

The Trace That Lingers

IKKIBAWIKRRR
MIN SUN JEON

Min Sun Jeon: Let me be honest. I've been following your practice ever since I first encountered your work at *documenta 15* in 2022 in Kassel, Germany. Having said that, even now, I find myself struggling whenever I have to explain your practice to someone else. In the summer of 2023, we had our first studio visit in Seoul. It was at Jungwon's house, perched midway up a mountain. I was only able to get there by taking a small village bus along a winding hillside road. Jungwon, who has recently "graduated" from the collective, cooked rice and kimchi-jjim, slow-braised kimchi with pork. We shared the meal together, then sat outside, eating fruit from the little kitchen garden and drinking beer. We spent a long afternoon there that stretched into the evening. But strangely, I remember very little of what we actually discussed that day. What remains is not a memory of words, but a deep imprint for me. In many ways, it felt much like my first encounter with your work at *documenta 15*. I have spent quite some time thinking about how to approach this conversation. And I wonder whether trying to define or interpret your work might be beside the point. Perhaps it would be more fitting to speak to this impression it left behind—the trace that lingers after encountering your work—and to the traces, personal, historical, ancestral, cultural, communal, and natural, that you in turn seem to follow and translate into your practice. What have you been tracing while working on this exhibition at ROH?

ikkibawiKrrr: There was this photograph we came across online. It was a sculpture in a rice field, and something

about it reminded us of a *mireuk*¹—almost like it might be friends with a *mireuk*. So when we were invited to take part in this exhibition, we decided we absolutely had to go there. And along the way, as we searched for that specific site, we discovered something: these things we assumed would be long forgotten and abandoned, many were actually still being tended by the locals, often with great care. And this, in turn, got us thinking about the ways our ancestors and the distant past remain part of our present. Many of the visible manifestations may have disappeared, sure, but we were really struck by the sense that the customs, rituals, and spiritual attitudes they held are still very much alive. In Korea, things associated with our ancestors are often regarded as relics of a disconnected past; in Indonesia, though, we got the distinct impression that they coexist much more closely with present-day life. For quite a while now, we've been seeking the traces of things forgotten or displaced in the course of modernization. On this occasion, however, as we spent more time in Indonesia and continued our project there, we came to realize that what truly draws our attention are the small beliefs that people carry with them as part of daily life, and the kinds of care and devotion they accumulate in order to sustain them. This particular project is closer to a journey that follows those traces.

MSJ: Notions such as ancestors, belief, and devotion can feel like big, abstract concepts. But in your work, it always feels like you begin with, or ultimately return to, something much smaller, more personal and intimate. Can you share a bit more about these small acts of belief and devotion you encountered?

ikki: The place we visited was Palu, on the island of Sulawesi, located to the north of Jakarta. There, we met two people: one was a curator from Palu, born in the 1990s, and the other an anthropologist who had spent more than thirty years researching the archaeological sites of the region. The two of them were actually distant relatives. Generally, the places we visited are thought of as archaeological sites; but to these new friends, they were nothing of the sort. In the vivid, embodied stories they shared with us, these were spaces where families, ancestors, and present-day lives all came together. One of these stories was about a strange experience where one day, while passing by a large megalith, the curator suddenly lost consciousness and collapsed. When she came to, the chronic pain she had been suffering

for years had completely disappeared. She understood this as a moment when she must have made some kind of connection with her ancestors. To us, this all sounded completely novel, a mysterious encounter—but to her, it appeared to be a completely natural kind of communion, or connection. And it seemed that this sense of connection extended into everyday life as well. For example, when setting out on a journey, a mother might tell her child to take a little soil from their hometown and rub it on their navel; or people might read the constellations to choose an important date, like the day of a wedding. She also told us that when conflicts arise within a family, the elders of the community come together to discuss the issue and find a solution, and that compensation is made not with money but with property, like cattle. What looked to us to be ancient customs were, for them, simply ways of living that extend naturally into the present. This left a particularly deep impression on us.

The journey to get there left quite an impression, too. On the map it didn't actually seem very far, but because there were no proper roads or infrastructure, the trip alone took more than six hours, and it was all so remote that we had to make arrangements with the local villages in advance to make sure we could have a meal. Along the way, it suddenly struck us: the things we encountered while working on the *Mireuk* project had been abandoned, which was precisely why we were able to touch them, as they were, imbued with the passage of such long stretches of time. Similarly, perhaps it was precisely because this place remained undeveloped that these ways of life and systems of belief continue uninterrupted.

After that experience, we no longer saw these archaeological sites as places that belonged to the past but began thinking of them as places that remain continually connected to present-day life. By contrast, in Korea, many archaeological sites remain severed from the present. Reflecting on this, we found ourselves wanting to find traces of similar ongoing connections on Korean soil as well.

MSJ: Your charcoal frottage works, which you termed "rock n' feel," are a way of bringing those traces to the surface, making visible the connections that might otherwise go unnoticed. What kind of objects or forms did you rub over this time? Your video *Rock n' feel the way* (2026), which documents the process of charcoal rubbing, conveys this strong sense of immediacy. There seems to be no hesitation. The gestures

¹ Translator's note: *Mireuk* is the Korean transliteration of Maitreya, the Future Buddha who will descend to Earth to save humanity; here, ikkibawiKrrr refers to traditional stone statues of such figures.

are raw, instinctive, and direct, almost suggesting a desire to register things as they are rather than to mediate or transform them. How do you see the physicality of frottage and the act of frottage itself as a way of exploring these questions?

ikki: Those works are primarily flat pieces made in the form of rubbings, using a frottage technique with *hanji*, traditional East Asian handmade paper, and charcoal. *Hanji* is both flexible and remarkably durable. Most often, we make rubbings of stone.

When we first conceived this work, we thought about the meaning of “taking an impression.” The phrase can mean making a copy, but it also carries the sense of creating a trace of an original form, of inscribing the shape of that original into another material. In this project, we took impressions of things like the stone figures left behind by the ancestors of the Palu region, and the patterns carved into the large stone jars that were used as tombs. Some depict human figures, while others include forms like monkeys or lizards. In Korea, birds, animals, and human figures often appear together. Back then, living alongside such animals would have been a natural part of everyday life. In art, there is often an emphasis on the symbolic meanings of such figures, but before turning to symbolism, we wanted to focus on the immediacy of what is shown and what we instinctively feel. This process unfolds by touching and tracing the surface of the stone. As we run our hands over what we have seen, we can come to know things that are quite different from what we perceived with our eyes, like the size of the stone, the depth of its contours, the placement of a face—producing an intertwining of visual knowledge, tactile knowledge, and the reality of the object itself. As a result, the finished rubbings become forms that are distinct from the original stone figures themselves.

MSJ: Alongside the frottage works, this exhibition includes a number of small objects. Some may feel familiar, particularly to those who recognize their cultural references, like the small stacks of stones people build at temples, while others remain more elusive. Could you talk about these objects and how you came to gather or make them?

ikki: Whenever we go to the outskirts or the countryside to shoot footage or work on a project, there will be things that strike us as particularly strange or interesting, or little things we’ll pick up to remember the character of the place in question. This could be a stone, or a seashell, or just bits of discarded debris—but we bring it back with us and keep it, without any specific purpose. These objects weren’t intended to be used in our work. Some were collected on the outskirts of some Korean city, some we brought back from Nagoya, but it isn’t that any one of these places

is especially significant in itself, or even that we were trying to tell their stories. What mattered to us were the small gestures and quiet care these things were imbued with. Instead of starting with a concept, you could say that we simply work by making and gathering, one by one, the things we are drawn to. Our new pieces, too—they weren’t planned and made specifically for the exhibition. Rather, they came more from thoughts like, “It would be fun if something like this existed,” or “Maybe if they were shaped like this, these objects would become friends with one another.” Any time we make work, there inevitably comes a point when it takes on a purpose; and of course, in order to exhibit it, we have to determine its composition, scale, and meaning. This is, of course, just part of what it means to be an artist—but at the same time, we’ve always had a more primitive desire to actually free ourselves from that so-called purpose. This time, we wanted to present the things just as they were. So this time, we simply followed that impulse.

MSJ: I’m glad you brought up the word “primitive.” It helps me better understand the way you’re approaching your work. Today, we often begin by separating categories—human and nonhuman, nature and culture, past and present—and only then try to relate them through causal or hierarchical frameworks. But indeed, I have never really felt that your work was interested in those distinctions in the first place. Again, “primitive” is a word that can sound very large or loaded, but it seems that what you’re really trying to open onto is something much more immediate and shared: a way of being in the world before those distinctions are made. Is that a fair way of understanding your work?

ikki: That’s right. To us, the primitive is something like leaning one’s body away from today’s institutions and society as they continue to develop, growing more and more fixed. There is, of course, a lot of discussion around the discourse of the Anthropocene, but those theories can start to get pretty heavy. And it occurs to us: what if the desire to return to a more primitive state stems from the fact that the problems we face today are caused by us humans failing to be fully human? This is why distinguishing between human and nonhuman, and going on to name the latter as “nonhuman,” makes us a bit uncomfortable. There is something stifling about having to explain our work within that kind of language and discourse. One of the pieces in this exhibition is titled *Two-Legged Being, Four-Legged Being* (2026). In Korean, the word used is closer to “beast” or “living creature.” In English, we used the word “being,” because we wanted it to come across as just a simple unit of existence. It might look like a person, but it doesn’t have to be a person; it could just as well be a ghost, or some other kind of being. What matters is

not a specific identity, but the sense of a life form that walks on two legs. In an ancient ruin, you might find carved depictions of buffalo, or lizards, or monkeys—but they often don’t look much like the actual animals themselves. For example, the buffalo might just have been an important symbol of wealth in that society, something essential that people would eat together on festive occasions. The monkeys don’t really look like monkeys either, but since they would have been so familiar, their lives so intertwined, I imagine the people making the carvings might have done them very casually, just depicting another part of daily life. There are also many small hollows carved into these ruins, and we were told that they may have been used, like constellations, to read the seasons or determine the timing of certain farming stages. We can’t know for certain, but they seem to have functioned as a kind of map or calendar, a guide for living. That’s why I think each of these sculptures is both a figure associated with its own very small village and also something that carries a real openness toward the wider world. Of course, these are Indonesian ruins; but to us, even as they clearly speak to the culture of a particular place, they also feel like traces left by very ancient ancestors shared by all of humanity.

MSJ: Maybe that’s why your work never feels limited by the locality of your research. It starts from a very specific place or community but somehow arrives at something that individuals, regardless of cultural background, can connect with. How do you see your practice navigating different temporalities and places, and bringing them into dialogue with one another?

ikki: Working on projects like this, we inevitably find ourselves contemplating their meaning within the society we belong to now. And since our lives are based in Korea, we return to thinking about it within a Korean context. This keeps leading us back to the same question: why have the traces of the distant past, and the stories of our ancestors, grown so far removed from daily Korean life? This September, in our exhibition for the Indonesia Pavilion at the Gwangju Biennale, we plan to engage more deeply with Korean petroglyphs. The best-known among these are the Bangudae Petroglyphs in Ulsan, which is actually a UNESCO World Heritage site. The carvings depict all kinds of figures, including whales, and it’s regarded by many as a mysterious place. There are many other petroglyph sites across Korea as well, with a particular concentration, they say, in the mountainous regions of Gyeongsangbuk-do along the Nakdong River basin. But public interest in these petroglyphs remains limited, and it’s safe to say that they have not been sufficiently studied. For now, we plan to continue moving back and forth between our research in Indonesia and our work on Korean petroglyphs,

reflecting on how these two places illuminate one another.

MSJ: It seems that, for you, “place” is about more than a physical location. Could you talk a bit more about what “place” means in this context?

ikki: Talking to the friends we spent time with in Indonesia, we noticed a recurring theme: whenever they were struggling or needing rest, their parents would tell them, “Come home. Come back to your hometown.” Some of them had left home to study in Yogyakarta or Jakarta, and a few younger friends had actually stopped their studies and returned to their hometowns a few years ago, when the tsunami struck Palu in 2018. The idea that this was always an option, that they could go home to their own island at any time—this was completely natural to them. For these friends, going home was not a sign of failure, but rather a completely reasonable step. In Korea, meanwhile, such a return is often regarded as a kind of failure. Even for our parents’ generation, one’s hometown was a place you only returned to after achieving success; otherwise, there was a strong drive to go to the city. This is largely because staying home was seen as accepting a life of relative hardship. So in this sense, it is easy to feel that we have nowhere to really “return” to. If you ask someone in Korea where their hometown is, most people will tell you about their parents’ hometown rather than their own. So when we are struggling or feel unsteady, we find ourselves asking: Where can I return to? And what positive meaning can this act of returning possibly hold? When we discussed this phenomenon with a friend who studies anthropology, they said, “It’s because we’ve lost our sense of place.” In essence, the places where time, wisdom, and relationships accrete have disappeared, and so we have also lost the very sense of what it means to return. Lately, I keep wondering what makes a “place,” about what it really is. A place is, of course, physically a place; but a place is also a psychological thing. It is a site where people’s relationships, memories, and time can accumulate. Hopefully, moving forward, our work can be a process of questioning and exploring that sense of place once again.

MSJ: What you are describing is not a turn to the past in a linear sense, nor to a place defined by geographical or physical boundaries. At the same time, you are neither advocating a return to the past nor arguing that the past, its rituals, and its traditions should simply be preserved intact. So perhaps it’s a place where layers of time continue to accumulate, allowing us to inhabit those sedimented layers. How does the future enter into this conversation?

ikki: Earlier, we mentioned that our small sculptures are made from materials such as wood, stone, black plastic sheeting, aluminum foil, and cement. Of course,

wood and stone are materials that have been used from the distant past right up to the present. To us, these materials are just as beautiful as they’ve ever been, and inspire many acts of imagination that feel both familiar and unfamiliar. By that same token, though, the materials of the present—things like black plastic and aluminum foil—are closer to waste. In service of this contemporaneity, we also included parts of an iPhone and a frying pan; a bit nonsensical, but they were simply the everyday, familiar objects that came to mind. Our lives are actually rather removed from the realm of advanced technology, which maybe makes us more used to the waste produced by contemporary society than anything else. I think the things we make are less about imagining the future than looking at the present.

MSJ: Listening to you, it strikes me that your practice has become the place you return to. It’s not about arriving at a definitive answer, nor is it about bringing a project or exhibition to a single conclusion. Instead, it’s about allowing things to accumulate over time, layer upon layer, and letting that ongoing process reveal itself.

ikki: The thing is—and this may sound a bit irresponsible, but—more often than not, we don’t have a specific goal. We often visit places without any particular objective. We might just pick up and bring back something we come across, or simply wonder what might happen if we stacked them together, or spread them out. In the end, what we do really trends toward very small, insignificant acts: handling and feeling the shape of a seemingly useless rock, for example. Looking back, I think our work has always unfolded in much the same way. Wandering somewhere, we’ll make or gather these small things, and sometimes we’ll even forget about them. Then, as we ask new questions, think through possible answers, and talk with one another, we gradually begin the process of discovery. And ultimately, I think this process is simply repeated, over and over.

MSJ: That makes sense. Whenever I experience your exhibitions, I have the impression that I’m entering a landscape you’ve laid out. Just as your work seems to resist binary ways of thinking, it also feels as though viewers are invited to enter that space without being assigned a specific role. Instead, they simply become part of the landscape, rather than simply observing it or participating. This is the imprint I was referring to earlier in our conversation.

ikki: We hope to enter such a landscape ourselves. It’s a landscape we’ve seen, it’s a landscape we want to visit, and it’s a landscape that’s still with us. We hope for situations in which no distinction can be made between us and the object of our encounter. At times, this is the city we live in; at others, it is just as likely to be a very small village.

Sometimes our hope is to meet others along the way, as we work, who will enter that landscape with us. This is what we can do; we hope.

Cho Jieun, born 1975 in Seoul, Korea.
Ko Gyeol, born 1994 in Jeju, Korea.

Formed 2021 in Seoul, Korea
Based in Seoul, Korea.

In Korean, ikkibawi means “moss-rock”, and krrr is an onomatopoeic word. Mosses live in the thin boundary between air and soil, adapt to their surroundings despite their tiny bodies, and expand their world along other worlds. Incorporating the survival tactics of moss into their projects and attitudes, the collective hopes to circulate its practice beyond individual projects and extend the boundary layer between life and art.

ikkibawiKrrr's solo exhibitions include *Who Forgot the Village* (2025), Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao; and *ikkibawiKrrr: Rocks Living in Rewind* (2024-2025), Art Sonje Center, Seoul. Major exhibitions by ikkibawiKrrr include *Threading Inwards* (2026), CHAT (Centre for Heritage, Arts and Textile), Hong Kong; The ACC's 10th Anniversary Special Exhibition: *Manifesto of Spring* (2025), Asia Culture Center, Gwangju, South, Korea; the Aichi Triennale: *A Time Between Ashes and Roses* (2025), Aichi, Japan; Singapore Biennale 2025: *Pure Intention* (2025), Singapore; 14th Gwangju Biennale: *Soft and Weak like Water* (2023) Gwangju; *documenta 15* (2022), Kassel, Germany; *Running Underground* (2022), Elephant Space, Seoul; and *Resbakan: Solidarity Event Lumbung FILM* (2022), UP Film Institute, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City, among others.

Min Sun Jeon is an Assistant Curator at Dia Art Foundation, where she has worked on exhibitions by Keith Sonnier, Roni Horn, Kishio Suga, Lee Ufan, Dan Flavin, and John Chamberlain, among others. Among her upcoming projects is a major multipart commission by Haegue Yang, opening at Dia Beacon in October 2026. Previously, she was on the curatorial team for the *2024 Whitney Biennial: Even Better Than the Real Thing* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Min Sun holds an MA in Curatorial Studies from Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies and curated *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: audience distant relative* (2022) while completing the program.