

POWER INTERVIEW

Commonwealth and Council

“The Delightful Rebellion of the Underdog”

Commonwealth and Council, a cradle of ‘identity art,’ was founded in Los Angeles in 2010 by Young Chung. Later, Kibum Kim joined as co-director, and in 2022, they expanded their presence by opening a branch in Mexico City. Over the past 14 years, they have made a significant impact on the global art scene with provocative exhibitions centered on themes of queerness, race, and diaspora. They aspire to create a ‘Budae-jjigae’ style of art, where diverse ingredients come together to form a new and unique flavor.

By Cho Jae-yeon





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ART Commonwealth and Council is known for its distinct identity. Could you share your management philosophy? What is the most important mission of the gallery?

CC As with most galleries, we are committed to envisioning and stewarding long-term careers for our artists. We think one aspect that has been paramount for the gallery’s mission has been an emphasis on the collective, stemming from the belief that we can grow more meaningfully and sustain success together as a community. The artworld can privilege the individual, anointing a few as stars, who get all the attention and accolades; but often that kind of success can be fleeting, liable to trend cycles. Of course, we work with certain artists who garner more attention than others at a given moment, but overall we try to foster a community in which the artists are excited to show alongside one another, share their resources and networks and know-hows, and the overall context that we build as a gallery program stands for something that hopefully makes for a sum that is greater than its parts.

ART In an interview with The New York Times this year, you described Los Angeles as “a site of creative production, particularly for people of color.” What does this mean?

CC We’re in Los Angeles, a vibrant, cacophonous, pungent city with a lot of space and great light. The city is comprised largely of immigrants (including of course the largest diasporic Korean population in the world!) who brought their cultural histories and knowledge. LA’s secret sauce is what makes Budae-jjigae so good: it’s a melange of myriad elements that at first may not seem to make sense together but stewed together it’s magic!

ART I’m also curious about the atmosphere in Mexico City, where you recently opened a gallery. Why did you decide to

open a gallery in Mexico City?

CC With a program rooted in Los Angeles, we work with many Latinx / Latin American artists. With Mexico City being such an exciting creative scene and as a hub for the Latin American art world, we wanted to engage more directly with the curators, artists, and collectors in Mexico City. In my opinion, Mexico City is also the most chic city in the world right now—some of the most innovative food, architecture, music, fashion, and of course art is coming out of Mexico City.

ART Commonwealth and Council emphasizes the ‘minority’ identity of its artists. What are the commonalities in the artistic worlds pursued by Commonwealth and Council artists?

CC Social issues are important to many of our artists’ practices, but we would say our artists are not necessarily interested in identity politics per se. Their lived experiences of course inform their work. The thread that runs through the program is rigorous experimentation and curiosity, asking questions from both formal and conceptual perspectives. As an example, the artist rafa esparza works with adobe, building material made with dirt, water, hay, and horse dung used by indigenous people of the Americas for centuries, based on a recipe he learned from his father, who came to LA from Mexico. rafa esparza makes new forms of art experiences by bringing adobe into art galleries; sometimes bringing this material into a museum space itself becomes institutional critique, making a Brown space in the white cube, bringing LA dirt into these spaces. rafa esparza has become very fluent with the material and now he makes panels which become the support on which he paints. He is thus painting on land; starting automatically with a landscape of sorts which the artist considers as a metaphor for Brown bodies. The work has many meanings before he applies his first stroke of paint.

I could go on, but similarly many of our artists think deeply about the processes and materials they use and how the subjects and content of their works relate to the formal methods. And we all learn along the way of showing, contextualizing, and finding homes for their works.

ART Given the gallery’s distinct identity, the relationship between the gallery and its artists must be unique. What does the Commonwealth and Council expect from its artists?

CC This is a question that merits its own book-length discussion! The most important aspect we would say is trust and that commitment to the collective mentioned earlier. Sometimes maybe it makes things more complicated, but we are friends with the artists as well as professional partners. It feels important to us to acknowledge and care for each other as people. It allows us hopefully to have more candid conversations that are generative for artmaking as well. It can be a vulnerable process, making art. And trust in the people who represent your work to the wider artworld is critically important.

ART What do you think are the current trends in the contemporary art market?

CC We are a tad wary of the word “trends!” Artists’ careers do not (or I should say, should not) develop in the trajectory of a hyped sneaker or an it bag; we hope for longevity where artists can continue to develop their practices and work on more rigorous projects and show their work decades from now. To the extent that a more expansive view of contemporary art and art history that includes previously marginalized artists is part of the zeitgeist now, we hope we are contributing to the conversation with artists who bring new aesthetic inquiries to the artworld. We are very bad at predicting trends, but what we hope we

will see more of and find more support from the artworld are art mediums beyond painting like photography and video garnering more attention. With the rapidly changing technological landscape, particularly with AI, questions about imagemaking are taking on interesting dimensions in photography and video.

ART What do you think is the charm of the Korean art scene?

CC We are biased of course, but for a “new” art capital that has garnered the international artworld’s attention in the past few years, Korea presents a sophisticated art scene that has developed domestically for decades with great museums, artist communities, schools, and collections. What to us sets the Korean art scene apart is ‘Jeong.’ Our colleagues often comment on how warm and hospitable the folks they meet in Korea are. Personal kindness makes all the difference.

ART Are there any Korean (or Korean-American) artists you have recently taken an interest in, aside from those currently represented with your gallery?

CC We are friends with and very proud of Mire Lee with all her accomplishments. She’s not making easy, pretty art. Her work is visceral, abject; and it asks important timely questions about body politics in our tech-ruled age. We have done exhibitions with and admire the works of Haneyl Choi and Oh Inwhan, both making fearless queer art along starkly different vectors. We think Kim Heecheon has developed a singular voice in video art that feels reflective of Korea’s rapid digitalization in the past few decades. Hanna Hur, based here in LA, makes beguiling elegant canvases with real rigor.

ART Could you please introduce the participating artists and the works that will be presented at Frieze Seoul this year?

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p.37 Kibum Kim and Young Chung. Photo: David Alekhuogie

p.38 Lecia Dole-Recio, *Untitled (pink and purple curves in floor paper)*, 2022, Acrylic, gouache, oak gall ink, cochineal ink, walnut ink, graphite, paper, cardboard, glue, 175×128×1cm. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council.

rafa esparza, *vuela vuela*, 2021, Acrylic on adobe, Approx. 8×208×703cm; installation dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council. Photo: Ruben Diaz

Exhibition view of *La vida secreta de las piedras* at Commonwealth and Council, Mexico City, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, Mexico City.



This year, we had five in the Whitney Biennial. It has been and continues to be a wild, unpredictable journey. Of course, we have had many disappointments along the way too. We try to remember to be present for it all and appreciate all the fun as well as the failures.

CC We will be showing works by Gala Porras-Kim and Kang Seung Lee alongside works by newer artists in our program Lotus L. Kang and Jesse Chun. This year’s booth has a connecting thread of cultural memory, from Lotus’s investigations of ineffable inheritances to Jesse’s inquiries into language(s), including spiritual shamanic communications to Gala’s works about cultural heritage and Kang’s works about queer artist ancestors. Our artist Harold Mendez will also be participating in a group show being curated by Christopher Lew, Cole Akers, and Jee Young Maeng for Lifeplus’s new art space.

ART What motivated you to start your art career and open Commonwealth and Council?

CC I was an artist in LA for a long time and organized a few shows for friends’ spaces. Opening Commonwealth and Council was a bit of a whim as Gala came back from the Skowhegan residency and asked to stay with me for a few weeks before she moved back into her apartment. We decided to treat it as a residency and put on a show. We cleared out my living room and Gala learned HTML to make a website. After the opening we made a drunk promise to do five solo shows at Commonwealth and Council (fulfilled in 2019), and we are still going. I met Kibum when he moved to Los Angeles from New York in 2016 and opened a project space nearby, showing artists like David Alekhuogie and Oren Pinhassi whom we represent now at Commonwealth and Council and Christina Quarles for her first solo show. Around that time, some of the artists we have been working with for many years were getting approached by commercial galleries and they staged an intervention with me, asking Commonwealth and Council to represent them. It started out as a joke, but Kibum joined soon after and we began participating in art fairs and cultivating a collector base.

Art Basel Hong Kong in 2018 with Gala was our first art fair.

ART Could you share the most memorable moment for each of you as gallerists?

CC When Gala was selected to participate in the Whitney Biennial in 2019, we remember riding a taxi to the opening. Kibum asked Young, “when you opened the gallery at your apartment in 2010, did you ever imagine you would be going to the Whitney Biennial as her gallerist?” Young thought for a second and said no. We still were not able to pay ourselves running the gallery, and it felt like such a big moment. By the time the next Whitney Biennial rolled around in 2022, we had four artists, which also felt like a once-in-a-lifetime moment but almost killed us in trying to support our artists’ projects. This year, we had five in the Whitney Biennial. It has been and continues to be a wild, unpredictable journey. Of course, we have had many disappointments along the way too. We try to remember to be present for it all and appreciate all the fun as well as the failures.

ART What does art mean to you? What has been the driving force that has kept you involved in the art scene for such a long time?

CC Art ultimately is a shared conversation that allows us to engage in a lifelong journey of questioning, learning, creating. For better or worse, there is never a dull moment!

ART You have already achieved a lot, but what is your ultimate goal in life that you still long for?

CC We would love for Commonwealth and Council to be its own communal entity with a value DNA that can continue on long after we as individuals are gone.