

The World of Gala Porras-Kim, Artist Picked by the Artist of the Year Award and the Leeum Museum

“Utilizing the Chaekgeori as a format.” What Gala Porras-Kim explores while traversing such cosmic space-time.

By Ahn Dong-seon



<530 National Treasures> (2023) visible behind the posing Gala Porras-Kim. Colored pencils and flash paint on paper, 4 panels, 181 x 300 cm each.

I stand in front of **530 National Treasures**, a drawing by Colombian-Korean artist Gala Porras-Kim composed of four panels measuring 300m wide and 180m high. I have just reached the final exhibition room after descending the rotunda from the top floor of the Leeum Museum of Art M1—where architect Mario Botta constructed terracotta bricks to represent Korean ceramics—viewing Goryeo celadon, Joseon white porcelain, and calligraphy in that order. A solo exhibition titled **National Treasures**, featuring three new works by Gala Porras-Kim, recently opened here and will continue until next spring. **530 National Treasures** is a new addition to Gala Porras-Kim's core series, which 'indexes' the interpretation and classification of historical artifacts. With the lists of national treasures from South and North Korea displayed on my phone screen, I scanned the artwork from the top left, which depicts the items alternately in the order of their listing. South Korea's National Treasure No. 1, Sungnyemun Gate; North Korea's

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National Historic Site No. 1, Pyongyang Fortress; South Korea's National Treasure No. 2, the Ten-Story Stone Pagoda at the Site of Wongaksa Temple; North Korea's National Historic Site No. 2, the Site of Anhak Palace... The origins of the current national treasures of South and North Korea can be traced back to the list of treasures of Joseon designated by Imperial Japan in 1933. Therefore, most of the artifacts depicted in the painting were the cultural heritage of a single nation called Joseon until the division of Korea. However, after liberation, that list was split into two. By reuniting the lists, *530 National Treasures* reminds us that various entities have managed cultural heritage according to their own needs, revealing the special context that the modern history of colonialism and division has imposed on our cultural heritage.

Gala Porras-Kim stated that she had hoped to realize this idea as a work of art for several years. "I became interested in 'National Treasures' in 2015 and read a lot of material on the subject. I also learned about the history of National Treasures, and questions arose in my mind regarding the significance of designating them in a situation where the nation is constantly changing, and on what criteria the judgment that a specific artifact is important enough to be designated as a National Treasure is based." Embodying these thoughts, the artist presented *National Treasure* (2015)—which could be considered the predecessor to *530 National Treasures*—at the exhibition *Art and the Measure of Liberty* held in New York in 2016 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the United Nations. "At the time, I was not in a position to produce it as a drawing, so I joined together pages from a notebook for nearly 4 meters and handwritten the National Treasures of both North and South Korea to create it in the form of a scroll." Later, finding time to work during the COVID-19 pandemic, I began creating *530 National Treasures*. It was presented at the invitation of the Leeum Museum, which houses numerous national treasures and has functioned as a venue where ancient and contemporary art coexist and constantly redefine their relationships. As you examine *530 National Treasures* from top to bottom, you can observe the changing types of artifacts. Architectural structures are numerous at the top, followed by ceramics below, and then documents. There are also empty spaces here and there, which are the spots for artifacts that were once national treasures but were de-designated for various reasons. "You might even hear the sigh of an artifact saying, 'I guess I'm no longer needed.'" (Laughs) Through *530 National Treasures*, you can see that people of different eras with different tastes decided on national treasures based on criteria that were important to them. It clearly reveals the fragility of man-made structures and systems." Furthermore, the text "Institute for Peace Studies" spanning several screens utilizes a photo from a database containing hard-to-find information on North Korea, faithfully reproducing even the watermark; this reveals Gala Porras-Kim's sense of humor, which is highly scholarly yet full of playfulness in her eyes.



Although Gala Porras-Kim presents only three works in "National Treasures," the exhibition leaves no room for disappointment as it demonstrates the multi-layered relationships surrounding artifacts—such as how the museum functions and the socio-cultural implications that arise—by displaying them alongside the Leeum Museum of Art's ancient art collection. In particular, a paradoxical intrigue arose as I gazed at the National Treasure **Painting of the Triad of Amitabha Buddha** placed side-by-side with Gala Porras-Kim's **37 Korean Artifacts Taken Abroad During the Japanese Colonial Period**, which depicts 37 Korean artifacts that were exported abroad through various channels during or prior to the Japanese

colonial period. This Goryeo Buddhist painting, which portrays the scene of Amitabha Buddha descending at the moment of death with extreme delicacy and beauty, touches upon a sensitive issue as it is a work that Samsung founder Lee Byung-chul painstakingly brought back from Japan. “I created this work because I was interested in the legal loopholes that allow artifacts to be moved from one place to another. Every art museum addresses such sensitive issues with different themes, but these are often inherited from previous generations rather than our own. Therefore, I want to continue examining how institutions handle and compromise on this issue.”

Gala Porras-Kim’s representative works and new pieces can currently be found in the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art’s “Artist of the Year 2023,” and among them, *303 Sacrifices for Rain in the Peabody Museum* (2021), composed of index drawings, installations, and prints of emails sent to the director of the Peabody Museum in the United States, is no exception. Gala Porras-Kim examines artifacts excavated and moved from a natural cave known as the “Sacred Cenote” at Chichen Itza, an ancient Mayan city ruin in central Mexico, and contemplates the historical and legal ownership surrounding these artifacts. In the early 20th century, approximately 30,000 artifacts and remains that would have been submerged beneath the waters of a cenote were transferred to the Peabody Museum; in the process, they were separated from their original owner, the rain god Chaac, and placed in the dry environment of the museum. In an email sent to Jane Pickering, the director of the Peabody Museum, the artist argues, “Museums must preserve not merely the physical form of artifacts, but also their immaterial, spiritual, and ritualistic functions.” I have broadly interpreted Gala Porras-Kim’s activities—which question the point where cultural heritage loses its original function and meaning according to modern classification systems—as an act of advocating for and opposing spiritual values that are not protected today. “I simply believe that the ancient people who created those artifacts held eternal faith regarding votive offerings. I do not believe in their spiritual beliefs, but I think this is directly related to the question of how our current beliefs will be treated in the future. Many institutions view only a single historical version when preserving and managing artifacts. What I believe is that there must be a way for the various interests and different functions associated with each artifact to coexist. That is why I have been able to continue this work. In fact, I sent a few ideas regarding this to the Peabody Museum.” Marking its 10th anniversary this year, the “Artist of the Year 2023” has changed its format to introduce the entire artistic world of the four selected artists through their new and major older works; accordingly, Gala Porras-Kim presented her new work, *The Weight of Antique Colors Left by Time*. The new work is a triptych depicting three perspectives on viewing dolmens, created based on research conducted at the dolmen site in Gochang, Jeonbuk. “The first panel of the triptych depicts a landscape viewed from the perspective of a person already deceased and buried in a dolmen; the second shows the situation of the dolmen as a UNESCO cultural heritage site classified as a historical park; and the final panel, a drawing of moss, views the dolmen from the perspective of nature, detached from humans and history. I am also very interested in the infrastructure of ancient societies, and what makes dolmens particularly interesting is that naturally formed rocks—that is, ‘found objects’—became spiritual markers through their rearrangement. However, currently, they have lost their ritualistic significance as historical heritage due to UNESCO.”



View of the "Artist of the Year Award 2023" exhibition. <The Weight of Antique Colors Left by Time> (2023) is positioned in the center. Encaustic painting, graphite and colored pencils on paper, 228.6 x 182.8 cm.

Has about 40 minutes passed since the interview began? It feels as though we haven't even covered half of Gala Porras-Kim's artistic world, yet sitting across from each other, we find ourselves wandering through vast stretches of time and space, from the Mayan civilization of Mexico to the Bronze Age of the Korean Peninsula. It struck me anew that Gala Porras-Kim's works are predicated on a process of professional exploration regarding the vast history of artifacts, behind-the-scenes stories of excavation, and the altered functions of those relics. "Fortunately, I really enjoy researching. However, it is not the typical type of research. While there are existing historical methodologies that follow specific rules, my approach to archives is akin to a game; it starts like a game and gradually becomes serious." Gala Porras-Kim, who says she "loves research," was born to a Korean mother who studies Mexican colonial literature and a Colombian historian father. When she was in her early teens, her father sought political asylum in the United States, and she subsequently grew up in Los Angeles. Currently, she is active internationally, traveling between LA and London. Wouldn't the scholarly style that permeates the vocabulary, process, and form of her work be inextricably linked to the environment in which she grew up? "In Colombia, if a church was built during the Spanish colonial era (16th–19th centuries), it is bound to keep archives where the Spaniards recorded their history of the colony. When I was young, I used to visit there with my father

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and examine the archives. My father would suggest games—finding all kinds of food or animals in the archives, or guessing how many dogs appeared—offering the reward of choosing the ice cream flavor for the day. In a way, I feel like I am doing something similar to that time now. At the same time, it seems I have acquired more tools for research. Perhaps I am carrying on a kind of family business, but since I don't particularly enjoy writing like my parents did, it will be difficult for my research to be published as a book (laughs)."

I understood that Gala Porras-Kim creates works using methodologies almost identical to those of a scholar, but produces different results because she is an artist. It seemed likely that there was an aesthetic attitude or style she maintained in this regard. "The most important thing is my hope that more people can access my work more easily. It is true that conceptual works are difficult for people without a background in art to understand, and I have witnessed my mom or her friends react many times by saying, 'What on earth is this? I don't understand it.' (Laughs) So, I hope that a more diverse audience will take the time to look at my work and understand the various layers inherent beneath the surface. The reason I insist on the medium of drawing is also because I feel that drawing might draw out that kind of interest or understanding more easily." Come to think of it, the artist repeatedly emphasized that the works, created with colored pencils and flash paint on paper, are "drawings" rather than "paintings." "Because I am a lazy person, I prefer to spend my time working on projects related to things I want to study. It takes a very long time to complete a drawing. That is why I believe I can understand each artifact one by one while working. Through the process of drawing, I have learned about many artifacts I am interested in, including the 530 National Treasures of North and South Korea. Since it would be difficult to set aside time to study them individually, art work serves as a good alternative. And above all, anyone can draw. I also like the fact that it is a medium that everyone actually uses in their daily lives."

Ahn Dong-sun is a contributing editor. To appreciate "National Treasures" more fully, I recommend checking out artist Kang Seo-kyung's exhibited work <Mountain>, part of the collection "Willow Drum Oriole," installed on the wall along the path from the lobby of the Leeum Museum of Art to M1, and savoring the distant connection of time drawn from tradition by the two artists.