Artiste Culture

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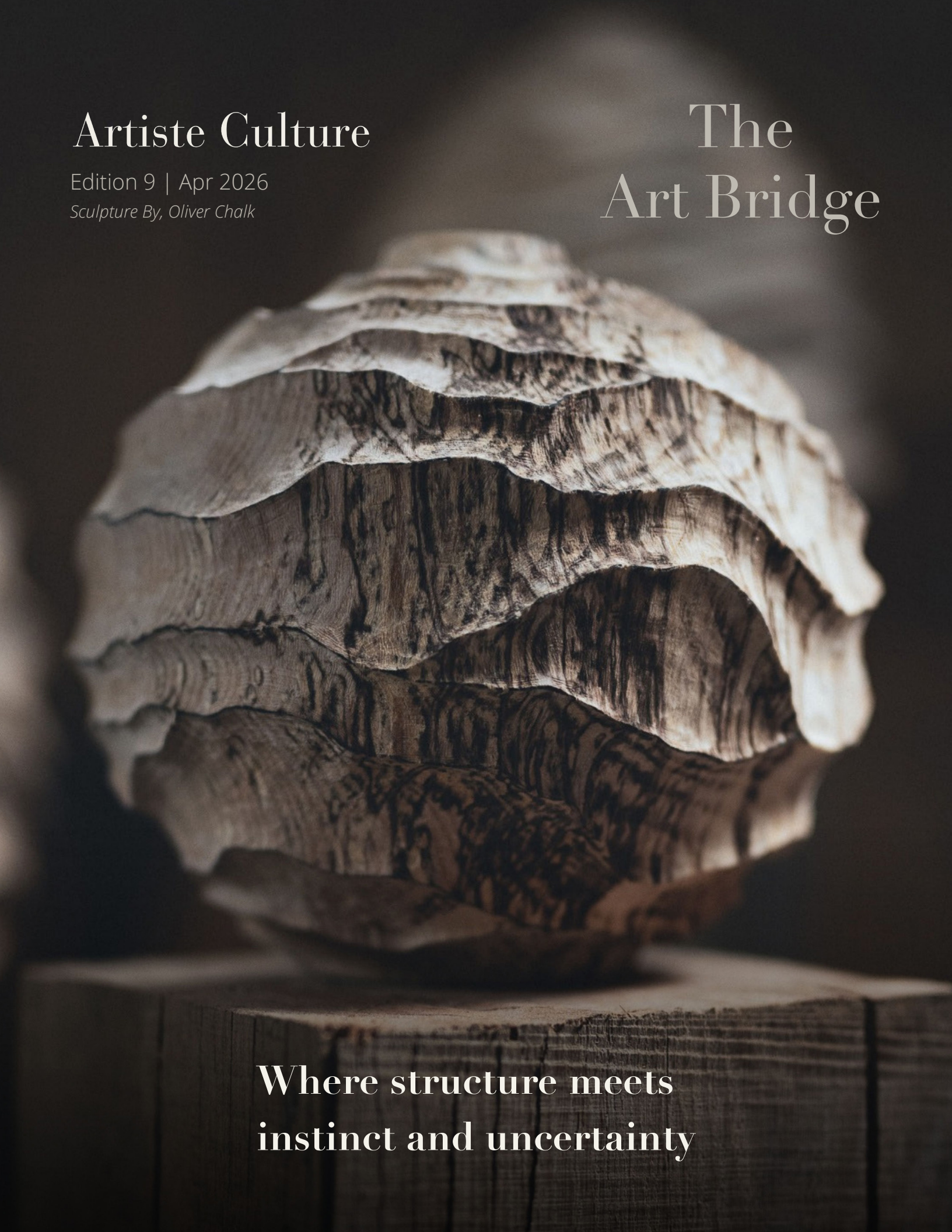
Sculpture By, Oliver Chalk

The Art Bridge



Where structure meets instinct and uncertainty

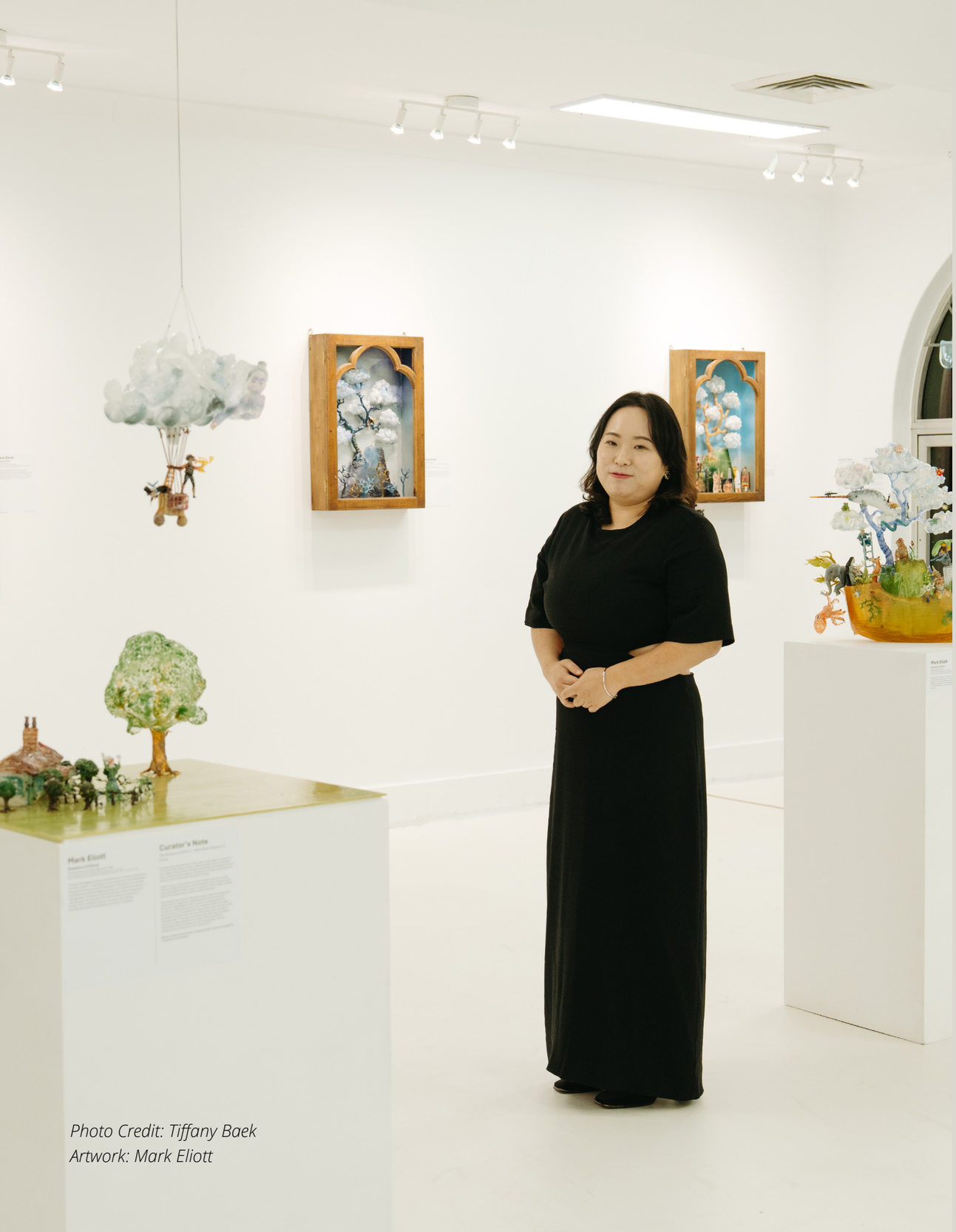


Photo Credit: Tiffany Baek
Artwork: Mark Eliott

Between Translation and Interpretation

Elaine Kim

Curator, Australia

Elaine Kim's curatorial practice unfolds at the intersection of culture, language, and lived experience. Based in Sydney, her work is shaped by her position between Korea and Australia, not as a fixed identity, but as an evolving condition that informs how she reads, frames, and connects artistic practices. Moving fluidly between roles as curator, artist, and now a student of law, she approaches exhibitions as spaces of translation, not in the literal sense, but as sites where meaning is negotiated, questioned, and reformed.

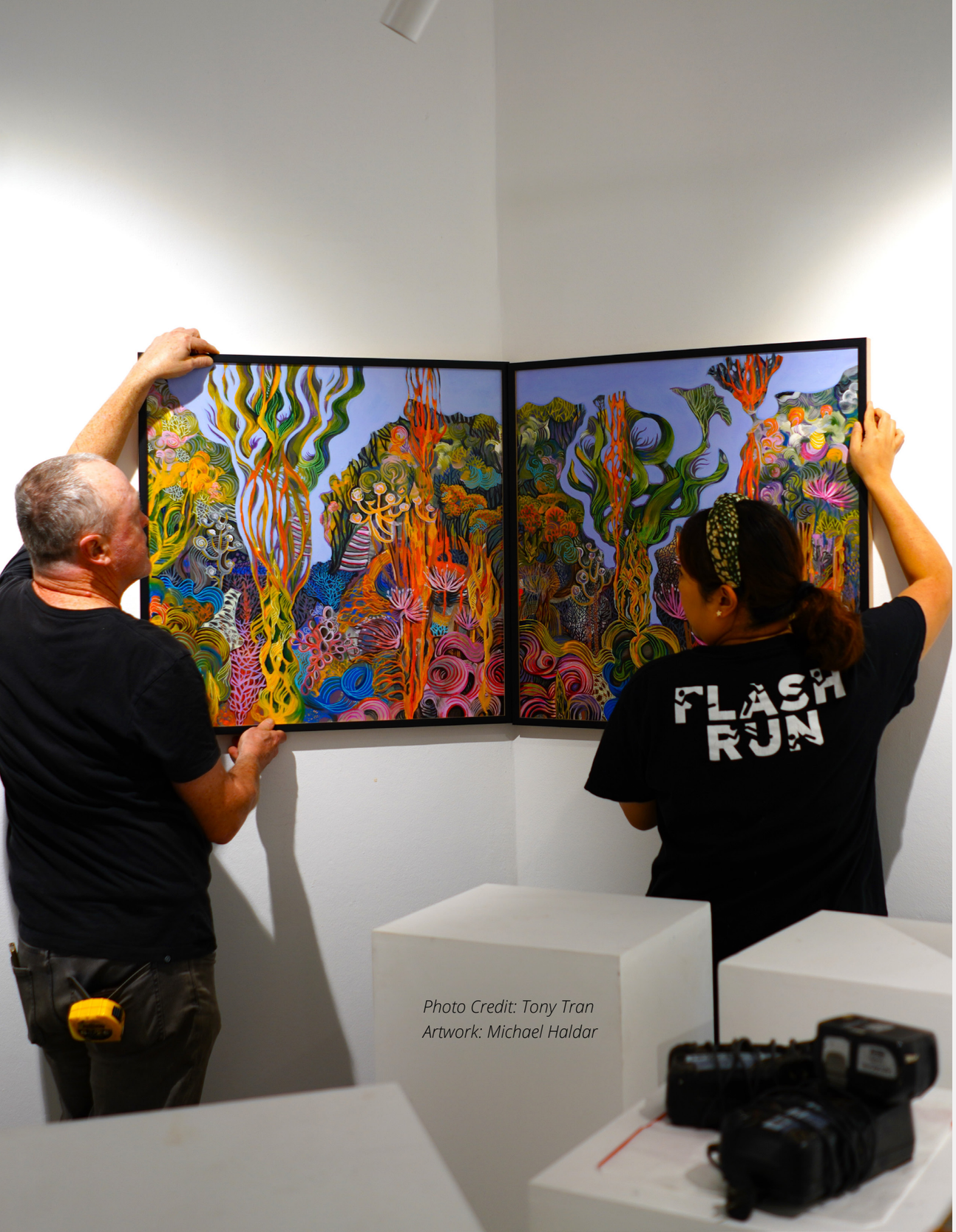


Photo Credit: Tony Tran
Artwork: Michael Haldar

Her projects are grounded in a sensitivity to material, memory, and cultural context, often drawing from Korean traditions while situating them within contemporary, multicultural frameworks. At the same time, her engagement with legal studies introduces a structural awareness of authorship, ownership, and ethical responsibility, expanding her curatorial lens beyond aesthetics into systems and rights. What emerges is a practice that resists simplification, instead holding space for complexity, friction, and dialogue.

In this conversation, Kim reflects on the responsibilities of cultural mediation, the limitations of translation, and a curator's role in shaping not only exhibitions but the conditions under which culture is experienced and understood.

Your curatorial practice emerges from your dual experience as an artist and curator. How has making shaped the way you read, frame, and ultimately care for the work of others?

As a Korean Australian immigrant living between two languages and cultures, I am familiar with the experience of standing at social boundaries or encountering language barriers. However, this sense of being an outsider has become a foundation for empathy, allowing me to understand others' perspectives more deeply.

My own experience of making art is closely tied to this. Having navigated the isolation and the physical and psychological labour required to complete an artwork, I cannot treat another artist's work merely as an object for display. I prioritise respecting the vulnerability and unique language inherent in each work, as well as the artist's intimate stories.

For me, curating is the careful process of creating a space where an artist's story can communicate fully with the audience.

Just as I once longed for someone to truly listen to me when I lacked the language after arriving in Australia, my role is to provide a space of attentive translation, allowing the artist's visual language to reach others with clarity and care.

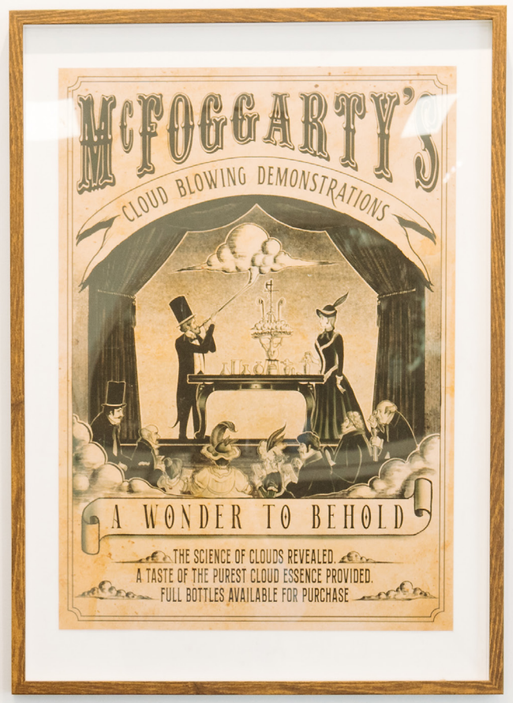
Photo Credit: Tiffany Baek
The Glass Narrative exhibition, curated by Elaine Kim at Off the Ground Studio

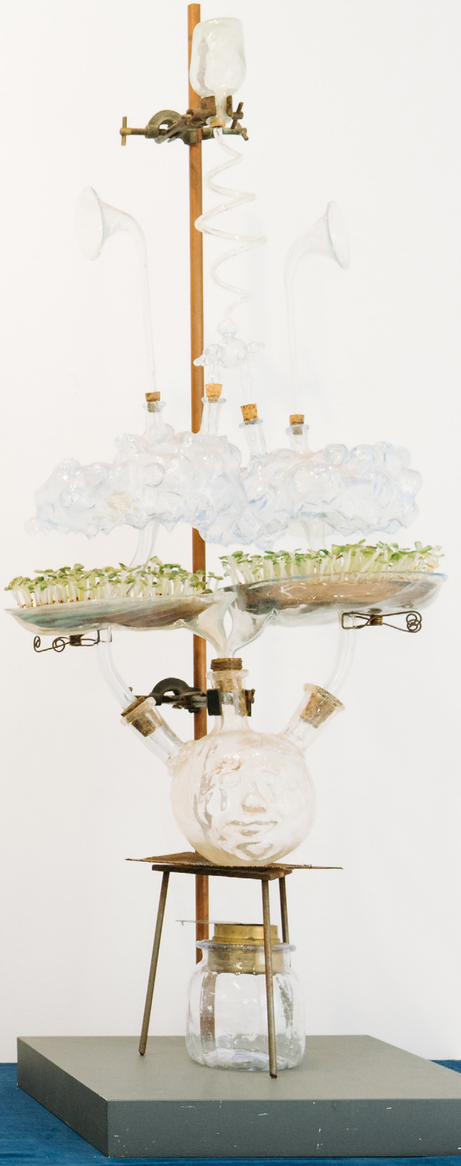
You describe yourself as a cultural bridge. What responsibilities come with occupying that position, and where do you see its limitations?

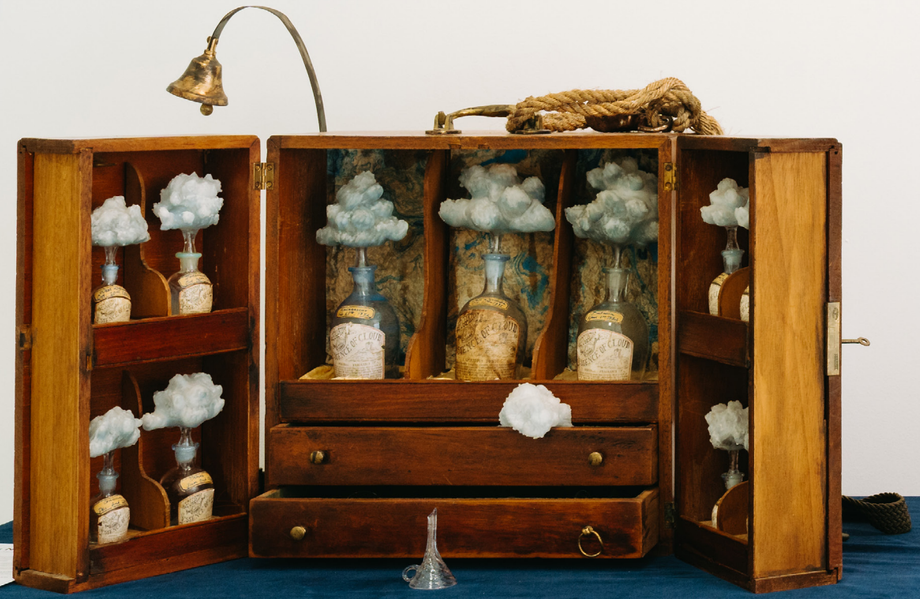
As someone deeply rooted in Korea but living abroad, I have always engaged with others cautiously, feeling a responsibility not to misrepresent Korean culture. With Korean culture receiving increasing global attention, this awareness has naturally extended into my curatorial work.

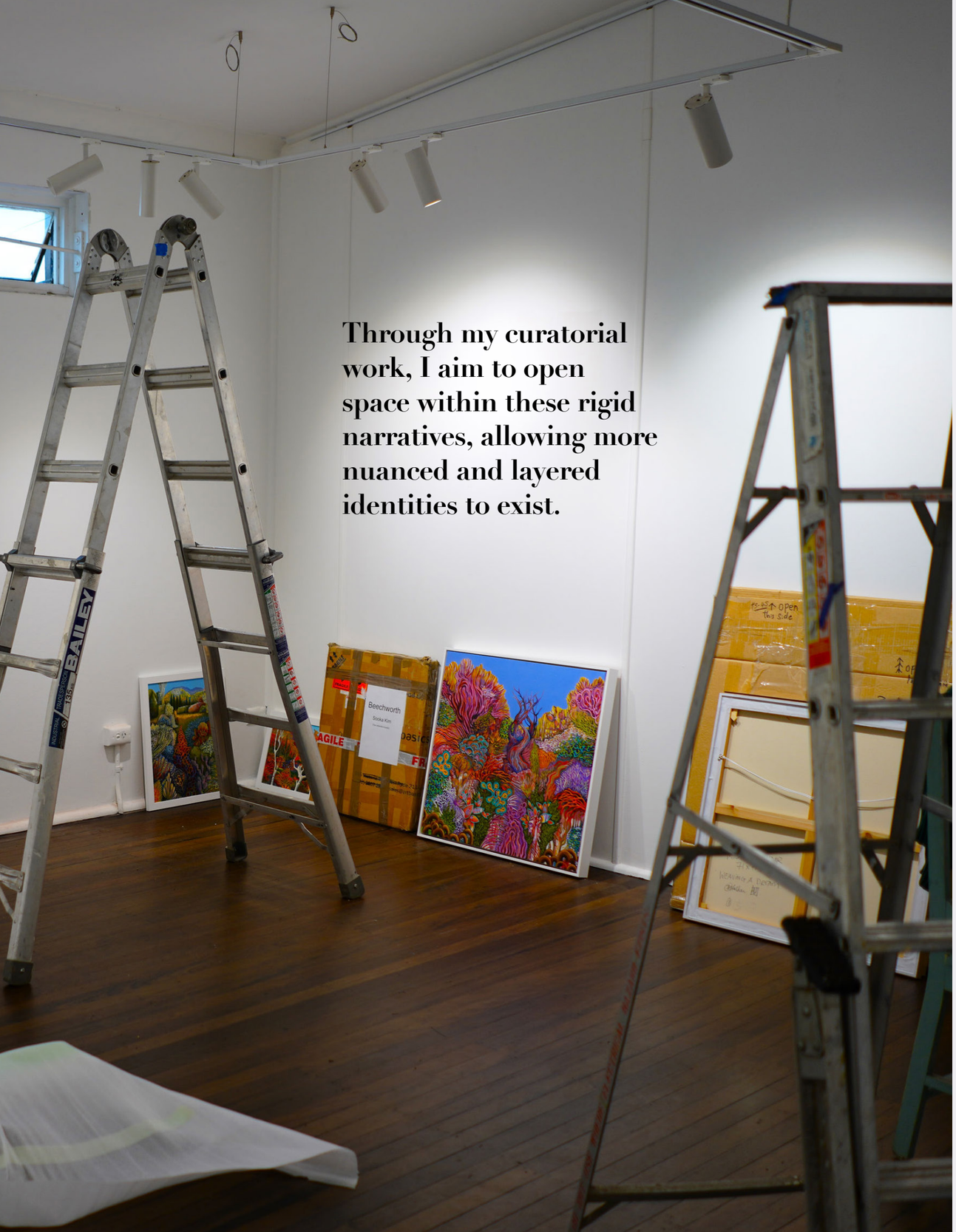
When introducing Korean culture to Australian audiences, I feel a responsibility to convey its depth so that it is not reduced to an exotic spectacle. At the same time, I recognise the limits of translation. No single individual can fully represent the entirety of a culture.

Photo Credit: Tiffany Baek
Artwork: Mark Eliott









Through my research into cultural hybridity, I came to understand that the meeting point between cultures is not a clear bridge but a complex and evolving third space. Rather than striving for perfect translation, I focus on creating conditions where meaningful dialogue can emerge, even within moments of misunderstanding or friction.

Having been born in Korea and raised in Australia, how do you navigate belonging within institutions that often expect a single cultural narrative?

I was not raised in Australia. I formed my identity in Korea before moving, which makes my experience of belonging more complex. Korean sensibilities remain deeply rooted in me, and as a result, I often feel that I do not fully belong in any singular context.

Institutional frameworks often attempt to categorise individuals into fixed narratives, such as the assimilated immigrant or the diaspora identity. I do not try to fit into these structures. Instead, I construct my own narrative by combining the perspectives shaped by my Korean background with the professional language I have developed in Australia.

Your current projects place Korea at their core. How do you approach Korean culture not as subject matter, but as a living framework for contemporary exchange?

For me, Korean culture is not simply a subject. It is the framework through which I understand relationships and the world around me. This principle becomes a curatorial methodology, allowing different artistic voices to interact within the exhibition space. In this way, Korean culture functions as a living system of connection rather than a static representation of the past.

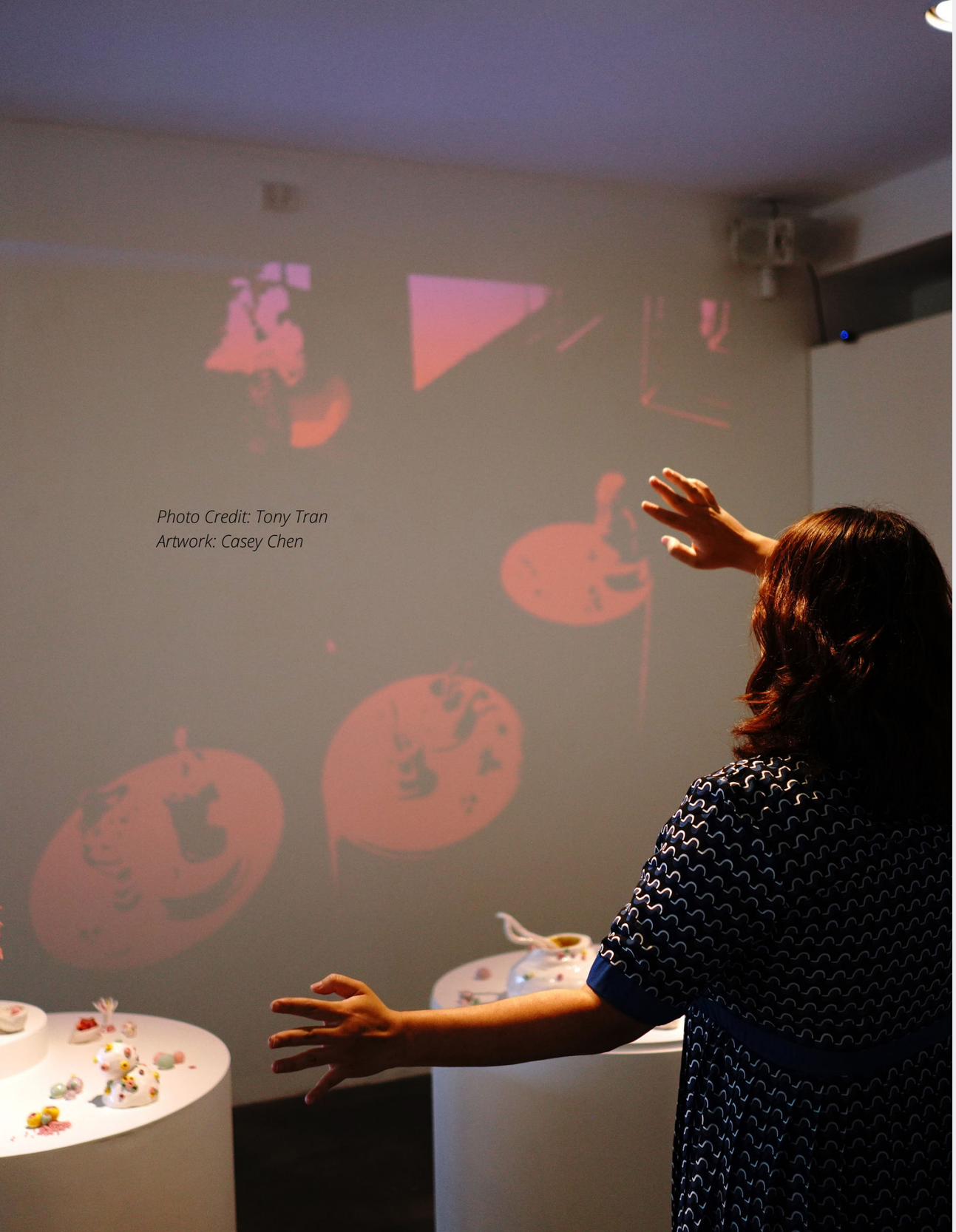


Photo Credit: Tony Tran
Artwork: Casey Chen

The Korean Project invites Australian artists without Korean heritage to respond to Korean cultural elements. How do you ensure this exchange remains meaningful?

The greatest risk in cross-cultural work is the extraction of visual elements without understanding their context. To address this, artists engage in research, workshops, and conversations that deepen their understanding of the cultural histories involved.

This creates a structure where artists respond thoughtfully, rather than borrowing superficially, allowing the exchange to remain respectful and reciprocal.

How do you distinguish cultural interpretation from cultural translation within your curatorial methodology?

Cultural translation often involves direct substitution between contexts. Cultural interpretation, however, acknowledges that full translation is not always possible.

Rather than simplifying unfamiliar elements, I allow space for their complexity. For example, describing Jogakbo as traditional patchwork is a form of translation. Enabling audiences to understand its emotional and historical depth is interpretation.

I aim to create conditions where audiences can engage with this complexity and arrive at their own understanding.

As a Korean Australian curator, you often act as an interpreter and mediator. How conscious is this role in your day-to-day curatorial decision-making?

This role is present in almost every aspect of my daily decision-making. I am constantly navigating different cultural expectations and perspectives, not only through language but through context.

Rather than seeing this as a burden, I approach it as a responsibility to ensure that my decisions become careful mediations rather than literal translations. This involves choosing words, framing narratives, and structuring exhibitions in ways that respect both the artist's intention and the audience's understanding.

What kinds of misunderstandings or frictions do you encounter when bridging cultures?

Misunderstandings often arise when complex cultural ideas are reduced to their surface qualities. However, I do not see these moments as problems. In making Jogakbo, different fabrics create friction when they are brought together, yet that resistance is what allows them to be stitched into a unified form. Similarly, cultural friction creates the conditions for deeper engagement.

When audiences encounter something unfamiliar, it prompts questions. That moment of discomfort can become the beginning of meaningful dialogue.

Do you believe curators should remain neutral, or is positionality unavoidable?

I do not believe neutrality is possible. Positionality is both unavoidable and necessary. By acknowledging my own position, I am able to engage more honestly with the work of others. Attempting to remain neutral often results in flattening complexity. Recognising one's perspective allows for more meaningful and equitable dialogue.

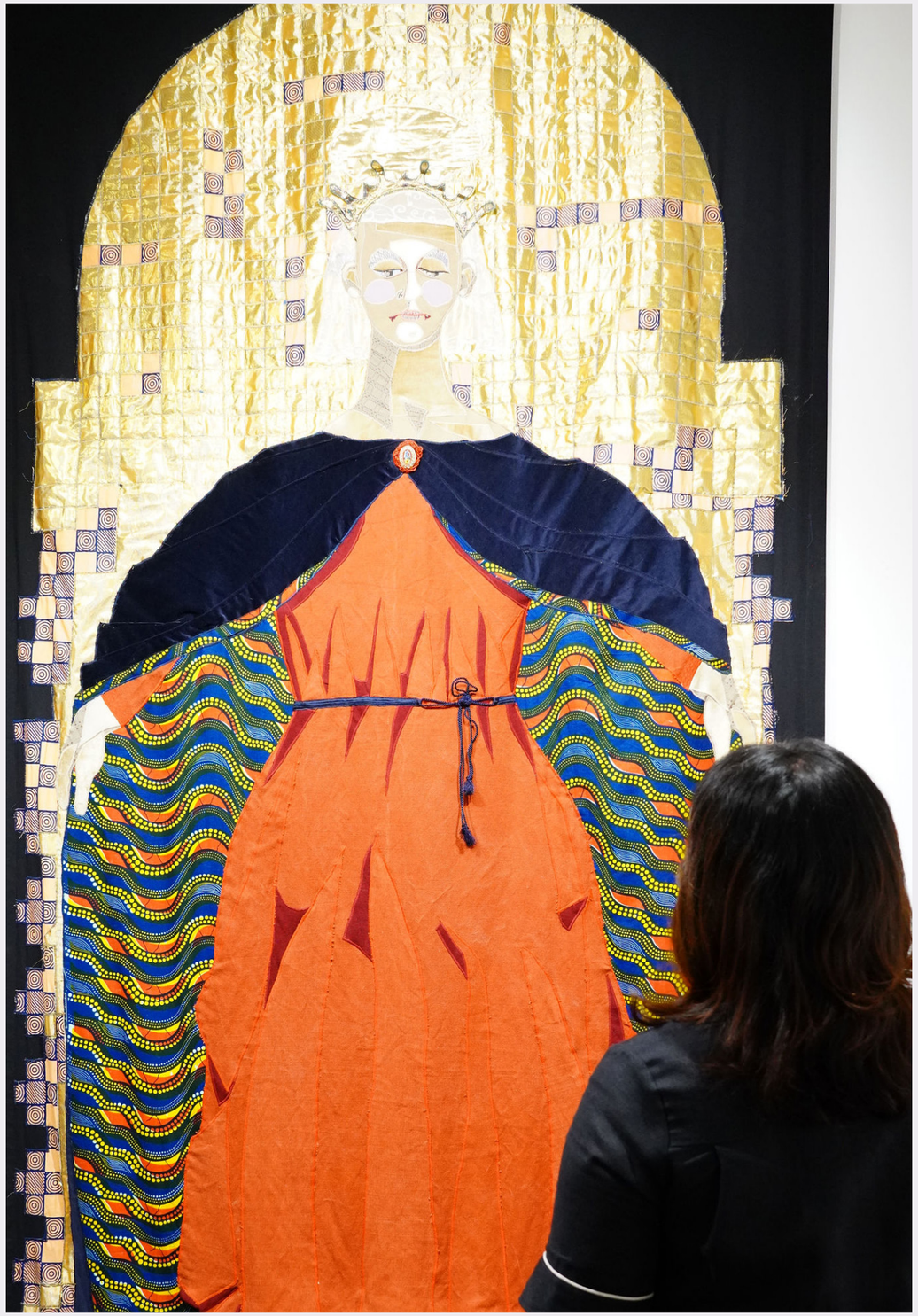
You are currently studying law alongside your curatorial practice. How has legal thinking influenced your approach?

Studying law has expanded my understanding of authorship, ownership, and cultural rights. It has shifted my focus from purely visual outcomes to the systems that support and protect artistic practice. Questions of agency, fairness, and representation now play a central role in how I approach curating.

Where do you see the most significant ethical gaps in contemporary exhibition-making?

The most significant gap lies in forms of invisible exploitation within institutional structures.

Artists from specific cultural backgrounds are often included in the name of diversity, yet their identities and labour may be used without sufficient agency or recognition. Addressing this requires a deeper consideration of ethics beyond formal agreements.



Can legal frameworks offer protection for cultural practices, or do they risk limiting them?

Legal frameworks can provide important protection, particularly against exploitation. However, they can also impose rigid structures on inherently fluid practices. The challenge lies in using legal systems as tools for protection while ensuring that cultural practices retain their openness and adaptability.

You work across independent initiatives and institutional structures. How do these environments differ?

Independent spaces tend to operate through relationships and trust, offering flexibility and autonomy, even with limited resources. Institutional environments provide infrastructure and support but often introduce hierarchical structures and constraints.

My approach is to move between these contexts while maintaining ethical clarity, ensuring that institutional frameworks do not override the integrity of the work.

How do you maintain rigour while supporting both emerging and established artists?

I focus on creating a space where all artists are engaged with equal seriousness. Rigour, for me, is not based on an artist's reputation but on the depth of their work and the integrity of the process.

What responsibilities do institutions hold when presenting culturally specific narratives?

Institutions have a responsibility to preserve the complexity of cultural narratives rather than simplifying them for accessibility. This includes ensuring that individuals from within those cultures are involved in shaping how their narratives are presented, allowing for more accurate and respectful representation.

How do you think about longevity in curatorial work?

Although exhibitions are temporary, the relationships and conversations they generate can continue long after they end. For me, curating is about creating connections that extend beyond the duration of the exhibition, contributing to a broader cultural dialogue.

What does success look like for a curatorial project over time?

Success is reflected in the continuation of relationships and conversations that emerge from the project. If artists, audiences, and communities continue to engage with one another beyond the exhibition, and if the ideas explored begin to influence wider cultural thinking, then the project has achieved something meaningful.

Do you see your curatorial work as building an archive, a conversation, or something else?

I see these as interconnected. Ethical frameworks create the conditions for meaningful conversations, and these conversations, over time, form an evolving archive. My practice is centred on facilitating this process.

What questions are currently guiding your thinking?

I am interested in how the fluidity of cultural hybridity can coexist with the structured nature of legal systems. This involves exploring how curatorial practice can operate as a space where these two frameworks interact without diminishing one another.

In a rapidly accelerating cultural landscape, what do you believe curators must slow down to protect?

Curators must slow down to protect context, relationships, and the rights of artists. In a culture that prioritises speed, there is a risk of reducing complex practices to easily consumable forms. Slowing down allows for deeper engagement and ensures that cultural narratives are treated with care. This is not a limitation but a necessary form of resistance, ensuring that the work retains its integrity over time.