

Profile
Koo Bohn-chang

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORIES: An artist explains

Koo's photographs are held by respected museums worldwide

By Inès Cho
Staff Writer

Even at the height of Koo Bohn-chang's prolific career in the mid-1990s, when most fashion industry professionals were fighting to be in the spotlight, the German-trained photographer had removed himself from the trendy boomtown of southern Seoul. He sited himself instead behind mountains on the outskirts of northeastern Seoul, making the movie stars and others seeking his work trek to find him.

Six years ago, Koo moved his studio even farther away to the Bundang district of Gyeonggi province. His small natural backyard fits in with the mountain behind the newly built Seongnam Arts Center. Pointing out a small pond next to the garden, he said, smiling, that Korean actress Chae Si-ra nearly froze to death posing nude in the chilly water for a photo shoot for the Korean edition of Bazaar in 2004.

With high ceilings and bare concrete walls, the Koo Studio is a spacious loft cluttered with an eclectic collection of things very personal to the 53-year-old photographer. Tissue paper seems freshly laid and cardboard packing boxes are half open, as if the momentum of his daily activities had been abruptly stopped. One of dozens of shallow drawers below a large photograph of a pocket watch contains used soaps that are thin and almost transparent. Like pebbles that have spent years on a beach, the soaps show the traces of time.

"White, 1999," below, and an image from the December, 2002 issue of "Vogue Korea," bottom.
Provided by Koo Studio



of a perfectly oval bar of soap on a white backdrop. In another drawer are postcards from his travels and an open pack of cigarettes, which he says is from North Korea. Other drawers, tables and cabinets are everywhere in the three-story building.

Against the walls and in corners are propped photographs from various phases and exhibitions in Korea and abroad in his two decades as a photographer, yet Koo says his latest subject matter is *baekja*, or white celadon, from Korea's Joseon Dynasty. The photographer's fascination with one of Korea's most important pieces of cultural heritage has caught on with the public, who can appreciate *baekja* through 47 of Koo's images currently showing at the prestigious Kukje Gallery in central Seoul.

For Koo, the warmth emanating from his clean and calming photographs redefines minimalism for today. Of similarly minimalist photographs from his 2003 exhibition, "Bohn-chang Koo: Masterworks of Korean Photography," at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass., the critic Mary Sherman wrote, "[Koo] forces us to take surrealism's irrational juxtapositions in the guise of a minimalist format and a post-modernist mindset."

To photograph the celadon masterpieces, Koo visited 11 museums in Korea and Japan. "The finest celadon pieces are all in Japan," he said, pointing at the pregnant bellies of large vessels framed by glossy board. "It's a modern, minimalist approach but with a human touch. I used flesh tones to embrace the white bowls."

The images shown in Korea are part of a recent retrospective exhibition at the prestigious Kahitsukan of the the Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art in Japan earlier this month. Previous works by Koo are owned by renowned museums around the world, including the Museum of Art and Craft in Hamburg, Germany, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Korea's National Museum of Contemporary Art.

The IHT-JoongAng Daily spoke with Koo Bohn-chang about his life and work as a photographer.

Q How did you get to Germany?

A I went to business school at Yonsei University. Back then in Korea, having artistic sensibilities was not considered a good trait, especially in a man's character. When I told my parents I wanted to go to art school, they got upset of course. Being an artist in Korea in the old days meant being poor and inadequate; students who couldn't get good grades studied art.

My father worked for a textile company and would bring home calendars from Japanese companies. His beautifully laid-out thread samples and the photographs in the calendars had, I remember, vivid colors. My brother read Newsweek and Time magazines; to this day, I've saved covers ripped from those old magazines. Those images, now that I think of it, helped lead me where I am today.

While studying at Yonsei, I met Bae Chang-ho. He directed a school play, and I made a poster for him. After graduating school, we both went to



"Japan Folk Crafts Museum, Tokyo, 2006," an image from the Korean white celadon series currently on display at the Kukje Gallery in central Seoul, above.

A self-portrait of the photographer Koo Bohn-chang, left, in his Koo Studio in the Bundang district, Gyeonggi province.

"Garden of Spirits, 1995," below.
Provided by Koo Studio

work, like most people, at big Korean companies.

My life as a Korean salaryman was miserable. I couldn't go home until the managers left their offices; after work, I had to drink and sing along with them. When Bae Chang-ho left his work and went to work under the film director Lee Jang-ho, I was really encouraged. I wanted to see what other people were living like outside Korea.

Didn't your family members get upset?

Of course. I wasn't married, and I've never married, just being satisfied with working.

So back then, it was my parents who were unhappy. I'm the fifth of six siblings with two brothers and three sisters. My oldest brother, who is six years older than me, was very smart and good at English. He studied in the United States and going to America to study was a big thing for smart people back then. But I couldn't afford expensive tuition, and I heard studying in Germany would be much cheaper.

So I moved to a small leather garment company and went to work at the company's branch office in Hamburg in 1979. Before that, I'd never been abroad. The city inspired me greatly. I went to the Goethe Institute to study German and took up a night class to study art. To my amazement, anything I drew, these young German students liked.

There were a group of young Germans who were preparing to get into the university Fachhochschule fuer Gestaltung in Hamburg, and we all hung out together, and I thought, I wanted to be there and do what I'm good at. It was sheer joy to find that what was considered bad back home was appreciated as my strength there. Out of our group, though, only two, I and one German friend of mine, made it to the university. That friend was already into photography. I bought my first camera — a Nikon F3.

On weekdays, we would roam the city and take pictures. On weekends, we would hold a "fete" in our homes — invite our friends over for beer and have slide shows. Those images, I would take to class, and anything I did in class, the profes-

sor would pick it up and say, "Toll!" ("Excellent" in German). That was really great.

The early photographs you took in Germany don't look Korean at all.

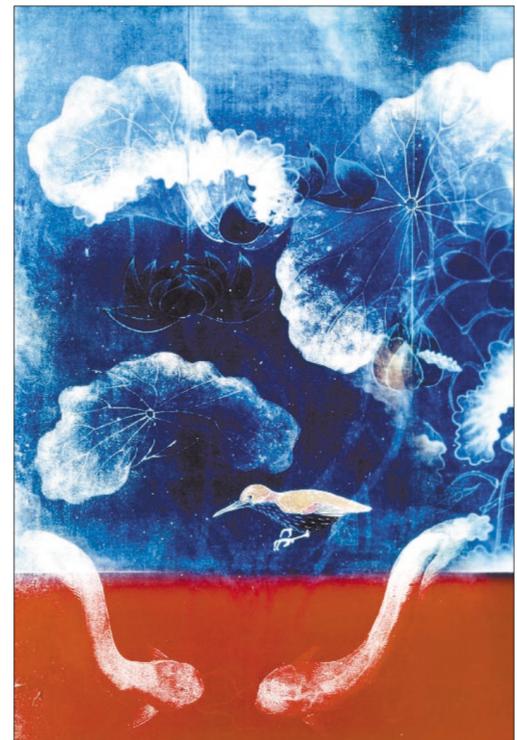
I know. They were styled after Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. One day, I traveled to Dusseldorf to meet with the photographer André Gelpke, whose images were all over books and magazines. He told me my photographs looked like they were taken by a European photographer. "What do you want to say?" he asked me. So that was when my photography began to take another path. I began to look for ways to tell my own story; it began to have its own narrative. I thought of what my country, Korea, was to me and what I was going through at the time. My images from that period speak of alienation and loneliness.

What was it like to be a photographer in Korea then?

In Korea, photography meant nude women posing in waterfalls. My kind of fine art photography didn't have any commercial purpose. My parents were very displeased because I was asking family members for 20,000 won (\$17) or 30,000 won allowances when I went out. They couldn't believe I had quit a good job and become so poor. I remained financially unstable for a while, and it was one of the hardest times I ever had. The pictures I had taken used bodies, so raw and physical — to express the tormented feelings inside me. There were some bloody colors too to express excruciating pain.

My situation didn't improve until 1988, when Korea hosted its first Olympics. The market opened up, and fashion magazines sprang up. When the German Embassy contacted me about German photographers coming to Korea, I thought I had a shot. Instead, I ended up working as a translator, and then later, as a courier — because back then photographers didn't use computers — collecting film German photographers had taken and delivering them fast to the airport.

Beginning in 1988, though,



I signed contracts with a few large fashion companies to do their catalogues and advertising campaigns. To this day, I'm proud that I only did three campaigns — for Esquire, Nonno and Botticelli. I also got to do portraits for movies and theaters. Important magazines such as "Vogue Korea" and the Korean edition of Better Homes and other licensed magazines came along, and I can say the 10-year period from 1990 to 2000 was the most prolific time of my career as a photographer. When I worked on editorials, my works used Korean images, such as *hanbok* and *tal*, Korean traditional masks. I once worked on images inspired by the Korean film, "Chihwaseon."

What do you want to do in the future?
Projects don't come out of nothing you know. At the moment, I'm still into white celadon, and I know there is more in Japanese museums. The *baekja* series came after I got into the theme of

nature after my father passed away in 1995. One of my series at the end of that period is a series of photographs, monochromatic surface of water, bare branches against the white snow backdrop, and dust on the white walls of Koji Temple in Kyoto.
And then I came across a photograph of the Austrian-born ceramic artist, Lucie Rie, seated next to a large Korean *baekja*. That jar, I was told, was given by her mentor, Bernard Leach, who knew the Japanese art critic and collector, Muneyoshi Yanagi. Yanagi, a renowned collector of Korean antiques, came to Korea in the colonial era and took away with him a lot of valuable Korean antiques and opened the Japan Folk Crafts Museum in 1936 in Tokyo.
When I saw the white celadon, I thought the surface, all white, tinged in various notes of colors, from gray to blue to beige, was similar to the white walls gathering fine dust — which I feel is a trace of time.
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