

EVENT SUMMARY:

Private View and Artist Talk: Sumi Kanazawa in conversation with Jonathan Watkins

Thursday 14 September 2023

Introduction by Sumi Kanazawa:

Before I start to explain about my work, let me introduce myself briefly. So, I'm a Japanese-Korean artist. I was born in Japan, but my nationality is Korean. My family have lived in Japan as immigrants for nearly 100 years, since my grandmother's generation. I have three family names, firstly, Kim. Kim is a Korean name, and this name represents my nationality and ethnicity. Next, Abe. Abe is my Japanese name, but my husband's family name. In Japan, 95% of women take their husband's family name after marriage, in fact married couples are still not allowed to have separate family names. Therefore this name tells us more about the social position of Japanese women, and the patriarchal customs of Japanese society. And lastly, it's Kanazawa. This is the previous Japanese name I used before my marriage, which I now use as my artist name. 'Kanazawa' can also be described as the name for a Korean living in Japan since the name 'Kanazawa' contains the same character as from my Korean name 'Kim'.

Why have Japanese Koreans lived in hiding in Japanese society? Or why did they have to do so? Just by explaining my family name, you can see social issues such as nationality, ethnicity, gender and minorities, as well as immigrants' history. But how about my first name, Sumi? 'Sumi' is the only name my father gave me and is common in Japan and Korea. He wanted me to be accepted in both countries. This story regarding my name represents the concept of my artwork – People live with two sides: as an individual and as part of society. I have been thinking about this eternal contradiction of the human condition through my work.

I would like to briefly explain the three main series of my artwork: First is my number series. In this series of works, the actual alien registration numbers ('B176404261') are applied, based on my experience when I first encountered them. These mechanical and emotionless figures represent my ethnic identity as a third-generation Korean based in Japan. On the other hand, these long numbers seemed to indicate the sense of many 'someone else' and a long 'time'. I have developed this series of

works while changing its contents and forms. This piece is the first piece of the number series. I made this work when I graduated from my university in Kyoto.

My next series is called Borderline. For me, 'borderline' represents 'the world in between'. This series of works was largely inspired by the view of the military border between South and North Korea. I had a chance to see the landscape inside the military border through a telescope. There were vast fields of grass and a deep forest.

A borderline is a political symbol between nations. Simultaneously, any thin line depicted on a map exists as a physical space. And it is on those 'borders' that generate different phenomena and stories. I have always wanted to recreate 'the world in between' as the landscape I saw on the North and South Korean military border at that time. This project is called the road line project. In order to achieve this, I stayed on a small island called Panyong Island for 6 months. It is the island that is closest to North Korea.

Lastly, I started working on this series after 2016 after I had my baby in 2015. I had to reconsider the way I engaged in art practice - it had to be artwork I could do at home. Every night, after I put my son to bed, I would start drawing. It was usually from 10 pm to 3 am.

I drew as if erasing an article from the newspaper. This was to shine a small light on images and words that I am interested in. These works express the discrepancy between an individual's sense of time and a society with a linear timeline. In this exhibition, I am also exhibiting one drawing, titled No . 06082023 , that was derived from the series of Drawing on Newspaper . I only worked on this twice a year : on 6th and 9th August – the dates the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki . I depicted the sky of those two days on top of the newspaper articles related to the atomic bombings. I am happy to delve into the inspiration and concept of this work later when we discuss Drawing on Newspaper.

Discussion with Sumi Kanazawa & Jonathan Watkins:

Jonathan Watkins: Thank you. It's such an achievement to be speaking, giving a talk in English. Congratulations. It was wonderful. I'd like to talk about your work, maybe in the order in which you showed it to me. I don't think many people understand what everyday life is like for people with Korean identity in Japan. I wondered if you could say a little bit more about that. We saw the work with the alien registration number, for example, which I think is your number. Yes. Could you say how it is? What is it like being Korean? I mean, you're Korean, but you weren't born in Korea. And your

parents weren't born in Korea. It's an identity that you inherited from your grandparents, I think. I'd like to hear a little more about your daily life as a Korean living in Japan.

Sumi Kanazawa: Well, my grandmother's generation, my father's generation, and mine are all very different. For example, my grandmother came from Jeju Island, and she lived in Japan as a foreigner. At that time, Korea was a Japanese colony anyway, so she was able to get Japanese citizenship through that route. So the island, Jeju Island, is exactly between Japan and Korea. After that, she was told she had to return to being a foreigner after Japan lost the war. Then, five years later, there was the Korean War, and Korea itself was divided into two, and she was forced to make a choice as to which nationality she would take of the two Korean options. As for her identity, her identity as an islander (from Jeju Island) was the strongest.

There was an incident that occurred in South Korea, where people opposed the creation of separate states, before the Korean War. The Korean army then committed genocide of the people of this island. They were treated as communists and therefore presumably undesirable, and a lot of them were killed. My grandmother has quite complicated feelings about both North and South Korea, and actually feels closer to Okinawa, which of course is part of Japan.

My father was born in Japan, but his birth parents were Korean, and therefore had Korean nationality. He didn't feel fully accepted in Korea or Japan. However, I'm third generation, so my story is a lot simpler. The difficulty I have found is deciding whether my ethnic identity is Korean, or Japanese, as I've lived in Japan my whole life.

Jonathan Watkins: The first photograph of the identification number is very clear but in the second it is fading away. Is there a significance to the juxtaposition of the two images?

Sumi Kanazawa: Yes, so I actually took seven photographs in total, one each day for a week. I didn't bathe for that whole week, I just continued my normal daily life and took photographs of it every day, gradually fading away. I couldn't write it myself on my own back so somebody else wrote it for me. The meaning behind is that all things will gradually fade away: I myself will eventually become an old woman and die, countries and ideologies will fade away in the same way as these numbers.

Jonathan Watkins: Okay, so it's more of an existentialist statement rather than, I mean of course it's intensely political, but I wondered if it was almost an optimistic idea, that your alien identity dissolves, but it sounds like that's not the case.

I think your Korean identity and your identity signified by this alien registration number is a really important part of your identity. It informs a lot of your thinking and a lot of your artistic practice.

Sumi Kanazawa: For me, this number symbolizes a very minimal and emotionless number.

Jonathan Watkins: There's an interesting comparison with another Japanese artist, Takamine Tadasu, whose work was shown at the Mori Museum, and relates to his experience as being Japanese, but married to a Korean woman. In his case, it's quite an extensive sequence of photographs about their relationship, how he relates to her family, images, and quite a lot of almost diaristic text. It's interesting that you have an opposite tendency. His background is theatrical, but you have a tendency towards a kind of minimalist abstraction. We see it in a lot of your work, and we see it a lot in the work which is downstairs.

Is it because it's almost too much? I mean, your family history, from what you've described, it's a kind of soap operatic story. I mean, it's so bound up with geopolitics. You know, the horrific end of the Second World War and the consequences that that had for these populations, but your family in particular. I wonder if, in the same way as Kawara's response to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was to almost distill it down to emotionless numbers. You feel it's almost too much to deal with, so this is the only kind of response you can make.

Sumi Kanazawa: I felt that these numbers actually represent long lengths of time and individual people's lives, so they're representative of a lot of things. In my next work, I wrote out all the numbers, starting with my own number, writing them out in order until I got to my father's number. My father was incredibly important to me, and so I thought that all these other numbers in between presumably represent people who are very, very important to somebody. It was fun to imagine that. I enjoyed imagining that with all of these numbers. In the end, if there was a first number, what kind of number would it be, and who would have it? I came to think well, presumably there was a first number, and I sort of invented a story about the person who had the first number.

These numbers were introduced through the Foreign Registration Law, which was passed in Japan just two years after the war in 1947. Of course, this is just fiction. It's something I made up, and probably such a person doesn't exist, but whoever had the first number in 1947 would be the same generation as her grandfather.

So I made up a story about this person. I made an installation in which this old man is living by himself. There are three rooms in the installation, and this is the bedroom, and this is him growing tangerines. This is the fictional person's kitchen, and I am writing a letter in the kitchen from my own identification number to this person, who I gave the number 1111 to. So, obviously, this letter will never be delivered to him. But if you read that letter, you would understand the whole history of these

numbers. It is made available to read for people visiting the exhibition. There is also a video of the hotel in Jeju where I started writing this letter to him.

Jonathan Watkins: Every number represents a human life, and it's a number that signifies alienation and dislocation. But you resort to a practice which is almost like a kind of meditation, you know, that it becomes almost a sort of aspiration to a kind of stillness, I think - an emotionless conclusion to sort of countless stories which are intensely emotional.

Sumi Kanazawa: So part of what I was trying to do was to see just how broadly I could imagine based on this simple number, representing somebody's life. Through doing that, I would be able to imagine the flow of history.

Jonathan Watkins: I mean, this is so interesting in relation to the work that's on exhibition here, and this sort of conflation of your individual identity and yet this much bigger picture. I mean, the images that you'll see are almost cosmic in their configurations based on current affairs, you know, in a very complicated way.

I wanted to ask about the DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone in Korea, the 38th parallel, which, you know, we saw the images of the roses. The roses with the thorns on the barbed wire, which is a very sort of nice correspondence. But you made the observation as well that that border is not a line. It's, I think, a three or four-kilometer stripe through the landscape. It's one of the most peaceful places you can experience. Could you say more about that? Because I've been there, and, you know, it is so odd. But from your point of view, probably even odder.

Sumi Kanazawa: When I went to Korea, one of the first things I wanted to do was to see this border area. It wasn't so much about me being ethnically Korean, but more so because I wanted to see what a border actually looks like. When I looked at the border area through a telescope, I felt that I already knew it somehow. Because my parents and my grandmother, and I have effectively lived all of our lives in a kind of border zone. A national border is a very political symbol, but I felt like my whole family has been on the front line of various political issues in Japan, including, of course, the issues related to Japan-Korea relations and especially Korea-Korea relations. My family and I want to be kind of free and independent in the same way that this border area is just free. It's free and wild.