

# Cosmetic Surgery in Contemporary Korean Art\*

## 醫美世代與韓國當代藝術

SooJin Lee  
李秀眞

Assistant Professor, Liberal Arts, Hongik University (Sejong Campus), South Korea  
南韓弘益大學（世宗校區）文學院助理教授

---

\* This paper is a revised version of a paper I presented at the AAS(Association of Asian Studies)-in-ASIA conference at Academia Sinica in Taipei, June 22–24, 2015.  
本文改編自筆者於 2015年6月22-24日中央研究院與亞洲研究學會 (Association of Asian Studies) 在臺北共同舉辦「AAS-in-Asia大會」研討會上所發表之論文。

## Abstract

This essay examines how South Korea's conspicuous cosmetic-surgery culture is represented and critiqued in visual works by young Korean artists. In particular, I pay attention to the recent works by Mind C (Kang Min Gu), Kim Tae Yeon, and Ji Yeo (Yeo Ji Hyeon), widely circulated online and attracting much viewership, but which have not received much in the way of critical evaluation or in-depth examination. Based on a close analysis of the images, I argue that they raise some important and complex issues with respect to cosmetic surgery and beauty culture that have previously been under-discussed in popular culture, such as gender stereotype, side effects, and the pain and desire involved in extreme makeovers, and the changing aesthetics and ethics of contemporary South Korea. For comparison, I will first review pop-culture representations of cosmetic surgery before discussing the artworks under consideration. My analysis of the artworks will highlight the role of artists as cultural critics, but it will also suggest that the artworks are products of the culture, and partake in the production of the growing discourse on South Korea's expanding cosmetic surgery culture and industry. Both scholarly and journalistic writings on South Korea's cosmetic surgery practice and culture will be used in this analysis.

---

*Keywords:* cosmetic surgery in contemporary art, cosmetic surgery, Korean art, Internet culture, beauty culture, Mind C, Kim Tae Yeon, Ji Yeo, gender, representation

## 摘要

本文探討年輕一代的韓國藝術家如何在作品中呈現、批判韓國眾所皆知的整形文化。特別是Mind C、金泰延，以及呂至這三位藝術家，他們近期的作品雖然在網路上廣為流傳，也吸引了不少觀眾點閱，但尚未得到評論界較具深度的回應與關注。經過仔細的分析，我認為這些圖像帶出了一些重要而複雜的議題，觸及流行文化裡一直未曾正視的醫美觀點，諸如性別刻板印象、手術副作用、改頭換面的過程中所經歷的疼痛與投射的慾望，以及今日不斷演變的南韓美學和倫理。為了便於比較，我將先從流行文化中的整容典型切入，接著再針對本文提到的作品進行討論。分析的角度除了將藝術家視為文化評論者以外，同時也將其作品視為整形文化的產物，成為南韓日益熱門的醫美話題之一。文章內容將引用南韓整形手術與文化的相關論述與期刊報導。

---

關鍵字：當代藝術裡的整形文化、整形手術、韓國藝術、網路文化、美容文化、Mind C、金泰延、呂至、性別、形象

## Preface

It is no secret that South Korea is “the world capital of plastic surgery,” as recently headlined in the *New Yorker* magazine (Marx). According to statistics revealed last July by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), over 20 million cosmetic procedures were performed worldwide in 2014, and about a million of them were done in South Korea (Korea hereafter), making it the country with the world’s highest rate of plastic surgery per capita. In fact, in Korea today, cosmetic treatments and procedures are popular and broadly sought after, and the ubiquity has created such neologisms as *seonghyeong munhwa* (“cosmetic-surgery culture”), *seonghyeong miyin* (“cosmetic-surgery beauty”), and *seonghyeong gwemul* (“cosmetic-surgery monster”). Especially in Gangnam, the commercial center of Seoul, advertisements for cosmetic clinics and surgeries fill the walls of subway cars and underground stations and it is not surprising to run into women with their faces wrapped in bandages striding down the streets.

This essay examines how Korea’s conspicuous cosmetic-surgery culture is represented and critiqued in contemporary mass culture and in works by young Korean artists. In particular, I focus on recent artworks by Mind C (Kang Min Gu), Kim Tae Yeon, and Ji Yeo (Yeo Ji Hyeon), as they have been widely circulated online and attracted many viewers without receiving much in the way of critical evaluation or in-depth examination. Based on a close analysis of the images, I argue that they raise some important and complex issues with cosmetic surgery and beauty culture, previously under-discussed in popular culture, such as gender stereotype, side effects, and the pain and desire involved in extreme makeovers, and the changing aesthetics and ethics of contemporary Korea. For comparison, I will first review pop-culture representations of cosmetic surgery before discussing the artworks under consideration. My analysis of these artworks will highlight the role of artists as cultural critics, but will also suggest that the artworks are products of the culture and partake in the production of the growing discourse on Korea’s expanding cosmetic surgery culture and industry.

## Methodology

This paper seeks to contribute to—and draw from—the growing scholarship on cosmetic surgery by adopting an art historical methodology of visual analysis. This analysis relies on a close viewing of the images, in addition to using both scholarly and journalistic writings on Korea’s cosmetic surgery practices and culture. Below I will demonstrate that careful and attentive observation can reveal more about the image or the object than would appear to be the case. It can be a “productive process” and a “skill for the understanding and interpretation of the historical world,” especially for researchers in art history and visual studies (Roberts). My interpretations and arguments concerning the artworks under consideration and their links to various social and cultural issues such as gender, gaze, and stereotypes are derived from my close, detailed observations of the artworks.

## Cosmetic Surgery in Korea

Korea’s cosmetic surgery industry began to grow quickly in the 1990s, the decade during which Korea’s commercial culture diversified and consumer culture expanded based on the rapid industrialization of the society during the 1980s. The Korean Medical Association’s statistics show that the number of certified plastic surgeons increased from 398 in 1992 to 926 in 2000 (Woo, KJ 61). In 2014, it is estimated that 2,054 plastic surgeons were practicing in Korea, ranking the sixth worldwide in absolute numbers after the U.S. (6,300), Brazil (5,473), China (2,800), Japan (2,221), and India (2,150), but first overall in terms of plastic surgeons per capita (ISAPS). Korea’s cosmetic surgery industry continues to flourish, especially with the increasing number of “medical tourists” from China and Russia who travel to Seoul to consult plastic surgeons in Gangnam. Since the Ministry of Health and Welfare granted local clinics official permission to receive foreign patients in 2009, the number of medical tourists has continued to swell year on year—from 60,201 in 2009 to 159,464 in 2012, and 266,501 in 2014 (Hong). Korea’s medical tourism industry tripled in revenue from 2009 through 2012, rising to 453 million US dollars (Lee). The government is actively promoting the industry, contributing to the increase in employment in the field by several thousands of jobs.

Cosmetic surgery is indeed highly conspicuous in Korean culture and society today. It is a common subject in everyday conversations in Korea, regardless of gender, age, or class, and advertisements for various cosmetic clinics and procedures are ubiquitous in public transport. One factor contributing to the popularity of Korean cosmetic surgery is said to be its relatively ‘cheap’ price: “An average—not excellent—face-lift in the United States will set you back about US\$10,000. But in Korea you can get the same service for US\$2,000 or US\$3,000” (Kim, V).

What has been often described as Korea’s ‘obsession with cosmetic surgery’ in the international media routinely refers to the above-quoted ISAPS data, which shows that in recent years Korea has had the world’s highest rate of cosmetic procedures per capita. However, the actual figures are likely much higher than recorded, as the Korean studies scholar Joanna Elfving-Hwang has noted elsewhere:

[A] significant number of surgeries go unrecorded: not only is the cosmetic surgery industry badly regulated but the clinical data included in the ISAP’s figures only takes into account surgeries performed by accredited surgeons who form a minority of medical or medical-related staff who perform surgeries. Many beauty salons and ‘health clinics’ offer smaller cosmetic procedures such as facial fillers (e.g. Botox® or Retylin®), blepharoplasty and mole removal laser surgery, which are not recorded as surgical procedures (Elfving-Hwang n.p.).

In fact, other sources estimate higher rates. *The New York Times* reported that in 2009 alone, about 30 percent of women in Korea between the ages of 20 and 50 underwent some form of cosmetic treatment (Fackler). According to the Korean Association for Plastic Surgeons, in 2010, about 15 percent of men in Korea underwent cosmetic surgery (Holliday and Elfving-Hwang 59).

An important thing to keep in mind when speaking of Korea’s cosmetic surgery is that in vernacular Korean language, ‘cosmetic surgery’ does not necessarily distinguish between nonsurgical treatments and procedures. The Korean expression *seonghyeong* (

성형, 成形), which is derived from such terms as *seonghyeong susul* (“plastic surgery”) and *seonghyeong wegwa* (“plastic surgery clinic”), is used often and widely to refer to a range of beauty-related treatments, from light cosmetic procedures (시술, 施術) to more dramatic surgeries (수술, 手術). The above-quoted ISAPS surveys show that the total number of procedures performed in Korea in 2014 was 980,313, and that 55 percent of these (539,730) were non-surgical procedures. Not just cosmetic surgery clinics, but dermatologists and other beauty-related procedures and products are fairly easily accessible in Korea. Anecdotally, I can attest to the availability and popularity of such procedures and products based on my experience living in both Korea and the U.S.: I will try to see a dermatologist or have a facial treatment once a month in Seoul, which I never did in twenty years while living in the U.S. This is not to suggest that the reported rate of cosmetic surgery in Korea is wrong, but only that *seonghyeong* is a prevalent and conspicuous aspect of Korean culture. Public awareness of—and interest in—*seonghyeong*, beauty and grooming is generally high and commonplace in Korea.

## Representation of Cosmetic Surgery in Korean Mass Culture

Cosmetic surgery emerged as a new, popular topic in Korean mass culture in the 2000s. In particular, the idea of complete facial makeover appeared prominently in several movies and television series—a trend possibly inspired by the international hit Hollywood movie *Face/Off* (1997), the plot of which evolves around an FBI agent and his terrorist enemy, each of whom undergoes a face transplant procedure to take on the other’s identity. In *Shiri* (1999), the first big-budget “blockbuster” movie made in South Korea, the main character is a North Korean female spy sent to South Korea after having a complete face transplant; she assumes the identity of an existing South Korean woman as part of the preparation for her missions in Seoul.

In 2006, there were three movies that took cosmetic surgery as a main narrative device, indicating the growing interest in *seonghyeong* in Korea at the time. It would be helpful here to look at how these movies portrayed the idea of plastic surgery, for they reflect a change of public opinion and attitude toward cosmetic surgery. First, a summer

當代藝術與媒體文化

thriller released in August, *Cinderella* (신데렐라) tells a gruesome story of Yunhee, a plastic surgeon, and her seventeen-year-old daughter Hyunsu. The movie begins with high school girls suffering from hallucinations and dying after having Yunhee perform cosmetic surgery on them. Hyunsu discovers in the basement photos of a girl whose face has been terribly disfigured, becomes curious, and investigates a secret her mother has kept in the dark basement for years. Second, there is *Time* (시간), directed by Kim Ki-duk, a filmmaker with an international cult following, and also released in August, a week after *Cinderella*'s release. The movie's main character is Sehee, a young woman who undergoes drastic cosmetic surgery to become a new person in order to win back the heart of her boyfriend, Jiwoo, who seems to be losing interest in her after two years of dating. After the transformation, Sehee, now with a totally new face, approaches and starts dating Jiwoo, who is unaware that this woman is Sehee. As Jiwoo shows a romantic interest in the 'new' Sehee, she finds that she is still unhappy; does this mean he has moved on from his ex-girlfriend and the 'real' Sehee?

Reviewing these movies in a newspaper article titled "On Celluloid, Plastic is Murder," Joo Jung-wan points out that "There are no good points to plastic surgery in the movies; it is uniformly seen as unnatural and undesirable."

In the movie *Time*, the plastic surgeon warns the female character that she should be aware of the fact that once she goes through with the operation, she will never be able to go back to what she used to look like. Despite the doctor's warning, [Sehee] insists on going through the operation — and regrets it. The movie *Cinderella* reminds people of the serious dangers plastic surgery carries. It shows eerie scenes of girls lying alone in the operating room, nervously waiting for the doctor to come in. It also depicts the gruesome results of the mother's quest to make her daughter the "prettiest girl in the world" (Joo).

While these were the first Korean movies to delve deeply into the issue of cosmetic surgery, they portrayed cosmetic surgery as a questionable and problematic practice.

In contrast, the third movie released in 2006 to deal with cosmetic surgery, 200



*Pounds Beauty* (미녀는 괴로워) took a positive take on life-threatening surgeries. In the story, based on Yumiko Suzuki's manga *Kanna-san, Daiseikou Desu*, the main character is Hanna, an unknown, overweight female singer who undergoes plastic surgery in order to become a pop star. Hanna is an excellent singer, but her talent is not acknowledged because of her unattractive appearance; and so, she acts as a 'ghost singer', singing backstage for Ami, a famous performer who actually lip syncs to Hanna's voice. After experiencing a series of rejections and failures in her career and love life, she decides to go under the knife to gain confidence and opportunities for a happier life. After a year secluded in a hospital, she returns to show business as the stunningly beautiful Jenny, and soon earns a solo-album recording contract from Sangjun—Ami's agency director and Hanna's long-term crush—who does not learn that she is Hanna until later. They become romantically involved while working together, and Sangjun learns that Jenny is Hanna when looking at her drawing, which he recalls from earlier—giving a hint that he had been impressed with Hanna's innocent nature and cute personality. Jenny becomes famous, but struggles with the guilt of having lied about herself. Finally, during a concert, she reveals her past career and surgeries to the public. In tears, she declares 'Jenny' to be "fake" and that the fat woman singing in the video is her "real" self. Following her confession, she releases her first album using her real name, Hanna, and gains both commercial and critical acclaim.

Though the *200 Pounds Beauty* was promoted as a "satire of lookism" ("외모지상주의 풍자"), there were some aspects in the movie that glamorized high-risk cosmetic surgery. In the two-hour movie, in which the main character's complete makeover provides the turning point, only five seconds are spent showing what happens inside the operating room, with the camera focused on the surgeon and rows of bottles of fat suctioned from the patient--the patient's face and body are not shown. Another ninety seconds are spent showing what happens during her recovery period; Hanna, now skinny, jogs on a running machine and visits her father with her face wrapped in bandages, while Ami's agency desperately searches for her to again ghost-sing for Ami. In brief, there is no realistic or serious depiction of the life-threatening plastic surgeries that Hanna is said to have undergone in the movie. Instead, the surgeries are presented as life-changing 'gifts', through which Hanna achieves success both in her singing career and romantic relations.

The movie went on to become the most successful romantic comedy in the 2000s, not only in Korea but also in China.

Joanna Elfving-Hwang, a scholar of Korean culture and the makeover culture, has pointed out “the fact that cosmetic surgery is, by and large, represented either positively or neutrally in South Korean popular culture and media.” She has analyzed closely the narrative of the popular makeover reality TV show *Let Me In* (2011-present) to argue that Korean popular media utilizes “a set of moral discourses of self-discipline, and even filial piety, to justify the presumed necessity for radical corporeal changes. These discourses coalesce to promote the practice not as an instance of vanity, but as evidence of moral fibre and responsibility that one ‘owes’ not only to oneself, but also to one’s parents or children as an expression of filial piety or parental duty” (n.p.). For example, each episode of *Let Me In* begins with a section in which contestants or surgery hopefuls, mostly working-class young women, seek to convince the show hosts and the group of medical and beauty specialists of their ‘need’ to receive life-changing surgeries, typically by explaining about their ‘tragic’ life affected by their ‘ugly’ appearance, coupled with ‘low’ class background—thus framing them as ‘cosmetic underclass’ (*miyong hawui gyegep*) who are unable to achieve success because of their appearance (Seo 20). This section accompanies videos in which the cameras follow the contestants’ everyday lives, isolated from others and/or negatively affected by their low self-esteem. Typically, in these videos, family members “reinforce and legitimate the discourse of exclusion based on appearance” (Elfving-Hwang). For example, the parents are shown to apologize to their children for passing on ‘faulty’ genes and lacking the funds to ‘fix’ these ‘faults’ through surgery. In such ways, the narratives on cosmetic surgery circulating in Korean popular media appear to combine Confucian discourses of filial piety and self-discipline with neoliberal discourses of self-improvement and class mobility.

## Cosmetic Surgery in Contemporary Korean Art

In the Korean art world, cosmetic surgery is a new subject matter which began to appear in the early 2000s, when the so-called “cosmetic-surgery culture” (*seonghyeong munhwa*) became conspicuous and problematized in Korea’s public opinion and in

the international media. It should be remembered though that cosmetic surgery is not completely new in art, however. Andy Warhol, the leading American Pop artist in the 1960s, whose art was all about his (and his culture's) fascination with the world of images and consumer culture, created different versions of painting titled *Before and After*, around the same time he got his own nose job done. They are large, identical black-and-white paintings made based on a small newspaper advertisement for a plastic surgeon in New York City in 1961, showing a woman's profile 'before' and 'after' getting (evidently) a nose job, a chioplasty, and having a mole removed. In art history, the artist most closely associated with plastic surgery is the notorious French performance artist Orlan, who underwent a series of surgeries throughout the 1990s to change her face to look like the female personae from famous paintings such as Venus and Mona Lisa, and later to implant features of ancient masks from Columbia, India, and Africa. Intended as performative critique of male-centric and Euro-centric ideals of beauty, Orlan's transformations have also been understood as a manifestation of a postmodern understanding of identity as mutable and reproducible.

While cosmetic surgery tends to be portrayed positively or neutrally in popular media as discussed earlier, artists have more critically engaged with the beauty-obsessed culture, often representing or performing portrayals of cosmetic surgery with irony. Recently, young Korean artists joined that strand of artist-critics, with their visual works commenting on Korea's *seonghyeong munhwa* going viral and receiving acclaim for unique and trenchant portrayal of the culture and the subjects. As I will discuss below, their works also address and reveal problems of gender, morality, and stereotypes that are specific to contemporary Korean culture and society.

## Case 1: Mind C's *Gangnam Beauty* is Plastic Beauty/ Monster

When the webcomic artist Mind C (Kang Min Gu)'s illustrations titled *Gangnam Beauty* went viral in 2013, viewers were impressed with the piquant humor and the keen observation and skills with which the typical face of *seonghyeong mi-in* or Korean

當代藝術與媒體文化

“plastic beauty” was depicted.<sup>1</sup> In the illustration series, the three or four different female characters look identical, obviously because their faces were shaped by the same clinic in Gangnam, “Gangnamkong Plastic Surgery Clinic, Specialty in Faceoff,” as a sign in one of the illustrations indicates. Like dolls mass-produced in a factory, the women have the exact same facial features. They have the same set of eyes, showing visible signs of double eyelid surgery and epicanthoplasty (which cuts the inner corners of the eyes to extend the length of the eyes), as well as the so-called “charming fat” injection beneath the eyes (which is done to add a cuter and younger look like the eyes of a doll or a baby). The women also have identical-looking noses, which are the exact same length and shape, with the exact same size and position of the nostrils. Furthermore, jaw reduction and cheekbone reduction surgeries, which remove portions of bone, have created the unrealistic V-shaped face. In addition, their protruding foreheads are effects of round silicon implants. Unfortunately, however, because of all the surgeries, these women cannot put on a smile on their face. They have the blank face of a doll or a robot. Making it even more eerie is that Mind C’s depictions of plastic beauty are not caricatures, for one can actually run into people bearing similar faces while walking through the Gangnam shopping district. It was this surreal ‘reality’ aesthetic in Mind C’s work that grabbed people’s attention when it first came out.

However, I would like to highlight some problems with gender and race in this webcomic series, which have so far escaped critique. While Mind C ridicules and objectifies his female characters as *seonghyeong gwemul* (“plastic surgery monsters”) rather than *seonghyeong mi-in* (“plastic surgery beauty”), the single subject of gaze in the illustrations is a Caucasian man dressed in a suit, who is depicted as staring with confusion at the identical-looking Korean women on the street. Evidently, in order to poke fun at the excessive cosmetic-surgery culture of Korea and its ‘blind’ consumers who are mostly female, Mind C takes the old, pre-feminist and colonialist way of representation in which the principal agent of looking is a Western man (Mulvey). By doing so, Mind C positions himself apart from the Korean cosmetic-surgery culture that he seeks to criticize, and alienates his female characters from Korean men like himself.

---

1 The illustrations started in 2012 Mind C’s webcomic series 2-chawon gaegeu (“2-dimensional gag”).

In this respect, Mind C's *Gangnam Beauty* illustrations can be related to the "kimchi girl hate" misogyny that is deeply rooted and seriously prominent in the Internet culture today in Korea. "Kimchi girl" (김치녀) and "dwenjang girl" (뽕장녀) are neologisms in the 2000s that describe young women obsessed with shopping and luxury lifestyle that they cannot afford, and have been adopted by young men to attack such women and the excessive consumerism. In fact, in many misogynistic writings in Korean online space, luxury brand accessories like the Chanel handbag and shoes that Mind C's female characters are flaunting are symbols of "kimchi girl." Considering Mind C's allusions to "kimchi girl," it might be proper to say that the target of Mind C's satire is less the cosmetic-surgery culture and more the ostentatious and hyperreal culture obsessed with appearance only.<sup>2</sup> As his illustrations concentrate on depicting only women as "plastic surgery monsters", and since the only male character—and the single subject of gaze—featured in the illustrations is a Caucasian man, Mind C cannot escape criticisms for reproducing the colonialist gaze and the imperialistic gender and racial stereotypes, which prominent postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak have discussed. If Mind C did so unconsciously, which seems to be case here, that would be another example of contemporary traces and effects of Western imperialism, which remain "so global and all-encompassing that virtually nothing escaped it" (Said 68). It hints at the sense of cultural inferiority that remains in contemporary Korea despite the economic growth and the development of a cosmopolitan culture about which the country often boasts.

## Case 2: Kim Tae Yeon's New 'Landscape' of Korea in 唯美獨尊圖

In the spring of 2014, Kim Tae Yeon, a recent MFA from Seoul National University, received considerable media attention after opening her solo show in Seoul titled 유미독존도 (唯美獨尊圖), which can be translated as "a painting that describes the current phenomenon in which people believe beauty is the most important thing in the world"

---

2 As of this writing in November 2015, Mind C's latest work is *Will You Marry Me?*, a cute and quirky romantic comedy based on his real life love story with his wife.



Fig. 1 KIM Tae Yeon. *Righteously Gorgeous* (유미독존도), 2014. Pigment on silk, 76.5x120 cm. Courtesy of artist

(Choi).<sup>3</sup> The show consisted of her series of paintings dealing with the Korean issue of cosmetic surgery. Kim, who studied Oriental Painting at the university, employs traditional convention of Buddhist painting to critique Korea's cosmetic surgery 'craze' and the industry.

The title of the exhibition is actually the title of one of her paintings exhibited there. In the silk scroll painting titled 유미독존도 (唯美獨尊圖), with its English title *being Righteously Gorgeous*, Kim presents a plastic surgery clinic as a paradise in which one gains reincarnation (Fig. 1). The plastic surgeon is portrayed as the godly Buddha. The lone woman struggling with her appearance in the bottom of the composition, gains a new body on the operating table situated in the painting's middle ground, and is depicted to live a new, happy life after the makeover: she receives a marriage proposal and flies off on a honeymoon. The "three goddesses" of plastic surgery beauty (who have identical faces

3 The solo exhibition took place at Gallery DOS in Seoul, from April 30 to May 6, 2014

like the women in Mind C's illustrations) are praying for the woman's "eternal youth and immortality" and "infinite potentials" after the surgical rebirth.

The triple goddesses frequently appear throughout the series, always positioned in the upper or center area of the composition, because, for the surgery hopefuls, those who have successfully obtained a new identity through plastic surgery are the surgeons deified. In the painting *Three Goddesses of Beauty*, each of the three ethereal figures are backed by a mandala and they together form the surgeon's brain (Fig. 2). In traditional Buddhist art, mandala is supposed to represent virtues of the universe, but in Kim's painting, mandala shows the surgical goddesses' painful recovery process from the surgeries. The foreground of the painting presents a ceremonial setup, giving rite to the three goddesses' previous faces, as well as their diplomats and awards. Here, physical beauty is exalted over education and career accomplishments.

Kim's paintings smartly address the recent change in Korean society of moral values about one's heritage and identity by merging the conventional Joseon Buddhist art with the contemporary issue of cosmetic plastic surgery. One of Kim's humorous titles is *My Parents Birthed Me and My Doctor Made Me*—a satirical twist of an ancient Confucian ode that goes, "My Father Birthed Me and My Mother Raised Me" (父生我身 母鞠我身). Long gone are the Confucian principles of filial piety that used to teach Koreans that one's body is an important inheritance from the ancestors that must be kept clean and unharmed. The complex mix of Confucian and neoliberal discourses of filial piety, parental duty, self-discipline, self-improvement, and class mobility in contemporary Korea's cosmetic-surgery culture has already been discussed above in regards to the popular TV show *Let Me In*. The phrase "My Parents Birthed Me and My Doctor Made Me" perfectly renders going-under-the-knife as the new virtue. It is not your parents but cosmetic surgeons who can "make" you—who can give you what you need for life—the man-made face and body that are believed to make your life 'better.' In twenty-first-century Korea, the Confucian idea of self-discipline is confused with the neoliberal idea of self-improvement, and physical beauty is a form of capital that one can purchase, own, and exploit. In her artist's statement, Kim asks, "Since when did it become so natural to change one's inborn face following some impossible standards?" (Kim, T).





Fig. 2 KIM Tae Yeon. *Three Goddesses* (세여신도), 2014.  
Pigment on silk. 81x143cm. Courtesy of artist

It should be pointed out that Kim is not entirely critical of the ‘cosmetic surgery’ syndrome in Korea. Her paintings of surgery patients and their transformations suggest her understanding of their desire for a ‘better self’ and a ‘better life’ in the changed Korean society where appearance is directly linked to success. In almost every painting of the series, the viewer can find a female figure that expresses her earnest wish or desperation to receive cosmetic surgery. In the painting *Goddess* (관능보살도), the tiny figure of a surgery hopeful is depicted as praying on her knees to the giant, glamorous goddess figure. In the lower left corner of the *Righteously Gorgeous*, the protagonist is shown crying, with her hands covering her face from the surrounding eyes and mouths staring at her. The dismembered eyes and mouths represent gazes of anonymous others—the society where lookism rules, where job applications require the applicants’ pictures,



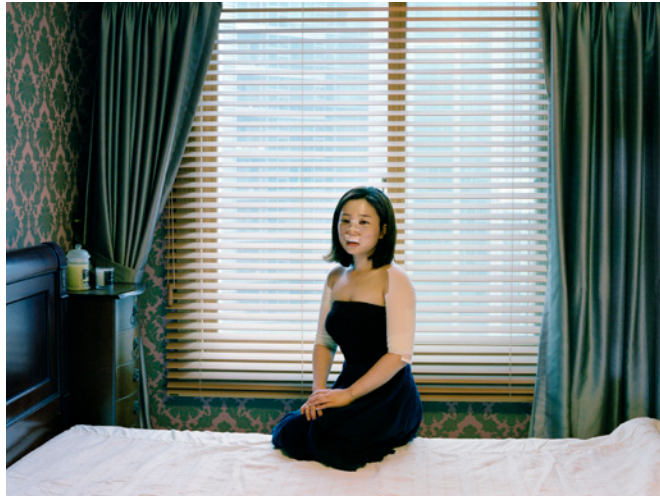
where moms give their daughters a double eyelid surgery as a ‘gift’ upon entering a university. Unlike Mind C, Kim does not blame or mock the surgery beauties or hopefuls. She rather satirically portrays plastic surgery clinics as a microcosm of the current Korean society ridiculously obsessed with physical beauty and material success.

### Case 3: Ji Yeo’s Empathetic Portraits in *Beauty Recovery Room*

The New York-based Korean photographer Ji Yeo (Yeo Ji Hyeon) takes her camera inside Gangnam’s cosmetic surgery facilities. In 2008, Yeo began to take photographs for her *Beauty Recovery Room* series, which presents portraits of patients in recovery rooms waiting to heal (Figs. 3-5). In her recent interview with the *Washington Post*, the artist said that she first became interested in the subject as she considered plastic surgery for herself. “She planned to transform her whole body, but when she started consultations with about a dozen doctors, she realized she had pictured plastic surgery in terms of the before and after, not the actual surgery in the middle” (Swanson). Yeo says, “During the consultation, I realized that all along, I was only thinking of plastic surgery as some kind of magic tool. From the media, and from my friends, not many people were talking about how plastic surgery was *surgery*” (Swanson). That is why she decided not to go under the knife, and why she decided to take photographs of patients in recovery rooms—to reveal the entire journey of cosmetic surgery.

The photographs of women (and a man) enduring post-surgery procedures and suffering all alone in the luxury hospital rooms express many complex feelings, including pain, loneliness, strength, vanity, and hope. There are no signs of fear or distress, however. Neither sadness nor happiness. In these very intimate photos of women in blood, scars, and bandage, one can clearly sense the photographer’s empathy with her subjects. Being a young woman who grew up in Gangnam and who once considered plastic surgery herself, Yeo evokes a deeply personal and complicated relationship with cosmetic surgery. In her official artist’s statement, she blames Korean society and culture for the high rate of extreme makeovers among Korean women. She describes her work as her attempt to “show the physical cost of adhering to social pressure in Korea,” in which “The male-dominated

當代藝術與媒體文化



Figs. 3-5 Photographs from Ji Yeo's *Beauty Recovery Room* series. Courtesy of artist

media endlessly reinforces its model of the ideal women” (Yeo). The photographer’s subjects are mostly female, except one photograph of a young man.

It is interesting that Yeo comments on gender inequality in order to explain her interest and to defend her subjects. Such an assumption, somewhat similar to the above case of Mind C’s work, exemplifies the gender stereotype that dominates the discourses on cosmetic surgery and the beauty culture. As Holliday and Elfvig-Hwang (62–63) have argued, “A number of studies have attempted to explain the high incidence of aesthetic surgery in Korea by emphasizing ‘traditional’ patriarchal culture,” and “there is general agreement that aesthetic surgery exists within a misogynistic (beauty) culture, and only really affects women, and exceptionally a small portion of deviant (feminized) men.” The examples she refers to are the feminist works of Kathy Davis and Kathryn Pauly Morgan.

However, statistics prove that men’s interest in cosmetic surgery is increasing, and more men are undergoing procedures and treatments. A survey among Korean university students in 2014 showed that 21.4% of the female respondents and 6.8% of the male respondents said they would undergo plastic surgery in order to secure places for themselves in the job market (Jang; Jeffreys). As the *Wall Street Journal* has reported, “In the past few years, a handful of men-only clinics have opened and existing clinics have started in-house centers for male patients,” responding to growing demand from men mostly for bigger eyes, nose jobs, and hair transplants (Woo, J). According to the report, a survey done by a male-only clinic called Real for Men showed that the reasons for the male patients to get cosmetic treatment were to improve competitiveness (33%), confidence (27%), and personal satisfaction (24%) among others. The survey also showed that 35% thought men’s appearance affects his success in society “greatly” and 53% “to some extent.” These examples suggest that it is not Korea’s patriarchal culture that drives women to go under the knife. After all, it is the same competitive society obsessed with appearance that affects both men and woman to consider aesthetic surgery.

## Concluding Remarks: Before and After

Over the last decade, cosmetic surgery has rapidly emerged as the most influential

當代藝術與媒體文化

and popular constituent of Korean culture. Both the number of certified plastic surgeons and clinics and the number of recorded procedures have continued to increase every year. Surgery hopefuls are as ubiquitous as “surgery beauties,” “surgery monsters,” and advertisements for cosmetic clinics and surgeries that are overflowing onto the streets. Now a five-billion-dollar industry, cosmetic surgery has become a popular, familiar and common aspect of Korean culture, and this is too a serious and critical phenomenon to be considered a passing trend (Wright). It is increasingly affecting the society’s aesthetics and ethics, and the ways people see themselves, others, and the world.

Relatively many artists and cultural producers in Korea have dealt with the issue of cosmetic surgery, reflecting its extraordinary popularity in the society. In no other country has cosmetic surgery provoked so many stories and imaginative works in such diverse forms and styles. As I demonstrated above, it was in the mid-2000s that cosmetic surgery came to the fore as an interesting and problematic part of Korean mass culture. In 2006, there were three Korean-made movies that took cosmetic surgery as a main narrative device, and while the first two movies—the summer thriller *Cinderella* and the gruesome romance *Time*—rendered complete makeovers as dangerous, disgusting and pathological, the summer’s greatest hit romantic comedy, *200 Pounds Beauty*, took a positive take on cosmetic surgery and even idealized and glamorized life-threatening surgeries. After the international success of *200 Pounds Beauty*, and as cosmetic surgery quickly became a popular aspect of culture and a significant industry in Korea, it became increasingly difficult to find negative portrayals of cosmetic surgery in Korea’s mass culture. As Joanna Elfving-Hwang has argued in her analysis of the makeover reality TV show *Let Me In* (2011-present), “cosmetic surgery is, by and large, represented either positively or neutrally in South Korean popular culture and media.” However, it was around the same time that the phrase ‘Korea’s obsession with cosmetic surgery’ began to make headlines in the international media, which often rendered it sarcastically or pejoratively.

While there has been no critical writing on contemporary art’s take on cosmetic surgery, in this essay I selected and focused on three young Korean artists’ works to see how they each portray and critique Korea’s extravagant cosmetic surgery culture

and industry. The recent artworks by Mind C, Tae Yeon Kim, and Ji Yeo bring critical perspectives to the cosmetic-surgery boom, which would otherwise remain unchallenged in representation. Through close analyses, I have argued that they each raise some important and complex issues that were rarely addressed in previous representations of plastic surgery, such as the homogenization of facial features among Gangnam's young women, the changing aesthetics and ethics in contemporary Korea, and pain and desire involved in extreme makeovers. We also saw that the artists' gazes and opinions are somehow shaped and informed by the culture and the prevalent cultural discourses on Korea's cosmetic surgery phenomenon.

The webcomic artist Mind C's illustrations, titled *Gangnam Beauty*, portray and poke fun at the identical-looking women who emerge from the same clinic in Gangnam, Seoul's mecca of beauty salons and plastic surgery clinics. Mind C's work keenly captures and highlights the 'surreal reality' of Gangnam's common street scene with his unique humor and drawing skills, but we could identify problems of gender and racial stereotypes. Apparently, Mind C intends to ridicule and attack only female consumers of cosmetic surgery, while all recent data and reports indicate a high (and rising) number of men who have gone under the knife. More problematically, the single male character in Mind C's illustrations is a Caucasian man, who is depicted as staring with confusion at the identical-looking women in Gangnam. While depicting his female characters as clueless victims of their own obsessions with cosmetic surgery, Mind C gave the power of looking to the male foreigner, thus reproducing the Western colonialist ways of representation where the subject of gaze is always the Western men and the object of gaze is typically foreign, exotic women.

Similar to Mind C, female artists Kim Tae Yeon and Ji Yeo depict mostly women as active consumers of cosmetic surgery. That said, Kim and Yeo intend to show the 'process' and complexities of cosmetic surgery, and both exhibit much layered, emotional and empathetic portrayals of the women who decide to go under the knife. For example, in almost every painting of Kim's *Righteously Gorgeous* (唯美獨尊圖) series, the viewer can find a female figure who expresses her earnest wish or desperation to receive cosmetic surgery—praying on her knees and/or crying in isolation—to achieve a 'better self' and

當代藝術與媒體文化

a ‘better life’ in the Korean society where appearance is linked to success. By employing the scroll format, Kim narrates the various, successive stages of a woman’s life before and after getting surgeries, from a pre-surgery unhappy life to a post-surgery romance. The photographer Yeo started her *Beauty Recovery Room* series in 2008 by taking her camera inside Gangnam’s plastic surgery facilities, to draw attention to the ‘surgery’ aspect of cosmetic surgery, as opposed to the ‘beauty’ part. Yeo’s intimate photographs of women enduring post-surgery procedures and sufferings in recovery rooms express complex feelings of pain and hope, mixed with strength—instead of sorrow or distress.

In fact, both Kim and Yeo have suggested that their critiques are aimed not at the women who go under the knife, but at the society that drives them to do so. Both artists have portrayed plastic surgery clinics as microcosms of Korean society, obsessed with appearance. Kim’s title, 唯美獨尊圖, which translates as “Painting that describes the current phenomenon in which people believe beauty is the most important thing in the world”, clearly indicates that the artist intends to describe the ‘phenomenon,’ not the people. By employing traditional Buddhist painting conventions to critique the cosmetic-surgery phenomenon and the industry, Kim also successfully revealed the ironies and conflicts society deriving from the awkward mix of Confucian disciplines and neoliberal discourses in contemporary Korean. In Yeo’s case, the artist has literally expressed her intention for her *Beauty Recovery Room* series to criticize the “social pressure in Korea” and its “male-dominated media” that “endlessly reinforces its model of the ideal women” (Yeo). It should also be noted that Yeo is the only artist among those mentioned in this essay to have portrayed a male patient of cosmetic surgery, and this strengthens the artist’s professed intention to blame the Korean society and the cosmetic surgery industry rather than the people. It hints at a perspective that is distinguished from common, gendered views about cosmetic surgery.

The focus of this analysis has been to examine recent representations of cosmetic surgery in Korean art and mass culture, and I have closely analyzed them in order to reveal their complexities as related to other various issues in Korean society and history. Further research on the relationship between cosmetic surgery and global art history would complement and enrich many streams and courses of visual culture studies.



## Bibliography

- Blum, V. *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003.
- Choi, J. "Landscape in the Era of Plastic Surgery." kimtaeyeon.net. 1 May 2014. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Davis, K. *Reshaping the Female Body: Dilemmas of Cosmetic Surgery*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- . *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences: Cultural Studies on Cosmetic Surgery*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.
- Elfvig-Hwang, H, R. Elfvig-Hwang, and J. Elfvig-Hwang. "Gender, Globalization and Aesthetic Surgery in South Korea." *Body & Society* 18.2 (2012): 58–81.
- Elfvig-Hwang, J. "Cosmetic Surgery and Embodying the Moral Self in South Korean Popular Makeover Culture," *The Asia-Pacific Journal Website*. The Asia-Pacific Journal 24 11. (2013). Web. 2 March 2015.
- Epstein, S. J., and M. J. Rachel. "Multiple Exposures: Korean Bodies and the Transnational Imagination," *The Asia-Pacific Journal Website*. The Asia-Pacific Journal 10. 33 (2012). Web. 20 February 2015.
- Fackler, M. "Economy Blunts Korea's Appetite for Plastic Surgery." *The New York Times Website*. The New York Times, 2 Jan. 2009. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Gilman, S. L. *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Haiken, E. *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Heyes, C. "Cosmetic Surgery and the Television Makeover." *Feminist Media Studies* 7.1 (2007): 17-32.
- Hong, S.G. "Euiryeo gwangwang hwalseonghwa 'gukje cuiyro saeop jiwonbeop' ilneyonje gukhweseo natjam." *Financial News Website*. Financial News, 19 Oct. 2015. Web. 30 Oct. 2015.
- "ISAPS International Survey on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures Performed in 2014." *International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery Website*. International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Web. 30 October 2015.
- Jang, J. "Wemojisangjueui? Yeodaeseng 1 jung 5...." Online video clip. *Hanguk Gyeongje TV Website*. Hanguk Gyeongje TV, 19 June 2015. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.
- Jeffreys, D. "Koreans Go Under the Knife in a Cut-throat Race for Jobs." *The Independent Website*. The Independent, 28 April 2007. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Joo, J.W. "On Celluloid, Plastic is Murder." *Korea JoongAng Daily Website*. Korea JoongAng Daily, 29 Aug. 2006. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.
- Kim, E.S. "The Politics of the Body in Contemporary Korea." *Korea Journal* 49.3 (2009): 5–14.
- Kim, T. "Neo-Confucian Body Techniques: Women's Bodies in Korea's Consumer Society." *Body & Society* 9.3 (2003): 97–113.
- Kim, T.Y. "Living Templates." Artist's Website. March 2014. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Kim, V. "Welcome to the Plastic Surgery Capital of the World." *CNN Travel Website*. CNN Travel, 9 Aug. 2012. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Lee, H. "Perfecting the Face-Lift, the Gangnam Style." *Bloomberg Website*. Bloomberg, 10 Oct. 2013. Web. 21 June 2015.
- Marx, P. "About Face: Why is South Korea the World's Plastic-Surgery Capital?" *The New Yorker Website*. The New Yorker, 23 March 2015. Web. 21 June 2015.
- Morgan, K.. "Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies." *Hypatia* 6.3 (1991): 25–53.
- Mulvey, L. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 833-844.
- Roberts, J. L. "The Power of Patience: Teaching Students the Value of Deceleration and Immersive Attention." *Harvard Magazine Website*. Harvard Magazine, Nov.-Dec. 2013. Web. 13 April 2016.
- Said, E. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993.
- Seo, J. *Seonghyeong Sobi Munhwa*. Seoul: Neha chulpansa, 2008.
- Swanson, A. "Stunning Photos Show Why S. Korea is the Plastic Surgery Capital of the World." *The Washington Post Website*. The Washington Post, 16 May 2015. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Woo, J. "More Men Opt for Plastic Surgery." *Wall Street Journal Website*. Wall Street Journal, 9 Oct. 2012. Web. 20 June 2015.
- Woo, K. J. "The Beauty Complex and the Cosmetic Surgery Industry." *Korea Journal* (Summer. 2004): 52–82.

---

當代藝術與媒體文化

Wright, P. "South Korea's Obsession with Plastic Surgery Leads to a \$5 Billion Industry." *Inquisitr Website*.  
Inquisitr, 12 Sep. 2015. Web. 20 June 2015.  
Yeo, J. *Artist's Website*. Web. 20 June 2015.