

# Canadian artist turns trash into art

*Andrew Owen exhibition to run until Saturday at Dam Gallery*

By Edward Kim  
Staff reporter

"Flesh Fish" and "Flesh Fruit," interesting titles for interesting collages made out of adult movie posters, are just a part of the innovative art work of Canadian artist Andrew Owen.

Half of Owen's exhibition, showing at the Dam Gallery near Kwanghwamun, was made during his six-month stay in Korea where he is trying to break into the local contemporary art scene.

Owen, who finds the international art scene in Korea growing very fast, gets mixed responses from Korean artists for his decision to become established here.

"A lot of Koreans think it's crazy that a foreigner would want to come here and try to engage in the Korean art scene — why not New York or Tokyo? Young Korean artists, especially, want to go to New York. But I go to New York all the time and I find the emerging scene in Seoul more dynamic and exciting with all the international shows being held here such as the Kwangju Biennale," said the 35-year-old artist from Toronto in an interview with The Korea Herald.

His work, which uses the Oriental carp and bamboo motif is set in traditional Korean frames or scroll hangings, has a Korean flavor which seems to be disappearing in the local art scene.

"Cho Soon-ho, a master in Oriental painting, came to see my works after viewing other Korean art exhibitions and said 'this is the most Korean exhibition I've seen all day.' I think in part he said this as a joke, but also in part as a commentary on young Korean artists these days who are trying hard to shed the constraints of national identity and make 'international art.' In fact, many senior artists are saddened to see young artists trading in their national style for big installations," he said.

Concerning his art style, Owen says it is similar to the European anti-art movement Dada which pushes the boundary of what is called art since it doesn't use paint or other mediums and instead places objects from the real world into the realm of art. Keeping in line with the Dada philosophy, Owen's works are based on "recontextualization," that is taking something from one realm and putting in to another.

"My art work is made of marginal materials, I 'excavated' adult movie posters right off the walls in Nagwondong and found these traditional Korean frames in the alleys of Insa-dong. I then carved fish and fruit designs into them — I recontextualized



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Canadian artist Andrew Owen poses with one of his pieces.

them making them into high art selling for about a million won apiece," said Owen.

The central theme of Owen's art is the Oriental carp which is in all of his works and the water drop ripples. The fish symbolizes Owen and the rest of humanity, while the water drop ripples is the synthesis between heaven and earth.

"I had an 'aesthetic epiphany' one day at a Buddhist temple while I was gazing out of focus at raindrops falling on a pond filled with fish. The water reflected the inverse image of the trees, clouds and the sky, and it looked like the fish were swimming through the trees. The water ripples made by the raindrops further blurred the boundary between heaven and earth... the fish were caught between the two boundaries, neither in heaven nor in earth just like humans who are not quite god and not quite dirt — it was a moment of lucidity," he said.

As for the modern contemporary art world, Owen, who feels the first priority of art is beauty, says that contemporary art is losing beauty.

"I would say that 95-percent of contemporary art is not beautiful and the artists are no longer interested in beauty, they only care about politics, gender and other issues like that," he said also adding, "The problem with the Korean art community is that they only want the works of blue-chip artists, who are mostly dead. They should invite young hot artists, who are not mainstream or blue-chip, but have a lot to offer."

As for the future, Owen plans to travel the Seoul-Tokyo orbit for the next few years and is already scheduled to open an exhibition in the Green Gallery near Hongik University next Sept. His exhibition at the Dam Gallery is to run until Saturday. For more information call 732-9861.