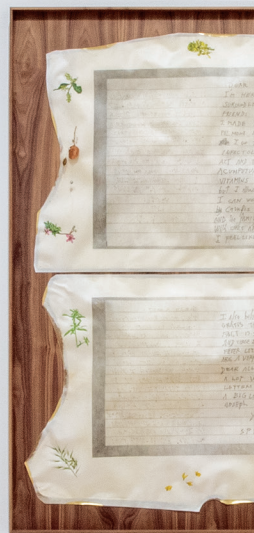


KANG SEUNG LEE





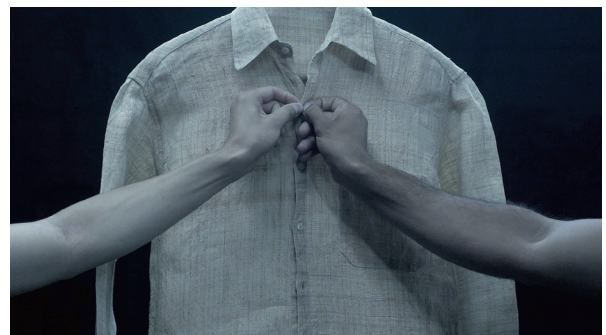


Portrait of **KANG SEUNG LEE**. Photo by Ruben Diaz. Courtesy the artist.

Friendship, kinship, community—how can these interpersonal connections be established and maintained across geographies and even across generations? The multiplicity of relationships that Kang Seung Lee forms through his artistic practice is both imaginary and real, as he recovers personal stories and transforms them into alternative histories of queer genealogies. Born in Seoul and now based in Los Angeles, Lee has formed a conversant network of artist-friends and mentors including artists such as Peter Hujar (1934–1987) and David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992), the late Hong Kong-born artist Tseng Kwong Chi (1950–1990), who captured himself in photographs at sites around the world wearing a *zhongshan* suit, and the first openly gay politician in the United States, Harvey Milk (1930–1978), who was assassinated in San Francisco.

As a nominee for the Korea Art Prize 2023 at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Seoul, Lee exhibited recent works such as the video *Lazarus* (2023), an homage to Singaporean choreographer Goh Choo San's dance *Unknown Territory* (1986) combined with the 1993 sculptural installation by Brazilian conceptual artist José Leonilson, and a short video, *Your Denim Shirt* (1998), by Chicano artist Samuel Rodríguez. Lee has also designed a font based on the hands in paintings by Chinese-American artist Martin Wong (1946–1999) in reference to the fingerspelling technique of American Sign Language, which recurs across his embroideries and drawings.

Lee's works are featured in the 60th Venice Biennale "Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere" where he is presenting a new body of work connecting the lives of artists from the 1980s and '90s who died of AIDS. In this interview, Kang reflects on figures and materials that he brings together in his practice.



KANG SEUNG LEE, *Lazarus*, 2023, stills from single-channel 4K video, color, sound: 7 min 52 sec. Courtesy the artist; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles/Mexico City; and Gallery Hyundai, Seoul.

Curator Adriano Pedrosa's concept for the 60th Venice Biennale explores migration between the Global North and South, and, more broadly, the conditions of "foreignness" or marginality. How do your works in the Biennale relate to these ideas?

I'm presenting a large-scale sculptural installation, about eight-by-three meters in size, and six wall works, *Untitled (Constellation)*, combining different projects that I've worked on over the past decade. Many of the artists who were part of my older series reappear in my graphite drawings on goatskin parchment and in watercolor, embroideries, and organic matter. They will be laid on a large platform facing different directions. There is no central narrative or person, so to me it appears like a constellation. The figures mainly consist of artists who died of AIDS in the 1980s and '90s. Although they come from all over the world and their lives are considered as separate histories, they come together in this work. This continues my exploration of kinship, intimacy, care, history, writing, and rewriting, as well as establishing intergenerational connections, transnational inheritance, and queer legacy.

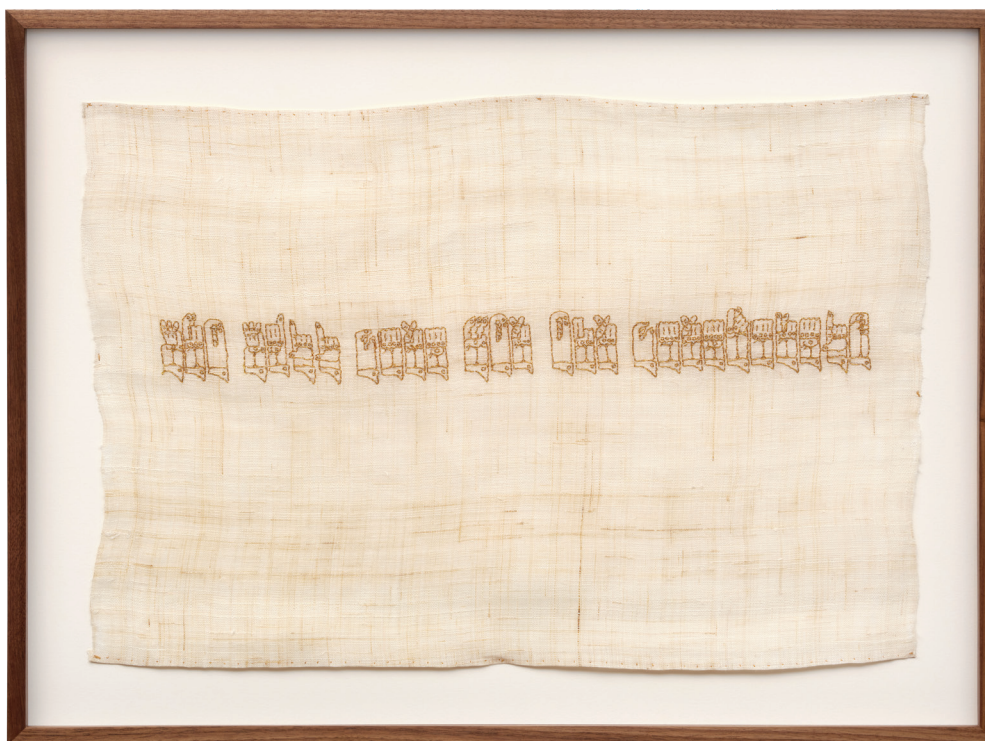
Adriano's idea of foreignness resonated with me, coming from Korea and living in the US, going back and forth, and also being queer. This framework makes me think about how, as I moved around, context changed my work. When my work is shown in Korea the conversation is more centered around my identity as a queer artist, as well as unknown or erased Korean queer histories. When I show my work in the US it is a bit more nuanced and complex because I'm also an Asian immigrant, making work about transnational queer histories and these in-between spaces. On the other hand, I am not a typical Asian American artist in that I have lived in many different places. I didn't come directly from Korea to the US, so I think of myself in a more intersectional area.

Regarding the conceptual framework of the Biennale, I think more about "foreignness" as an invitation to consider that we are all born as strangers or visitors not only to one place, but to the world, to this Earth. We are here temporarily. This connects to my project about Tseng Kwong Chi, whose photographs often featured him wearing a badge that labeled him a "visitor-visituer." Ultimately, no one really feels like they belong to one place.

For the Korea Art Prize 2023 you used the title phrase "Who Will Care for Our Caretakers," from poet Craig Harris about queer friends (and then explored by Pamela Sneed, in her poems) who died during the AIDS epidemic—but not in the form of a question. Do you think of your practice, in works such as the video *Lazarus*, about the Brazilian conceptual artist José Leonilson, or the two connected linen shirts, *Untitled (Lázaro, Jose Leonilson, 1993) (2023)*, as eulogies or as a potential answer to that question?

It's a suggestion; I'm not giving an answer. I was particularly interested in this idea of kinship and intimacy outside of the traditional family or community that takes the form of care. I'm also addressing intergenerational memories and the process of collective care as remembering, writing, or rewriting history.

The title also became an embroidery written in a font that I designed based on Martin Wong's paintings. Next to that were drawings [*Untitled (Harvey)* (2020–22)] of a little cactus, as well as an artwork by my friend Julie Tolentino called *Archive in Dirt*, which traces back to 1978 when Harvey Milk was assassinated. All of his belongings, including his plants, apparently went to his ex-boyfriend who he lived with. He started to give cuttings from that plant away to friends or friends in his queer community, and then those pieces were propagated and shared. Julie received a cutting in 2019 from a friend, and then I got a cutting from Julie. It's a succulent receiving water or care from people around it, so I began thinking about the attention given to the plant as a metaphor for the process of sharing, caring, and resilience.



KANG SEUNG LEE, *Who will care for our caretakers*, 2022, antique 24k gold thread on *sambe*, walnut frame, 48 × 67 × 6 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Hyundai, Seoul.

How do you assemble the historical artists and figures for a project? What is the level of permission that you give yourself to work with others' stories and artworks, and how do you think through those complexities?

There is always a process of research before making any artwork. It could be very long or relatively short, but the basic level is wanting to learn about them first, which usually leads to another desire, to share their work with people. During the research process, I often reach out to the estate, family members, or friends of these artists, and that leads to very long conversations. I try my best to establish trust and relationships with them. I'm only able to access their stories because of these relatives who cared about those who are no longer with us. I also like to keep them updated on what I'm doing.

The connections often occur very organically. In my 2018 project *Garden* I made connections between two artists, one from Korea, Oh Joon-soo, and Derek Jarman from the UK, who were both artists and activists in their lifetime. Obviously, one was a lot more well-known, while the other (although he was a great writer and artist) was known as an activist, especially in Korea. I'm bringing in these two individuals who did not know each other in their lifetime, but are connected through their activism and the people of the next generation—including myself. I find that connection very important.

In *The Heart of a Hand* (2023) project the central figure is Goh Choo San, a Singaporean-born choreographer and dancer, but I made many connections with people of his generation: writers and other queer artists, but also people of the previous generation, such as Xavier Villaurrutia (1903–50), a Mexican writer whose poem “Nocturne” I used as a text (written in the Martin Wong font that I designed) to create layers of stories. I believe that when you juxtapose these different histories or memories, images or books, there's always a new meaning created. It becomes a fascinating process of arrangement and rearrangement.

I'm interested in the incorporation of plants in your drawings from Elysian Park in Los Angeles. What do these natural elements contribute to this conversation for you?

I started incorporating seeds and plants when I was doing research for the *Garden* project around 2016, when I was invited to stay at Prospect Cottage. It was the home of director Derek Jarman and the invitation came from Derek's late partner, Keith Collins, who died in 2018. The flowers they sowed come back every year since they were first planted in the 1980s. I was very touched by this idea of regeneration, from the roots of plants 27 or 28 years later. I would call this a kind of “queer genealogy” because the care and the labor were given not just by Derek, but by many friends of theirs as well. So, I started looking at plants and flowers as witnesses to histories.

People often think of these artists who died, particularly of AIDS, as representing a collective failure, because we were not able to provide care to them or cure that disease. There was this collective guilt, which was exacerbated by not writing those histories properly, so their stories were largely erased. But in some ways I think those memories have been recorded through other beings and plants. The stories are there, and there's a possibility to talk about them now by bringing these objects and organic materials into the project.

Like many other areas, Elysian Park has become a beautiful place, used by many families, like Tapgol Park or Namsan Park in Seoul, but they are also cruising areas with long histories. I would like to talk about those unknown visitors, too—not only the artists that are the primary subjects of my works—but all those whose lives have not been recorded.

Your recent works use goat skin parchment, linen, and gold thread embroidery. Why did you begin using embroidery in your works and what does it bring to your work—especially the antique 24-karat gold thread and parchment?

Embroidery is a very slow process of drawing as well. It is a different way of making drawings or images. But of course, it comes with the connotations of craft, and the materials I use are carefully chosen. I use *sambe*, which is Korean traditional hemp fabric that is used for shrouds. The vintage gold thread that I use, called *nishijin*, was produced around 1910. It's a very old, precious material that has a longer history than one human life cycle. We have a tendency to think of everything from the perspective of our own life, but a lot of the time things happen at a much slower pace. Embroidery, when I think about the labor involved, is like a long process of embodiment of images or texts.



KANG SEUNG LEE, *Untitled (Tseng Kwong Chi, New York 3, New York, 1979)*, 2019, graphite on paper, 20.3 × 20.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles/Mexico City.



KANG SEUNG LEE, *Untitled (Chairs)*, 2023, graphite, antique 24K gold thread, *sambe*, pearls, 24K gold leaf, sealing wax, brass nails on goatskin parchment, 68.5×67.3 cm; 67.3×59.6 cm; 68×67.3 cm; 71×64.7 cm. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles/Mexico City.



Installation view of **KANG SEUNG LEE's** *QueerArch*, 2021, wallpaper installation, archival materials from the Korea Queer Archive, dimensions variable, at "Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning," 13th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, 2021. Courtesy the artist, Gwangju Biennale, and Gallery Hyundai, Seoul.

I'm also interested in how people tend to differentiate the conceptual from the processes of craft. We always tend to think that ideas come first and then we figure out how to execute the idea. But what I think craft provides is a space for thinking, because you are doing something very repetitive. This also provides space for something conceptual.

Similarly, when I'm using goat skin parchment, what I'm interested in is life and death, as one goat skin is one life. There's a different feeling of the life they lived in that skin. Making parchment paper also has a very long history—it is one of the oldest materials that human beings used to record events, and it required that a life be taken. So, it was always a very precious and difficult material to use. It's not like paper. Doing a watercolor or a drawing on it takes a lot longer.

When you work with photographs, as in *The Heart of a Hand* or the *Untitled (Tseng Kwong Chi)* series (2019–20), you erase, or efface, the figures. What kind of pathos or intimacy does drawing have for you as a medium of translation? Can you talk about why these figures disappear and which parts remain?

Translation is never one-to-one; there's always something lost or gained. My work is not about exactly what happened, but rather about how it is remembered. What's more important for me is the feeling of absence and presence at the same time. It's the residue of something or someone that we know was there—that has disappeared or is disappearing. That feeling or affect is what is important for me to communicate with the erased figures. What I do very carefully is to describe the background, so when the human figures are erased everything else in the picture is quite well executed.

The scale changes a lot. I rarely make an image that is the same size as the original. Bigger images become very tiny drawings or really tiny images become large. Many of my drawings are smaller than eight-by-eight inches, so in the process I create an intimate relationship between my body and the image. Or I make very large drawings, so that I have bodily gestures in the making of the work. That creates a different connection between the viewer and the image.

How and when did you first become interested in creating queer histories? How do you think your practice or approach has evolved over the last decade? And what do you feel is urgent for your practice today?

It really goes back to my childhood. Growing up in Korea as a queer kid was difficult. I didn't have access to the people who came before me. There were no role models—not because there weren't any queer elders, but because I did not know about them. So, I had this strong desire of creating my own lineage through a learning process, of making a narrative for the next generation. I also realized through moving around a lot, as an outsider, that some histories are valued a lot more than others.

My older project *Untitled (Artspeak?)* (2014–15) is very much connected to my current works as well—though it was much more intentionally didactic. I wanted to make a commentary on an official art history textbook used in many high schools. I attended an American private art school, which is advertised as international, but is extremely Eurocentric and American-centric. That somehow also led to my other projects about history and memory, collective history and community history. I felt like I had to work with the people from my community in order to tell those stories, which is very similar to what I'm doing these days as well.

With the *Queer Arch* project, which you showed at the 2021 Gwangju Biennale and earlier in Seoul, what kind of reception has that had in Korea and elsewhere?

That collaboration started in 2018, as I was doing research at their archives since 2015. It's an archive that's open to the public, but mostly for writers and researchers. As I was doing my research I felt this strong desire to share those materials with a larger audience. I realized that events or exhibitions were a really good way of thinking about it. Academic research usually takes a long time—it takes years to write a book—whereas an exhibition can be made much more quickly. So I did an exhibition, also titled “QueerArch,” in 2019. We moved about two-thirds of the material to this storefront artist-run space, Hapjungjigu, in Seoul. I did collaborations with a younger group of queer artists, and they all made new works after their research at the archive, paying homage to the materials, the histories, and the people who came before us. It also gave us this possibility of bringing that history to the present, thereby making something for the future as well.



JULIE TOLENTINO, *Archive in Dirt*, 2019–, living cactus propagated from “mother” cactus originally belonging to Harvey Milk (1930–1970), soil, pebbles. Ceramic pot and saucer (made of California clay mixed with soils from Derek Jarman’s Garden, Tapgol Park, and Namsan Park in Seoul), laser engraved walnut plinth, by **KANG SEUNG LEE**. Ceramic pot: 22 × 18 × 20 cm. Walnut plinth: 38 × 38 × 91 cm. Installation dimensions variable. Photo by Paul Salveson. Courtesy the artist; Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles/Mexico City; and Gallery Hyundai, Seoul.