

JAE KO - Gi (氣 Vital Force)

22 March - 9 May 2023

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### JAE KO: MNEMIC STORING, FORMING, EVOKING

a text by Sungji Park

In the following exchange, Ko and I were discussing the traditional Korean straw egg container in relation to her piece JK304 Dark Green with Purple (2009) (fig. 1):

Ko: I have seen and am trying to see a lot of precious (traditional) cultures. But I do not integrate them into my work deliberately. There have been times when I, as a Korean, miss these things, and (sometimes) they have spontaneously found their way into my work. Most of the time, I finish a work, (look at it later,) and wonder, 'What is it?'. I do not create a plan before making a work, such as 'I am going to create this kind of art'...

Park: Is the unconscious working here? (Do things unconsciously) come into your mind from time to time?

Ko: I think it is the unconscious, but as well as the conscious. When I see something on-site, I always avoid doing [sic] 'This is so nice, and I have to take a picture'. When the camera takes a picture of a thing, be it of natural or organic shapes, they become copies. Whenever I go, I say 'no' to taking photographs or making sketches.

Park: Just experiencing (it).

Ko: Yes, then (it) comes back later<sup>1</sup>.

This idea of working with undocumented experience brings to mind Richard Semon's The Mneme (1904)². Semon asserts that when we encounter any event, it leaves a trace – what he calls an 'engram' – within our memory. Engrams hold potential energy which can be reactivated under appropriate conditions³.

This essay introduces some engrams that artistically inspire Ko and explores the distinctive features of her work in terms of colour, shape and line. One engram is her father, who wrote Ko letters in a delicate calligraphic style, which plays a part in her sumi ink sculptures. For instance, her *JK726 Black* (2018) reflects a calligraphy style whose undulating curves suggest the flying, swirling and twirling movements of the brush on paper, captured in a sculptural shape. *JK232 Black* (2010) renders written characters from

various Asian languages in abstract shapes.

Its rectangular shape consists of rolled paper. Its vertical, curved and bended forms resemble the aesthetics of seal-script calligraphy, with flowing lines housed in a symmetrical structure. For those who are familiar with this style of Asian penmanship, it is not too difficult to associate the work with certain Chinese characters, such as hé (river), as well as the simple forms of old Korean alphabets.

Another engram arises in Ko's *JK 318 Red* (2009), an oval sculpture infused with different shades of red, reminiscent of camellia petals (fig 2). The work confused Ko: she had never previously applied red in her art. Until then, Ko had worked exclusively with sumi ink for seven or eight years<sup>4</sup>. In wondering 'What is it?', her memories came back, and she recalled coming across a traditional Korean wedding ceremony.

The bride had applied a single *yeonji*, a coin-sized red dot, on each of her cheeks<sup>5</sup>. Facing the red sculpture before her, Ko realised that red is her background colour<sup>6</sup>. Along with black, blue, white and yellow, red holds special meaning in Korean colour theory *Obangsaek*, which expresses the order of the universe through the primary colours. *Obangsaek* suffuses much of Ko's work, and the primary colours dominate many of her pieces. For instance, *JK2160 Red and Indian Yellow* (2022) stands out for its red and yellow.



Figure 1. JK304 Dark Green with Purple, 2012, rolled paper, coloured ink and glue, 61 x 127 x 15 cm

In this case, red is primarily embodied by two inverted 'L' shapes situated on the top and the bottom in diagonal symmetry, each embracing two small oblong forms. These shapes are minimal in design, with their outer parts saturated in a deep red that gradually transitions into a vibrant yellow as they reach towards the centre. This orientation dovetails with *Obangsaek*, which places yellow at the centre, guarded by red – symbolising the vitality manifested through blood, fire and the sun.

Obangseak, despite its Korean origins, speaks to a universal connection between colour and nature. This association might bridge the Asian sensibilities with the Western influences present in Ko's work. Since moving to the United States, the artist has frequently travelled to the American West and Southwest to explore the epic landscapes of Utah, Colorado and New Mexico, which are rich with vibrant, colourful palettes. Her JK2113 Ultramarine Blue (2021) (fig. 2) captures the unfathomable blue of the Blue Hole in New Mexico; JK466 Blue with Pink (2018) the vivid bluish and pinkish hues of a sunrise at Glen Canyon in Utah; and JK439 Red and Indian Yellow (2022) the warm red, orange and yellow of changing aspens in Colorado. Contrary to Ko's collective engrams of Asian traditions, these landscapes construct Ko's unique experiences and further materialise in her use of lines. These regions of the U.S. are home to bristlecone pine trees. They grow in unforgiving weather conditions, where wind whips, sand chafes, and ice crystals beat down upon them. To survive, they twist their trunks, limbs and branches in gnarled shapes, the eeriness of which is emphasised by their winding patterns. Their tenacity and vitality, so



Figure 2. JK2113 Ultramarine Blue, 2021, rolled paper, sumi ink and pigmented ink,  $81.3 \times 81.3 \times 12.7$  cm



Figure 3. JK365 Crimson, 2015, rolled paper, colour pigment and glue,  $56 \times 44 \times 15$  cm

antithetical to the impression left by their appearance in Vance Kirkland's deadwood painting *Timberline* (1939), ultimately left Ko awestruck.

Ko's entangling sculptures, such as *JK2169 Four Reds* (2008-2014) and *JK 709 Cream* (2010) (fig. 8), reflect such torquing force in their resultant lines.

While the lines of these sculptures primarily highlight their external presentation, Ko also pays attention to the internal formation of lines. For instance, she is intrigued by tree rings, the internal concentric lines that trees create each season, which serve as a relatively precise record of past climate conditions. Dendrochronology is not dissimilar from archaeology in that studying the traces contained in tree rings offers a glimpse into what nature and human life were like in ancient times. This interest reflects Ko's childhood dream of becoming an archaeologist, as well as her fascination with stratified layers, such as those found in canyons and glaciers<sup>7</sup>. An indication of this kind of line-making progress is presented in her *Force of Nature (FLOW)* (2018), where her lines are accumulative (fig. 4).

Another type of line that the artist creates is constructive, many of which are on view in the exhibition  $Gi (\Re Vital Force)$ . This element can only be grasped by looking closely at Ko's description of the process for creating wall-mounted works, such as JK365 Crimson (2015). To assist her explanation, Ko made two drawings, the first depicting a side view of adding machine paper re-rolled by the artist. Ko explained that it would 'rise up' sculpturally, forming its organic shapes while absorbing water. Consequently, it would look like a slightly elliptical circle when viewed from the top, as the second drawing shows. The two orthogonal



Figure 4 Jae Ko. Force of Nature (FLOW), 2018. White kraft paper, 600 x 750 x 20 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. Vincenzo de'Rossi, *Design for an Altar Surmounted by a Crucifix in Four Different Views*, 1546-47, Pen and brown ink, brush and gray-brown wash over traces of black chalk, ruling and compass work, 57.3 x 42.6 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

drawings represent the three-dimensional object in two dimensions by delineating its side and top views. Similar to how Vincenzo de'Rossi's *Design for an Altar Surmounted by a Crucifix in Four Different Views* (1546-7) shows how flat lines can emerge as architectural shapes, the 'drawing' created by the edges of layered sheets of rolled paper is an act of construction (fig. 5). The type of drawing produced by Ko's rolled paper departs from the traditional idea of drawing.

In architecture and sculpture, drawing is traditionally used in preparatory studies for finalised works, a process which is grounded in the idea of translating an image projected on paper into completed compositions through controlled execution.

Ko's rolled-paper 'drawing' challenges such conventional assumptions by emphasising organic processes and creative accidents. The artist un-rolls airtight rolled paper and re-rolls it to loosen it slightly, giving it space to breathe between each sheet of paper. Following this, Ko folds, curves or twists the roll to give it primary forms and then immerses it in water, infused with ink or later injected with coloured spray. The roll absorbs the water, becoming soft and swollen, creating unique organic shapes. During this stage, chance is at play. The 'drawing' declares I am what I am becoming. What we see in the final installation is what each roll has chosen to become. Like (bristlecone pine) trees, rocks or ice, each form of rolled paper has uniquely produced its lines, but unlike tree rings and stratified rocks whose meaning can be interpreted by scientists, we cannot decode Ko's sculptural lines. Rather than



Figure 6. JK726 Black, 2018, sumi ink, graphite powder and glue, 31 x 27 x 79 cm

provoking the desire to decipher, Ko's work opens a space into which our imagination and memory can enter.

The dynamic, twisting lines of JK726 Black (2018) (fig. 6) remind me of my childhood, when I would wash my dark hair with water infused with sweet flag on the traditional Korean holiday Dano; the swirling lines of JK2169 Four Reds (fig. 7) evoke the time I curiously stared at my thumbprint stained with red stamp ink; and the feather-like lines of JK2154 Green (2022) call to mind my visit to Leeds Castle, where I was chased after by an upset peacock fanning out his eye-patterned feathers. The visual language Ko has developed stirs our vision with an evocative power, activating and resurfacing our collective and individual memories, or engrams, that have been buried deep within our minds.



Figure 7. K2169 Four Reds, 2008 - 2014, rolled paper, pigmented ink and glue, variable dimension



Figure 8. *JK709 Cream*, 2010, rolled paper and glue, 170 x 60 x 42 cm

#### **NOTES**

- 1. Jae Ko, interview by Sungji Park, 14 February 2023.
- 2. Richard Semon, The Mneme, trans. Louis Simon (London: G. Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan Co, 1921)
- 3. Ernst Gombrich and Fritz Saxl, Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography (Undefined: Warburg Institute, 1970), 242.
- 4. Jae Ko, interview by Sungji Park, Jae Ko Gi (氣 Vital Force) (London: Opera Gallery, 2023), page number(s), accessed date, URL. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organised by and presented at Opera Gallery London, 22 March 2023-9 May 2023.
- 5. Ko, interview by Park.
- 6. Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, "In Conversation: Jae Ko with Valerie Cassel Oliver," YouTube, July 20, 2016, video, 38:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct9O9z9\_OII.
- 7. Ko, interview by Pébaÿ.k.



## **WORKS**



# JK439 Red and Indian Yellow 2022

Rolled paper, pigmented ink and glue 105 x 55 x 14 cm | 41.3 x 21.7 x 5.5 in





JK2160 Red and Indian Yellow 2022

Rolled paper, pigmented ink and glue 104 x 65 x 14 cm | 40.9 x 25.6 x 5.5 in





# JK2159 Red and Indian Yellow 2022

Rolled paper, pigmented ink and glue  $55 \times 104 \times 14$  cm |  $21.7 \times 40.9 \times 5.5$  in





# JK454 Wine Carmine with Orange 2014 - 2017

Rolled paper, colour pigment and glue  $38 \times 51 \times 13$  cm |  $15 \times 20.1 \times 5.1$  in



## JK365 Crimson

2015

Rolled paper, colour pigment and glue  $56 \times 44 \times 15$  cm |  $22 \times 17.3 \times 5.9$  in





# **JK232 Black** 2010

Rolled paper, Sumi ink and glue 125 x 66 x 17 cm | 49.2 x 26 x 6.7 in



### JK2169 Four Reds

2008 - 2014

Rolled paper, pigmented ink and glue Variable dimension







## JK709 Cream

2010

Rolled paper and glue 170 x 60 x 42 cm | 66.9 x 23.6 x 16.5 in



### JK726 Black

2018

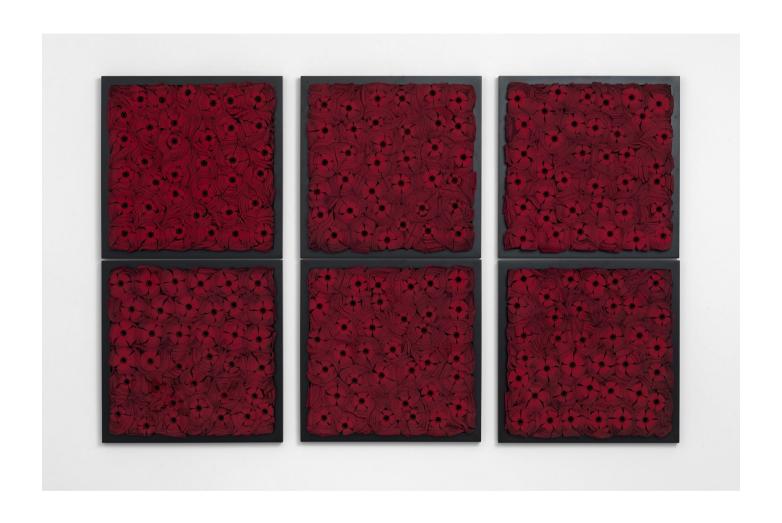
Sumi ink, graphite powder and glue 31 x 27 x 79 cm | 12.2 x 10.6 x 31.1 in





**JK 764 Black** 2017

Rolled paper, coloured ink and glue  $76 \times 32 \times 43$  cm |  $29.9 \times 12.6 \times 16.9$  in



### JK2138 Magenta 2022



# **JK2154 Green** 2022





# **JK2153 Sky Blue** 2022

Rolled paper, colour pigment and glue 132 x 101 x 5 cm | 52 x 39.8 x 2 in



# JK2105 Ultramarine Blue with Black 2021

Rolled paper, pigmented ink and glue 122 x 132 x 8 cm | 48 x 52 x 3.1 in





## JK1036 Ultramarine Blue

2018 - 2019

Rolled paper, colour pigment and glue  $92 \times 61 \times 18 \text{ cm} \mid 36.2 \times 24 \times 7.1 \text{ in}$ 





## JK1035 Ultramarine Blue

2018 - 2019

Rolled paper, colour pigment and glue  $92 \times 61 \times 18 \text{ cm} \mid 36.2 \times 24 \times 7.1 \text{ in}$ 



JK2113 Ultramarine Blue

2021

Rolled paper, Sumi ink and pigmented ink 81.3 x 81.3 x 12.7 cm | 32 x 32 x 5 in



### A CONVERSATION WITH JAE KO

## Comparing your early paper practice to your current paper practice, what do you think has changed the most?

My paper practice can be divided into four series, each highlighting different techniques. The first series is about 'submerging everything in water'. The second series involves 'twisting'. Here water plays no role. The third series simply presents paper, as seen in my installation work. The fourth series involves both 'cutting' and 'submerging in water'. I wouldn't say my work then and now is different per se, but it's evolved to be finished differently over time. I would say they all come from one place, only with different results.

When you mentioned Joseph Beuys, you said that felt was his personal material. Likewise, you said that paper was your personal material, relating to your background in Asia. Can you explain this in detail?

In order for artists to create their work, they have to find the specific medium that works for them. Felt material worked for Beuys; paper works for me. When I grew up in Korea, plastic and other industrial materials were expensive and hard to find. But paper was very common, from rice paper to newspaper, which could be easily obtained. And paper could be used as material for art—origami, for instance. We also used paper for calligraphy. Objects we found on the street were wrapped in paper, too. I believe this is where my paper practice began. I mean, there are many Asian artists working with paper. Paper is very, very familiar to us. Everything else was expensive, but paper was not. We could always make something out of the simplest material.

You mentioned that your father wrote a letter to you using a calligraphy brush and ink. You found it difficult to control the brush, so you said you decided to use sumi ink only instead of a calligraphy brush. Is that correct?

No—I actually started using sumi ink because I became familiar with the medium while doing calligraphy. First of all, you find that sumi ink does not easily wear away. Sometimes, my father would send me letters written in thin brushstrokes with an Asian brush, which also contributed to my decision to use sumi ink. As for why

I paired this medium with paper, the two materials share a common source. I was curious about how sumi ink was made; even though we use it often, we don't really think about how it's made. Sumi ink comes from burning wood, which is similar to ash. Of course, paper is also made from wood. Soaking up a paper-based work with sumi ink interested me because they come from the same source but from different manufacturing processes. During my early paper practice, there was a period when I worked exclusively with sumi ink, around seven or eight years.

## You also said that you came across a Korean traditional wedding and noticed the colour red.

Yes, you know how the colour red is often used in traditional Korean settings; for instance, how the bride applies yeonji gonji (coin-sized circles of red pigment, one on each cheek—similar to modern-day blusher). There are lots of clothes in red, lots of primary colours being used. But for me personally, I have never worn red much in my life or really lived with red. I haven't worn red clothes, tried red in my art. But then, one day, I thought, what is my background colour? What is MY colour? That's why I created this red sculpture in the first place.

In your catalogue essay published by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, you said that your work is rooted in Eastern philosophy. Is there anything specific about what you meant by Eastern? For example, is there something like Confucianism, a view of nature, or something else?

In Korea, or more so in Japan, there's something called the 'family crest'. Korea doesn't have it as much as Japan, but there are many distinctive family patterns in Korea too. So, as I looked at them one by one, I became interested in the forms of the patterns and sometimes created works based on them.

You said that you draw inspiration from the nature of the American West. Do you find inspiration in Asian landscapes as well? Is there a clear distinction between the two?

When I first started making art, there was certainly a lot of Eastern philosophy in my early practice. But

as my work evolved, it become more Western. In the United States, especially in places like the American West, there's still a lot of untouched wildernesses, so I draw a lot of inspiration from that region.

## Did these places give you a sense of being overwhelmed? Or something else?

Yes, the scenery can be overwhelming, but what I feel even more is a sense of belonging—that I am part of nature. Climate change has really made the natural environment change its shape so quickly, so it made me want to see these natural features (such as the dramatic canyons of the American West, inspirational icebergs, glaciers near Newfoundland and Labrador) before they change too much; the ice is melting, winter is disappearing, summer is getting hotter. How can we slow down that change?

One of the things I found interesting is that there are many elements of your work associated with trees. For example, sumi ink is made from trees. Paper is also made from trees. You mentioned bristlecone pine trees as well.

About bristlecone pine trees—these trees, I think, are the oldest living things. They can live for over 3,000 or 5,000 years. Most of their bodies are dead, but some parts are still alive. This is gratitude towards nature. Because the weather there is so brutal and so windy, nothing really grows there except for these trees, and they are still alive. Since the wind is so strong and so cold, the trees don't grow upwards, but instead spread out and twist into the ground to find a way to survive, and that's how their shapes are formed.

#### So, would you say that vitality is important for you?

I think if we go to China, we can find a similar tree called the jujube tree that grows in the desert, but many of these trees are dried and preserved in the same dead state. Yes, it is about vitality. I feel grateful for that vitality because they survive despite the harsh environment they live in. It's impressive to see that their forms are shaped by their will to live; like you said, it's gratitude towards vitality.

## Could you describe the process of how you created your work?

For this work, I used adding machine paper. I usually use about 100-150 rolls and for this work, I think I used about 100.

To begin, I first undo all of these rolls and start winding them back to make one large roll to the thickness I want,

about 10 inches. Then I flatten this roll to make an oval shape and tape it so that it keeps its shape.

At this stage, the top, bottom and sides of the roll are still flat. To give it more volume like how it is at the moment, I submerge the roll in water and what happens is that it starts swelling up, absorbing the water. Then, I use glue and tape to make sure the shape doesn't break down further. At this stage, the actual face or front of the artwork is facing down, so at that moment, I can only see the back of the work. Then I put an enforcement at the back so that I can hang it up later.

#### And when do you put the colour in?

I do that after the shape has been made and fully dried. So, I take the work out of the water and put it down, still with the back of the work facing me so that the current front side of the artwork is touching the work surface.

I then dry the work using fans and once it's dry, I flip it round to see how the front side of the artwork has come out. This is the first time I get to see what the face of the artwork looks like. The reason I keep the front side of the artwork at the bottom the whole time is so it receives constant pressure and for the overall shape to not break down. So, it's quite a surprise when it comes to revealing the front of the artwork because I have no idea how it's turned out until after all these processes. It's good if it turns out well, but a lot of the time I have to make another one.

Still, I do have some control over how the final work will look. For example, when I am fixing the shapes, I can leave some areas free which allows the paper to swell up more in some areas than others. So, I can control the final shape to some extent.

This also means that when I'm forming the overall shape, I have to make sure it's not done too tightly. Otherwise, there isn't enough freedom for the shape to swell and bend. If it's too tight, the whole roll just breaks.

#### **BIOGRAPHY**



Born in 1961, Korean artist Jae Ko attended the Tokyo art school and received a BA from the Wakō University in Japan and a MFA from the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore, USA. She currently lives and works in Maryland, USA.

Jae Ko creates a new visual language with elegant spirals and ribbon installations that can take on monumental proportions. She finds inspiration in nature, and her forms readily evoke organic matter-tree rings, tornadoes, roots, branches or seeds. The intuitive design of each of Ko's sculptures are made from miles of everyday office, recycled paper or adding-machine tapes, which she unwinds and reshapes, bathes in vats of ink and then lets dry out over months. Her seductive work occupies a space between writing and sculpting; a biomorphic form that often looks like a swollen calligraphic mark.

In 2002, Jae Ko received the Pollock-Krasner grant. In 2012, she was awarded the prestigious 'Anonymous Was A Woman' art award and The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC mounted Ko's installation of "Force of Nature". Her work is part of prestigious private and public collections such as the Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Phillips Collection in Washington DC, the Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington DC, the Washington D.C. Convention Center, Wilson Building, Washington, DC and the ADM in Chicago, IL amongst others.

#### **EDUCATION**

1998	MFA, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD
1988	BFA, Wako University, Tokyo Japan
1984	Toyo Art School, Tokyo Japan

#### **AWARDS AND GRANTS**

2017	Maryland State Arts Council
2015	National Endowment For The Arts
2013	DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities
2012	Anonymous Was A Woman
2011	Maryland State Arts Council
2010	DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities
2007	Maryland State Arts Council
2000	The Pollock-Krasner Foundation,Inc
1999	DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities
1998	Virginia Commission for the Arts
1996	Maryland Institute College of Art

#### **SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC

U.S. Embassy, Amman Jordan

Sherman & Sterling LLC, New York NY

Facebook Headquarters, Washington DC

Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton NJ

Phillips Collection, Washington DC

Williams & Connolly LLP, Washington DC

Selendy & Gay PLLC, New York NY

Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington DC

Washington DC Convention Center, Washington DC

ADM, Chicago IL

Wilson Building, Washington DC

Agnes Scoot College, GA

Wilkinson Walsh + Eskovitz LLP

University of Maryland, Takoma Park  $\mbox{MD}$ 

Arlington Cultural affairs, Arlington VA

Wilson Building, Washington DC

DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, Washington DC

#### **SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

2023	Opera Gallery London
2022	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
2020	Galerie Roger Katwijk, Netherlands
2019	Heather Gaudio Fine Art, New Canaan CT
2018	Art on paper, NYC NY
2018	Galerie Roger Katwijk, Amsterdam, Netherlands
	Andrew Bae Gallery, Chicago IL
	C.Grimaldis Gallery, Baltimore MD
2017	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
	Galerie Lausberg, Dusseldorf Germany
2016	Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, TX

2015	East Gallery, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton NJ
	Domestic Art Building, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton NJ
2014	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
2013	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
2012	Andrew Bae Gallery, Chicago IL
	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington, DC
2011	Galerie Roger Katwijk Amsterdam Netherlands
0040 44	Dick Graff Fine Art Honorable Silver Objects, Antwerp Belgium
2010-11	Phillips Collection, Washington DC
2010	Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke VA
	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
	Walker Contemporary, Boston MA
2000	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
2009	Dick Graff Fine Art Honorable Silver Objects, Antwerp Belgium
	Andrew Bae Gallery, Chicago IL
	Lausberg Contemporary, Toronto Canada Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
2008	Katzen Arts center, America Univ. Museum, Washington DC
2007	Galerie Lausberg, Dusseldorf Germany
2007	Galerie De Rijk, Den Hague Netherlands
	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
2006	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
2000	Galerie De Rijk, Dan Haag Netherlands
2005	Andrew Bae Gallery, Chicago IL
2004	Robischon gallery, Denver CO
2003	Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville VA
2002	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
	Kiang Gallery, Atlanta GA
2001	John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan WI
	Robischon Gallery, Denver CO
	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
2000	Braunstein/Quey Gallery, San Francisco CA
	Kiang Gallery, Atlanta GA
	Marsha Mateyka Gallery, Washington DC
1998	Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD
	Gallery Q, Tokyo Japan
1987	Gallery Sora, Tokyo Japan
	Gallery Q, Tokyo Japan

## OPERA GALLERY

©Jae Ko. Image: Todd-White Art Photography

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### Opening hours

Monday to Saturday: 10 am - 7 pm

Sunday: 10 am – 5 pm