

## How “I” Shifts When Crossing Borders: Reflections of South Korean Artists Who Study Abroad in the United States

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the distinct journeys of two cross-cultural South Korean artists who each received an MFA degree in the United States. The research examines challenges faced by cross-cultural students, correlating with previous literature on the subject. The analysis provides insights on the experiences of cross-cultural artists, highlighting the educational implications for both artists and art educators, encouraging them to approach students in a manner that fully embraces their abilities.

**KEYWORDS:** East Asian students in the United States, South Korean artists, cross-cultural artists, international students

### Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been an increase in cross-cultural students leaving their home countries to pursue Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016; Rhee, 2013). Crossing borders involves coming to terms with issues of language, race, culture, and nationality as well as the potential shifts in identity that result from finding one’s place in a new academic and professional community (Lee, 2008; Wang, 2015; Yue, 2009; Zhong, 2013). To explore these challenges, art education researchers such as Acuff (2018), Alexander and Sharma (2013), Delacruz (2011), Dervin (2015), and McFee (1996) have sought to understand diverse socio-cultural aspects by examining the academic culture. The role of qualitative research is to gather reflections and experiences about the relationships between individuals and socio-cultural contexts (Clandinin, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) since studying the lived experiences of artists illuminates nuances in cross-cultural environments, specifically, how socio-cultural transitions influence their artwork and professional lives (Kim, 2015; Moen, 2006).

For this mini case study (Clandinin, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), using purposeful sampling (Kim, 2015; Moen, 2006) via the Internet, both a South Korean male and female visual artist were selected based on the completion of a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) and/or a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in South Korea and a two-year MFA in New York. Participants were interviewed at their convenience in a variety of locations in New York for about two hours. Interview recordings were

transcribed in order to provide accurate text to correspond with each participant’s verbal responses based on their lived experiences and narratives. Data for this study were collected predominantly through semi-structured interviews supplemented by images of participants’ completed artwork and a document review of material published by or about the participants.

### New Country, New Learning?

Cross-cultural artists often have to adapt to a different language, value system, and set of social expectations to accommodate unfamiliar essentials of daily life when they move to the United States (Park, 2014). Jones (2008) argued that there is a limited understanding in how faculty and programs in higher education currently support the learning and identity development of cross-cultural students. According to Marambe et al. (2012), cross-cultural students display diverse approaches to learning regardless of their cultural background, as education is not universally conducted in the same manner and so teaching and learning in a new culture is not necessarily in line with the educational framework of one’s home culture (Entwistle & McCune, 2004; Ramsden, 1997; Van Rossum & Hamer, 2010).

A new academic environment can present unanticipated challenges for a cross-cultural student. According to Clark and Gieve (2006), Ryan (2011), and Wu (2015), cross-cultural students acquire an awareness of their status as an international student among native students. In other words, the cross-cultural student becomes aware that they are different from native students when teachers or other students treat them like they are a challenge to deal with in the classroom. Cross-cultural students often interpret this as being inherently part of their international status and may shy away from venturing outside of their cultural group, either to socialize or to engage in an educational learning practice other than those they have previously experienced (Ryan, 2011). Zapf (1991) argued that it is important to encourage orientational support for cross-cultural students in a new culture for understanding this “stressful period of adjustment” (p. 105) in new socio-cultural settings.

### Examining the “I” in Cross-Cultural Identity

Alba (1990), Phinney et al. (2001), and Yinger (1986) emphasized that finding a balance between preserving cultural practices and adjusting oneself to the new environment is important for cross-cultural students’ identity development. Researchers from a wide range of fields have sought to study identity and the ways in which it may shift depending on its context (Garrido & Ruiz, 2018; Koh, 2018; Shibutani & Kwan, 2005). In the past, ethnographic scholars often focused on people’s cultural identity within the context of their unique community rather than viewing identity as a “discrete variable” or an individual preference

(Kim, 2007). After the 1930s, scholars of social science argued that one's cultural identity can be "adaptive" and evolving, identifying immigrants and cross-cultural students as examples of this process (Kim, 2007). Furthering this concept, Erikson (1968) stated that cultural identity is an individual's main identity, and a conflict between the individual's and the group's identities converge in personal identity when someone finds themselves in a new cultural environment.

### Method of Asking Self-Reflection Questions

As a South Korean artist who finished an MFA in the United States, I often reflect on my educational and cultural experiences, and how I was influenced by them. I found myself struggling to understand who I was, where I was, and what I was doing in the United States, confusing my ethnic, cultural, and social identities. Asking self-reflection questions and creating art were similar to ritual processes while concerning my identity, voice, and philosophy as an artist (Gill et al., 2008), and the process was helpful to find my self-direction while bridging gaps between my awareness and socio-cultural understanding. Thus, the list of self-reflective questions is the same list of interview questions I asked of the artists to understand how their conceptions of their identities shifted through their educational careers based on locations and cultural contexts. The open-ended interview protocol included 16 questions (see Table 1) for each participant's own description of cross-cultural learning experiences. The interviews focused on participants' overall experiences studying art and the cultural influences in their artistic practices.

<b>A. Personal stories, ideas, and beliefs as an artist</b>
1. When did you know you wanted to become an artist? How, if at all, did early experiences orient you to pursue art?
2. Which artists and experiences from your home country have influenced you?
3. What does art mean to you? How has this meaning changed as you have developed as an artist?
<b>B. Significant learning experiences in graduate school in the United States</b>
4. What led you to pursue a graduate degree in the United States? What were your expectations and perceptions about your United States graduate program?
5. What are some of the most important things you learned from your graduate school experience? Did the learning experiences meet your expectations?
<b>C. Reflections on interactions with teachers and peers</b>

6. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers across your art education?
How has the nature and quality of your peer-professor relationship differed if at all, between education in your home country and education in the United States?
7. What have teachers talked about in critiques of your work, and how have you responded to these critiques? Have these dynamics differed in your cross-cultural experience?
8. What are some challenges you have experienced in working with fellow classmates? How have you overcome these interpersonal challenges?
9. What have your classmates said to you about your artwork in group studio critiques? What have you found to be similar or different across your international education experiences?
<b>D. Reflections on the impact of graduate school</b>
10. As you reflect specifically on your graduate curriculum, is there an artist, theory, or mentor that has had a lasting influence on your current work, if at all?
11. After experiencing completing an MFA in the U.S., what would you consider to be the advantages or disadvantages of pursuing an international art degree in the United States? Consider these for your artwork, your professional career, and personally.
12. How has your overall experience in the U.S., challenges, and cultural differences that you have identified affected your sense of national and cultural identity and your artwork?
<b>E. Future aspirations</b>
13. What are your short term and long-term career aspirations? How have these aspirations been affected by your studies and residence in the U.S.? What, if any, specific experiences caused these changes?
<b>F. Suggestions based on their reflections</b>
14. How do you evaluate your education in your home country in contrast to the U.S.? If you are going to meet new students coming from your native country, what suggestions and advice would you like to share?
15. Have you expressed the differences of art education between your home country and the United States with others? (Please elaborate)

16. What else might be important to know about international student peers and their work which we haven't discussed yet? What are some other challenges that may arise upon transitioning into the U.S. context as a cross-cultural artist?

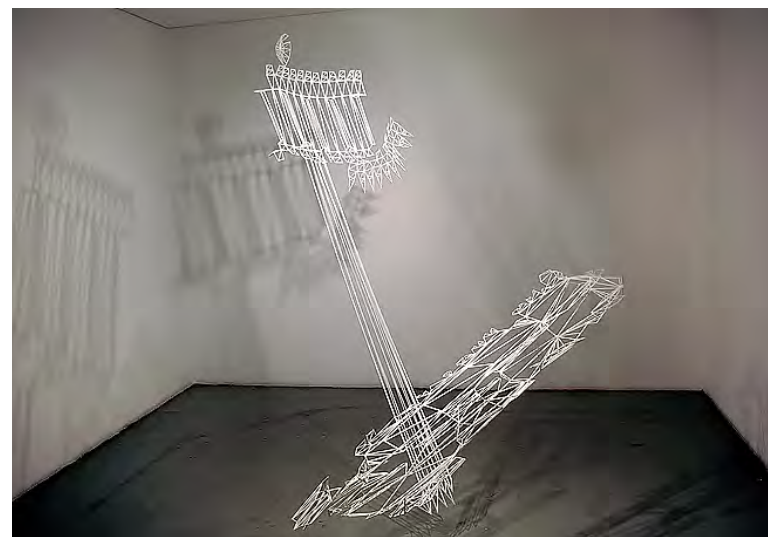
**Table 1:** List of Self-Reflective Questions for Artists who have Cross-Cultural Learning Experiences.

### Interview with Bonam Kim (South Korean Female Artist)

Bonam Kim is a South Korean sculptor based in Brooklyn, New York. She completed her BFA (2011) and MFA (2013) in South Korea, majoring in sculpture for both degrees. Upon the recommendation of her previous MFA professors, Bonam decided to pursue a second MFA in sculpture from Pratt Institute in New York in order to develop her own artistic concepts and learn new skill sets in a new academic environment. Influences on Bonam's work developed over time through a variety of classes that she participated in during the beginning of her second MFA. She shared, "Since I'm here as a foreigner in America, right now art is my language. Since I've come here, my work is about my personal experience of displacement and sense of isolation as an outsider." Bonam also creates work to reflect the emotions that came with her transition from one culture to another.

As for her motivation to pursue a degree in the United States, Bonam explained, "When I was in Korea, I made a lot of series. I kept working on the same thing in the same subject (see Figure 1). So, I felt a kind of mannerism. That's why I decided to come to America to study abroad." When asked about the academic structure of her BFA and first MFA program, Bonam discussed what group critiques were like in South Korea:

During my MFA in Korea, seven or eight students were in a class, and we had a lot of assignments. I prefer to have one or two projects per one semester. In Korea, each week we would have a critique, make artwork or something, and then again two weeks later. They prefer to make a lot of sculptures and a lot of works in one semester and then check it, check it, check it. It is more passive in Korea.



**Figure 1:** *Modified Forms*, painted stainless steel, 51" x 71" x 30", 2011, Bonam Kim.

When I asked Bonam about her relationships and interactions with her professors and peers in both South Korea and the United States, she briefly compared both countries, but primarily discussed the nature of peer-professor dynamics in South Korea:

In Korea, before I graduated, if you want to do something or have a good chance at something you have to be nice to the professors or you have to help them. The first time they asked me to help them was when I had no plans during one weekend. A professor would text me or call me at 11am, but it's not just offering something, it's asking for a favor.

She indicated that the dynamic between students and professors was different in South Korea and the United States. She also described the dynamics of the classes in her home country as a "hierarchy." Her answer led us to talk about her motivation behind pursuing an MFA degree in the United States, and why she specifically chose to study in New York, Bonam said:

My three professors back home already studied abroad in New York. So, they recommended some art schools here to me. Also, I have visited New York two or three times before coming here. The first time, I was a traveler. And the second time I took a class in a university so that I could just kind of experience it before I decided to study abroad... So, this is a melting pot,

like every day, to see the images, or whatever, the street scenes inspire me a lot...

She described her class experiences when she first came to the United States, specifically her critique classes:

Critiques are very intense here so the professors will study the art a lot and give their information in a new way, and they give a lot of good advice during critiques. Even if sometimes it's really intense where they just directly say something, there's no drama. The professors invite people like artists, critics, or juries from outside of the school to class and then they just jump into our critiques to foster a good environment so the students can participate too. So, it's more open and it is not for a specific group.

When discussing the challenges she experienced working with her fellow classmates, Bonam described the nature of her friendships as well as significant cultural barriers. She felt it was difficult being away from her home country but also saw advantages in the art scene in the United States. As for cultural challenges and overall experiences in the United States, Bonam said that she specialized in three-dimensional installations (see Figures 2, 3, and 4) and conceptual work as part of a ritual (see Figure 5), creating pieces that reflect her transition from one country to another.

Right now my sculpture is a sculpture but at the same time it's a device. My work is about my personal experience of displacement and the struggles with cultural identity, so I made my own private space for whenever I want to hide somewhere but at the same time go outside as well.



Figure 2: *The Story of a Stranger*<sup>1</sup>, 27" x 24" x 19.5", 2018, Bonam Kim

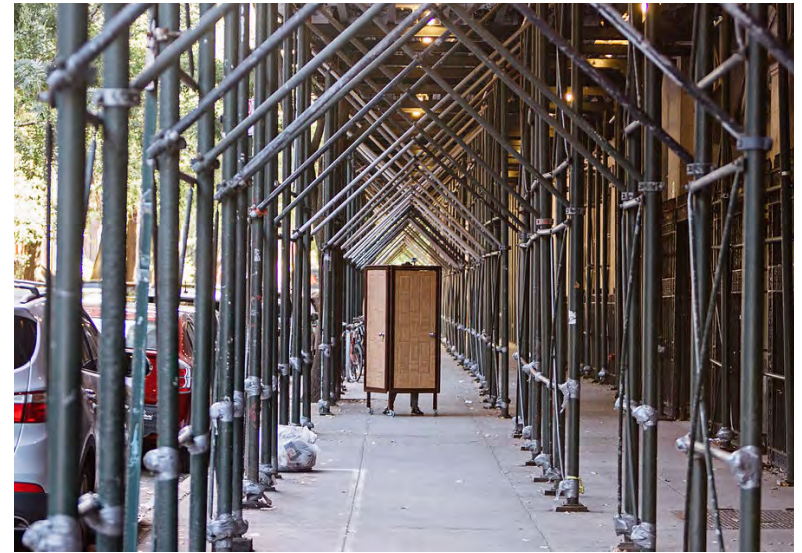


Figure 3: *The Story of a Stranger (detail)*, 27" x 24" x 19.5", 2018, Bonam Kim.

<sup>1</sup> "I have recreated in miniature the full-scale projects I made since moving here from Seoul, I put them into a trunk. I have moved many times from one place to another since I came to New York, keeping my work as a miniature allows me to hold on to it. This work represents my time and history here." (Bonam Kim's artist statement)



**Figure 4:** *World's Passports<sup>2</sup>, Silkscreen on paper, Vending machine, Each 4" x 5" size of passport, 2016, Bonam Kim.*



**Figure 5:** *Through the Crack<sup>3</sup>, Wood, hinge, wheel, floor sheet, insulated foam, 35" x 35" x 77", 2015, Bonam Kim.*

Bonam shared, "As a foreigner, I had to put in more effort, probably more than twice, every single day to prepare my work. But sometimes I misunderstand what they [said]." When reflecting on how her work will change in the future, Bonam said:

Right now the question is, how can I make my artwork not just about my personal experience but also how can I go further and engage my artwork more? It's not about the answer, but it's about my thoughts as an artist these days.

The interview with Bonam concluded with a final question regarding her insight on things she felt she would want international students to know, like possible challenges that may come up when transitioning to another country as a cross-cultural artist.

### Interview with Jaewook Lee (South Korean Male Artist)

Jaewook Lee is a South Korean artist, curator, and writer based in New

<sup>3</sup> "This performance expresses a collision between a sense of displacement and feelings of fear that I feel as a cultural outsider. I made four doors scaled to my body size. They are hinged together to create a prop for my performance. After adding wheels to the bottom, I enclosed myself in the doors and journeyed out into the city, I was only able to find my way by peering through a crack between the doors." (Bonam Kim's artist statement)

<sup>2</sup> "I made passports from 100 countries and installed them randomly in 5 vending machines in Brooklyn. The passports were sold at USD \$1.50 each." (Bonam Kim's artist statement)

York. He started forming an interest in art as a child, participating in drawing and painting classes up until college, where he learned about conceptual art and started forming his stylistic preferences. During his BFA program in South Korea, he decided to study abroad in the United States for a semester where he was exposed to other facets of conceptual art. After that semester, Jaewook decided to pursue an MFA in the United States. While completing his MFA at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, he pursued a second MFA at the School of Visual Arts in New York during his summer breaks to develop his technical skills. Upon the completion of his MFA degrees, Jaewook now works as a professor in a few BFA programs in New York, instructing his students about the artwork of minority populations and artistic movements in other countries: "I feel it is important to teach my students to have different perspectives and to understand people of color" (Interview with Jaewook Lee).

Jaewook articulated the differences between different professors he encountered in both South Korea and the United States. He started by mentioning that his professors in South Korea were like "CEOs," as he described:

In Korea I thought that there was a big hierarchy between students and the faculty members... they are a lot older than you and we have to respect them a lot. I guess here we respect them in the United States, but in a different way. You have to think of them as CEOs of companies and you're just an intern in Korea.

He explained that it was not until he studied abroad at Carnegie Mellon University as an undergraduate student that he decided to pursue an MFA:

They taught me a completely new concept of art like art [see Figures 6 and 7] in context which is nowadays what people call socialized art...in Korea, there are no classes like that. So, for me, Carnegie Mellon University was like a leading institution, which I had never experienced before, so that's one of the reasons I wanted to go back to the United States to study for my master's degree.

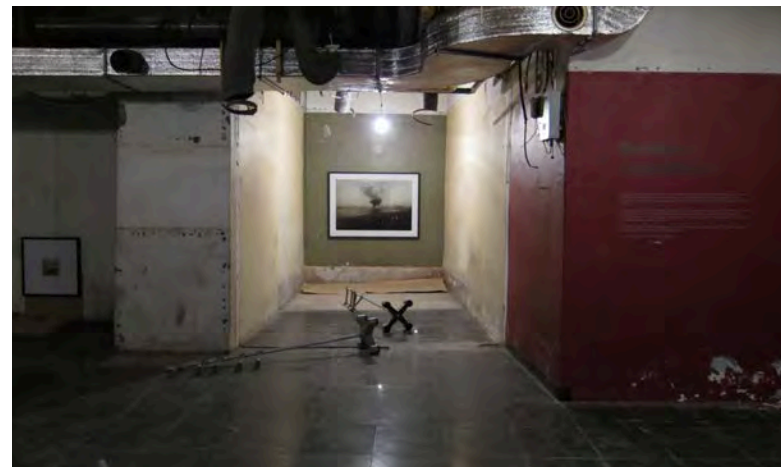


Figure 6: *Building/Unbuilding*<sup>4</sup> #1, Mixed Media, 2102, Jaewook Lee.

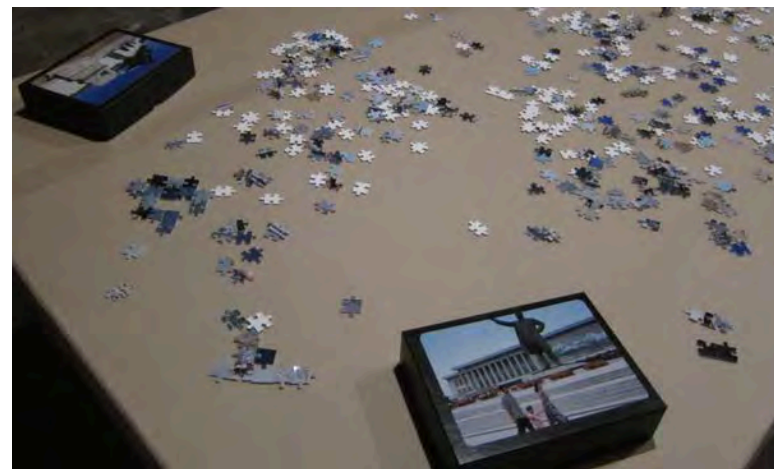


Figure 7: *Building/Unbuilding* #2, Mixed Media, 2102, Jaewook Lee.

Jaewook enjoyed his study abroad experience but also elaborated upon the difficulties he faced in the beginning of the MFA program. With regard to his interactions with professors and peers during the begin-

4 "Building/Unbuilding examines the relationship between art, architecture, and the self/city; here the self is both singular/personal and an expanded consciousness shaped by a group, nation, and even beyond boundaries." (Jaewook Lee's artist statement)

ning of his MFA, he said that “at that time, I had a really nice teacher there who really cared for exchange students like boarding students, so I didn’t feel like a foreigner at the time.” However, his perceptions of the faculty as a whole were not consistent. Jaewook recognized racial stereotypes occurring in his program, stating:

At that time, I didn’t know that it was about racist things or stereotypes. From my point of view now I think it was about racial stereotypes because they kicked out a Chinese girl because she couldn’t speak English too much.... I thought it was about the language barrier and they just didn’t give her a second chance. It was kind of really stressful because I’m not from China, but I’m from a similar country.

When asked about what teachers have said about his work in classes, Jaewook focused on his desire to develop a theoretical framework. He stated that his art was focusing on “deep philosophical ideas about objects or speculated realism.” Specifically, he created art that reflected the socio-political issues occurring within his home country:

I make things about the Korean war and about empathy, and how to get the Korean people with an empathic point of view. I intentionally make work about what war means for Koreans... it’s about real experiences of real people in the real horror of war. I wanted to have a sense of empathy for those who live in Korea from the American people.

When reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing an MFA internationally in the United States, Jaewook felt disconnected from his home country and discussed struggles he faced trying to pursue residency in the United States as he developed his career. Upon graduating with his MFA, his work became socio-political, focusing on the experiences of ethnic minorities in the United States (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8:** *All Men Are Created Equal*<sup>5</sup>, Single-channel video with sound, 6 min., 2018, Jaewook Lee.

Jaewook became a full-time instructor of undergraduate sculpture and media skills at art schools in New York and Chicago and has put on a variety of symposiums surrounding Asian artists and art movements. In his classroom, Jaewook focuses on socio-political movements occurring in the United States. He shared:

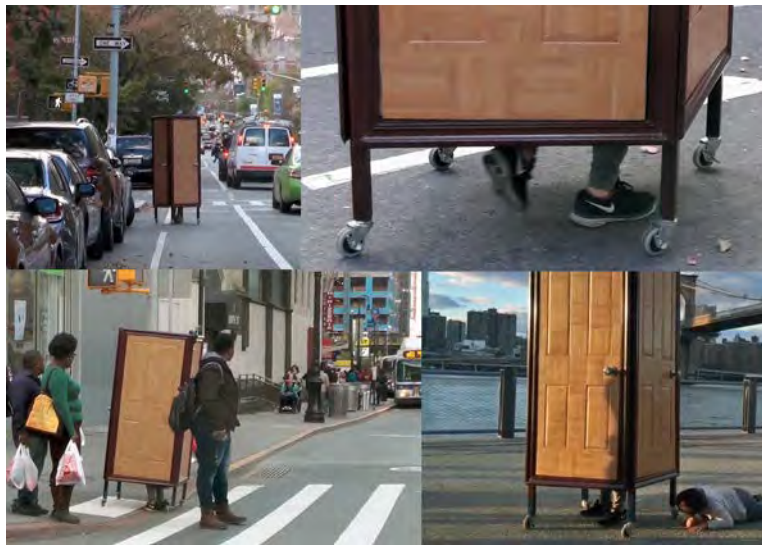
It is a very important part of my class to give examples of artists from different parts of the world like from Korea, Africa, Latin America, and even people of color in the United States and how their identity affects their making processes and about the storytelling about their experiences as foreign artists from Third World countries. I feel it’s kind of like a responsibility for me to teach my students to have global perspectives and different perspectives than just teaching “Western” art history.

### Does the Academic Environment Impact the Self?

Research participants shared that advice and practical knowledge exchanged among them and their professors made them feel that they were equals in their interactions. As Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) suggest, the guidance and emotional support given to participants on behalf of their teachers provided them with the ability to develop

<sup>5</sup> “I created a condition ‘Struggle’ for this action by taping myself up. The laborious action appears absurd in light of New York City’s skyline, emblematic of the overdeveloped city in contrast to the potent struggle of Asian-Americans against racism.” (Jaewook Lee’s artist statement)

their perceptions and thoughts regarding their art without feeling they would be judged or criticized harshly. A cultural difficulty that international art students face is finding their place as artists from another country living in a new environment (Burnett & Gardner, 2006; Ghosh & Wang, 2003; Kegan, 1980). Bonam expressed that art critiques in the United States were more engaging and participatory, which made them feel more comfortable expressing their opinions. She felt that this more engaging style of critique encouraged students to think more deeply and critically about their art and “pushed [them] to a new body of work.” Eisner (2008), Flora (2007), and Renter (2014) explained that art calls on individuals to reflect upon their identity within the context of a particular setting. One example of this kind of reflection is Bonam’s artwork from her MFA program in the United States. She navigated New York City as a small room made of doors (see Figure 9), and the purpose of the doors was to allow herself to enter and withdraw from the surrounding culture whenever she wanted. She also created a series of miniature passports to sell in vending machines, allowing other people to explore another culture as well (see Figure 10). Bonam’s art served as a physical representation of her feelings of being within two distinct cultures and created rituals for navigating various cultures via her work.



**Figure 9:** *Through the Crack*, Video, 4 min. 58 sec., 2015, Bonam Kim.



**Figure 10:** *World’s Passports*, Silkscreen on paper, Vending machine, Each 4” x 5” size of passport, 2016, Bonam Kim.

When participants think of culture and their cultural surroundings while adapting to new surroundings, their thoughts about their role in society may be reflected within their own art. The participants were not only in the process of transitioning their art, but they also needed to transition out of and relearn who they were as artists in a new country. Finding a balance between preserving their cultural identity and implementing a new culture is a process that needs support, as it can become challenging for an individual to go through the process of re-evaluation alone (Alba, 1990; Kim, 2007; Phinney et al., 2001; Yinger, 1986).

## Conclusion

According to both Kegan (1982) and Kim (2005), if an individual feels they are lost in between the culture of their home country and the culture of their new environment, they are left to evaluate the emotions involved in their cultural identity transition. For South Korean participants, moving to the United States for their MFAs meant feeling distant from their home countries the longer they stayed abroad. The negative effects of these feelings of alienation and isolation can lead to emotional hardships and stress (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998; Andrade, 2006; Kegan, 1980). The challenges of moving from one country to another, adapting to a new cultural and academic framework, and developing a new identity (Kegan, 1982), pushed the interview participants to identify their needs in order to succeed and thrive in their new environments.



They all shared an understanding of their identities through self-reflection questions presented in the interviews, which served as important learning tools to highlight their own unique perspectives.

An educational implication for art educators from this case study would be to share the list of self-reflective questions with cross-cultural students to aid their understanding of how they see themselves and behave in relation to others (Hofstede, 1980; Koh, 2016; McFee, 1986; Shin & Yang, 2021). The role of an educator is to foster an environment that encourages students to expand their creativity and exploration, as well as encourage them to ask questions and actively participate in art activities (Coats, 2014; Hofstede, 1984; Koh, 2020; Shin, 2019). There is an incentive to learn from these participants' helpful insights so that art educators across cultures may collaborate with one another and share their own experiences and practices in order to help their cross-cultural students grow in their artistic journey.

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