

WONJUNG CHOI: Chimeras¹⁾ in Armor

The experience of arriving in a new world can be described akin to that of descending underwater; treading alive with only a muted sense of ones surroundings. It is an analogy artist WonJung Choi (b. 1976) frequently uses to describe the realisms with which her artistic practice contends. Such as a fish on land, thrust from a two-dimensional to three-dimensional existence, the journey to the West — from Seoul, South Korea to New York City, United States — in her later years, was one which inevitably upturned the artist's worldview and creative practice. And it is perhaps a paradox relating to all generations of immigrants, the desire to alter yet protect ones identity where everything is foreign, including oneself. For the artist, an ever metaphorical, imaginative thinker, this desire embodied the need to acquire horns, fins, wings, and other "mutations" for survival at the margins. Choi's works thus play adeptly on a multitude of tensions while embracing hybridity as form, moving fluidly between feminine and masculine, nature and culture, internal and external, ephemeral and enduring, through macroscopic and microscopic worlds.

From lace-like copper fish sculptures frozen in crystalline resin, fantastical creatures constructed of armor and historical silverware, to glistening schools of transparent fish floating in air, the artist's multi-medium practice utilizing disposable everyday materials to Swarovski crystals, can be adapted to seemingly any environment, from museum-grade glass baubles, to free-floating immersive installation.

Choi's prolific, labor-intensive practice has also long been informed by equally intensive research-based processes. When the search for "a certainty" in a new bizarre environment led the artist to studying bone structures, the fish — an enduring symbol imprinted within the oldest cultural and fossil records in the world — increasingly became a reoccurring metaphor in her work. Earlier projects include large-scale suspended installations^{Fig1.} of skeletal outlines drawn in hot glue on thin plastic or plexi. Though fragile with feather-like levity, there is a sensibility of ethereal permanence to such works, as each form casts a glistening shadow on the ground.



Fig1. Fish + Feather, 2006, 2009. hot glue, plastic, string, dimensions vary

1) Any mythical animal formed from parts of various animals. Oxford Dictionary.

In more recent series, Choi turns to historically precious materials, embarking on an investigation of Western armor and vintage silverware heirlooms, from which the artist intricately hand-crafts armor for fish. Fish in this case, take on different traits and characteristics, an allusion to the artist's own continuous evolution. After spending hours at the Metropolitan Museum in the medieval wings, Choi recalls being captivated by the full suits of armor. Though a symbol for kings, victory, and manhood, armor also served a fundamental purpose as protection against external forces. The works that currently make up Choi's distinct oeuvre are thus a combination of animal hybrids that have evolved polished protective shells. In her studio, chainmail, silverware with the faces of American presidents, and other U.S. historical figures have deftly been interwoven into several armored chimeras. Here, silverware is recognized in its lineage within a Western heritage, yet the artist has transformed singular fragments into complex compositions with a deeply personal sensibility. It is interesting to note, that unlike the appropriation of Qing porcelain wares by the Dutch, mass produced in Orientalist reverence, Choi creates her mystical hybrid entities born of Western traditions with a deft, nostalgic touch, as if preserving her own heritage.

Despite the sturdiness of metal and armor as material choice, there is a resounding changeability and weightlessness to the work. And as the progression of series titles over the years suggest, Choi's

artistic progression increasingly plays on a "-less" sensibility, (from *Mindless Particles*^{Fig2}, *Speechless*^{Fig3}, *Breathless*^{Fig4}, to most recent *Fearless*), of loss that also seems a removal of baggage. During the first years of living in the U.S., disconnects in language and perception often left Choi with the bitter aftertastes of frustration and resentment. Now having lived a majority of her life in-between, the artist has embraced the resounding parallel in her work, citing the words of Homi K. Bhabha²⁾ describing the global epoch: "in-betweenness is a fundamental condition of our times." Though the idea of evolution has played an integral part in her life's work, Choi seems to have made peace with the paradox of hybridity. If still underwater, she has certainly acquired the adaptations to not only survive, but also flourish. And if culture itself is a survival mechanism, then hybridity offers even greater vantage points for survival. "At the beginning I wanted to adapt and assimilate, but now I don't want to. It's as if I want to protect and prevent my own identity from further change," the artist muses in her studio. In this way, Choi's works ultimately turn an introspective lens onto the core of identity and being. While her chimeras create a multiplicity of ever-evolving exteriors, it is the body inside which swims the ocean, flies the air, and walks the earth.

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2) Homi K. Bhabha (b.1949) was born in India. He is one of the most important figures in contemporary post-colonial studies, and has developed a number of the field's neologisms and key concepts, such as hybridity, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence. Such terms describe ways in which colonised peoples have resisted the power of the coloniser, according to "The Location of Culture (1994)". One of his central ideas is that of "hybridisation" describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Cultural difference is a process of identification, while cultural diversity is comparative and categorized. Bhabha refers to the "in-between" spaces as terrain[s] for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. The Third Space acts as an ambiguous area that develops when two or more individuals/cultures interact. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homi_K_Bhabha