

10 A mother's work

A mother/daughter, seamstress/
fibre artist's merging practice and
politics

Aram Han Sifuentes about Younghye Han

Intro

I learned to sew when I was six years old, the year we moved to the United States from South Korea. My father worked at a bank, and my mother was an artist and ran her own art centre in Seoul. My parents came here without knowing what they would do for work. Luckily, someone in the small Korean community in the Central Valley in California hired them to work at their dry-cleaning business. My father worked the machines, cleaning, pressing, spotting and ironing, and my mother hemmed and altered clothes. My parents were able to open up their own dry-cleaning business and they still do this work today.

My parents work 12–13 hours a day at work, six days a week, and my mom always brings sewing work home with her. I'd estimate that they work 15–16 hours a day, six days a week. They've been doing this for 26 years now. We'd sit in the living room after dinner and watch TV as my mom would work on her alterations. Spending time with my mother meant sitting and sewing with her, so we would all contribute by ripping seams, ripping out bad zips, sewing on buttons and mending rips and holes in *other* people's clothes. This is where I learned to sew.

And it is here, at the beginning, where sewing became political for me and linked to my identity. I will always see sewing from this place, inside this living room, sewing with my family to make a living as immigrants in this country.

It is to this same living room that I return time and time again. It was this living room and witnessing the work of my parents that inspired me to go to UC Berkeley for undergrad and study Art and Latin American Studies with an interest in immigration policy and where sewing surfaced in my art practice and became my medium to talk about immigration and identity politics.

Younghye Han, artist, arts educator, my mother

My mother tells me that she always knew she wanted to be an artist. She used to win awards for drawing and painting every year in her elementary school, and she always had a knack for working with her hands, such as embroidery and making her own clothes. She was born during the Korean War, two

months before the armistice was signed. Her family was very wealthy. Her father was a self-made businessman who invested in the right companies at the right time. He owned a liquor store and a soy sauce factory, and even sold cotton to the Korean military for their army uniforms. It was this last business that made him bankrupt. What I have been told is that a shipment of cotton was making its way from Japan when the ship sank. He lost a lot of money that day and had to sell all of his other assets to try to make up for his loss. They lost everything. He never recovered, financially. This was when my mother was in high school.

Despite her family's bankruptcy, she never strayed from her dreams of becoming an artist. She continued to win award after award for her artwork and studied hard so she could go to the best college she could get into. Her family continually discouraged her from pursuing college because they knew that they couldn't pay for it. My mom told me she just knew that it was her responsibility. She was determined to make it.

My mom got accepted into Ewha Woman's University, the top women's college, to study traditional ink painting in Seoul. College was very difficult for her because on top of being a full-time student, she was taking on as many jobs as possible to pay for her education. She worked at a flower shop creating flower arrangements, taught children art, taught adults traditional ink painting and tutored high school students. She often tells me how she used to walk one hour to school and back because she couldn't afford the bus fare, and how she used to bleed down her leg because she couldn't afford sanitary pads. She used to faint all the time because she just wasn't eating.

She graduated in 1976. She started to work with children, teaching them art. In college, she met my dad and got married six years later. He graduated with two degrees in meteorology and business and started to work at a bank. She decided to open up her own painting and drawing academy for children in 1977. I asked her if she ever just wanted to be an artist. She told me she did, but this just wasn't an option for her since she had to earn a consistent and stable wage. So she taught children art, which she loved doing.

My parents had my sister, and a year before I was born, they applied for a visa lottery to the United States. I was five years old when they were selected. I still don't really know why we moved to the United States. Whenever I ask my parents, their answers are always different. Sometimes they tell me it was because my mom didn't want my sister and me to deal with the pressures of being women in Korea, or because they wanted my sister and me to be fluent in English, or because the United States has better *opportunities* than Korea, or because my dad wasn't moving up in his company, or because my dad's parents wanted to come and live with us.

My father had a similarly hard time going through school and getting set in his career. He left his parents' home in the countryside at 12 years old to study in Seoul. Why would they work so hard only to give it all up to come to the United States?

**Aram Han Sifuentes, immigrant, artist, daughter
of an immigrant artist**

Why did we move to the United States? Why did my parents give up all they had worked so hard for in Korea to be here? Why do my parents do this type of work today? Why can't my parents pursue their passions here? Why are we always under pressure to prove ourselves and prove that we deserve to be here? These are the questions at the core of my being and my art practice.

Interestingly, I became an artist. I don't really know how, but my mother has always said it is in the blood. This is why she actually never taught me how to draw or paint, even in her art centre days in Korea. She told me she never wanted me or my sister to be artists. 'It's too hard and financially unstable.' Instead, she taught me how to sew, because she had to, and she didn't see it as art. Rather, 'it's useful.'

In our living room, I started to collect my mother's jean cuff remnants, the artefacts of the bulk of her manual labour. In 2011, I went off to Chicago for grad school to get my MFA at the SAIC in fibre and material studies. Away from my mother, I wanted to visit those who did this same type of work in Chicago in order to question what we share and how others came to do this type of work. I started to visit tailors and seamstresses in Chicago, talked with them about my project, used their services and asked them to donate their jean remnants.



Figure 10.1 A Mend: A Collection of Scraps from Local Seamstresses and Tailors (Chicago), 2011–2013, jean scraps and gold denim thread, 14 × 10 × 4 ft

Source: Photo credit: Hyounsang Yoo.

And these are the scraps.

The lure of the ‘American Dream’ draws many immigrants who already know or quickly find out that their employment options are limited. In 2014, only 15% of immigrants entered through employment-based preferences and were able to enter the US workforce in their field (American Immigration Council, 2016). For the rest, usually because they do not speak English and their credentials don’t carry over to the United States, their employment options are limited.

Many of them end up getting jobs that offer low wages, require repetitive manual labour and are sometimes hazardous with no unions or collective bargaining protections. These tailors and seamstresses, like my mom, work long and tedious hours and often take extra work home or to places where work is unregulated. With work entering the home, the domestic space of racialised immigrant homes becomes an infected space where the division of home and work dissolves.

While collecting jean cuffs, I asked them: From where did you immigrate? How long have you been in the US? How long have you worked as a seamstress or tailor? What type of work did you do before? And how much do you charge to hem a pair of jeans? This chart reflects their answers.

It is very difficult to immigrate to this country legally. Illegally, as well, but that’s another conversation. Immigrants who are granted visas and green cards are usually educated and skilled. So why are these nurses, businesswomen, graphic designers, bankers and teachers finding themselves sewing jeans for \$10–\$20 apiece for 12 hours a day?

As I asked these seamstresses and tailors these questions, many of them generously offered their oral histories, which I wrote down. With their permission, I’ve been working on sewing their stories.

Some say my parents should be appreciative of the opportunities given to them. I don’t see it this way. I see it as an exploitation of immigrants to keep the cost of handiwork low in this country.

My mother’s first solo exhibition, 2016

When we moved to the United States in 1992, my mother drew and painted. She made two drawings: one of roses and one of persimmons. She usually placed these drawings under another sheet of mulberry paper as guides for her paintings. From the drawing of roses, she started a painting of purple-pink roses – her favourite colour. She painted two vibrant, fully blossomed roses with a closed bud in between them. They stayed this way, petrified and untouched, for 24 years.

For a while, they sat in my room. The painting sat on an easel with her watercolours – set up as if my mother could return to them at any moment. I used to stare at them, wondering when my mother would ever complete them. Even as a child, I used to ask her: what’s the point of working so hard when you can’t even do what you love?

I gave birth to my daughter, Nara, in July 2015. Naturally, we all fell in love with her. We live in Chicago and my parents still live in California. Because my parents work so many hours without vacation time, we rely heavily on the iPhone and FaceTime to connect. I send my parents photos of Nara every day.

One day, my dad sent me a photo of a simple pencil drawing my mom had done of Nara's face, with 나라 (Nara) in hangul in ink underneath the portrait, and the bottom right-hand corner signed 'Grandma Han.' By the time I called them later that day, my parents had already photocopied the drawing several times and framed one to put up at the cleaners and the other to put up on their mantel at home.



Figure 10.2 *Nara Sitting*, 2016, Younghye Han, pencil on paper, 24 × 16 inches

Source: Photo credit: Kanthy Peng.

My mom continued to draw for the next few months. My parents had just hired a second part-time employee for the first time, who afforded my mother some extra time each day to dedicate to her drawing and painting. My mom went into my room, took all the art supplies I'd left there and brought them to the cleaners. She set up her easel next to her sewing machine at the cleaners.¹ Whenever she had some extra time, she drew and painted Nara – Nara on a pillow, Nara with her onesie over her head, Nara pulling the roll of toilet paper in the bathroom. Every time I FaceTimed her, she showed Nara and me all of these drawings, finished and in progress. Every time she finished a piece, she framed it and put it up above the front counter at the cleaners to show all her customers.

My dad and I were proud of her and excited to share her work. My dad took photos of my mom's artworks and text messaged all our relatives in Korea. I had a solo exhibition lined up as a Bolt Resident Mentor at the Chicago Artist Coalition in summer 2016, and one day I asked my mother if she wanted to show her work for this exhibition as a solo show. She initially snapped at me. 'Why do you have to stress me out and put so much pressure on me? I was just doing this for fun,' she complained in Korean over the phone. 'Just think about it and tell me next week,' I told her. The following week over FaceTime one day, she showed me a new drawing: Nara on the beach. 'This is for my solo show,' she told me.

Younghye Han: My Mother's First Exhibition took place at the Chicago Artist Coalition from 22 July to 11 August 2016. It featured the three paintings (the only works) made in the 1970s and 1980s that she had brought over from Korea, my responses and interventions to her last unfinished drawings and painting made in the first year we immigrated to the United States and five of her most recent drawings and paintings of Nara and their Boston Terrier, Fonzi. (See Plate 10.1 in the colour plate section.)

My mom flew to Chicago for the opening. She entered the exhibition space, walked around in silence. She turned around to see others entering the gallery. She walked over to them, shook their hands, and introduced herself: 'I am the artist.'

Interview with my mother about her solo exhibition

These are the questions I asked my mother. Some of these are questions I've asked again and again throughout my life, and the answers have changed and evolved throughout the years, further complicating my mother's story. Some of these are questions I've never had the courage to ask her before. This interview was translated from Korean.

How did you decide to become an artist?

When I was seven or eight years old, I found out about an art contest at my elementary school. I went home and told my sister, who yelled at me and told me to get money from our parents to apply. So I was crying when I asked my parents. They gave me the money and I went to school after hours to apply.

This was the first time I participated in an art contest, but I won a big prize. From then on, I applied every year and continued to win big prizes. Later on, I asked my sister why she yelled at me to apply. She said that when she saw me draw, I didn't draw like other kids my age. They would draw stick figures but I wouldn't. She said I drew high heels particularly well and saw that I had talent. My sister wanted to study theatre, and our parents were opposed to it and didn't let her pursue it. Then, in high school, our family went bankrupt and I wanted to go to college. I knew that artists wouldn't be able to make much money straight out of school. I was deciding whether or not to go into art or to go into nursing. Even though it would be hard, I decided to go into art. I took the tests and got into art schools. My mother hoped I wouldn't pass. She didn't even believe it when I passed the tests.

Why did you decide to move our family to the United States?

Even though your father and I received our education from very good universities, our English wasn't very good. We thought that you and your sister could do anything if you both knew English well. This is why we decided to move to the US.

What type of job did you think you would work in the US?

I knew it would be difficult, but I just wanted you and your sister to learn English. Then you would both be able to do anything and get any type of well-paying job. I didn't think about myself, so I didn't know what type of work I would do. I just thought about your future. My parents weren't able to help me so I wanted to make sure that I could help you both in any way.

You didn't think about it?

I thought that if other people could find work and make it in the US, then I could do it too.

Why a dry-cleaner?

When we came here, it seemed that the only job available to us was to run a liquor store, ice cream shop or dry-cleaner. We didn't want to work at a liquor store because at this time the LA riots were happening and liquor stores were targeted so we decided not to go that route. And I can do anything with my hands. I knew how to sew already and thought that working at a dry-cleaner would be easier.

Did you think you would be able to practice art here?

I knew that I would make art again at some point in my life before I died. It was too hard working at the cleaners. I gave up even though my mind was there

and I thought about it often. But when I saw Nara, I started to make art again because I felt so inspired.

How did you feel about me becoming an artist?

Now I feel happy about it. At first, I was so worried. It is not an easy job and there is no stability. I know, since I was an artist. It was so hard for me so I didn't want that for you. It is too hard. Now that I have worked too hard for many years, I've lost my happiness. Now I am thankful to you. Through you, I was able to find my art again. You FaceTime me every day so I can see Nara and you talk to me in Korean. I always thought that if you are kind, then life will be good to you. This isn't true. I gave up on my art, but it has come to me suddenly.

Now

Since her solo exhibition, my mom hasn't made any new work. Their second employee left shortly after and my mom doesn't have the time anymore. She tells me that making work again gave her a new sense of confidence. Even though she's not currently making artwork, she knows it's there for her to return to whenever she pleases and as time permits. My parents' goal is to retire in the next couple of years. They want to move to Chicago, and my mom wants to help me make art. I see collaborations in our near future. She used to get upset with me: 'I sew so that you don't have to sew for a living.' But now she tells me, 'I can see now that I sew so that I can help you with your projects once I retire. Also, I'm much better at sewing than you are so I can help you realise anything.' I can't wait.

Radical art practices by immigrants of colour in the workplace

My mother and I both sew as a profession, but our worlds are vastly different. I constantly question our differences: What is the difference between an artist who sews to reference immigrant labour and an immigrant labourer who sews as work but is also an artist? I think a lot about our differences in relation to time, economy, access, agency and the value of our work and labour.

The conversations of which my work becomes a part in the art world are within the discourse of feminism and women's work in the domestic space. However, these spaces and discourses are not inclusive of my family, our experiences and who I am as an immigrant woman of colour; rather they are oppressive in their denial. For example, women's work references women who work at home and perform the tasks of child-rearing, cooking, cleaning and sewing for *their own* family. However, it is important to question which women we are referring to and who has access to this domestic space.

Grace Kwungwon Hong, in her book *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and The Culture of Immigrant Labor*, breaks down the

episteme of domestic space and women's work as privileged white spaces that are exclusionary, particularly for immigrant women of colour. She starts the conversation with the question of who has access to privatised domesticity and who these possessive individuals are (Hong, 2006: 50). How can we broadly apply concepts of this fantasised domesticity when women of colour historically do not have access to private property and have been dispossessed? Or when women like my mother are absent from the home because she is working 12-plus hour days, and when she is home, she's sewing *other people's* clothing? How does the notion of women's work apply to my mother when domestic space is built as a private space outside of the surveillance of capitalism (Hong, 2006: 86) and when work for capital and industry enters, contaminates and infects the home? When the entire family that lives in this supposedly private space also has to participate in sewing *other people's* clothing to make money?

Another part of this conversation is the way leisure and creativity enter the workspace for immigrants of colour. With my mom spending much more time at the cleaners than at home, she finds ways to insert leisure into her workspace – activities that she might do at home, if only she spent more time there. Someone recently told me that they notice that every dry-cleaning business they enter has excellent plants in the windows. My mother's business does too. There are beautiful, lush, healthy plants in the windows of the cleaners to bring joy and comfort to those who work there. They are not for the customers, but for my mother herself (which is something that even my mom has told me). Similarly, my mom bringing art into her workspace transforms her sewing station into a radical space, where creativity and leisure have entered a surveilled capitalist space. I ask my mom why she has brought her art materials to the cleaners, and she says to me that she has no other option. The art is what she needs to make, and work is the place where she can do it.

I sit here writing this in the back room of Kim's Corner Foods,² where Thomas Kong, a 68-year-old Korean immigrant, runs a corner store that he has turned into a studio. He has covered every surface of his store – shelves, windows, refrigerators, freezer, walls, ceilings – with his collages. He found art coincidentally one day because he started to clean the dirty, rusty shelves in his store, and decided to cover them with paper. Paper then turned into collages, and since that day, he hasn't stopped making art. He works from 7:30am to 7:30pm every day of the year at the store. He tells me that since he started to make art six years ago, he hasn't taken any vacations, because the ability to make art every day is better for him than being able to take any sort of vacation. He is happy to use the talent that God has given him to please other people through art. (See Plate 10.2 in the colour plate section.)

I look at these two artists whose art practices surprise me, and the terms of their art-making are radical in their necessity and imagination. I see two artists who have spent most of their lives tenaciously prioritising working to make a living and support their families as immigrants of colour. Both tell me a story of how art surprised them in their lives and how much of a necessity it has become for them. Art and creativity are essential for all lives, but I find myself

surprised by their practices because of the way they found art through the daily demands of their work. But it seems essential that one seek creativity and art through the monotony of the everyday, especially when one is working long hours in the same place every day; of course creativity and art will make their way into these spaces. In this way, turning workspaces into studio spaces to produce art is radical and political. In a hyper-capitalist society where the pressures placed on immigrants of colour are to work long hours in specific jobs, such as a dry-cleaner or corner store, creating art in these spaces becomes a disruption. It becomes a rejection of the demands and expectations of work and culture put upon immigrants of colour. It is a mundane space that becomes the site for imagination.

My mom works to support and sustain me as an artist in many ways. Her work as a seamstress is the inspiration for much of my work, and her radical art practice begs me to ask many questions of myself and the art world. To whom are art and the art world available? What types of art practices can emerge when they enter the workspace simultaneously to function in the workspace and disrupt the workspace? What types of practices are we missing and not seeing because they are unconventional, sit in our periphery or are made by people we don't expect to be artists?

Notes

- 1 Mainz Dry-Cleaners, 340 N Main St, Manteca, CA, 95336.
- 2 Kim's Corner Foods, 1371 W Estes Ave, Chicago, IL, 60626.

References

- American Immigration Council. (2016) *How the United States Immigration System Works*, 12 August. Available from: www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/how-united-states-immigration-system-works.
- Hong, G. K. (2006) *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.