

Jongwook Park: Breathing Words | 날숨

By Adam Lauder

Breathing Words | 날숨
Jongwook Park
September 5 - October 31, 2024



Top: Jongwook Park. *Talisman*. Pen and Ink Drawing. 61x45.7.”

Bottom: Jongwook Park. *Breathing Words | 날숨* Installation . Photo by Derick M. Darby.

Jongwook Park invites viewers into a magical world of personal imagery with deep cultural roots. His unique vision is inspired by his diasporic experience. After relocating to Montreal from Seoul, Park grappled with acquiring fluency in both English and French in his thirties. Language barriers presented an acute challenge for this artist so deeply committed to communicating with his audience. Giving free rein to his imagination to improvise the richly patterned forms and otherworldly creatures that populate his drawings and ceramics, Park yearns for “representation to revive the communication I long for.”¹

This dedicated exploration of communication is evident in the stylized Hangul characters of the Korean alphabet animating the surfaces of Park’s work. Trees and creatures alike spout cryptic speech bubbles packed with Korean script. What do these nonhuman beings “say”? “The letters are just listed, not in order,” Park clarifies. “It’s an aesthetic view of the letter.”² He likens this liberation of Hangul from the linear constraints of conventional meaning-making to an amplification of the musical qualities of language. The multisensorial potentiality of Park’s nonrational use of script suggests comparisons with the linguistic experiments of conceptual artists such as Gu Wenda (b. 1955), whose creation of an “unreadable language” mobilized traditions of Chinese calligraphy while enacting a knowing distortion of established characters.³ Similarly, Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991) consists of four books printed from more than a thousand characters that are,

as Curtis L. Carter writes, “unreadable to those who understand Chinese despite their likeness to traditional Chinese characters.”⁴ In contrast to the logico-empirical propositions of Western conceptualists like Joseph Kosuth, the effect of these language games is an invitation to explore the material and associative properties of writing.

Park has eloquently described his own dispersal of characters as materializing the “migration patterns” of diasporic subjectivity. While his Hangul speech bubbles reference the visual conventions of contemporary graphic novels and Japanese manga, Park also plumbs deeper histories of visual culture. The bold outlines and flattened forms of his drawings are a nod to *minhwa*, a ubiquitous genre of Korean folk painting. Despite its pervasiveness, however, it was only after moving to Montreal that Park began to engage with *minhwa* as a subject for artistic investigation. On one hand, a genre of *minhwa* known as *munjado* (“flower writing”), in which Chinese ideographs are stylized into plants and animals, has been influential on Park’s transformative interpretations of Hangul. On the other hand, the fantastical ensemble of tigers, magpies and anthropomorphic pine trees inhabiting his scroll-like drawings allude to the figurative content of traditional *minhwa*. These motifs carry political meanings that magnify the populist valence of *minhwa* as an art form crafted by anonymous artisans.⁵ This art created by and for ordinary people carries subversive undercurrents that likewise resound in the ceramic traditions mined by Park’s sculptures.



Jongwook Park. *Breathing Words | 날숨* Installation. Photo by Derick M. Darby.



Jongwook Park. *Breathing Words | 날숨. Untitled. Ceramics. Photo by Paul Litherland.*

The sinuous forms of Park's black-and-white ceramic works recall the bulbous volumes and minimal palette of Korean *buncheong*, a type of stoneware distinguished more by its unassuming beauty than a particular technique. Still practiced today, *buncheong* arose in response to disruptions to Korea's renowned celadon pottery workshops wrought by Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century. In distinction to the elegant greenware that preceded it, whose gem-like finish drew comparisons to jade, *buncheong*'s defining feature is its modest white slip, which can be decorated through techniques of carving or stamping.⁶ Commissioned by ordinary people and manufactured by independent potteries, *buncheong* offers a countermodel to the top-down, state-controlled idea of art communicated by the high polish of celadon. Park summons these historic vernaculars to voice his own experience of migration in the present tense.

While consciously intervening within tradition, Park's use of the sgraffito technique to engrave the surfaces of his ceramics with pulsing patterns and scattered letterforms is always guided by intuition. Like the suite of milled wooden sculptures specially created for the Forest City Gallery presentation of *Breathing Words* | 날숨, and the complex shadows they cast on the gallery floor, Park's ceramics are an oblique evocation of Hangul characters—but equally conjure animate forms. This shape-shifting morphology parallels the shamanic associations of certain figures populating Park's drawings—some crowned by antlers—as well as the hybridity of 7

ambient animal, vegetal and letterform entities. References to indigenous religious practices predating the arrival of Buddhism and Christianity to the Korean peninsula are a widespread feature of contemporary South Korean visual cultures. Park's allusions to such imagery is part and parcel of his *minhwa*-inflected conception of art's talismanic function. His art protects the freedom to re-signify in inherited forms.

Endnotes

1 Park quoted in Foteini Chatzoudi, "Jongwook Park shares his thoughts on integrating Hangeul into his art," *Honorary Reporters*, May 29, 2024, https://honoraryreporters.korea.net/board/detail.do?articlecate=1&board_no=20387&tpln=1.

2 Conversation with the author, August 5, 2024.

3 Steven Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 308. See also Gao, Minglu. "Conceptual Art with Anticonceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 127–138.

4 Curtis L. Carter, "Conceptual Art East and West: A Base for Global Art or the End of Art?" in *Aesthetics and Culture: East and West*, eds. Gao Jingping and Wang Keping (Hefei Shi: Anhui Education Publishing House 2006), 554.

5 See "Minhwa," Wikipedia, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minhwa>.

6 See Mark Cartwright, "Korean Pottery," *World History Encyclopedia*, 2016, https://www.worldhistory.org/Korean_Pottery/.

Bios & Acknowledgements

Jongwook Park Jongwook Park, an artist who moved to Canada from South Korea, earned an MFA in Communication Design from Sangmyung University in Seoul and a diploma in Animation Art and Design from LaSalle College in Montreal. Park utilizes his continuous exploration of his cultural background to connect his immigrant journey, utilizing drawings as a thinking hat. His challenges with acquiring new languages as an adult immigrant have led him to reflect on the impact of language on personal identity.

Park's work has been showcased in various exhibitions and publications across Japan, South Korea, Finland, Canada, and the United States. Most recently, he has had two solo exhibitions in Ottawa at the Ottawa School of Arts and the Korean Cultural Centre. He is set to hold consecutive solo shows at Maison de la Culture Maisonneuve in Montreal and Eastern Edge Gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland Labrador, until 2026.

Adam Lauder Adam Lauder graduated with a Ph.D. from the Department of History of Art at the University of Toronto in 2016. Lauder was co-curator with Mark P. Hayward of Computational Arts in Canada 1967-1974 (2020) at Western University's McIntosh Gallery, and has contributed articles to scholarly journals including *Afterimage*, *American Indian Quarterly*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *PUBLIC*, and *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, as well as features and shorter texts to magazines including *Border Crossings*, *C*,

Canadian Art, e-flux, esse, and Flash Art. In 2017-2019, Lauder was SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow at York University, and is currently an adjunct professor at OCAD University.



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To acknowledge this traditional territory is to recognize its longer history, one predating the establishment of the earliest European colonies. We also acknowledge the colonial frameworks within which Forest City Gallery operates and the need to identify and remove barriers on an ongoing basis.

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