

## Canadian Pop Artist Presents Korean Themes

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Staff Reporter

He is far from being a world-renowned artist nor have any of his works been displayed at big-name international art festivals like the Kwangju Biennale. But that is not what matters to Andrew Owen, a Canadian pop artist, working on humble Korean motifs.

"Most art pieces at famous exhibitions appear to convey foreign themes that may not be understood among many Korean viewers. Even Korean artists deal with Western themes," said Owen in a recent interview with The Korea Times. He "stays" here to present his Korea-inspired art pieces.

Huge, glaring and gigantic installations and highly philosophical paintings do not mean anything but a piece of craftsmanship and objects of curiosity to non-experts, Owen stressed.

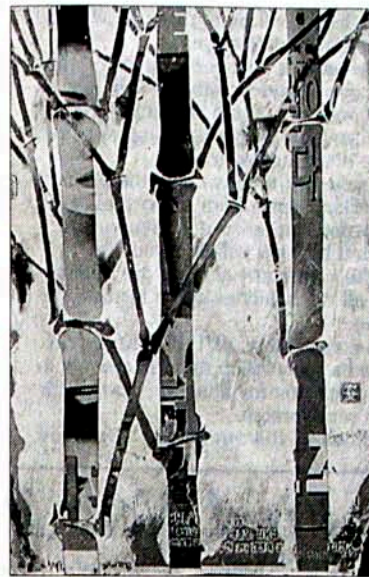
He claims that he is not one of those so called "migrant parachute artists" who drop off in a foreign country to exhibit their works and pack up to leave as soon as the show is over.

Andrew Owen finds inspirations for his artistic work from anywhere his feet hit. On the corner of back streets, in subways, temples or in his own room, his mind searches for clues to explain his themes.

During his 10-month stay in Korea, Owen has been focusing on expressing his understanding of the host country. The 35-year-old Canadian artist takes advantage of some marginal and miscellaneous items found in daily life in Korea and turns them into significant art pieces showcasing Korean culture.

His latest 30 "Korean native" works have been on display at Dam Gallery in Sagan-dong (732-9861), downtown Seoul. The exhibition will continue till Sept. 13.

The most prominent artistic item he discovered is, among others, the rich layers of film posters, including pornography pictures, plastered on back-street bulletins in Seoul. He takes down the wall paper and peels off each layer from the surface on



Two fine art works created by peeling off layers from film posters feature traditional symbolic themes common in Korea: concentric circles on the pond (left) and bamboos (right).  
Korea Times

designated patterns until he finds the right symbolic combinations that he refers to as "hidden treasures." The finished works are embraced with traditional Korean frames discarded in Nagwon-dong, downtown Seoul.

"Knife excavations into found wall posters are much like revealing history. The entire process can be compared to creation from subtraction or slight alteration and recontextualization of existing materials," he said, reviewing his street art.

When he first visited Korea in 1995, he noticed an erotic movie poster with "Konglish" captions in Insa-dong, and he found it very interesting. Two years later, he spotted the very Konglish text in a heap of posters and realized that this form of art can be like going back in history, Owen recalled.

His peculiar observatory power embraces some symbolic facets of Korean culture as themes and he casts a bitterly sarcastic glance on Korean society.

The corporate logo of a multination-

al company, inexpensive miscellaneous items sold by peddlers on subway and souvenirs from tourist attractions are some of materials with which he make "jokes" about the industrial and commercially-driven culture of Korea.

"Hawkers target the subway system to sell their inexpensive wares to the captive audience on the train cars. I glued the objects I had bought during my train rides on a large subway map," the pop artist said.

Pepsi recently changed their famous logo reminiscent of the red and blue circle in the Korean national flag in a move known as "Project Blue." It was changed worldwide except in Korea.

"The spiritual symbol of the Korean people has been manipulated for commercial purposes. Is Pepsi the National Drink of Korea? Are universal product codes a new yin-yang symbol?" he asked.

To artists like Owen, overseas trips serve as opportunities to broaden their perspectives and find some inspiration for their work. He came to

realize that spurious images or false existences are more emphasized than real things in conjunction with commercial values.

This idea is presented in the installation work where souvenirs are fixed in front of pictures capturing a blurry image of the real historic site. Included in this section are the Buddhist temple of Pulguksa in Kyongju; Chomsongdae, the Silla terrestrial observation structure; the Taj Mahal in India; Senkakuji Temple in Japan; and an erotic Mayan sculpture.

Built on the premise of enabling closer contact with the world's wonders, the tourism industry now threatens to smother the objects of its desire. One often sees a hundred cheap simulacra before the real thing. The original wonder has been reduced to being in the background and obscured by imitative products.

"At almost every tourist site, souvenirs seem to be treated as something of the greatest value. Tourists see the souvenir before actually observing the real things. The souvenir is number one and the historic site is not important," he said.

Another Korean theme he deals with is Buddhism. Painting ripples and fish, lotus flowers in a pond at a Buddhist temple, the Canadian Buddhist artist makes metaphorical attempts to express his concept of the human and material world from a religious point of view.

He captures a series of concentric circles made from a stone throwing in a pond in his own terms, where the sky, trees (the heaven) are reflected in the background of the mud and fish (human existence). However, the ripples blur the boundary.

"Looking at fish I see myself stuck between heaven and earth. Trees are growing down, the sky was down and fish are floating up in the sky," the artist said.

In a sense, lotus flowers carry the image of enlightenment. They grow for six months to blossom for just one day and this may be a metaphor for human life climaxing for a just brief moment after a big struggle coming up from the dirt, Owen noted.