

Must-See: Thirsty Vision of Artist Interrupted

BY DAVID KENDALL | 20 JUNE 25

In her touring retrospective, artist Hyo-Chong Yoo (87) envisions putting the sorrow, resentment and longing that haunt her paintings on full display at galleries in New York, Los Angeles and Seoul, the cultural centers of her two homelands. Each piece is connected to her mother Kim Kwan-Sum, hence the title “Samogok” (思母曲). This lyric poem from Korea’s Goryeo Dynasty lauds the primacy of maternal love and is delivered by “a female figure ... who, even in the face of separation from her beloved, ultimately cannot (or does not want to) let go of the thread of hope”—in the words of Professor Park Sang Young, Daegu Catholic University.



Hyo-Chong Yoo, *Mother, Gardening*, oil on canvas, 30" x 36". Courtesy: the artist

Yoo Dong-Sun, Yoo’s father, instilled an appreciation for art and passed on his natural talent. One of her earliest memories is her father teaching how to grind ink stick against stone before drawing: “He’d keep repeating, ‘Concentrate. Be serious.’” She was just a little girl eager to go out and play, but she did as told, absorbing his mindset in the process. “He was very talented, but we couldn’t give his paintings away after he got out of prison. People were afraid of his tuberculosis,” she said.

Yoo remembered her father being released in 1945 when he was too weak to be a threat to Imperial Japan. He died a few months later at age 42. Teaching farmers' wives how to read and write Hangeul script was his offense, she recalled. The clandestine night classes were held at agricultural training facilities near their home in what is now North Korea's South Hamgyong Province. He had sold off large rice fields to fund their construction, according to a 1939 Chosun Ilbo article Yoo keeps in a scrap book. "His sentence was severe because he threw a chair at the Japanese magistrate during the hearing," Yoo lamented, her tone reflecting love and resentment—the recurring leitmotiv of her paintings.



Hyo-Chong Yoo, *My Mother's Breakfast*, oil on canvas, 9" x 11".
Courtesy: the artist

Another early childhood memory of her father involved his periodic trips to discuss "scholarly topics for a very long time" with the Benedictine monks who had a monastery near their home. "He'd rent an ox cart, load it up with apples and vegetables and take it to them. ... My sisters and I were afraid of the monks' long beards and brown robes."

Yoo's mother told her that her father had been torn between joining independence figures like Kim Kyu-sik, who set up a Korean government in exile in Shanghai, or Choi Rin, who remained in Korea. Eventually, he chose to stay and help develop the human resources Koreans would need to build a resilient nation. "My father knew the Japanese would be

defeated,” Yoo offered when asked for any post-prison memories of him. “I remember him telling my mother that his biggest regret was not living long enough to see the Japanese go.”

The Kim clan to which Yoo’s mother belonged had a long line of notable figures throughout the history of Hamgyong Province, the artist explained. Unfortunately, all of them were on the wrong side of the class divide. Once the communists began to seize control, her mother reasoned that the best way to protect her three young girls was to hire a guide to lead them into South Korea in 1946



Hyo-Chong Yoo, *My Mother's Knitting Place - She Just Got Up*, pastel on canvas, 19" x 15".

Courtesy: the artist

Kim Kwan-Sum abandoned everything. “We brought only what she and I could carry on our heads. My sisters were too small. My mother stuck some of my father’s drawings in her bundle,” Yoo recalled. Relatives helped them settle in Seoul’s Ahyeon-dong, but what little they managed to bring later perished when shells dropped during the Korean War set their neighborhood on fire.

From her mother, Yoo inherited a life-time of inspiration. Kim Kwan-Sum sewed and knitted clothes to keep her daughters sheltered under one roof. Following the Korean War, there

wasn't always enough food, she explained, so Yoo and her sisters would play with orphans linked to a church that also fed refugees. When the church leaders discovered that the Yoo sisters could sing, they put them in a choir that regularly performed for the U.S. Armed Forces Korea. "I felt bad [for lying about being an orphan], but I figured we were helping them raise money."

The Yoo girls grew up and earned scholarship-funded degrees. The middle sister Suk Jung went to New Jersey to study nursing, got married, had three children and brought Kim Kwan-Sum over to watch them while she worked toward a Ph.D. Hyo-Chong, the eldest, got her B.F.A. and M.F.A. from Seoul's Ehwa Womans University in 1961 and 1966, respectively. She then took a teaching position at the Ewha-affiliated Geumran Girl's High School because it offered the chance to study in Paris or New York for a year, all expenses paid.



Paintings related to her mother in the home of Hyo-Chong Yoo

In 1969, Yoo's dream came true: She was awarded the academic year abroad in Paris. She also got a call from Suk Jung: Their mother had been diagnosed with cervical cancer and given six months to live. It was now Yoo's turn to be the primary caregiver. She quit her job, gave up on Paris and moved to New Jersey.

Yoo studied hard to pass the multitude of tests needed to secure herself a student visa for America. She wanted her mother to be able to receive advanced care and stay close to her daughters and grandchildren. Kim Kwan-Sum grew stronger, the six months passed into a year ... then two ... then 34. She succumbed to old age in 2003 at 93. "She outlived the doctor who gave her six months," Yoo declared proudly with a laugh, calling it one of the miracles that have punctuated her life.

While helping her mother, Yoo studied at the National Academy of Design and other art schools in New York—figure painting and human anatomy under Robert Phillipp, water colors with Mario Cooper, pastel painting with Daniel Greene, figure drawing with Robert Hale. In time, her work was exhibited in America, Korea and Europe, and she began to win prizes and coveted judging slots.

She secured an adjunct professor position at Upsala in East Orange, NJ, in 1978 and worked her way up to a tenured position before the college closed in 1995. Seven of her students followed her to Centenary College (now University) in nearby Hackettstown the next year. In addition to teaching, she took administrative positions related to foreign recruitment before retiring in 2019.

While with her mother, Yoo found a ready—if not always willing—model. “I couldn’t afford to pay anyone,” Yoo explained. “‘Didn’t you say the models at your school get a 15-minute break?’ my mother would ask me. I’d always get her to stay still until I finished.

After her mother passed, Yoo would do still lifes in pastels to capture “traces” of her mother—her glasses, a bed cover she had knitted for Yoo as an early wedding gift.

Yoo never married but has helped raise hundreds of children. For the students whom she taught Western techniques acquired in New York and Oriental Brush Painting skills picked up from her father, she established a gallery on Centenary’s campus where they could display their work and build confidence. For the foreign students she had brought there, she designed culture and language programs as well as excursions to help them adjust and feel welcome. Seeing Korean students struggle to fit into America in the same way she had was especially motivating, she explained



Hyo-Chong Yoo pitching her retrospective ‘Samogok’

Yoo says it was only later when looking at her mother’s face in her numerous portraits that she saw the suffering—the pain of losing a husband and homeland, all the aches endured while providing for her daughters’ needs. “I was concentrating so hard to paint correctly that I never stopped to really look at her expression, but I can see it all so clearly now. That’s why I want this exhibition and why the title has to be Samogok.”