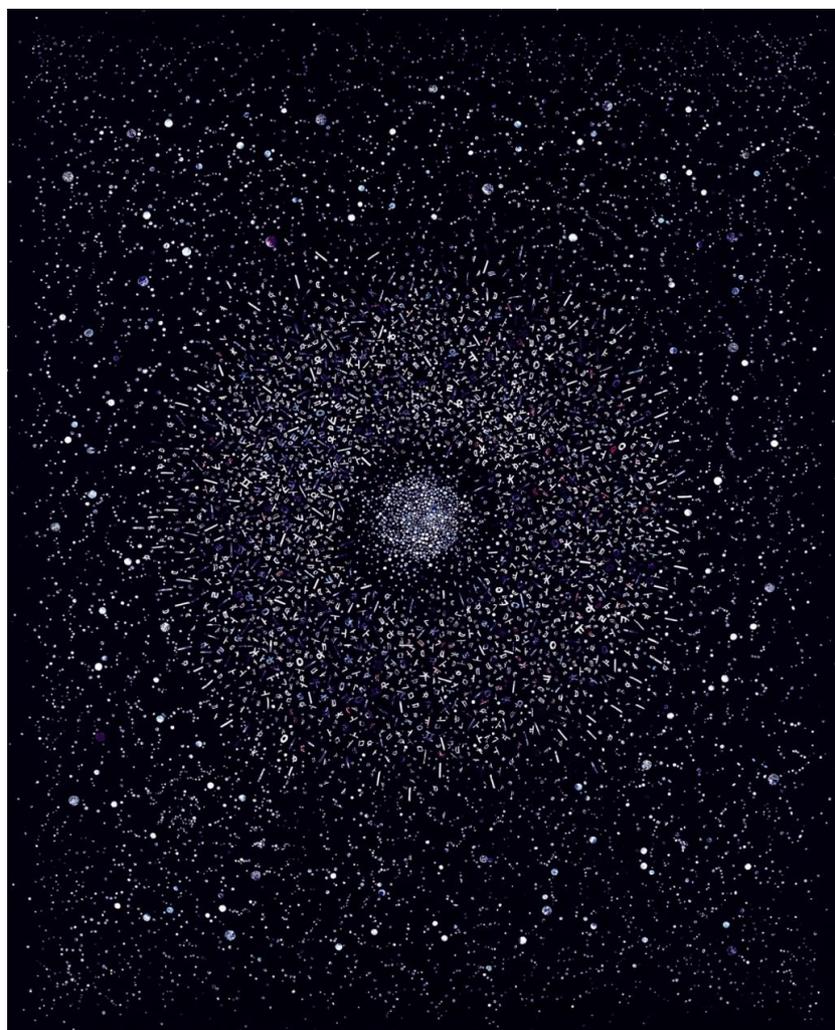


Kong Sookja: The Fruits of Perseverance

Exhibition: Kong Sookja: The Fruits of Perseverance
Venue: 38 rue Quincampoix, 75007 Paris
Dates: 10 - 22 OCT 2019

(Paris, August 01, 2019) - Siat Gallery is thrilled to announce *Kong Sookja: The Fruits of Perseverance*, the inaugural solo exhibition of South Korean artist Kong Sookja, in the heart of Paris. Featuring both large and small-scale lacquer mosaic paintings created with thousand-years-old Korean artisanal techniques, the exhibition runs from 10 to 22 October 2019. One will be able to not only discover the enthralling contemporary lacquer works that will capture the eyes and mind, but also learn about the mastery of material achieved through great perseverance.



Hunminjeongeom - Formation, 2010
160 x 120 cm
Mother of pearl, *otchil* on wood panel

"The work process on an *ottchil* board has to be strictly in order, with peace of mind and perseverance, keeping neutral without tilting to extremes, and with a praying heart that every single choice will bring out the best result. That is what I have learned through years of *ottchil* practice." - Kong Sookja -

In a world where speed, practicality, and convenience have become indispensable parts of life, people tend to lose patience. Kong Sookja bucks this tendency, spending years honing the endurance and self-restraint required for her intricate production process, resulting in a limited number of works each year. Korean lacquer, also known as *ottchil* is produced from an *ott* tree, a plant that can be both medicinal and poisonous depending on the usage. This peculiar nature of *ott* makes *ottchil* one of the most difficult mediums to utilize. This all-natural varnish can cause skin irritation when touched with bare hands and fully dries only under very specific conditions. Despite its difficult handling process, it is also one of the most durable mediums. Made from the sap of an *ott* tree, *ottchil*, unlike synthetic paints or lacquers, releases no hazardous or pollutive materials during production. It is scientifically proven to be resistant to humidity, acid, and heat and repels insects, preserving the lacquered product for over a thousand years. Fully understanding the material is the key to unlocking not only its indescribable luster but also its unparalleled natural benefits. Although mastering this complicated medium is already challenging, it is merely the first step of the lengthy process of creating an *ottchil* mosaic painting. Mosaicking mother-of-pearl and eggshell on top of the *ottchil* board, a traditional *ottchil* technique called *Najeon-chilgi* and *Nangak*, is a highly repetitive method that requires intense focus and discipline. The artist describes the process as "mosaicking time and life into the work."

Although arduous and labor-intensive, using *ottchil*, mother-of-pearl, and eggshell allow Kong to fuse traditional Korean sensibility with her personal narratives. Having studied piano at the most prestigious school in Korea earlier in her life, few people, not even her own family, were supportive of her drastic midlife career change. Indeed, she had been painting for more than a decade, deciding to commit to become a professional artist in her early 50s was beyond challenging. However, she did not succumb to the expectations and opinions of the society and chose to pursue her passion. As a pioneer in reinterpreting one of Korea's most traditional crafts, Kong Sookja encountered countless discouragements and continues to have moments of self-doubt, but her belief in the endless potential of *ottchil* and her hope of encouraging the audience with her artwork has provided the inspiration to continue this rigorous process over the last 15 years.

Her personal experience inspired the *Back* series, one of the major series of this exhibition. One of the many messages that Kong wishes to convey through her work is that of encouraging women to be self-confident and assertive. The protagonists in her works are predominantly women. In the *Back* series, Kong depicts them dressed in *hanbok* (traditional

Korean dress), in Western dress, or seminude, but no matter what they wear, they are always portrayed with an air of boldness and assurance. At first glance, the positioning of the subjects, facing away from the viewer, may appear to convey shyness. However, a closer look allows one to detect confidence from the direct, upright posture. These portraits are embodiments of Kong Sookja's belief that true beauty comes not from appearance, but from self-confidence and self-respect in trusting and loving oneself.

Always looking to bridge opposites, Kong Sookja's works bring not only past and present but also East and West together. While paying homage to Korean tradition, Kong constantly seeks to communicate what may be important to keep in mind in the society today. By using *hangul*, Korean alphabet characters, in her *Hunminjeongeum* series, Kong Sookja encourages the younger Korean generation to appreciate their unique culture while introducing to foreigners what is known to be the most efficient written language. According to linguistic scholars, the *Hangul* alphabet, also known as *Hunminjeongeom* developed by King Sejong in 1443, is the most logical, ingenious, and scientific writing system. In this series, Kong Sookja has special affection for *Formation* and *Diffusion* because they were the most challenging but gratifying pieces. While looking at black *ottchil* boards, Kong had an urge to depict the infinite stars in the sky, driving her to work day and night relentlessly for two months. By incorporating *hangul* characters to depict countless stars, Kong illustrates her love for her country and her desire for the Korean language to become more widely known, like the diffusion of stars in the universe.

The *Decorative Art* series, the last major series of this exhibition, represents Kong Sookja's efforts to bring this traditional Korean medium to a wider audience. In depicting Western pieces of furniture such as chandeliers and chairs in her work, she draws inspiration from her studies and experiences in the US and in Europe. She pays homage to masters such as Vincent Van Gogh and David Hockney who utilized the chair as a stand-in for human bodies and personalities. To her, chairs and chandeliers are objects that signify far more than their pure function - the simple addition of a single such object transforms an empty space into one with purpose. They are quintessentially Western objects that have widely permeated daily life in Asia, signifying how previously diverse cultures have melded. By depicting familiar objects in *ottchil*, the artist brings the traditional medium closer to the global audience she encounters at international exhibitions in Paris and Basel.

"Kong Sookja's recent works contain the beauty of Korea in terms of material, productive techniques, monochromatic expressions, and compositional treatment of the void... They communicate with an international language that transcends geographical and chronological boundaries."

- Min, ByungGak, Artist and Chairman of International Art Association -

Born in Seoul, South Korea, artist Kong Sookja studied Piano at Seoul National University Painting at Parsons School of Design in New York and The Art Students League of New York to continue her passion. She is currently an official member of various art associations nationally and globally, including Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts (SNBA) of France, Korea International Art Committee, and the Korean Fine Art Association. Since 2002, Kong Sookja has exhibited in numerous group and solo exhibitions and attended numerous art fairs around the world, including Le Salon des Beaux Arts de la Société Nationale des Beaux Arts at the Carrousel du Louvre from 2006 to 2016, KIAF (Korea International Art Fair) from 2008 to 2019, Affordable Art Fair in NY, Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia, and SCOPE Art Show Basel.

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