

# Scraping away veneer for bare truth, visual artist Andrew Owen is back

By Edward Kim  
Staff reporter

For Canadian artist Andrew Owen, any object applied with the proper amount of creativity can be turned into art, including tacky souvenirs, excavated adult movie posters and even sticker photos.

Owen, who had a solo exhibition last year at Dam Gallery in Seoul, is back from Japan on a solo exhibition tour of his latest works at Gallery Noksaek near Hongik University. Tomorrow is the last day for his Seoul run, which will be followed by three more shows in Osaka and Tokyo.

About half of the works are from his last show here while the other half was done during his year stint in Japan. Titled "The Faraway Nearby," the exhibition will possibly be his last Seoul show for a few years since he has moved to Osaka.

Again he displays his memorable "flesh art," which are excavated adult movie posters in traditional Korean picture frames that are layered and then have designs such as fruit, carp, bamboo and lilies carved into them. The artistic process is unique and the layers of porn posters provide a vibrant display of skin and colors.

Many casual observers have mistaken the works for collages but they are quite the contrary.

"I use a subtractive process rather than an additive one — creating by subtracting. I'm interested in removing and showing the beauty that is already there," said the 36-year-old artist from Toronto.

His new works include installations, photographs and pseudo paintings done in Osaka. The exhibition displays a total of 18 pieces with many of them being in sets and series.

Titled "Obscure Tourism," this series of photo installations show a famous tourist site with a



"Lilies (Spring)" made from excavated adult movie posters

tasteless souvenir replica pinned over the original in the photograph. The juxtaposition of the site and souvenir sends a strong message about contemporary society.

"Before you get to the Taj Mahal, you are barged by a swarm of souvenir vendors selling trashy replicas so when you finally see the Taj Mahal it becomes anticlimactic. And many tourists just pose to get the mandatory picture and exit quickly," said Owen.

"Tourism is smothering the object of its desire. The souvenir and photograph are becoming more important than the original wonder which

inspired the tourists to come in the first place ... People don't realize these places are being irrevocably damaged perceptually."

A series of works based on print club sticker photos, which are the rage here among young people, are displayed next to "Don't Be Shy," a set of ink jet prints of uniformed Japanese girl students and married women, who cover their faces with a bouquet of flowers, from a hostess catalog. The quality and subject of the photo reproductions are appealing, but a gritty theme underlies the works.

Owen, who lives in a hostess district in Osaka, says the pictures express his feelings about being in this particular neighborhood, where hundreds of sex shops with glaring neon lights and beckoning women dressed up in strange costumes from schoolgirls to nurses surround him. He tries to capture the beauty and weirdness of the Japanese sex industry and the loneliness that drive people to this business.

"Water & Electricity" is a series of photos of the dirty river that flows beneath Ebisu Bridge, the epicenter of Osaka, where thousands of people from all walks of life gather. Visually colorful, this photo series of neon signs reflecting off the water emphasizes Owen's personal approach to art.

"I'm interested in the interstices and space between all of these wonderful places that most casual observers don't see," he said.

In addition to art, the artist has also written a collection of short essays on his thoughts on art, medicine, design and fashion during his stay in Seoul. The book is available at Indeco Art Book Store (734-7254) in Insa-dong.

Concerning his future plans, Owen says he will continue to stay in Japan to explore different avenues of expression and to push the limit on what people would call art.

For more information, call 323-4941.