

**UNORIGINAL ORIGINAL**

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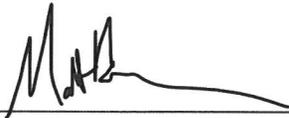
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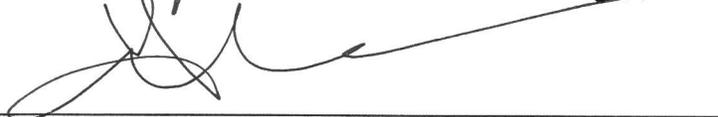
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**Sanghun Yoo**

**(Artist name: Yoosamu)**

## **Abstract**

Unoriginal Original is a multimedia installation based on my investigation into the culture of remakes. The remake can be a double edged sword. It can be utilized to marginalize the culture of others. On the other hand, the idea of remake is not merely a practice of replicating but a way to utilize history as a database. By collapsing the old with the new, and the East and the West, remakes offer an alternative understanding of the present and visions of the future. This thesis document provides analysis of my artwork, cultural context, and the creative process, which allowed my ideas to manifest into objects.

## Keywords:

Unoriginal, Original, authenticity, remake, reconstruction, gaze, representation, underrepresentation, misrepresentation, polyphony, translation, transformation, misinterpretation, Buddhism, tradition, replication, desecration, rectification, transfer, ownership, monopoly, hierarchy, subversion

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## **PART I: Remake as a form of cultural monopoly**

I arrived at my current project *Unoriginal Original* is due to a deep interest in remake culture. Remaking is not merely a practice of replicating but a way to utilize history as a database. Reconstructing the works of the past through a wide range of contemporary vernaculars transforms the meaning of the original work into something different. A remake can update the old with current elements. A remake can allow for a different interpretation of the old work from a different vantage point. In a postmodern world where the idea of originality or authenticity seems to be an absurd and naive notion, the surge of remade movies and cultural content might be a logical trajectory. However, Western culture's obsession with re-telling the stories of the others through new lenses does reveal political and cultural motives behind remake culture. In the visual art context, more appropriate term would be *appropriation* instead of *remake* in discussing my *Unoriginal Original* project. However, by using the word *remake*, I intend to imply my critical view is not limited to the world of contemporary art but targeted at bigger issues of representation in popular culture.

Hollywood remakes of Asian films reveal the underlying direction of contemporary Western culture: the revival of protectionism. Until the 1990s even the early 2000s, foreign films used to make up 10% of the American box office. American audiences used to watch foreign content with subtitles. For example, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden dragon* was a huge success in American market, grossing over 128 million dollars in American market and 213 million dollars

worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the market share of foreign films has dropped to 0.7%.<sup>2</sup> Instead of showing foreign movies in their original form, Hollywood studios started acquiring rights to remake them. Foreign films, especially the ones from non-Western nations, are remade as domestic products by casting Western actors and replacing the original elements with those fitting Western taste. Since Asianness is not perceived as a part of Americanness in the Western culture despite the two centuries of immigration history, film studios hire actors with Western heritage to play Asian roles instead of hiring Asian American actors. As a disclaimer: Casting non-Asian actors for the roles of Asian character itself is ok with me. Interesting casting can offer alternative ways of reading the original work. However, I have yet to see an Asian American actor playing the main protagonist role in American remakes of Asian films ever. Thus, I am interested in addressing the issue of underrepresentation in my project.



Scarlett Johansson playing the role of Major Kusanagi in the remake of *Ghost in the shell*



Tom Cruise playing the role of major Keiji Kiriya in *The edge of Tomorrow*, a remake of *All you need is Kill*

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<sup>1</sup> Exile cinema: filmmakers at work beyond Hollywood, Michael Atkinson, State University of New York Press - 2008, 2

<sup>2</sup> Perren, Alisa. Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. 183.

In this political climate where major presidential contenders scream for promoting American products and values through protectionism, the obsession with remake movies seems to reveal a sense of reluctance to accept foreign influence in Western market. In the era of globalization where other cultures constantly have to accept Western influences, the notion of protectionism and unwillingness to look at the world through the lens of others appears quite ironic. I would like to make it clear that my issue is not with the American audience but with the institutions that promote the obsessive remake culture in this country. American audience cannot watch movies that they do not have any access to. I am confident that American audiences are capable of enjoying foreign content. Exposure to diverse foreign content will enable American audience to shift their perspective from one view to another, thus allowing them to escape the traps of limited perception of the world.

I do not oppose the idea of re-telling narratives through the lens of others. I think that the practice of remake creates possibilities for cross-pollination and unpredictable cultural production. However, when Hollywood studios buy up rights to repackaging the stories of others from all around the world as *American*, I question the implication of such a cultural monopoly. Would such a monopoly lead to the transfer of cultural capital<sup>3</sup> from the rest of the world to the United States?

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<sup>3</sup> Gallagher, Charles A., and Cameron D. Lippard. Race and Racism in the United States. an Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic. 2014. 599

## **PART II: Remake and the transfer of ownership**

Western remakes carry so much more cultural power than the original foreign content due to Western dominance in contemporary culture. Scott A. Lukas in *Fear, Cultural Anxiety, and Transformation*, discusses how remakes subvert the hierarchy between the original and the remakes. “The global ubiquity of the English language and Hollywood’s superiority in its ability to distribute the remake content inevitably grants the remake a greater audience than the original.”, argues Lukas.<sup>4</sup> He also discusses how the rhetoric of homage claiming that its remakes remain as true to the originals as possible prevents the international audience from seeking out the original. As the remakes become more accessible for a global audience and consumption, a transfer of ownership takes place, not to mention a kind of erasure that takes place. The remake can dethrone the original.

Before going further in my discussion about how the transfer of ownership takes place between the original and the remake, I would like to emphasize that remaking is different from copying since the process of remake relies on the interpretation of original work. The process of interpretation can be explained by Harold Bloom’s ideas in his book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom argues that the influence of precursors instill in young artists a type of anxiety as they struggle against the fore-bearers to create something original. Bloom dismisses the idea of originality by claiming that every new work is simply a misreading or misinterpretation of the fore-bearer’s work. The influence is inescapable. Through the process of misinterpretation, what

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<sup>4</sup> Lukas, Scott A., and John Marmysz. *Fear, Cultural Anxiety, and Transformation: Horror, Science Fiction, and Fantasy Films Remade*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009. 113.

once belonged to the precursors can be claimed by their disciples; the transfer of ownership from one generation to the next takes place.

Among many other artists that I admire from the Western art tradition, Lucian Freud, Ellsworth Kelly, and Alex Katz stand out to me because they were presented as *hero* painters by my instructors in college. These *hero* painters were my teachers. I learned a great deal about painting from reading their images. When I was in college, everyone had to create master-copies of hero artists such as Lucian Freud, John Singer Sargent, Caravaggio, Velazquez, and so on. Many of my peers were obsessed with replicating the images by these master painters. However, looking back, some of the most interesting works came out not from copying their images but misinterpretations and alterations. Thus, I agree with Harold Bloom. Misreading of the precursors' works is an integral part of the creative practice. Perhaps, I am more interested in actively misreading and mutating their works in order to claim what was once theirs as mine.

In my *remake* paintings, the element of purposeful misinterpretation is accentuated by my use of anime aesthetics. By reconstructing the works of the canonized western painters through the lens of anime, I am actively defamiliarizing what was once familiar and iconic. Through this process, I am destabilizing not only the iconic images of Western painting but also the hero-disciple relationship that I have with the *hero* painters of the Western painting tradition. The use of anime makes my interest in subverting the hierarchy between the original and the remake more visually evident. Unlike many other contemporary artists who utilize anime as a visual language, my intention behind the use of anime as a visual language is both cultural and political. I would like

to discuss my complex relationship with anime and what cultural and political reasons motivate me to use anime in my creative practice.

### **PART III: Anime as a visual language and its post-colonial dimension**

Anime is a globalized language with an interesting history. Anime has been widely disseminated all around the world since the 1960s. The success of global dissemination was possible because of anime's culturally ambiguous ties to Japanese culture. The element of statelessness, in anime characters' features made it easier for the global consumption in the post World War II period.

The statelessness refers to the use of racially ambiguous facial features in anime characters.

Often, the use of unnatural hair colors, tiny nose, tiny mouth and huge eyes are some examples of the *statelessness* features. Although anime as a culture now has a strong connection to Japanese culture, the stateless features of anime characters played an important role in propelling the popularity of anime worldwide in its early stage. Anthony Y.H. Fung states in *Asian Popular Culture: The Global (Dis)continuity* that, "Children in various countries that Japan had exported their anime to had fundamentally absorbed Japanese anime and regarded it as their own media culture. As an *odorless* medium, early Japanese anime was able to navigate easily through various countries' television programming."<sup>5</sup> Korea was no exception in this case.

36 years of harsh Japanese colonial rule in Korean peninsula left Koreans traumatized and exploited; thus, consuming Japanese cultural content was frowned upon by the Korean society.

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<sup>5</sup> Asian Popular Culture: The Global (dis)continuity Anthony Fung - Routledge - 2013. 221.

However, anime was somehow an exception. TV stations in Korea made sure that the anime films aired on TV appeared ambiguous in their national identities through editing of logos and Japanese characters. I watched numerous anime films under the assumption that they were Korean. Some of them were, in fact, *made in Korea*, but were not Korean content. The cultural censorship imposed on anime by the Korean government allowed the Korean audience to consume Japanese anime without having to think about colonial history between Korea and Japan. Watching anime was certainly a part of pastime among Korean youths. In that regard, I would like to discuss *Mazinger Z*, a quintessential good vs evil anime film featuring a giant robot fighting evil monsters. *Mazinger Z* was an important part of collective cultural memory in 1970s and 80s South Korea. The series was so popular that everyone knew the *Mazinger Z*'s theme song in Korean. There is no question that the giant robot series played a significant role in the construction of Korean identity among the younger generations in the 80s. However, *Mazinger Z* reminded Koreans how Japanese culture still has a strong influence on the post-colonial Korean culture.



Korean national soccer team fans



Japanese national soccer team fans

It was 1996 during the friendly soccer match between Korea and Japan that I witnessed a epiphanic moment of post colonial transposition. A soccer match between the two nations is taken very seriously due to the unresolved issues of colonial history. The air is often filled with nationalistic fervor. Korean soccer fans started singing a *Mazinger Z* theme song to boost their spirit. Of course, they weren't aware that *Mazinger Z* is a Japanese film. Puzzled by Korean soccer fans' choice of song, Japanese fans sang the same song in Japanese as a response. Not truly understanding the Korean fans' intentions, some Japanese fans took it as a gesture of friendship and hospitality.

This was an interesting moment because it reveals how one can construct one's identity without understanding the true origin of cultural influences. Korean nationalist historians dismiss colonial era as the history of colonizer, not as part of Korean history in an effort to restore the pre-colonial Koreanness and national identity. Yes, colonial memory is a scar. Colonial era was one of the darkest moments in Korean history. But, isn't scar a part of our identity? Perhaps acknowledging the colonial history as part of our identity might present us with the ways to deal with the wounds. I would say embrace the colonial history as our own. Embracing the scar is the only way to disempower the power of scar.

Khalil Gibran said, "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars."<sup>6</sup> Scars tell the story of resilience and strength. Slavoj Zizek, a Slovenian philosopher, says that the true victory over colonization is not the return to any

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<sup>6</sup> The Treasured writings of Kahlil Gibran, Kahlil Gibran - Castle Books - 1980

‘authentic’ pre-colonial existence but the fully accomplished loss of pre-modern, authentic origin.<sup>7</sup> In other words, colonialism is not overcome when the presence of Japanese cultural influence in Korea is abolished, but when Koreans stop attempting to restore the pre-colonial authentic Koreanness.

I encountered one American audience who described my use of anime as “problematic” since I am using the “language of colonizer”. It is clearly not a well thought-out accusation but I would say, “why not?”. I grew up watching it. When I was watching it, I thought it was Korean. The influence of Japanese culture in postcolonial Korea played a role in constructing the identity of Korean youths since Korea’s independence. The influence is inescapable. Anime is not a local visual language any more. Its influence is global and anime is a globalized visual language in contemporary culture. Thus, the license to use anime as a visual form is not exclusive to Japanese artists anymore.

Instead of dismissing anime as the cultural language of the former colonizer, I embrace it. I claim it as part of my cultural identity. Žižek once discussed how the British used to have an authentic ownership of their language, English. Through globalization and colonization, English became a lingua franca of the world.<sup>8</sup> Globalization transforms not only the indigenous cultures around the world but also the very entity that propagates it. Western expansion gave birth to Australian English, South African English, Singaporean English, Hong Kong English and so on. The British

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<sup>7</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *Trouble in paradise: from the end of history to the end of capitalism*. New York: Melville house, 2015. 192-93.

<sup>8</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *Trouble in paradise: from the end of history to the end of capitalism*. New York: Melville house, 2015. 192-94

is no longer the sole owner of the language. Now it is shared by everyone. The relationship between the British and their language changed because of globalization.

In my creative practice, my intention is similar in using anime as a visual language. By actively using and redefining what “anime” can be, I intend to open up new possibilities and contribute to the evolution of anime as a globalized contemporary language, shared by everyone. Through this process, transfer of ownership can take place.

#### **PART IV: Remake as an update *patch***

So far, I have discussed how the process of remake can allow for the transfer of ownership and possibilities to challenge the influence of others. In addition to those characteristics, I would like to point out how the process of remake can update the old with new elements. In computing, a term *patch* indicates a piece of software programmed to update an existing software either to fix bugs or improve performance. I am interested in how the process of remake can function as a *patch* in transforming the traditional objects. If the notion of tradition is based on replicating a practice that was passed down from predecessors, process of *remake* can offer a way to update and transform the traditional practice with new elements.



India

Tibet

China

Korea

Japan

The migration of Buddhist sculpture production is a great example to illustrate how tradition stays alive through a process of updates. Buddhist sculptures went through a constant process of remake and becoming something new as the Buddhism migrated from India to East Asian nations, encountering and incorporating new cultural elements. These cultural elements function as *patches*. Most *patch* updates take place in the facial features of the sculptures and allowed the audience in different regions to insert their images in the ever-transforming Buddhist tradition.

#### **PART V: Western art and nudity**

Although nudity is not my interest in Unoriginal Original project, I would like to point out nudity as one of the major traits that set Western art apart from non-Western art. Lynda Nead, an art historian and scholar at the University of London, states how anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any other subject, female nude connotes 'Art'. The framed image of a female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art in the western tradition of art. It is an icon of western culture. One will see a female nude painting in western palaces like Versailles or Vatican City. But one will never see a female nude painting in East Asian palaces like Kyungbok palace or Forbidden City. During Iranian President Rouhani's visit to Rome and Vatican in 2016, the Italian officials covered up all the sculptures and paintings that depict nude bodies in order to avoid embarrassment. The display of images of nudity in public space is a part of Western art tradition. Manet and Goya challenged the notion of nudity in their works. Manet's *Luncheon on the grass* depicts a naked woman casually enjoying a picnic while her male friends are fully

clothed. It is interesting to note how Manet's nude figures stare right at the viewers. The confrontational gaze of his subjects suggests Manet's criticism of nudity in Western art. Before Manet, nude figures never confronted the viewers with their gaze. Goya also raised similar question about the public display of nudity in his works: *La maja vestida* and *La maja desnuda*.

## PART VI: Artists in dialogue



Chapman brothers, *Great deeds against the dead*, 2003, drawing on Goya print

The majority of Chapman brothers works is based on their interpretation of etchings by Francis Goya. They create reiteration of Goya's etchings as small scale models and large size sculptures. Although their early iterations were faithful to the depictions of violent conflicts between Spain civilians and French military, Chapman brothers subverts the meaning of the scenes of violence

by inserting Ronald McDonald or German soldiers in their recent iterations. The introduction of new elements injects a sense of immediacy and allows a greater room for different interpretations. Utilizing their financial resources, Chapman brothers continue acquiring Goya's original prints in order to draw on them. By rectifying the images by Goya, they intend to desecrate, castrate and efface the symbolic power of the original works.

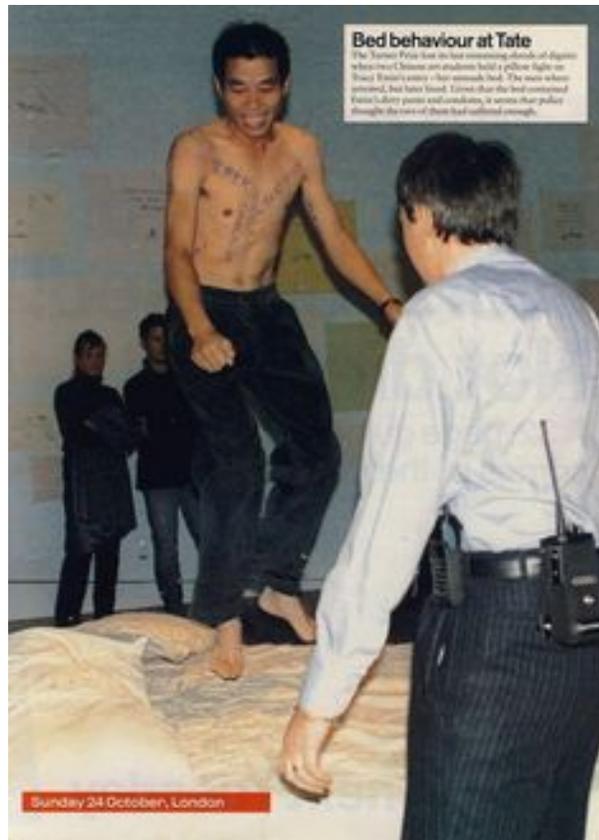


Chapman brothers, *Disasters of War*, 1993, sculpture

Artists have explored the ideas of subverting hierarchy in the art world by either defacing or injecting a new meaning into the original works by others. Rauschenberg explored the idea of erasure as a creative process by erasing De Kooning's drawing. Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi jumped into Tracy Emin's 'My Bed' because they felt the piece was not unmade enough. These acts can be understood as gestures of interventions to undermine the power of established artists and to give visibility to the artists' critiques on the power structure of the art institutions.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953



Yuan Cai and Jian Jun Xi, *Two Men Jump into Tracey's Bed*, 1999



Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998

The notion of making a remake work based on pre-existing work has been a strategy for resistance. Kehinde Wiley recasts old Western paintings with contemporary African American youths and celebrities. It is his way of questioning the legacy of Western art and the construction of blackness in the contemporary pop culture. By inserting African American figures in the images of Western paintings, he is utilizing the idea of displacement to deconstruct the stereotypical representation of blackness.



Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2003



Kehinde Wiley, *Ice T*, 2005

Yinka Shonibare also employs a process of recast in order to make a statement of political protest and a critique on the colonial history. Shonibare often dresses life sized headless mannequins in 18th century European dresses. These dresses are decorated with African fabric patterns and color palette. The introduction of African influence in the Western dress not only makes his piece visually gorgeous but also reveals how he embraces Nigeria's painful colonial history as part of his identity.



Yinka Shonibare, *How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, 2006



Yinka Shonibare, *The swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001

While the process of remake can be utilized as an effective means to question the institutionalized power structure and issues of visual representation, it can also become an effective tool in updating the old iconic works with new elements, thus making it more accessible to the contemporary audience. For example, Jeff Wall employs the conventions of painting, photography, and cinematography in his creative practice. By carefully constructing a cinematic visual narrative, applying the compositions and movements of painting, and pushing the stillness of photography, Jeff Wall updates the images of iconic works with contemporary Western visual elements. *Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* and *The Destroyed Room* are great examples of Jeff Wall's visual update and translation of iconic works by both Eastern and Western masters: Hokusai and Eugène Delacroix



Katsushika Hokusai, *Yejiri Station, Province of Suruga*, 1832



Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993



Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827

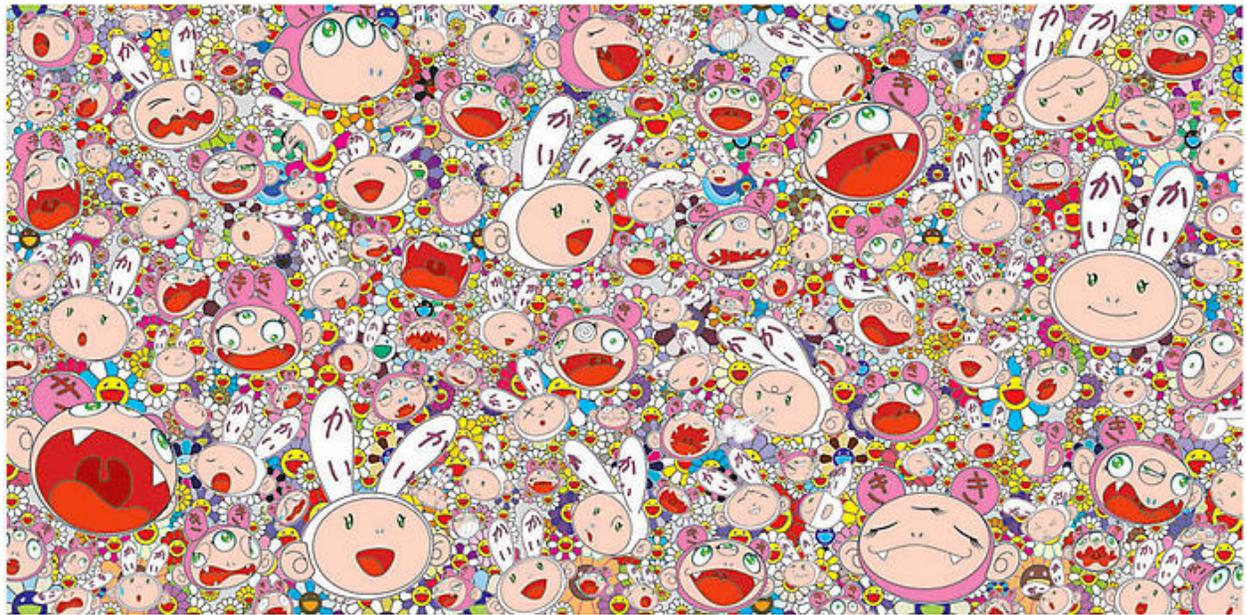


Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978

Instead of looking into a distant culture for a source of inspiration, artists such as Murakami Takashi focuses on redefining what traditional Nihonga painting can be in the contemporary art context. The term *Asian art*, in the western context, often refers to traditional work of art from previous centuries. As an artist who was trained as a traditional painter, he introduces his anime-injected art as a continuation of traditional Nihonga. Thus his creative endeavor focuses on not only updating the old Nihonga form with the contemporary language of anime but also deconstructing the western dismissive perception of Asian art as a traditional craft.



Murakami Takashi , *a.k.a.*, 2002



Murakami Takashi, *Flower Matango* (insallation at Versailles), 2010

Murakami Takashi, *Lots, lots of Kaikai and Kiki*, 2009

## **PART VII: Studio practice and discussion**

This section discusses my creative journey in creating

- 1) Remake paintings
- 2) Anime Guanyin sculpture and shrine

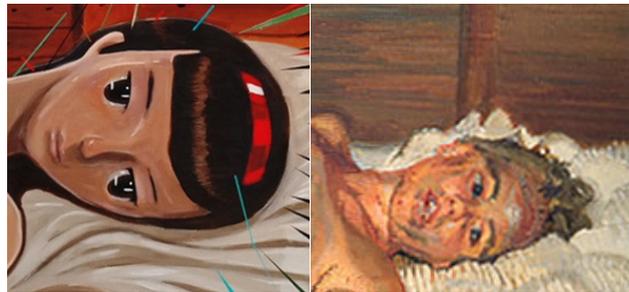
### **On creating *remake* paintings**

The primary goal of my remake paintings is to recast iconic images of Western art with anime characters or reconstruct them through the lens of anime. By employing the Hollywood's remake process applied to foreign movies in my re-iteration of Western paintings, I am reversing the gaze and attempting to subvert the hierarchy between their images and mine. The first hero painters that I tackled through *Unoriginal Original* were Lucian Freud and Ellsworth Kelly. Although the selection of artists that I challenge through this project expanded to include Alex Katz and Frank Stella later on, I chose Lucian Freud and Ellsworth Kelly as a starting point because they represent two facets of the Western painting dominance: figurative and abstract. As I began painting in college, Lucian Freud and Ellsworth Kelly were presented as the hero painters by my instructors. Lucian Freud was revered as a god by my peers. His paintings are known for many great qualities, but I am struck by two things: 1. Interaction between the subjects and Lucian Freud 2. Presence of the painter in the paintings.

The relationship Lucian Freud has with his models can be inferred by the way they confront or evade Freud's gaze. In both *Flora with Blue toenails*, and *Naked portrait with reflections*, both figures avoid confronting Lucian Freud's gaze.



Yoosamu, *Flora with blue toe nails (after Lucian Freud)*, 2016    Lucian Freud, *Flora with blue toe nails*, 2001



In my remake paintings, my figures confront the viewer with their gaze. There is an exchange of gaze. The subject of the gaze in Freud's images becomes the gazer. Further, Lucian Freud's evidence of presence in original images were deleted in my remake. The large shadow cast by the painter himself in *Flora with Blue toenails* is erased. Erasing the presence of the hero painter was an integral part of the remake process. Once again, my attempt to facilitate the transfer of ownership is hard at work. Instead of emulating Freud's brushworks and application of pigment, I am purely interested in his image as a template. If anything, I'd like to think that I force-feed

his image through my lens of anime. Thus, in my work, remake is both an homage to a hero and an expression of assertion of power through rectification.



Yoosamu, *Naked portrait with reflection*, 2016



Lucian Freud, *Naked portrait with reflection*, 1980



Freud's feet are visible in the original image of *Naked portrait with reflections*. In the remake painting, his feet are replaced with the female anime character's boots. The presence of the painter is edited out. There is an ambiguity about whether the gazer depicted in the light box is in the same space with the figure or not. Just like Goya's *La maja vestida* and *La maja desnuda*,

Manet's *Olympia*, my anime figures stare back at you. By having the figure stare back at the viewer, the privileged gaze of the spectator is reciprocated. Thus, the figure is no longer playing a passive role in the painting.



*Mazinger Z* (anime series)



Sayaka piloting her robot

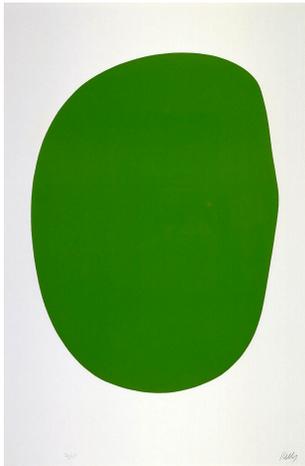
The particular character I chose to recast Freud's paintings with is Sayaka from *Mazinger Z*. Sayaka is a heroine of the film and pilots a giant robot to fight a horde of alien monsters. As I explained earlier in this paper, my intention for using a character from *Mazinger Z* is to comment on the inescapable influence of Japanese culture in post-colonial Korea. The use of Sayaka in my work reflects how I internalize the post-colonial influence as part of contemporary Korean identity. When I watched *Mazinger Z* as a kid, I knew Sayaka as Younghee a name given to this character by the Korean broadcasting regulatory committee as a part of cultural censorship. By claiming anime as part of my cultural identity and integrating the influence of former colonial culture, I am disempowering anime's cultural ties with Japan. By embracing anime as my visual

language, I acknowledge the impossibility of constructing one's identity without the influence of other cultures.

I would like to make a connection between this question with my earlier discussions in this paper. I discussed how Hollywood's infatuation with remake culture reveals the rise of American protectionism and unwillingness to accept foreign cultures. Despite its short history as a nation, the United States enjoys its rich cultural capital. The rich cultural capital and its economic wealth is what allows America to have a hegemonic voice. America's rich cultural capital comes from its diversity in cultures, races, and religions. The idea of protectionism, in a country built on the idea of diversity, will result in the attrition of its cultural capital in the global market.

Although my current body of work is quite figurative, I have a secret desire: I would like to create abstracted anime forms later on in my career. It is an idea I am still toying with. What would abstract anime forms look like? So I often enjoy looking at abstract paintings. Among them, I am especially drawn to Ellsworth Kelly's paintings. His images seem to be misinterpretation of Matisse's works. Through rigorous misinterpretation, Kelly mastered his own style. I love his compositions and color palette. His reductive abstraction gives his works strong presence. It might sound strange but I picked *Green White* because it is one of my favorite landscape paintings. I would like to believe that the color blocks in *Green White* were once green trees in snow field outside Kelly's studio window. The remake process affords me an artistic license to reimagine Kelly's image in different context. In the process of populating the snowy field with new visual elements, I chose Kenishiro, a main character from the *Fist of North star*.

Kenishiro is a desperado who travels in the post apocalyptic world to fight giant villains. He seemed like the perfect character to destabilize Ellsworth Kelly's iconic Green White. Perhaps Kenishiro represents my desire to challenge the giants in contemporary art.



Ellsworth Kelly, *Green White*, 1965    Kenishiro from *The Fist of North star*, animation film



Yoosamu, *Green White (after Ellsworth Kelly)*, 2016



Yoosamu, Blue Umbrella (After Alex Katz), 2016



Alex Katz, Blue Umbrella, 1979

My inspiration to create Unoriginal Original series came from my experience with Hollywood remakes. Thus, introducing cinematic close-up techniques and sequential convention to my painting series seemed like a logical choice. By employing cinematic compositional conventions in my interaction of Alex Katz's *Anika* and *Blue Umbrella*, I intend to amplify a sense of emotion and generate unspoken narrative. By emphasizing the gaze of the character in the sequential image, I eliminated the need to use light boxes for these small scale remake paintings. Having sequential images forces the viewers to imagine the in-between narrative and emotion.



Yoosamu, *Anika (After Alex Katz)*, 2016



Alex Katz, *Anika*, 2008



Yoosamu, Blue Umbrella (After Alex Katz), 2016



Alex Katz, Blue Umbrella, 1979



*A zoom shot from Kill Bill*



*A zoom shot from The Way of the Dragon*

### **On creating Yoosamu Guanyin and Watermoon shrine**

As mentioned in the introduction, I am interested in how the process of remake can function as a *patch* in updating the traditional objects. I would like to discuss my experience of creating a remake of a Buddhist sculpture in China and how I incorporated contemporary visual elements to reboot the traditional sculpture from its formal stasis.

Growing up in Korea as a Buddhist, I often wondered about the formal stasis of the Buddhist sculptures. The faces of Buddha sculptures seemed frozen in time. Buddhist sculptures always went through formal transformation until the late 1800s. Each dynasty has its own idealized face reflected on the Buddha sculptures. While the physical features of Buddha sculptures stayed rather constant, the facial features changed. With the introduction of industrialization and Western modernity, the transformation came to a halt. Looking at the frozen aesthetics of

Buddhist sculptures, I felt compelled to bring about updates in the traditional forms of Buddhist sculptures. The process of remake can facilitate an update in the frozen form.



A Buddhist temple in Korea

I researched the shifting tradition of Buddhist sculptures. Traditional Buddha sculptures represent a certain kind of idealized form, which embodies the idea of compassion in certain times of the past. While Buddha sculptures represent the idealized aesthetics of old Asia, Anime is an art form, which embodies the contemporary Asian visual elements. By infusing the anime aesthetic into the traditional Buddha sculpture form, my intention is to free the traditional Buddha sculpture from its formal stasis.

The migration of the Buddha sculpture tradition took place in medieval East Asia. During the migration, there was a progression of transformation in the Buddha sculpture that reflected the marriage between Buddhist culture and many local cultures. That transformation came to a halt in the roughly mid 1800s. That aesthetic has been frozen in time. By introducing new elements,

I'm rebooting the transformation. However, the visual language of anime, though it reflects contemporary ideals, distorts the Buddha in another way. Anime language may be more accessible, but it also promotes a certain type of idealized form. Weirdly proportioned body and facial features reveal our distorted perception of beauty in the era of internet and technology. Updating the visual form also draws attention to updated problems such as the idealized aesthetics of anime.



Transformation of Guanyin sculpture from India to various East Asian nations

### **Search for the answer, search for the master sculptor**

Jingdezhen is located in Jiangxi province, China. Jingdezhen artisans have been responsible for creating religious sculptures and ceramic goods for centuries. Considered as treasures by merchants from Europe and MiddleEast, Jingdezhen ceramic goods have been exported to many parts of the world since the medieval period. Aside from Jingdezhen's importance in the world of sculptures and ceramic, the history of Cultural Revolution also motivated me to conduct creative research in China.



Sculpture studio in Jingdezhen



Jingdezhen city

The Cultural Revolution in China banned the four olds: old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. From 1966 to 1976, production of traditional objects was banned.<sup>9</sup> I wanted to find out about the impact of such historical events on the practice of tradition. I became interested in how the traditional artists dealt with such a cultural prohibition. So I left for Jingdezhen in the Summer of 2015.



Destruction of old sculptures during the Cultural Revolution in China

During my stay in Jingdezhen for seven weeks, I conducted interviews with local artists who experienced the Cultural Revolution to find out the impact of the government ban on the old objects. Some of the questions I investigated included: What does it mean for a traditional practice to stop all of a sudden? Did the cultural revolution force the artists to stop entire practices of traditional art production? How did knowledge about the traditional methods survive the revolution? What I learned from interviews astounded me. They said, “Everyone was crazy. Since Chiang Kai-shek’s party took most of our national treasures when they escaped to Taiwan. People were just smashing Qing dynasty sculptures. Qing relics weren’t considered to be that valuable. There were so many then. Funny thing is that we continued making the traditional sculptures but we had to be inventive. In order to find a loophole, we introduced new patterns

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<sup>9</sup> Kieschnick, John. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 70-71.

either carved or painted on the traditional sculptures. The small tweak and introduction of new elements into the old form remade it and made it new in the eyes of the bureaucrats. Yes, we continued our production but had to transform things a bit.”



Artisan talks about her experience during the Culture Revolution  
Local translators accompanied me to various interviews

Aside from conducting research and interviews, I collaborated with a traditional master sculptor to create a Buddha sculpture with anime features. Finding the right sculptor was a difficult task. My role in the production was to provide artistic direction. Introducing a new element into a traditional form requires not only great technique but also a willingness to redefine what traditional sculpture can be. I looked for a master sculptor whose training comes from an old school tradition. I rejected all the artists who received Western sculpture training in colleges. After investigating the whole city for a week, I found Mr. He. Mr. He got his training through a traditional atelier, which can be traced back to many generations of notable master sculptors in China. He was intrigued by my idea of rebooting a transformation of tradition by injecting new visual language into old form and agreed to working for me. Mr. He was brilliant in creating traditional forms but had a difficult time with anime features. Thus, the process of injecting new

elements to the traditional sculpture involved numerous exchanges of conversations and negotiations.



Mr. He in his studio

Local artisans hired to create molds for the sculpture



Working on press-mold with a master artisan

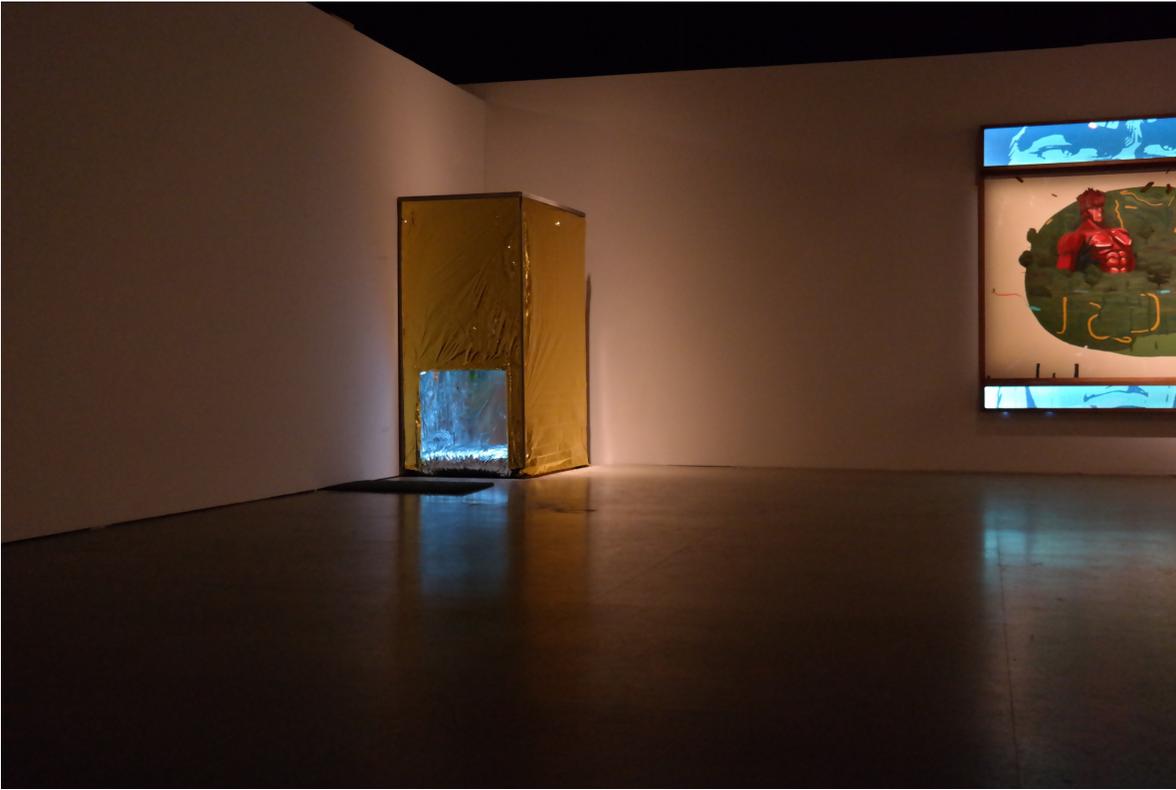


Mr. He, myself, Wangfei



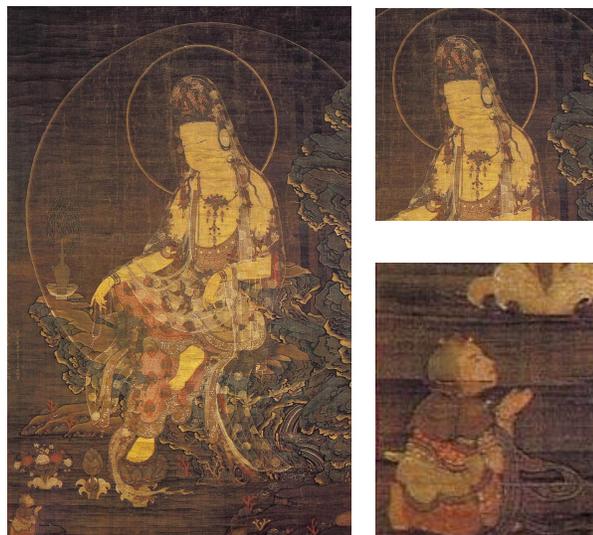
All the Buddhist sculptures are associated with certain dynasty in their names; Gandhara Guanyin, Koryo Guanyin, Ming dynasty Guanyin, Nara Guanyin and so one. It seemed fitting that I add my name to the tradition of Buddhist sculpture lineage since we no longer live in dynastic world. Thus my anime Guanyin is named Yoosamu Guanyin.

I plan to continue working on this project. Ultimately, I would like my sculptures to function in both contemporary art and religious context. If a sculpture is consecrated through a Buddhist ritual, then the sculpture becomes a religious object, while non-consecrated sculptures will function as contemporary art object in galleries and museums. After completing the Guanyin sculpture, I realized that a Buddhist statue requires a shrine to properly function. Thus, it became necessary to build a shrine. The idea of the shrine came from my previous immersive installation work titled *Mahadeva at a vanishing point*. It was a piece that discusses how tradition is an act of creating simulacra. In order to create visual images of infinite multiplicity, I used the infinite mirror idea. The *Watermoon* shrine utilizes similar structure, but is a more updated version. The *Watermoon* shrine is designed to allow the viewers to enter it in a kneeling position. Without kneeling or bowing down, one cannot enter this shrine. After all, this shrine is my endeavor in updating and redefining what the religious experience can become. Every religious context comes with an imposed etiquette and code of conduct. My shrine offers a religious experience in exchange for a gesture of humility. Some viewers told me that it was their first time to kneel before any object.



*Watermoon shrine* in the exhibition space, a viewer kneels inside the shrine for an immersive experience

Although the title of the show *Unoriginal Original* does not suggest it but I wanted my exhibition space to function as a kind of anime temple. My paintings are the thangkas that cover the walls of the religious space. The Guanyin sculpture activates the space as a place of religious beliefs. Guanyin greets the viewers as they enter the space. The gazes from both my light boxes and the characters on the canvases let the audience know that they are under observation. The exchange of gaze intensifies as the viewers enter the immersive shrine installation. As the viewer looks up in a kneeling position, Guanyin gazes into the viewer's eyes. The interaction between a kneeling devotee and Guanyin is similar to the depiction in a medieval Korean painting titled *Watermoon Guanyin* painting. The work depicts a scene where Guanyin interacts with a devotee.<sup>10</sup> Other interpretation explains this scene as Guanyin welcoming a newly arrived soul into the world of heaven. The exchange of gaze that takes place within the immersive installation can be read as a remake of the *Watermoon Guanyin* painting. Like the Zen philosophy says, it is the gaze that allows you to reflect on who you are.



Koryo Watermoon Guanyin painting, 14th century  
A devotee kneels before Guanyin

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<sup>10</sup> Chōng, Yang-mo, and Judith G. Smith. *Arts of Korea*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998. 453-56.



Watermoon shrine interior, a viewer kneels before a Guanyin sculpture inside the shrine



Kaleidoscopic video, constructed from nature scenes, plays in the background.  
The video functions as a live-Thangka

Exhibition space





## **PART VIII: Conclusion**

More than anything, project *Unoriginal Original* has allowed me to discover how misinterpretation can become a strength rather than a weakness. Misinterpretation, an inherent quality of remake process, allows me to distort the images of my precursors. Thus, the process of remake reflects my intention of destabilizing the hero-disciple relationships I have with my Western *hero* painters.

By remaking Western iconic paintings in my own anime aesthetics, I am asserting my power as a foreign artist. I am well aware that my remake process is essentially replicating how Hollywood remakes foreign films. Force-feeding the images of iconic Western paintings through the lens of anime, I am reversing the gaze. My intention is to reveal how the process of remake feels from my perspective as an Asian artist.

The process of remake will eventually allow me to subvert the hierarchy between the original and my remakes. Thus, I become more than a foreign painter in Western art context. I become a subversive force that questions the hegemonic dominance of Western art. My journey into the culture of remakes is still at its early stage, I do not have all the answers yet, but I am thrilled about what is to come.

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