Korea Modern

Overshadowed by neighbors China and Japan, Korea has often been an art world afterthought. But as BARBARA POLLACK reports, attention should be paid.

As CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART CONTINUES ITS FULL-throttle ascent, Korea is something of a sleeper, tracked by those in the know but largely overlooked by art-trend addicts. With Japan's Superflat painting stars priced sky-high and China's post-Mao artists fueling escalating prices, Korean works come off as best buys. Deservedly so. Absent the hype of other Asian art hot spots, Korea has developed a strong, stable gallery scene, producing artists whose track records more than back up their prices. Which leads savvy art watchers to wonder, Why isn't the country a recognized brand in the global market?

Over the past 20 years a sophisticated art scene has blossomed in Korea with prominent international galleries, first-rate museums, artist-run alternative spaces, and major corporate and private collections. Last fall Korea was the epicenter of the contemporary art world, when it played host to a pair of biennial exhibitions.
in the cities of Gwangju and Busan. The country’s top commercial show, the Korea International Art Fair in Seoul (this year, May 9 through 13), continues to draw interest from dealers and collectors abroad, and Korea was the special guest nation at the high-profile ARCO contemporary art fair in Madrid in February.

Overshadowed by Japan and China, Korea has often been dismissed as a mere conduit between those two megacultures. Or just plain bland. But as Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society museum in New York, puts it, “Korea has one of Asia’s most sophisticated art scenes. Because of the internationalism of cities like Seoul, there isn’t an ethnic marker to the country’s contemporary art, and that is one of its strengths.” Without a history of political isolation, like China’s, or an insular culture, like Japan’s, adds Chiu, “Korea is more globally integrated. Its culture is the most adaptive of all the Asian nations.”

Naota Hidaka, a Los Angeles-based specialist with Sotheby’s, believes the country will catch up with Japan and China in the marketplace. “The quality is there,” she says, “but since there is no major movement to characterize the art, it’s more difficult to get an overall grasp of the Korean market.”

In fact, there were distinct styles in Korean art in earlier decades—the Informel movement (abstract painting of the late fifties and sixties) and the Minjung movement (political art pushing for democratization and the end of military rule in the GOING GLOBAL
AN ARTIST’S STORY

Even in 2006 it didn’t really mean much to be famous in Korea,” says Yongjoo Jung, a 37-year-old artist who creates colorful, playful photographic mis-en-scènes. “Your career would start and end here. Now being an artist in this country helps you get attention from all over the world.”

Jung has appeared in major exhibitions like the 2005 Venice Biennale and the recent Taipei Biennale, and he shows with Kukje, one of Seoul’s premier galleries. He is probably best known for his 2004 “Wonderland” series, in which he re-created 17 children’s drawings in photos, such as Princess Tori (left). Using actors in custom-made costumes and meticulously built props (one involved a trampolin, for a flying magician), he captivated the world of the children’s imaginations, down to the smallest details.

“Princess Tori,” says Jung, who wears a scruffy goatee, eyeshadow-drenched hair, and violent horn-rimmed glasses, “My work is about the people around me, their stories. It has layers like an onion, with multiple narratives rolled into one.”

Like many Korean artists of his generation, he has lived in the West, including New York and London, where he got an MA from Goldsmiths College (London for touring our British stars such as Damien Hirst). “It was hard to survive as a Korean artist there,” he recalls. “Now I’m lauded for being Korean. It’s funny.”

Identity is at the heart of Jung’s latest project: a video that uses photos he took of New York’s ethnic enclaves, narrated by individuals with heavy accents from each group. “I’m trying to show these in-between cultures, a place that is not China but not New York,” Jung explains. "Because of the dramatic lighting and its theatrical effect, it becomes a sort of imagined, unreal place.” —CHRISTINA KU
Consuming Passions

eigheteens)—but for the past 15 years the country's artists rarely have been identified with a single aesthetic or national theme. If anything, they have succeeded by doing what so many businesses in their homeland do best: seamlessly integrating themselves into the international arena.

"What's exciting about work emerging from Korea today is that the attention has been slow in coming, which has given these artists the opportunity to develop," says Mary Dinburg, a New York-based art consultant who has been drawing Western eyes toward Korea for more than a decade. "They take from their own culture a proficiency of execution, a dexterity with material, and a thoughtfulness about artistic concerns."

Few Western artists can top the visibility of Do-Ho Suh, a 44-year-old sculptor who commutes between the United States and his studio in Korea. One of two artists to represent Korea at the 2001 Venice Bienale, he has had major exhibitions at the Seattle Art Museum, the Serpentine Gallery in London, and the Sackler Gallery in Washington, D.C. He is represented worldwide by the New York gallery Lehmann Maupin, where he will have a show this fall.

At first glance Suh's sculptures—such as the ghostly rooms made of transparent fabric that replicate spaces he has lived in—don't look especially Korean. Instead they are seen as exploring universal themes of displacement and transience, expressing the rootlessness of an urban nomad who transcends national boundaries.

Yet anyone familiar with the sublime perfection of Korean celadon and the country's magnificent textiles can find comparisons with the precise scale and meticulous construction of Suh's Reflection, an installation shown at the Maison Hermès in Tokyo in 2005. Using thin steel tubing and delicate blue nylon, he fashioned an ethereal replica of the traditional brick gateway outside his parents' home in Seoul.

"We may be talking about international artists, but those who have studied Asian art will find Korean influences in the work," says ThaliaVrachopoulos, a leading expert in this field who teaches at Parsons the New School of Design and the City University of New York. "There is a particular finesse with materials and a preoccupation with detail."

SEO, a young Korean artist living in Berlin, creates subtly textured collage paintings by painstakingly applying thin strips of colored rice paper to the canvas. The effect calls to mind the Expressionist brushwork of his mentor, German painter Georg Baselitz, while her imagery of figures in romanticized landscapes are based on memories of her homeland.

Adding to this confusion—Korean international—is the fact that so many Korean-born artists are educated in the West (mostly in the United States) and maintain residences here. When asked if her works are representative of Korean culture, video artist Kimsooja hesitates. "I work as a cosmopolitan artist rather than as a Korean, although this

THE SHORT LIST

For advice on collecting contemporary Korean art, New York consultant Mary Dinburg (212-807-0832, dinburgarts.com) definitely knows the scene. Akutagawa Hitomi (310-786-1883) is the specialist in this field for Sotheby's, which holds its next sale of contemporary Asian art in New York on March 21. Seoul has a number of top-notch galleries with English-speaking staff. The most prestigious is Gallery Hyundai (82-2-734-6111; galleryhyundai.com), which features a stable of artists on par with those of leading dealers in New York and London. Koja Gallery (82-2-735-8449; kojagallery.com) has the hoppin' roster, representing Cho Duk-Hyung and Yeon-deok Jung as well as Ed Ruscha, Kiki Smith, and Rachel Whiteread. And CAI Gallery (82-2-351-0660; caiagallery.com) shows Cho Sang-Ah and Hong Kyong-Tack alongside Lisa Rayter and Gary Simmons in its five-year program of local and international artists. In Seoul, Kang Un-Ah, a professor at SungMyung University, leads tours of artists' studios and galleries on the third Saturday of every month (e-mail requests to yunih1224@yahoo.com). All the country's major art venues have Web sites, including the LeeumSamsung Museum of Art (leeum.org), which houses a not-to-miss collection of traditional and contemporary art.
Many young Korean artists are combining tradition with a global pop sensibility shaped by Japanimation, video games, and fashion.

identity asserts itself from time to time," says Kimsooja, who has filmed herself in crowded cities around the world, carrying bundles of traditional Korean fabrics or standing absolutely still as pedestrians swarm around her.

Even Korea has stretched the definition of “Korean,” Michael Joo, who represented the country at the 2001 Venice Biennale, was born in the United States.

The country's best-known contemporary artist is the late Nam June Paik, the pioneer in video art whose family fled their homeland during the Korean War. As the first artist to incorporate television sets into sculptures and installations, Paik was a central figure in international avant-garde circles from the fifties until his death last year. A museum dedicated to his work is under construction in Yongin, south of Seoul, and is slated to open later this year.

Lee Bul, 42, is an international artist, though she lives primarily in Seoul. She combines sc-fi, silicone, and Japanese anime in sculptures and installations that have been shown at museums around the world. Recently turning away from the feminist monster “Cyborg”—think prosthetics meets plastic surgery—that brought her acclaim in the nineties, she is now considering the impact that changing landscapes have on our lives. Her 2005 sculpture Mon grand visage, because everything only really perhaps yet so limitless combines ghostly white models of utopian architecture—including Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International—with the bloody red forms of some futuristic organism. Lee, who will have an exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris in late 2007 or 2008, has explained that these new works are about the collision of
Architecture erupting in Seoul as the city has undergone rapid modernization. Even without high-tech fireworks, many young Korean artists are combining traditions with a global pop sensibility shaped by Japanimation, video games, and fashion. In her "Ultra Immortality" series, Choi Sung-Ah, an artist represented by the Gering & Lopez Gallery in New York, replaces Buddhist and Korean symbols of everlasting life (deer, turtles, trees) with emblems of American consumerism (Bambi, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Christmas Tree). Nob Sang-Kyoon, who shared the Korean Pavilion at Venice in 1999 and is represented by New York's Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery, covers figures of Buddha and Jesus in tiny colored sequins. Lee Dong-Jae, who shows at the Gana Art Gallery in Seoul, has done portraits of the Venus de Milo and Buddha using tiny colored grains of rice.

"These works attract collectors from both Korea and abroad," says Sabin Lee, of Kukje Gallery. "I don't think there's a distinct difference between audiences." At the same time, the meditative simplicity of Korean abstraction, pioneered by artists Park Seo-Bo, Chung Sang-Hwa, and Chang Chang-Sup in the sixties, is also resurfacing. Kim You-Sun, who shows with the CAI Gallery in Seoul, covers monochrome canvases with shimmering strips of mother-of-pearl. Chun Kwang-Young, a Kukje artist, builds rugged surfaces on his canvases—which he calls "Aggregations"—by arranging folded paper triangles in varying sizes. "While Korean appreciate his skill with traditional paper folding," says Kukje's Emma Son, "he is popular with Western audiences looking for something Korean in the work."

This return to a more traditional, home-grown abstraction—using subtle coloration and earthlike tones reminiscent of Korean pottery—is seen by many as proof of a growing confidence, buoyed in part by the willingness of Western collectors to travel to Asia and find new artists. Exhibit A of this trend is the Gwangju Biennale, the higher profile of Korea's two biennials held this past fall. A world-class exhibition that began in 1995 as the first of its kind on the continent, the Gwangju show has greatly furthered the internationalism of Korea's art scene. Appropriately, the theme of the most recent edition, "Fever Variations," focused on the contagiousness of Asian art and its spread around the globe.

The historical portion of the exhibition made bold claims for Asia's influence on the West by mixing works by Nars June Paik and Yoko Ono with pieces by John Cage, George Maciunas, and Ben Vautier—and that was only the beginning of the global reach. For anyone who thinks of Korea as less cool or savvy than other Asian art centers, there were plenty of surprises in the contemporary section. One highlight was Michael Jou's mesmerizing Bodhi Olbaum, a tradition-meets-high-tech installation featuring an antique stone Buddha in the middle, surrounded by surveillance cameras trained on every inch of its surface and dozens of screens displaying the details.

Outside Biennale Hub in Jumgogi Park, Choi Jung-Hwa's gigantic inflatable flowers soared 60 feet into the sky; blossoming periodically as a generator filled them with air. They seemed an apt metaphor, capturing the prevailing spirit of Korea's art community: that this burgeoning scene is too big and too globally minded to be contained by any boundaries—national or otherwise.