

Identity in Diaspora:
Conversations Around Yong Soon Min

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Yong Soon Min is a modern visual artist whose works tend to become the focus of critics and scholars. The comments regarding Min and her work are mostly positive, praising her involvement in political activism. However, a few scholars accuse Min of intensifying the classification in the art world. Some of the common messages that Min likes to address in her works are Asian American civil rights and identity of immigrants in the United States.

Undoubtedly, scholars view Yong Soon Min as one of the most prominent female Asian-American artists. In a journal article, Hwa Young Choi Caruso praises Min to be the “leading contemporary Korean/Korean American women artist whose artworks deal with issues of cultural, social, feminist, political, and hybrid identity and art as political activism.”¹ She then argues that artworks by Korean-American minority female artists like Min are especially worthy of investigation because they represent a multifaceted life experience “both as women and as Korean immigrant members of a cultural minority in American society.”² Nina Felshin shares similar sentiments towards Min in her article from *Art Journal*. Felshin lists Min as one of 12 feminist artists from 1966-1994 because she is attempting to figure out the change of trend in feminists' artist's main focus throughout time.³ Although Felshin does not spend more time talking about Min, the mere fact that she juxtaposes Min with famous contemporary artists like Lesley Dill and Harmony Hammond shows the respectable status of Min in the contemporary art society.

Yong Soon Min is perhaps most famous for her works concerning the identities of Korean immigrants in the United States. Through artwork, Min is able to reconnect to her Korean cultural roots and learn about her self-identity as a Korean-American. When commenting

¹Hwa Young Choi Caruso, “Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity, and Gender by Suk Nam Yun and Yong Soon Min,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 3 (2005): 71–87.

² Caruso, “Art as a Political Act”, 82.

³ Nina Felshin et al., “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966-94,” *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995): 71–85.

on Min's new collection, *Bridge of No Return*, Jane Necol says that Min seems to be "turn[ing] a larger scope on the global politics of difference."⁴ Necol then calls Min an "intellectual terrorist", for Min is at her best constructing edgy conversational works that are able to express her inner struggles.⁵ Caruso shares a similar view in her journal. She contends that art serves as a "personal quest for truth and meaning" for Min in a way that she is able to "stabilize whom she is, negotiating with herself, and finding self-resolution of a woman who is straddling Korean and American cultures."⁶ Sometimes Min's self-reflection on the identities and history of Korean Americans can encourage the viewers to pursue their own true identity. When discussing her thoughts after looking at Min's artwork *Defining Moments*, Moira Roth confesses that she starts to ask herself what the defining moments in her own life are.⁷

Besides attempting to portray the identity of Korean Americans, Yong Soon Min also focuses on using her art as a political act, especially regarding the status of Asian American women. Both authors Elaine Kim and Jung Heum Whang discuss Min's involvement in political activism. Kim focus on feminism; where Whang talk about Asian American civil rights. In the journal "Bad Women", Elaine Kim discusses the idea of "bad women" using the work of Asian-American artists-activists such as Yong Soon Min to reexamine the true meaning of "badness".⁸ Kim states that visual art is one field in which "bad women" seem to flourish by challenging feminine stereotypes. Kim suggests that Min is certainly a "bad woman" because she is able to "uncover the past buried by the winners of history and place the woman's body in world history,

⁴ Jane Necol, "Yong Soon Min: Bridge of No Return: Art in General, New York," *Exhibit22*, no. 5 (October 9, 1998): 48–49.

⁵ Necol, "Yong Soon Min", 49.

⁶ Caruso, "Art as a Political Act", 85.

⁷ Moira Roth, "Traveling Companions/Fractured Worlds," *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): 82–93.

⁸ Elaine H. Kim, "'Bad Women': Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min," *Art Essay* 22 (Fall 1996): 573–602.

thereby gesturing toward both the history and politics of the possible.”⁹ Kim also comments that “because [Min] is concerned with helping to create a culture of resistance,” she “grapples with perspectives, themes, and images traditionally kept hidden in the Korean American community.”¹⁰ Kim believes that Min’s work directly challenges the traditional Korean concept of sadae-jui, “reliance on the powerful”, which is the idea of exploring the affinities among people who have suffered oppression in the west.¹¹ In his thesis, Jung Heum Whang argues that Min, in order to “to struggle publicly to engage in minority and gender politics”, often portrays herself as the protagonist in her own artwork, “suggesting the connection between the personal and the political.”¹² According to Whang, Min criticizes the stereotypes of viewing Asian Americans as the “model minority” inside the United States by displaying the “stereotypical images of Asian American women who have been marginalized through the American white male gaze as an act of defiance.”¹³ Whang also discusses one of Min’s recent panels, *Object Other*, which he describes as Min’s suggestion of her progressive willingness not to hide her racial differences through the process of assimilation by exaggerating her slanted eye in the artwork.¹⁴

⁹Kim, ““Bad Women,”” 585.

¹⁰Kim, ““Bad Women,”” 587.

¹¹Kim, ““Bad Women,”” 592.

¹²Jung Heum Whang, “Body Politics of the Asian American Woman: From Orientalist Stereotype to the Hybrid Body of Yong Soon Min” (M.A., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2007).

¹³Whang, “Body Politics of the Asian American Woman,” 34.

¹⁴ Whang, “Body Politics of the Asian American Woman,” 36.



Figure 1. *Object Other* by Yong Soon Min contains a selfie of herself exaggerating the slanted eye.

Meanwhile, Yong Soon Min has been doing a series of other artworks that have attracted the interest of critics. In 2004, Min created an art exhibition entitled “*Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity*”, in which she urges her readers to treat foreign laborers working in Korea with equality and respect. Soyang Park, in a review of the exhibition, comments that by creating this specific exhibition, Min “intervenes in this binary opposition of native and foreigners in the Korean mind.”¹⁵ She supports Min’s intention behind this exhibition by claiming that “Koreans may be strangers to themselves if they do not see themselves reflected in the Other within their own borders.”¹⁶ Park also finds some of Min’s interviews with foreign workers in Korea interesting,

¹⁵ Soyang Park, “‘Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity’: Yong Soon Min with Allan DeSouza,” *Exhibit19*, no. 4 (July 2005): 427–31.

¹⁶ Park, “‘Xen,” 430.

for Min sometimes has to mix English to make up for her limited Korean ability. Park believes that the mix of languages between different cultures is able to create “an imaginary community” in which “mutually marginal and marginalised identities can be mediated.” Park’s sentiment links back to Caruso’s point that Min’s work serves as a mediation between her own inner conflict between Korean and American culture.

Not all commentaries on Yong Soon Min are positive, however. In the article “Beyond the ‘Authentic-Exotic’: Collecting Contemporary Asian Art in the Twenty-First Century”, the President and CEO of Asia Society, Vishacha Desai, criticizes Yong Soon Min’s artwork to be “signify[ing] the problems of classification.”¹⁷ She claims that the fact that Min’s work mostly only addresses issues of Korea and Korean identity in diaspora contributes to a more divided visual art world. According to Desai, traditional encyclopedic museums have placed Asian art apart from that of other areas of the world. Desai feels that the works of so-called “ethnic” artists like Min can only lead to severer divisions.

Most critics and scholars look into Min’s art and focus on issues of immigrant identity and/or Asian-American rights. They praise Min’s incorporation of her personal experience into her art while giving her credit for inviting her viewers to join in the conversation. However, it is fascinating to note that critics tend to focus on the messages that Min conveys in her works rather than Min’s art itself. It seems that they consider Min more as an activist who uses art to express her messages than an artist, which prompts the following questions: how much should art matter when critics talk about an artist? Does an artist necessarily need to express some kind of message in his/her work?

¹⁷ Vishakha N. Desai, “Beyond the ‘Authentic-Exotic’: Collecting Contemporary Asian Art in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Collecting the New*, ed. Bruce Altshuler, STU-Student edition, Museums and Contemporary Art (Princeton University Press, 2005), 103–14.

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