer ritual. This ritual or ceremony is performed in many forms and can be found throughout the Buddhist temple. For my purposes I will explain the ritual from my experience. Within the confines of the Buddhist temple you are able to offer prayers to Buddha either by writing your prayer and then giving that to a monk who will repeat those prayers for a period of time. In other cases you may write your prayer on pieces of paper and attach it to the wall, or lantern. In many cases the paper would be

¹⁵ T S Park, *Korean Cultural Heritage: traditional lifestyles, Vol 4*, JW Kim, ed. Samsung Moonhwa Printing, Seoul, South Korea, 1997, p.182.

folded to conceal the written word, to keep it sacred or a secret. I have always found this ritual to be intense and gratifying and in many ways very special.

This simple act, originally performed in the Buddhist temple can now be found practiced in a multitude of forms throughout the Korean culture. Possibly this is because Korean Buddhism has absorbed much of the belief system, often built around superstition, contained in Shamanism. The use of paper prayers used by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike sometimes containing prayers but mostly wishes can be found being used in the wider community, usually on special days. These are often hung at the entrance to villages, from trees in the mountains and more recently in popular culture, across streets.



Fig 11: Paper prayer ritual in In-sa dong, Seoul

According to Buddhist beliefs, lanterns are used as symbols because they bring light into the world. ‘Yeondeung’, which means lantern lighting, is an important ritual which pays respect to Buddha. It culminates in the Lotus lantern festival, which is held annually to celebrate Buddha’s birthday. From a personal viewpoint, I remember our family making paper lanterns to be hung in the Buddhist temple along with hundreds of others. People would make small offerings, in exchange the monks would write the names of the family

on a merit certificate which would then be attached to a lantern. In the evening each family would seek out their lantern and place a lit candle inside. Although this ritual has manifested itself in the streets and has become a major celebration of Buddha's birthday, I have memories of it in the temple being deeply spiritual as well as visually memorable.



Fig 12: Lantern ceremony on Buddha's birthday in the temple, Korean Cultural Heritage, Volume 2, P49

Korean people are very superstitious which is a direct influence from folk beliefs. When I was growing up my family needed to move house many times because of my father's work. Upon moving to a new house my family would make a sacrifice to the 'Gods' with sacrificial rice cakes made from red beans to protect against evil spirits for the new house. Dried fish and notes tied with cotton thread were also hung from the center pole of the ceiling, and a bowl of water was placed in the middle of the room. Each person would take a bow towards the four points of the compass upon entering the new house. This is one of

the rituals with which I had become accustomed, it is common in Korean families on all social levels although the actual ritual may vary in its practice.



Fig 13: Gosa, National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul

I remember when I bought my first car and after I had an accident people said it was because I did not perform the sacrifice to the gods. I am quite amazed by these memories now that I live in another country, they seem a little quaint and irrational but ironically they were very normal at the time. I think with each successive generation that these superstitious rituals will die out. But what has been evident to me is that many Koreans still believe in Shamanistic beliefs and rituals. To illustrate this, it was not uncommon to witness my father hang pieces of paper (sometimes in the form of a scroll) either on the front door or some special place within the house. On these papers were written messages of good fortune or protection against evil, composed usually of Confucius sayings. It is my observation that Korean life is littered with these small rituals either derived from religious or more ancient folk beliefs.

All of the afore mentioned rituals I have grown up with and experienced as an expression of my culture, it is these rituals which have left their indelible mark on my memory and which create a connection with the country of my birth.



Fig 14: Practical examples of calligraphy as used on doorway entrances in traditional Korean houses,
National Folk Museum of Korea, Seoul

Chapter 3

Early Research and Methodology

3.1 Discovering Hanji Paper

When I visited Korea a couple of years ago I decided to learn calligraphic skills from my father, along with enhancing my meditation practice. The process involved meant that while developing my calligraphy practice, I became reacquainted with hanji paper. This was to prove pivotal in the future development of my work.

‘Hanji paper’ is made from the bark of the mulberry tree and is a traditional Korean paper. For Koreans this paper has great significance, not only for its useful physical properties but because it carries an intangible spiritual quality, having been used by Koreans in all facets of religious and daily life since the eight century AD. “The importance of this paper can be realized in that it was of a sufficiently high quality for the printing of Buddhist texts, which constituted the largest surviving body of early prints and manuscripts on paper”.¹⁶

“Hanji is characterized by five unique properties. First, it lasts for more than one thousand years, as revealed in the old Korean adage ‘Canvas lasts five hundred years, but paper has been known to last for a thousand’. Second Hanji is extremely durable, yet smooth to the touch. Third, it permits ventilation. Fourth, it retains heat as well as cotton cloth. Fifth it is shiny and translucent. Hanji’s unique characteristics are borne of the fine natural properties of its raw materials and the delicate care and devotion of the Korean craftsmen who make it”.¹⁷

I realized that I, along with most Koreans had grown up with and experienced this paper in everyday life. I remember it being used in the traditional screens which are displayed in my

¹⁶ J Wilkinson and N Pearce, *Harmony and Contrast, A Journey through East Asian Art*, National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1996, p.81.

¹⁷ Y D Ven, *Korean Cultural Heritage: fine arts, Vol 1*, CH Son, ed. Samsung Moonhwa Printing. Seoul, South Korea, 1994, p.154.

family home. Also, we made paper lanterns to be used in temple ceremonies and the *Lotus Lantern Festival*¹⁸ which is held on Buddha's Birthday.

Working with paper has now become my preferred medium. It has become a spiritual fiber that connects me to a place and time, connecting me to my home.

The Korean artist Soo Ja Kim(b.1952) laments that, "I can't interpret my own culture with other culture's materials in the same way, I try to find materials in their own context, but it always ended up with me bringing materials from Korea as theirs looked so neutral and hard to get the sense of the energy I feel from ours"¹⁹ I can relate to that sentiment. The Korean Hanji paper holds cultural significance and it was a medium that I was comfortable using, but was difficult to obtain in Australia so I began to source this material in Korea. The introduction of this paper into my work proved to be another significant step in my research, although I realized that I needed to present such traditional materials in a more contemporary manner.

3.2 Wishes and Prayers

In 2012 I visited the National Folk Museum of Korea in Seoul to see the Shaman Exhibition titled 'Mediator between Heaven and Earth-Shaman'. The exhibition hosted seminars and performances and re-enactments of Shaman rituals. I attended a 'gut and dance' performance which related to the Shaman as mediator between the present life and our ancestors. This has strong connotations of the Confucius practice of ancestral worship which is still practiced in Korea.

This exhibition really fascinated me and spurred my interest into how these Shaman beliefs have filtered down into the daily lives of Koreans. A large tree dominated the center of this exhibition and on the branches were hung hundreds of small pieces of paper. On these papers wishes were written and then the paper was folded and tied to one of the branches. This is not an uncommon sight in Korea, often I have seen these papers concealing prayers, around the temple. Elsewhere on special occasions folded papers can be

¹⁸ The Lotus Lantern Festival is held to commemorate Buddha's Birthday. Called 'Yeondeung' meaning the lighting of the lantern. www.discoveringkorea.com/10529seoul-lotus-lanternfestival accessed 7/11/14

¹⁹N Bouriaud, interview with Kim Sooja, kimssooja.com, 2003, <http://www.kimssooja.com/texts/bouriaud.html> accessed 15/7/14

seen tied to trees in the street. These are usually secular in nature and relate to personal wishes of good luck or good fortune. The interesting point is that in both the religious and secular sense the ritual has been derived from a folk tradition passed down over time. Sometimes these paper prayers may be found in quiet isolated locations, imbuing the site with a sense of secrecy and sacredness.

Witnessing paper prayers inspired me to embark upon a project to create a body of work which would parody and reinvent this ritual. Keeping in mind that it had its roots heavily in folk tradition and to a lesser extent, religious practices, this work became important for me in that I was discovering a means to develop an understanding and a methodology to reinterpret rituals in a contemporary manner.

I developed the work 'Prayer Series' by repeating the process of making folded pieces of paper. The actual act of folding the pieces of paper became very rewarding and almost meditative. I decided to present these on small canvases, giving each canvas an individual purpose and character based on my reasoning behind each work.



Fig 15: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Prayer #6*, 2012, ink, hanji, cotton thread on canvas, 25x25cm

I reused many of the calligraphy writings that my father had made. In this way I felt I was confirming a bond and giving his work a more contemporary existence. To do this I

gathered the larger sheets of paper and divided them into pieces small enough to fold. On each of these I repeated the original message and my response, written over the fragmented pieces of the original work. After folding them I stitched them onto small canvases. These canvases took on very different personas predicated on the original work selected to be used. On each of these I wrote with pastels or pencils and colored inks. I called these works ‘prayers’ and in the process I developed a greater understanding of my reasoning and methodology which would lead me on to the next stage of my work.



Fig 16: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Prayer series*, 2012, installation view, Paint12, Arterreal Gallery

3.3 Departure: Re-inventing the Ritual

The work that developed out of my 'Prayer' series was derived from my personal experience of the two religions, Buddhism and Catholicism which had influenced my life. *Homage*, which won the John Coburn Emerging Artist Award for the Blake Prize in 2012, was directly related to my personal experience in bible study before being baptized as Catholic. I was encouraged to write the first four books from the New Testament when I converted from Buddhism to Catholicism after moving to Australia. I repeated this experience using the Buddhist paper prayer ritual, which consisted of small pieces of paper which were then folded and stitched onto thirty six small canvases using cotton thread. The work became meditative and cathartic and an alternative way of prayer for me. It was during this working process that I felt that I had retained a strong spiritual connection with the two religions which had been so important in my life.



Fig 17: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Homage*, 2012, pencil, ink, hanji paper, cotton thread on canvas, 150x150cm



Fig 18: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Homage* (Detail)

Judges' Comments, 61st Blake Prize Exhibition :

'This perceptive work engages with translatability, and the increasing interstitial nature, or in-between-ness, of religious life. Each panel contains texts of the New Testament translated into Korean. These texts are cut into strips and then folded and knotted into small bows and attached in a complex overlay. Some have the individual seal of a writer, although their identity is not clear (as with most sacred texts). Spirituality is found inevitably at intersections. In each new location, they are enculturated, operating as the bridges between cultures' ²⁰

I felt very comfortable with the materials that I was using and with my working process. The use of paper and text had become very natural for me to the point that a kind of meditative working process developed with my work. This led to a large body of work being produced delving into rituals and family memories, creating connections on spiritual and emotional levels.

²⁰ R Boer, F Fenner, and H Valamanesh, 'Judges' comments', *The Blake Prize Exhibition*, 61st Blake Art Prize Catalogue, 2012.

For the Blake Prize 2013 I created a work called 'Confessions' which was derived from a ritual my family did every New Years Eve. The ritual involved the assemblage of pieces of paper with our confessions written on them, that were then folded and ceremoniously burnt, signifying the purging of our miss deeds and a new beginning for the coming year. I have recreated this family ritual using small pieces of folded paper with writing that will always remain secret. The paper is dyed in black ink parodying the burning of our confessions on New Year's Eve.

In Korea the follow up ritual we all did to compensate for our confessions was to write our wishes and desires on new white paper and then tie them into a knot to be hung somewhere in the house. This was always a happy and joyous occasion as we all wished our family and extended family the very best for the coming year. Following this the family would always have a large feast to commemorate the occasion.



Fig 19: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Confessions*, 2013, ink, cotton thread on canvas, 100x100cm

Chapter 4

Influence and Research

4.1 The Influence of the Other

During the course of this research I have become interested in a number of artists for different reasons. Some because they are producing work which is predicated on the notion of loss or displacement, others because I am attracted to their work process and the materials they use. To a more or lesser extent I have been influenced and guided by these artists. They have all given me new insights and possibilities relating to the issues and practices I pursue in the course of my research.

One of the Korean artists who interested me in the use of hanji paper as a medium in contemporary art was Kwang-young Chun (b1944). When I viewed his exhibition at Conny Dietzschold Gallery (2011) I felt a strong cultural connection with Korea. Along with the use of Mulberry paper the work is delicate and fastidious in its construction. This is something I can relate to as I perceive my work as having similar attributes. In 2013, I was very keen to see his work again at the Museum of Art, Seoul University. The work is referred to as *Aggregation* and consists of pieces of foam wrapped in Korean mulberry paper (hanji) covered in text and then tied with string. The paper that he uses was sourced from old medical books. As a sick child he often needed to visit the neighborhood doctor, his work reflects his memory of the numerous packages of mulberry paper he saw hanging from the ceiling, each holding a name card of the medicine wrapped inside. For me there is a certain ‘Korean sentiment’ in his work expressed in the manner in which he has used traditional materials in a contemporary context. The use of Korean paper in this non-traditional way encouraged me to experiment with possibilities outside. This has been inspirational to me in my use of paper as a contemporary art medium.



Fig 20: Kwang Young Chun, *Aggregation*, 2011 (Korean Monthly Art, 2011, 06, p2)

Another Korean artist, Do-Ho Suh (b.1962) migrated to America in 1990. Much of his work concerns his experience of dislocation, memories of places and feelings of loss. Suh's installation affected me visually from first sight, this initial impact encouraged me to understand the reasoning behind his work. Suh recreates his family home in Seoul, using sewn translucent fabric replicated in minute detail. He regards his home as an extension of his own clothes and therefore fabric becomes the ideal way to express that feeling. These are impressive and monumental structures and at the same time they exude a sense of intimacy.

I have a certain empathy with Suh's concept of recreating the idea of 'home' as a physical and emotional place. It is his way of forming a tangible connection.

Suh's *Seoul Home/Seoul Home* at the Leeum Samsung Museum, Seoul, which I visited in 2012 is a reproduction of his family home in Seoul, he uses layers of transparent fabric to define the concept of 'transcultural displacement' and implications of vanishing spatial and temporal boundaries. Also I have been privileged to see his recent installation *Home Within Home Within Home Within Home Within Home* (2013) at the new National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul. The initial imperative to create this work and the need to connect is displayed with both these exhibitions and it is certainly a driving force

with which I can relate. Along with these thoughts, the ability to create something which is visually overpowering cannot be underestimated and that something which has left a lasting impression on me.



Fig 21: Do Ho Suh, *Home Within Home*, 2013 installation view
National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul,
(Look,2014,11,p19)

I initially became interested in Korean artist Soo-Ja Kim (b1957) because she used traditional Korean wrapping cloth combined with the process of sewing in her work. These are materials and methods you would find in a home and not normally in the context of contemporary art.

Kim is well known for her *Bottari* (wrapped bundles) work where she maintains that the needle is an extension of her body while the thread is an extension of the mind, so a trace of the mind is always in the fabric. I can appreciate and understand her ideas when she speaks of her use of material and the process of stitching. I have found with my own work that stitching has a strong relationship to healing in that it becomes meditative and creates connections with the past.

Also, she is known as a video, installation and performance artist. In her work *The Needle Woman* her body becomes the important element as it symbolizes the needle, theoretically walking through the universe creating connections. In this work she is very much influenced by Buddhist philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism but she maintains “the ideas in my work are created from my own questions and experiences, not from Buddhist theory itself”.²¹ I have strong empathy with her sentiments.



Fig 22: Soo Ja Kim, *Bottari: Cities on the Move*, 1997, used clothes, bedcovers, truck, Changshindong, Seoul, dimensions variable. Contemporary Korean Art, P79

Hossein Valamanesh was one of the Judges in the Blake Religious Prize in 2012. It was because of this connection that I have developed a strong interest in his work. His use of a wide range of natural materials and methodologies is of particular interest to me, helping me to appreciate my own approach and choice of materials.

Hossein Valamanesh (b.1952) comes from an Iranian background and his work is intricately connected to the culture of his birth. His work references the Iranian culture, memories and especially his connection to land.

²¹ Bouriaud, 2003, accessed 17/3/2014

Valamanesh uses a vast array of materials in his work from text written in saffron, *Middle Path* (2008) to sculptural installations such as *Dwelling* (1980) which “signified a place of security and hospitality, and while affirming the artist’s cultural heritage, evoked a sense of dislocation”.²²

There is a simplicity in his work which is deceiving when you understand that he is expressing personal ideas and complex emotions. I see his work as unpretentious and one that attempts to establish connections to many fundamentals. This has been an inspiration for me and I believe has opened my eyes to greater possibilities in my art practice.



Fig 23: Hossein Valamanesh, *Longing Belonging*, 1997, colour photograph, 99x99cm, Persian Carpet, black velvet, 215x305cm, Photograph: Ric Martin. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Hossein Valamanesh, *Out of Nothingness*, P78

Another work which exemplifies a broad use of materials whilst addressing a search for connection is *Longing Belonging* (1997) “This work infers ruptures and new connections. It suggests a volatile tension between loss, separation and yearning, and a hopeful

²²M Knights and I North, *Hossein Valamanesh: Out of Nothingness*, Wakefield Press, South Aust, 2011, p.81.

reconciliation with being in a new country”.²³ The installation contains a Persian carpet which is an obvious historical reference to his ancient culture as well as home and family, the fire denotes the loss he feels for his home whilst referencing the new landscape of his adopted country.

Psychological and emotional references abound in this work, as with much of his work, along with what I perceive is an attempt to connect in some way with his culture.

Mary Knight writes with great insight about Valamanesh’s work;

“Hossein’s work is meticulously designed—distilled to essential forms with no extraneous details. The pared back simplicity is imbued with a stillness. Hossein orchestrates complex metaphorical associations between raw materials, made and found objects. Everything is precisely placed to create a poetic and aesthetic tension. Relationships between elements resonate and rupture. Gaps in meaning provide spaces for imaginative engagement and contemplation. Vague allusions are made to intangible possibilities”.²⁴

When Suh Do-Ho recreates a place, which is in fact a particular space defined by his memory, I believe he is attempting to fill that gap that Hossein Valamanesh speaks about. I can empathize with both of these artists. They have been important markers for me in understanding the processes that are necessary to fill the space or bridge the gap.

All the artists I have mentioned are concerned with personal memories and experiences, as well as using materials which are strongly connected to their culture. This has been emphasized for me with Hossein Valamanesh when he says “paradoxically the more the work becomes personal the more it has universal appeal”.²⁵

4.2 Further Influence: Buddhist Practice

In 2012, I was keen to conduct further research on Buddhism, so I accepted an artist residency in the studios of Red Gate Gallery in Beijing.

²³ *ibid.*, p.78.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.93.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.11.

I took the opportunity to compare my knowledge of Buddhism in Korea with that practiced in China. With this focus I investigated the way rituals and practices were experienced within the Buddhist temples in Beijing and I searched for the connection between my experiences in Korea. I discovered much of that relationship between Chinese and Korean Buddhism in the *Yonghe Temple*,²⁶ popularly known as the ‘*Lama Temple*’ and one of the largest and most important Tibetan Buddhist Temples in the world. It was here that I participated in the prayer ritual with the Buddhist monks. This involved a process of offering prayers and burning incense in the five main halls of the temple.



Fig 24: Hyun-Hee Lee, *28Days in Beijing*, 2012, pencil, paper, variable dimensions

In response to my residency at Red Gate I created an installation I called ‘28 Days in Beijing’ which reflected another expression of cultural displacement but also the connection between the religious practices in both countries. The installation comprises twenty-eight cut out and collaged suspended paper panels that express my experiences, as

²⁶ The Yonghe Temple is known as the ‘Palace of Peace and Harmony’ the ‘Yonghe Lamasery’ or ‘Lama Temple’ is a temple monastery of the Geluk School of Tibetan Buddhism in Northern Beijing.
www.sacred-destinations.com/china/beijing-yonghe-gong-lama-temple accessed 20/11/14

well as wishes and prayers on each of my twenty eight days in Beijing. The hangings are inspired directly from my father's calligraphy panels that hold great emotional significance for me.

Another work I created at this time referenced my families Buddhist beliefs and practices. This particular work *108 Defilements* is based on the Buddhist philosophy of enlightenment. In Buddhism there are 108 agonies and desires which are fundamental in human life: six senses, three aspects of time, two characteristics of the heart, and three emotional preferences. In the 108 defilement, which are expressed in Buddhist sayings, each individual work relates to one agony (defilement) of life. To experience the 108 defilements of life is to find the meditative path to enlightenment. I am repeating and expressing in this work the breaking of the 108 defilements and searching for my own path to enlightenment.



Fig 25: Hyun-Hee Lee, *108 Defilements*, 2013, hanji paper, ink, pencil, silk thread, silk, 47x96cm, JADA Collection.

4.3 Folk Painting and Superstition

Following the Red Gate Residency I visited the Gahoe Minhwa Museum in Seoul and the exhibition *Korean Folk Paintings: Fortunes Within* at the Korean cultural office in Sydney 2013. After visiting Korea I realized the extent to which Koreans still use folk imagery around the home. It is one of those practices which tend to be overlooked because it is so commonplace. This realization led me to develop a body of work based on folk images. “Minhwa means ‘Korean Folk Paintings’ which were produced and spread mainly by ordinary people in the Joseon Dynasty”.²⁷ The use of these paintings in the Korean home does not constitute so much a ritual, but more a common practice. I discuss it here because of the strong memories I have of these paintings, usually decorating folding screens, and the lasting effect they have had on my connection to my family and culture.

I grew up during a period of resurgence in the popularity of this particular genre of painting in Korea. Although the popularity has now waned, the practice of using these paintings has left strong memories of their role in the daily lives of my family. Around the early 1970’s Korean people began to take renewed interest in Minhwa, having a kind of rebirth in Korean homes. Most often they were used to decorate screens which could be seen in most Korean homes.

Minhwa were extremely popular during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) when Confucianism was the dominant religion. These paintings were adopted as a way to project harmony and good luck into the Korean household. The principal features of Minhwa are their basic symbolism and purpose. They are believed to contain Shamanistic powers to protect against disasters and to make wishes come true. The themes based around the native folk religions are strongly connected to Shamanism which evolved from the early folk religions.

Quite often text and imagery are combined in the screen paintings and wall hangings and are used to decorate houses or to celebrate birthdays or weddings. The symbolism found in Minhwa are largely wishes of good health and longevity, riches, many sons, or a life with honor and wealth.

²⁷ S Y Eom, *Korean Cultural Heritage: Fine Arts, Vol 1*, CH Son, ed. Samsung Moonhwa Printing, Seoul, South Korea, 1994, p.84.

Minhwa can also be categorized by their placement and use. For instance, paintings for longevity may be placed in the main living room, paintings for harmony in the room for a newly married couple, and paintings symbolizing a successful career in a drawing room for visitors. In the past Koreans wished to enjoy all the good fortune that could possibly befall them during their present life. These practices are still an intrinsic component in the Korean culture.



Fig 26: The folding screen, depicts the ten longevity symbols, Korean Cultural Heritage, Volume 1, P90

There is a strong element of superstition implied in the use of these images which are used in many aspects of daily life, because of the belief that they hold the power to bring good luck and prosperity.

With these folk paintings in mind I developed a body of work which constituted the theme of a solo exhibition at Arterreal gallery in 2013 titled *Korean Whispers*. The exhibition is based on memory of folk painting and the symbolism implied with these paintings.

I have dyed all paper and canvas a strong yellow because the idea of the colour yellow was derived from the good luck charm (the charm consists of Chinese characters and Buddhist motifs on yellow paper often hung in the home or kept on ones person to protect against evil) and I found that it signified the ‘centre’ of the five directions in Shaman folk art.

Instead of writing on each piece of paper I have chosen to woodprint one of the folk images

symbolizing good luck and longevity on each of the small pieces of paper before folding and stitching onto the canvases.

I have named these works the 'Charm' series. These are contemporizing a traditional folk image and the idea of folk belief encapsulated within the Buddhist paper prayer ritual.



Fig 27: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Charm* (Detail), 2013, ink on hanji, 17x13cm



Fig 28: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Charm #4*, 2013, ink, hanji paper, silk thread on canvas, 60x60cm



Fig 29: Hyun-Hee Lee, Working Process



Fig 30: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Korean Whispers*, installation view, 2013, Arterreal Gallery, Sydney



Fig 31: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Korean Whispers*, installation view, 2013, Artereal Gallery, Sydney

Chapter 5

Recent Work: Distilling the Ritual

My research has opened many symbolic doorways for me and it has awakened my understanding of the many rituals which take place as an integral part of Korean culture. It has revised my understanding of the way my family use rituals and practices as a way of retaining or developing a structure in their daily lives.

Along with this I have uncovered many small practices which I had over looked as being important in my life. The irony is that it is often these small things which carry a lasting hold on your memory.



Fig 32: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Devotion*, installation view, 2014, COFA Space, UNSW

The direction and maturity of my work became evident to me in my most recent exhibition in COFASpace UNSW (2014). This exhibition was titled '*Devotion*' (*family rituals and personal memories*), these works were derived from very personal experiences and memories involved around the rituals and practices that are connected to my family.

The artworks reinterpret many of these in a contemporary context, often reinventing the original intent and specific objectives but maintaining a connection with materials and methodologies which are symbolic and spiritual to Korean sensibilities.

Each of these works required me to recreate a ritual, transforming it from a traditional act of observance to a contemporary act of reinterpretation. From my perspective the process became the ritual for me and was important, or possibly more important than the work itself. I say this because it was my discovery through this research that the act or process of making the work became the correct and satisfying way for me to connect spiritually and emotionally. These artworks best expose my investigations and my journey through my research.



Fig 33: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Devotion* , installation view, 2014, COFA Space, UNSW

One of the works in this exhibition is titled *Confession #2*, which is part of my ‘Confession’ series. In the previous work *Confessions* (fig 19), I wrote my confessions on small pieces of paper and then dyed them in black ink to signify the act of burning the paper. In this particular work each panel has a story about what I wanted to confess based on family rituals and the Buddhist paper prayer ritual. I burnt the word which symbolized my confession for each panel, these were then folded and stitched onto canvas, creating the work for sixteen panels. The very act of creating this work became an integral part of the process “the clearly readable process of making the work contributes to the sense of ritual”.²⁸

As I was alluding to at the beginning of this paper, the time consuming and work intensive processes necessary to create my work were at the core of my achievements and objectives. This small ritual or family practice has lingered strongly on my mind, possibly more so since I had migrated. Recreating this ritual became cathartic and a process of reflection for me.



Fig 34: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Confessions #2* (Detail)

²⁸ Knight and North, 2011, p .77.



Fig 35: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Confessions #2*, 2014

Pencil with burn marks on hanji paper, silk thread on canvas, 124x124cm

White Tears. This work is derived from very personal memories which I couldn't forget. After a family trauma I remember it was heavily snowing all night. I depicted my hopes and dreams as if they were falling like the snow and my tears in this work. I created this work based on the experience of my time spent in the temple to alleviate my feelings of sadness through meditation and prayer. I wanted to connect to this powerful experience and the memories of the many paper prayers hanging in the temple. It was undeniably a strong spiritual experience but also it was visually memorable. This was essentially what I attempted to recreate in the work, which consists of prayers written on hundreds of pieces of paper, these were then folded and hung with string. This piece emulated my tears and hopes.



Fig 36: Hyun-Hee Lee, *White Tears*, 2014, hanji paper, pencil.ink, cotton thread, Variable dimensions



Fig 37: Hyun-Hee Lee, *White Tears* (Detail)

Dear My Father. I grew up with Korean screens and folk paintings in the home. These contained family precepts written with my father's calligraphy expressing Confucius sayings. As they were written in Chinese characters I didn't understand the meaning or value of these when I was young. Now as I have matured I can understand the meaning of the sayings on those screens and I have gained much greater understanding of my father. This work parodies my father's calligraphy which uses words taken from Buddhist sayings. The words were originally written in Chinese but I have translated them to Korean before writing them in my own personal script. The prayers that I used were cut out of silk and then re-stitched back onto silk. Creating this work I have shown respect to my father through the Buddhist prayer, giving them a new life and hope for my father's recovery, as he hasn't been in good health, as well as connecting with religious rituals used in the family.

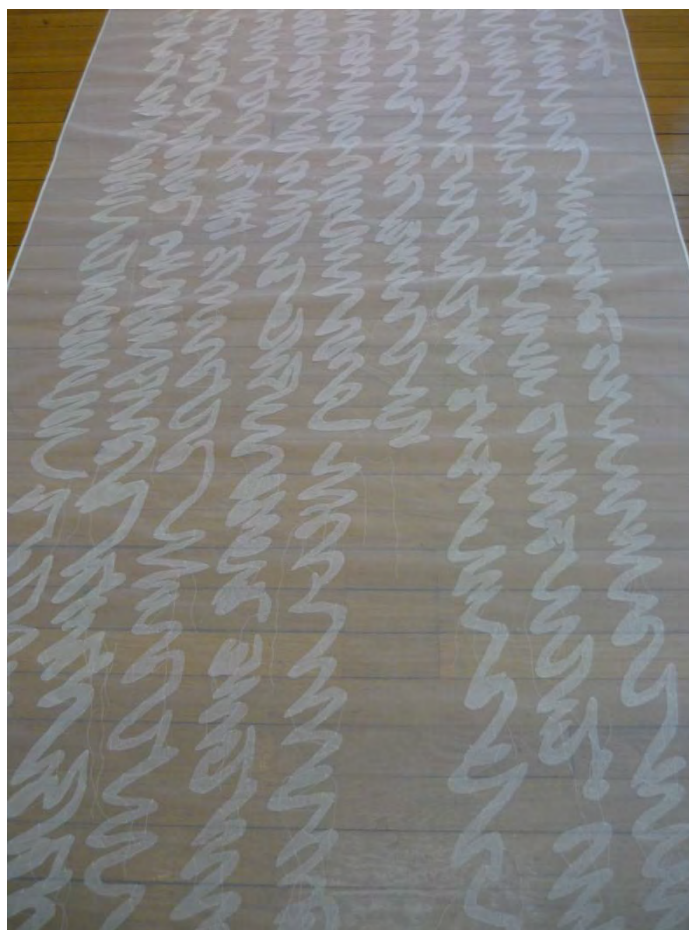


Fig 38: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Dear My Father* (Detail)



Fig 39: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Dear My Father*, 2014, silk, silk thread, pencil, 700x112cm

Also, I created two other screen works which were influenced from the format of traditional Korean screens. The first of these was called ***'Devotion'***. Recreating this work pays homage to my mother's sacrifice for the family. She has always prayed for one hundred days in the Buddhist temple for important things coming up in the family. I grew up with this practice and I was naturally adapted. But now I realize how deeply 'faith' is needed and the power it has in life. I have responded to my mother's sacrifice with the creation of this work. I have burnt in my own individual script the word 'faith' on 100 pieces of hanji paper and stitched onto silk to express my mother's faith and devotion.



Fig 40: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Devotion*, 2014,
pencil with burn marks on hanji paper, organza, 215x113cm

The second of these is called '*Dedication of 1000 Days*' which expresses the feelings I had after returning from the *Bulguksa* temple in Korea for the dedication of 1000 days prayer for my family.

In 2013, I visited this *Bulguksa* temple which is one of the most famous Buddhist temples located in the middle of South Korea. It evoked many childhood memories when I had visited with my family and it reminded me of my mother's dedicated prayers for the family whenever she visited a temple. I cherished those memories during the walk to the top of the mountain where I could see the major Buddhist statue in the cave called 'Seokguram Grotto' which is classified as a world heritage site. In this work I recreated that experience by dedicating 1000 days prayer by the Buddhist priest for the family. I have written and repeated a simple prayer on 1000 pieces of silk as my response to this experience.



Fig 41: Buddhist Paper Lantern Prayer, installation view, Gakwonsa, Cheonan-si, South Korea

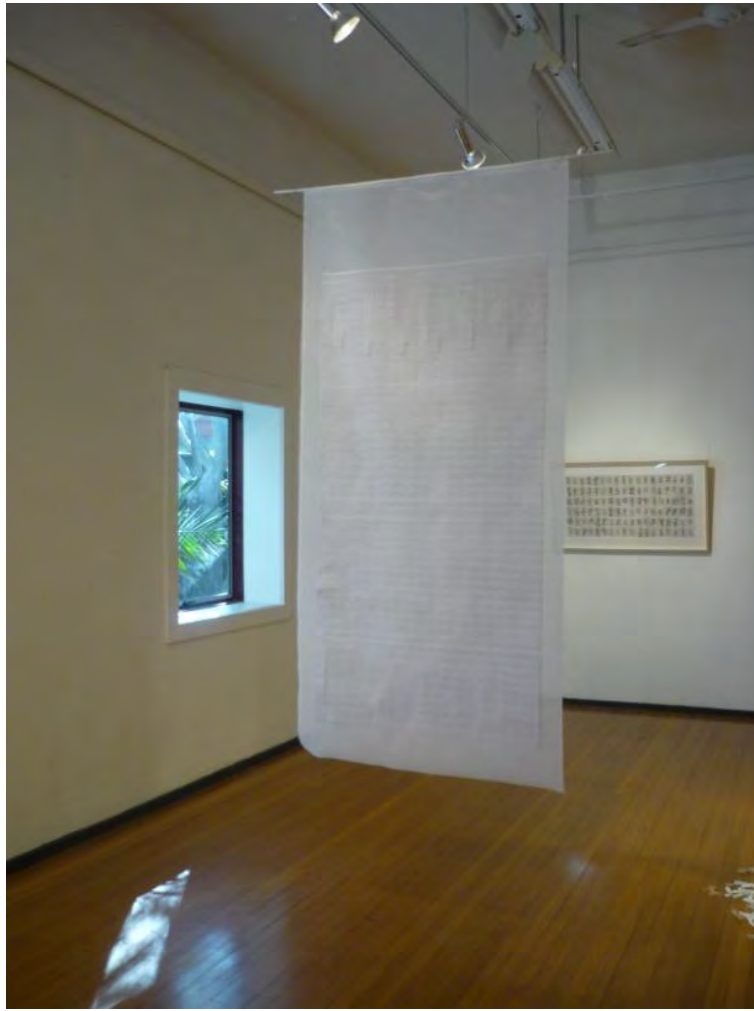


Fig 42: Hyun-Hee Lee, *Dedication of 1000 days*, 2014, silk, silk thread, pencil, cotton, 200x94cm

CONCLUSION

My goal with this research was to establish a way to re-connect with a culture which I had left many years ago. Because I had migrated I had great feelings of loss and dislocation, something I believe is common with many immigrants. As an artist, it was through my art practice that I chose to find a solution to my feelings of dislocation. In my introduction I stated my aim was to establish connections through my art practice with my family and culture and my research was aimed at discovering a means with which to do this.

During the course of my research I have observed the changes which have occurred in my work. It is notable that my work is now almost completely made with natural materials such as paper and silk. Along with this the work has become much more installation based. From my point of view the methodology itself is ritualistic and meditative and this is something that is extremely satisfying to me. It is an involvement which I craved for and I feel that this is the real act of creating connections.

I have recreated rituals that have been relevant to my life in Korea. These have been derived from Buddhism, Shamanism and Confucianism. From a traditional act of observance I have reinvented many of these into a contemporary act of reinterpretation. This has been done as a way to maintain a connection on a cultural and spiritual level with my family and the country of my birth.

I have been able to visit Korea on two occasions to observe with new eyes practices and rituals which still exist in the religious, family and cultural context. This has been done on one level within the family, collecting stories and observing daily routines. I have also visited Buddhist shrines and temples to participate in religious rituals. Part of my theoretical research involved a number of visits to the folk museum in Seoul to gather information and trace cultural practices.

The connections I was seeking came to me not just as a finished piece of work but as the process of making the work. My work practice became a form of meditation, it became cathartic and ritualistic. The act of reinterpretation became my way of connecting. The final work became proof of my involvement, dedication and connection.

In chapter one I detailed the reasons for my research and explained the process of development which has led me through my research.

In chapter two I have explained the history of Korean religions and culture with emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings to my investigations along with observing Korean culture with an understanding of the significance of religion in the practices and rituals which exist today.

In chapter three I have detailed the path that I took through my early research which helped me develop an understanding of the methodology which would create the foundation of my research.

In chapter four I mention the influence of some artists with whom I have great respect. I also speak in detail of a number of my works which have developed through this research. With these works I describe the narrative behind each as well as the reasoning attached to the ritual connected to each work.

In chapter five I have detailed the artworks which best expose my investigations and my journey through my research.

In the final analysis I find this research has enlightened me to practices within my family and culture with which I had often overlooked or taken for granted. I feel enriched with the knowledge I have gained. Greater than that, I know that I have achieved the connection which was the aim of my research. To elaborate this point, it is apparent to me that I have established a working process which is in itself at the very heart of what creating a connection means.

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Catalogue of work produced throughout the duration of the MFA

- 1-19. Prayer #1~#19, 2012, ink, pencil, mixed media, Korean paper, cotton thread, canvas, 25x25cm
20. Homage, 2012, pencil, ink, Korean paper, cotton thread on canvas, 150x150cm
21. Filtered Memories, 2012, pencil, acrylic, silk thread on silk, installation, dimensions variable (9 panels, 155x57cm)
22. 28 Days in Beijing, 2012, pencil, cotton thread, Chinese paper, installation, dimensions variable (28 panels, 250x50cm)
23. 108 Defilements, 2013, ink, pencil, silk thread, silk, Korean paper, 47x96cm
24. Genesis of Prayer, 2013, ink, pencil, Korean paper, cotton thread on canvas, 50x100cm
25. Yin and Yang, 2013, ink, pencil, Korean paper, cotton thread on canvas, 100x 200cm
- 26-31. Memory Lines #1~#6, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60x60cm
32. Memory Lines #7, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 137x137cm
33. Memory Lines #8, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 120x120cm
- 34-36. Charm #1~#3, 2013, ink, pencil, Korean paper, silk thread on canvas, 50x50cm
- 37-39. Charm #4~#6, 2013, ink, pencil, Korean paper, silk thread on canvas, 60x60cm
40. Korean Whispers, 2013, installation view, Artereal Gallery, Sydney
41. Confessions, 2013, ink, pencil, mixed media, Korean paper, cotton thread, canvas, 100x100cm
- 42-43. Devotion, 2014, installation view, COFAspace, UNSW
44. White Tears, 2014, ink, pencil, cotton, Korean paper, dimensions variable, (approx 350cm long)
45. Dedication of 1000 Days, 2014, pencil, silk, cotton, silk thread, 200x94cm
46. Dear My Father, 2014, pencil, silk thread, silk, 700x112cm
47. Devotion, 2014, pencil, cotton thread, Korean paper, organza, 215x 113cm
48. Confessions #2, 2014, pencil, Korean paper, silk thread on canvas, 120x 120cm
49. 108 Defilements #2, 2014, pencil, silk thread, silk, Korean paper, 46x76cm
50. Forgive, 2015, ink, pencil, Korean paper, 137x70cm



1. Prayer#1, 2012



2. Prayer#2, 2012



3. Prayer#3, 2012



4. Prayer#4, 2012



5. *Prayer#5*, 2012



6. *Prayer#6*, 2012



7. *Prayer#7*, 2012



8. *Prayer#8*, 2012



9. *Prayer#9*, 2012



10. *Prayer#10*, 2012



11. *Prayer#11*, 2012



12. *Prayer#12*, 2012



13. *Prayer#13*, 2012



14. *Prayer#14*, 2012



15. *Prayer#15*, 2012



16. *Prayer#16*, 2012



17. *Prayer#17*, 2012



18. *Prayer#18*, 2012



19. *Prayer#19*, 2012



20. *Homage*, 2012



21. *Filtered Memories*, 2012



22. 28 Days in Beijing, 2012



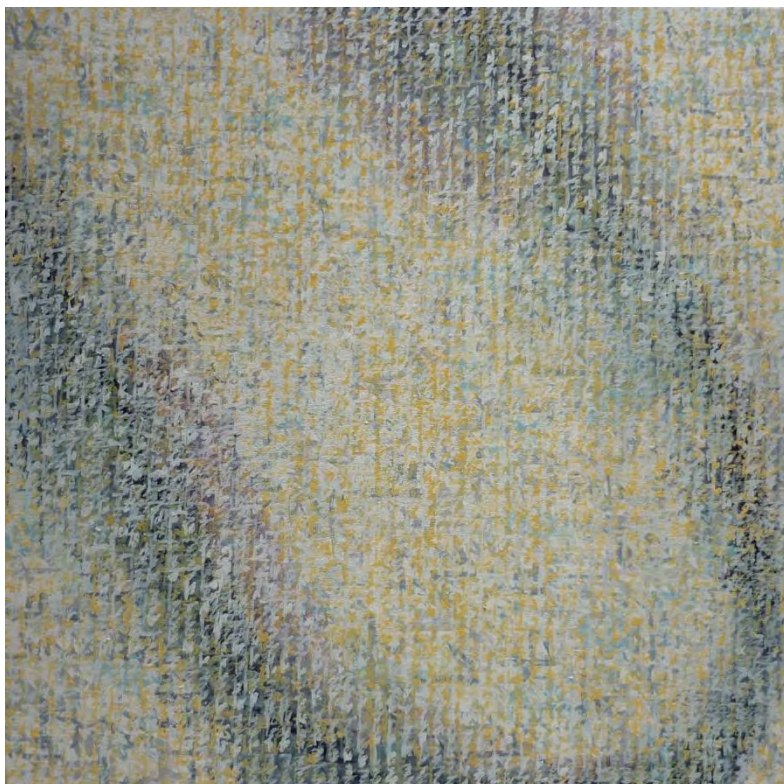
23. 108 Defilements, 2013



24. *Genesis of Prayer*, 2013



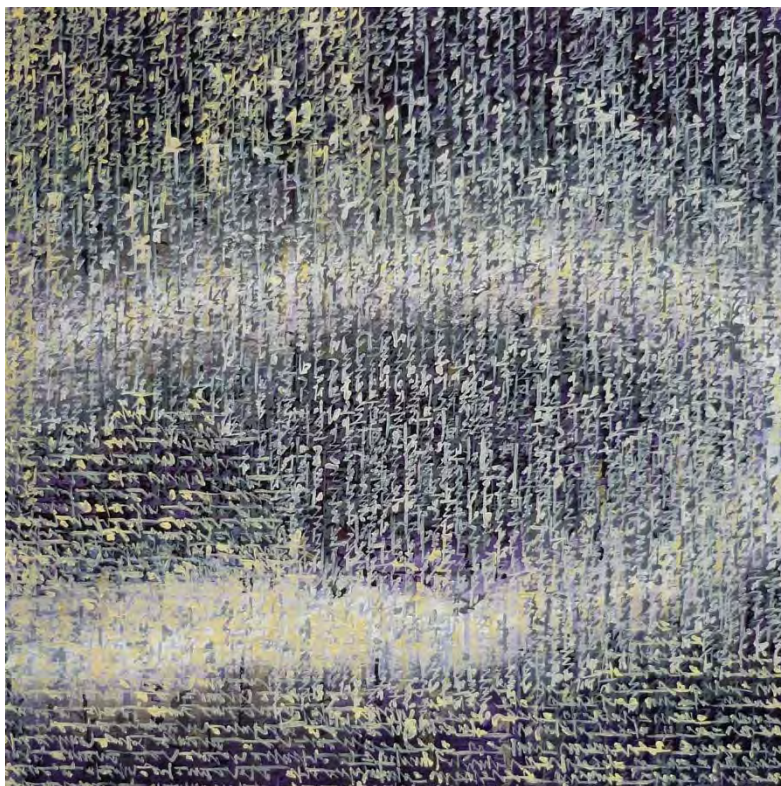
25. *Yin and Yang*, 2013



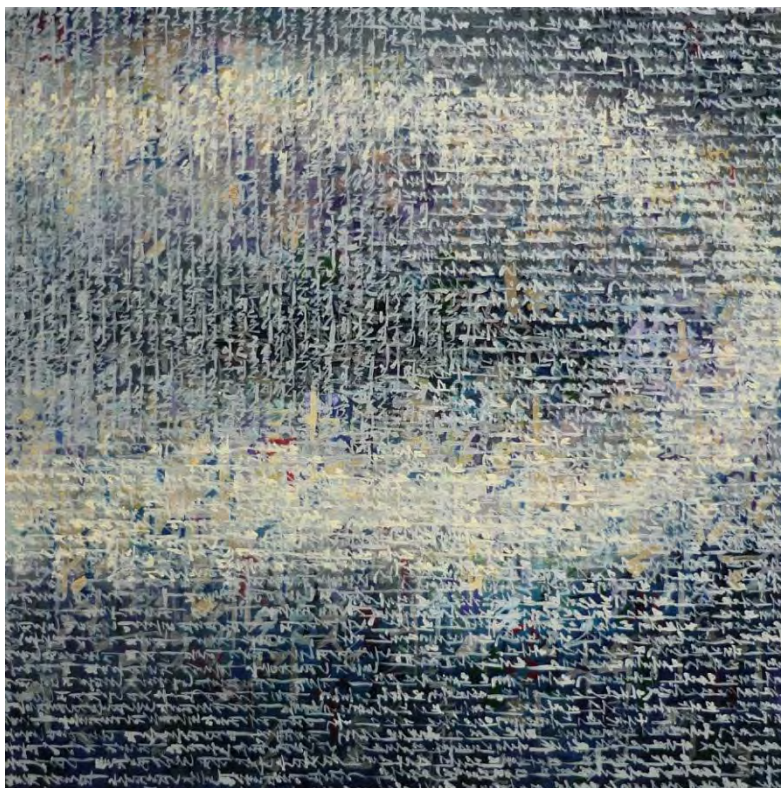
26. *Memory Lines #1*, 2013



27. *Memory Lines #2*, 2013



28. *Memory Lines #3*, 2013



29. *Memory Lines #4*, 2013



30. *Memory Lines #5*, 2013



31. *Memory Lines #6*, 2013



32. *Memory Lines #7*, 2013



33. *Memory Lines #8*, 2013



34. *Charm #1*, 2013



35. *Charm #2*, 2013



36. *Charm #3*, 2013



37. *Charm #4*, 2013



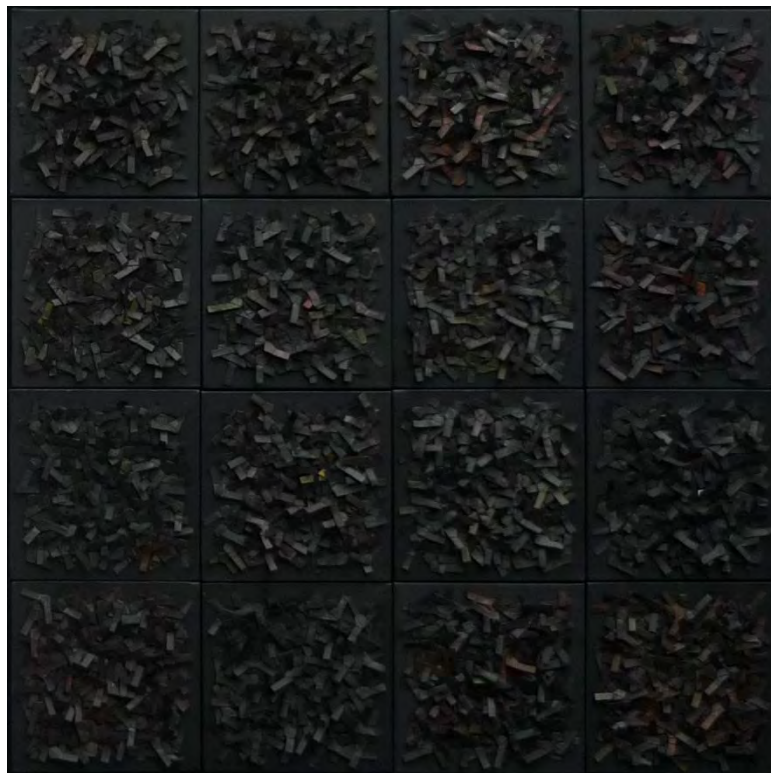
38. *Charm #5*, 2013



39. *Charm #6*, 2013



40. *Korean Whispers*, 2013



41. *Confessions*, 2013



42. *Devotion*, 2014



43. *Devotion*, 2014



44. *White Tears*, 2014



45. *Dedication of 1000 Days*, 2014



46. *Dear My Father*, 2014



47. *Devotion*, 2014



48. *Confessions #2*, 2014



49. *108 Defilements #2*, 2014



