

Wandering into Jiseung

AIMEE LEE



My pace was akin to extreme sports but in craft form...

STORY BY JANET DE BOER

Early in 2013, I received this message from an artist named Aimee Lee: *My friend Velma Bolyard recommended that I contact you about my new book on Korean papermaking and related arts... it recounts my studies with papermaking, paper felting, paper weaving, calligraphy and natural dyeing matters.*

Having met Velma Bolyard at the Beautiful Silks Natural Dye Symposium in mid-2012 (and being very impressed with her shifu work), I was keen to learn more. Also, as South Korea is still very much on my mind after my experiences of the inaugural Korea Bojagi Forum in August 2012, I was especially motivated to set out on a journey that proved highly rewarding.

Aimee Lee provided me with a review copy of her new book, *Hanji Unfurled: One Journey into Korean Papermaking* published by The Legacy Press USA. When the images of her artwork arrived and I had had time to enjoy the book I was convinced that this is indeed a remarkable artist with a similarly remarkable story to tell.

Like Chunghie Lee and her daughter Jiyoung Chung, Aimee Lee is interested not only in Korean folk art and its cultural influences (along with the threat of some aspects disappearing from practice), she also has a strong awareness of, and feeling

for the invisible maker; for the disregarded experiences of people which can sometimes find a voice through crafting.

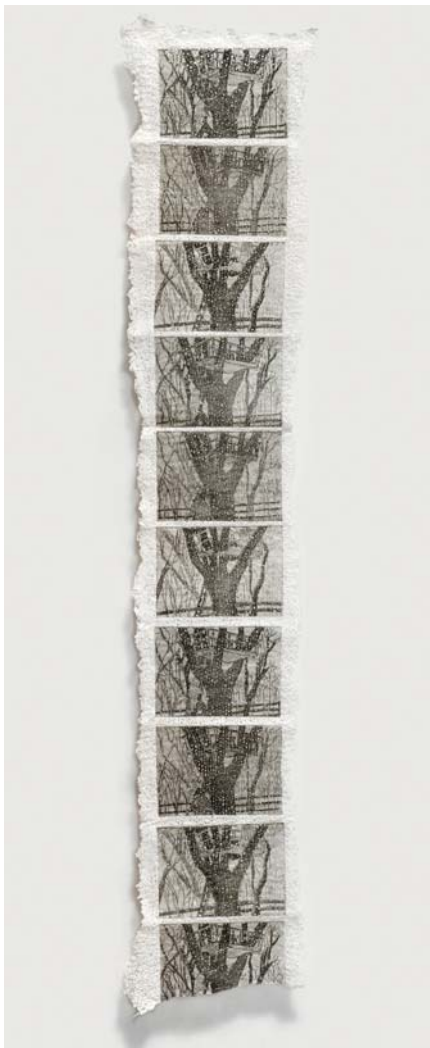
As Lee says in her Artist Statement: "Through my study of hanji, I became interested in how certain craft forms have survived in the face of mass production and a culture of cheap and fast excess. Seeing this clash between past and present production values, I have adapted ancient techniques and materials in my art to revive and update tradition, and encourage the survival and evolution of the old ways, while adding layers of meaning to my practice.

"My work examines the nature of being human, and ways that people create personal realities based on constructs of family and culture. My tools include papermaking, book arts, installation, performance art and writing, and my recent focus is on making and working with hanji, Korean handmade paper."

To highlight the importance of hanji and address its endangered status, Lee built the first Korean papermaking studio in North America in 2010 at the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio. She travels across the USA, her country of birth, to teach and lecture about hanji and related crafts while maintaining free digital archives online.

"I am fascinated by the boundaries between spaces that delineate 'in' and 'out', especially after a year of field research in Korea, whose culture has specific borders, thresholds, and customs for each person in its society. I am especially interested in the private experiences of people in social strata that are usually disregarded or rendered invisible. My work looks at how people express these experiences and how private stories can be projected onto the outside world."





Opposite page top left: CHAMBER POT (2009); woven hanji, lacquer; 6.25" high. Top right, LAMP (2009); woven hanji, persimmon dye; 14.5" high. Bottom of page, black and white BUD VASE (2012); hanji, ink; 3.5" high; 0.75" rim diameter; 2.1" base diameter. **This page left, PRIVATE PERFORMANCE: TREEHOUSE** (2008); intaglio on knit linen paper yarn; 53 x 9.5". Below, CHAPTER FIFTEEN (2009); spun, knit, corded and woven handmade paper (abaca, hemp and dyed hanji); pen on hemp paper, thread; 4 x 5 x 0.75". Below bottom; DO IT OVER (2008). Typewritten sestina on kozo paper, sewn into spun and knit kozo paper, thread, cloth and Mexican amatl; 4.5 x 5.25 x 2.5". Both works are in the Collection of the University of Denver Penrose Library Special Collections. All photography by Stefan Hagen.



Lee had a unique opportunity to fulfill numerous personal and professional goals when she obtained a Fulbright Fellowship (2008-2009) to research Korean paper arts, which led to her fascinating book. It is one of the many delights of *Hanji Unfurled* that she is completely honest about her journey and how she negotiated its challenges. Those who are not so intrigued by the techniques and materials she describes would still find much that illuminates the human journey and how craft interfaces with it.

Chapter Six of her book is titled 'Wandering into Jiseung'. Through a 'hanji apprenticeship' with a Mr Jang, Aimee Lee met Mr Na who agreed to work with her. "I am grateful for this because my jiseung apprenticeship became the most life-changing experience of my time in Korea."

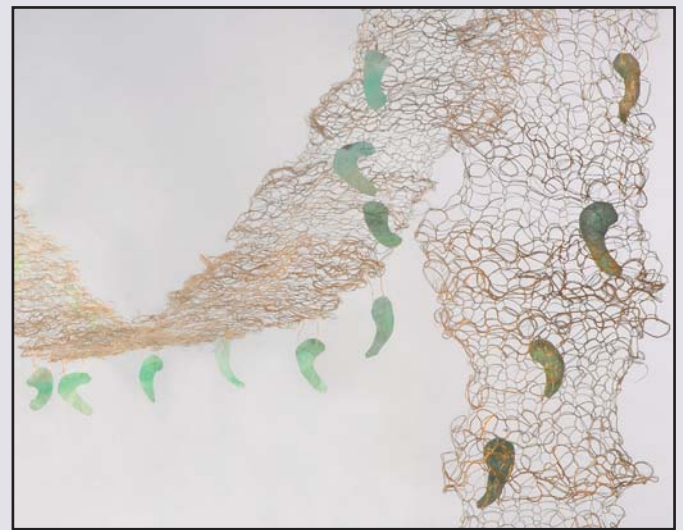
Basically, with jiseung, paper is twisted into cords that are woven to create objects "that struck me as miraculous on first sight... Unlike the Japanese art of making shifu, which is paper cloth created from spun paper thread woven in a loom, jiseung techniques involve hand weaving

akin to basketry. Over time I came to agree that jiseung is the most interesting and versatile craft related to hanji, though it is also the most difficult."

Space does not permit a more studied appreciation of jiseung here – nor of so many other aspects of Aimee Lee's apprenticeships (including natural dyeing). In selecting a symbol of what jiseung could be used for, it is almost impossible to pass up the chance to describe the uses of the *yogang* or chamberpot which was lightweight and made little noise when used. It was also virtually waterproof of necessity. Plus it was beautiful, "so the new bride, traveling all day in her palanquin, with no form of comfort stop, while journeying to her husband's family, was able to relieve herself."

"Any doubts I had about the veracity of this were erased when I met a woman whose mother had had this exact experience. She was sleepless the night before her trip because she was worried how she would relieve herself. The next morning, she climbed into the palanquin and then two hands pushed a hanji *yogang* through the curtains. Her worries vanished, and she used it twice on her way to her new home."

Aimee Lee's description of her efforts to create a *yogang* to a level approved by Mr Na tells a great deal about the art of craftsmanship. The term 'extreme sport' could well apply – not only was there a steep learning curve but the work was hard on the body. "Mr Na had had many students but was reluctant to accept new ones because they inevitably balked at the amount and tedium of work necessary to learn jiseung... My fear of disappointing him was the driving motivation to complete my homework assignments..." Lee confirms she required seven lessons over a two-month period to complete her double-walled chamber pot and its lid. ▶▶▶



Prior to her Fulbright year, Aimee Lee was active in many facets of her career. In 2006 she created *Hunk & Dora* for the Columbia College Chicago Center for Book & Paper Arts. This was an interactive performance and installation involving one woman inside a 14-foot paper brick tower. Over two thousand bricks were made from handmade paper to construct the edifice, in which the artist drew comics onto blank bricks for those who entered the space with a brick. The opening performance lasted four hours. Another self-portrait in a series, the work is described by Lee as a manifestation of interior walls – those we build inside ourselves for protection.

With the Fulbright year over, and her fascinating 'Hanji' book completed, Aimee Lee has continued on the trajectory of her artistic and professional pursuits. She is clearly seeking a contemporary 'truth to materials' where the traditional is allowed to speak simply and directly as part of her journey towards relevance in her own times and her own country of birth.

Sources of information for this article: the book [Hanji Unfurled](#) and website: www.aimeelee.net

Top of page and middle left, versions of *HUNK & DORA*: "How to build a 1-foot handmade paper brick tower with 30 pounds of pulp, one brick at a time. A one-person feat of sheer factory-like production and imagination-heavy vision that created an open but enclosed space of translucent bricks hanging from the ceiling". Generously supported by the Albert P. Weisman Memorial Scholarship Fund at Columbia College Chicago. Photography by Renee Bair.

Middle of page right, *SWEETEST* (2009); knitted ramié thread, dye and gouache on hanji; 126 x 8 x 5". At right, *PASTORALE* (2008); handmade cattail paper, thread, knitted ramié thread; 17 x 10". Photography by Stephan Hagen.

