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# Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang

by Francesca Curtis • 13.03.2024

In the moving image work *Halmang* [FIG.1](#) by Jane Jin Kaisen (b.1980), eight women in their seventies and eighties are seated on a rocky outcrop of the volcanic coast of Jeju Island in South Korea. Set against the dark stone, they fold *sochang*, long pieces of white cotton cloth associated with women's labour, which are also a symbol for the cycle of life and death and the connection of humans to the spirit world. Over the course of the twelve-minute film, no words are shared between the women. Instead, close attention is paid to their increasingly animated gestures: the women's meticulous and methodical folding and tending to the *sochang* gives way to the more chaotic movements of draping the fabric over the rock face [FIG.2](#). As the women then begin to knot together the strips of cloth they form a large web that envelops the hardened lava [FIG.3](#).

The women in Kaisen's film have lived and worked together for most of their lives on Jeju Island as *haenyeo* – women free-divers who harvest seafood from the ocean. The islet where they arrange the *sochang* used to serve as a shrine for the wind goddess Yongdeung Halmang, and is also the point from which these divers would depart for the sea. In the film, the close-up footage of the women's hands and faces is accompanied by a soundtrack of crashing waves and a recording of the once-banned 'Jeju Haenyeo Song', written by the social activist Gwan-soon Gang. Free-diving in Jeju dates back to the fifth century, and was initially undertaken exclusively by men, but by the eighteenth century women dominated the profession. *Haenyeo* communities are often characterised by a matriarchal social structure, in which women play a key role in societal and political decision-making and the support of their families.

*Halmang* is the central work of Kaisen's first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom, at esea contemporary, Manchester [FIG.4](#). Vital for understanding the film's layered history is the vitrine of archival material [FIG.5](#) installed on the opposite wall of the space. Collected over a ten-year period, these materials consist of memorabilia, photographs and publications relating to the organised anti-colonial actions of the *haenyeo*. This includes Kaisen's father's camera and a book written by her grandfather [FIG.6](#), who was the Head of the Commemoration Committee for the Jeju Haenyeo Anti-Colonial Resistance Movement. The movement emerged in 1931–32, led by the women sea divers who protested against the economic exploitation and taxation of their profession by Japanese

occupational forces. Photographs and objects collected by Kaisen also explore how the resistance was commemorated [FIG.7](#) after Korea's liberation in 1945, including shamanic rituals, parades and the establishment of monuments. These materials outline the crucial role of the *haenyeo* in this period, but they also contextualise a collective history of Jeju Island – one that exists within the landscape so affectingly captured by Kaisen.

It is with the inspection of these archival documents that the artist's personal connection to – and reverence for – the *haenyeo* tradition quietly becomes apparent. Kaisen was born on Jeju Island, where her mother and grandmother worked as divers, before she was transnationally adopted and moved to Denmark at the age of three months. In addition to its reference to the shamanic goddesses of the wind and sea, *halmang* is also a Jeju term for 'grandmother'. Kaisen's film is thus a simultaneous reflection on the longstanding *haenyeo* tradition and her personal ties to the culture. The artist has often returned to her ancestral roots throughout her film-making career. Her four-channel video, *Offering – Coil Embrace* (2023), for example, was also filmed on the island and shares *Halmang's* focus on the women divers and the symbolism of *sochang*. Although both films possess a melancholic beauty, the folding of the cloth in *Halmang* becomes almost a domestic act when compared with the slow, underwater choreography of *Offering*, in which swathes of fabric can be seen floating in the murky depths of the sea.

Kaisen has also returned to Jeju Island to confront its Cold War history, which is frequently framed in her practice through issues of memory, colonisation, modernisation and migration. The relationship between the *haenyeo* tradition and the political history of the island is also explored in two earlier moving image works, which are exhibited in the gallery's communal project space [FIG.8](#). In *Of the Sea* [FIG.9](#) Kaisen reflects upon her grandparents' involvement in the resistance movement. The artist walks along the black lava shore, carrying items used for diving as well as her grandfather's book *Annals of the Jeju Haenyeo's Anti-Japanese Resistance*, which was published in 1995. *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* [FIG.10](#) follows a group of transnational adoptees and other women of the Korean diaspora, exploring transgenerational trauma through oral histories, interviews, public statements and poetry. Although these films are exhibited separately from *Halmang*, provocative connections can be made with the titular work, as Kaisen focuses on the legacies of conflict embedded in the landscape from which the *haenyeo* still depart into the sea.



Fig. 1 Still from *Halmang*, by Jane Jin Kaisen. 2023. Film, duration 12 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; exh. esea contemporary, Manchester).

*Halmang* seeks to make parallels across not only histories, but also geographies. Xiaowen Zhu, the Director of esea contemporary, frames Kaisen's practice through 'the interconnectedness of our shared human experience'.<sup>1</sup> According to the exhibition wall text, this is uniquely revealed through its presentation in a building that was once part of Manchester's Victorian fish market. *Halmang* not only aligns with the organisation's mission to profile artistic practises informed by East and Southeast Asian backgrounds and their diasporas, it also seeks to draw spatio-temporal relationships between Jeju Island and the United Kingdom through the histories of aquaculture. However, the ways in which these locations are linked is not contextualised beyond the historic use of the esea contemporary building. As the film is exhibited in a conventional darkened environment, this history is also not immediately apparent to the visitor. Therefore, these correlations operate most effectively on a more conceptual level, with the entanglement of the *sochang* and the landscape representing the ingrained relationships between people, memory and geography. Through the legacies of colonisation and modernisation, one can trace imagined lines of connection between Victorian Manchester and the devastating impact of industrialised fishing on the *haenyeo*.

The writer and curator Anne Kølbæk Iversen has described Kaisen's practice as a 'presentation of migratory memories, floating signifiers hesitating to embody signification'.<sup>2</sup> *Halmang* reveals this trepidation firstly through its elusive relationship to location, and secondly – and most powerfully – in its refusal to portray the *haenyeo* in the act of diving. As their community declines, an increasing fascination with their practice is developing in the tourist industries.<sup>3</sup> This is what the anthropologist David Berliner has referred to as the 'UNESCOisation' of cultural traditions, in which communities are pressured into performing their culture while simultaneously experiencing a sense of loss over their traditions.<sup>4</sup> Kaisen, by contrast, shows the divers engaged in

another activity: they do not enter the sea, and there are no visual signifiers of diving.

Perhaps this refusal is an allusion to the decline in traditional diving practices resulting from the integration of industrialised fishing methods on the island. More convincing, however, is that it embodies the political need to not spectacularise the *haenyeo*. In *Halmang*, the audience bears witness to Kaisen's intense respect for these women's lives, their political legacies and their care for traditions under threat of erasure by modernisation. As they fold the *sochang*, the significance of the divers extends well beyond their occupation; as they carry the weight of history, they confront the memories that haunt the shores.



Fig. 2 Still from *Halmang*, by Jane Jin Kaisen. 2023. Film, duration 12 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; exh. esea contemporary, Manchester).



Fig. 3 Still from *Halmang*, by Jane Jin Kaisen. 2023. Film, duration 12 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; exh. esea contemporary, Manchester).



**Fig. 4** Installation view of *Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang* at esea contemporary, Manchester, 2024. (Photograph Jules Lister).



**Fig. 5** Installation view of *Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang* at esea contemporary, Manchester, 2024. (Photograph Jules Lister).





Fig. 6 Installation view of *Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang at sea contemporary*, Manchester, 2024, showing detail of archive table. (Photograph Jules Lister).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang at sea contemporary*, Manchester, 2024, showing detail of archive table. (Photograph Jules Lister).



**Fig. 8** Installation view of *Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang* at esea contemporary, Manchester, 2024. (Photograph Jules Lister).



**Fig. 9** Still from *Of the Sea*, by Jane Jin Kaisen. 2013. Film, duration 2 minutes 15 seconds. (Courtesy the artist; exh. esea contemporary, Manchester).



**Fig. 10** Still from *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger*, by Jane Jin Kaisen and Guston Sondin-Kung. 2010. Film, duration 72 minutes. (Courtesy the artists; exh. esea contemporary, Manchester).

## Footnotes

- 1** Xiaowen Zhu, quoted in the press release for *Jane Jin Kaisen: Halmang* at esea contemporary, Manchester, 2024, available at [www.eseacontemporary.org/exhibition/jane-jin-kaisen-halmang](http://www.eseacontemporary.org/exhibition/jane-jin-kaisen-halmang), accessed 20th February 2024.
- 2** A.K. Iversen: 'A parting ways while being with: critical investigations and acts of assembling in Jane Jin Kaisen's practice', in *idem* and J.J. Kaisen, eds: *Community of Parting*, Copenhagen 2020, p.56.
- 3** S. Fuchs: 'Haenyeo - the sea women of South Korea', *Kyoto Journal* (3rd March 2022), available at [www.kyotojournal.org/uncategorized/haenyeo-the-sea-women-of-south-korea](http://www.kyotojournal.org/uncategorized/haenyeo-the-sea-women-of-south-korea), accessed 20th February 2024.
- 4** D. Berliner: 'Multiple nostalgias: the fabric of heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR)', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no.4 (December 2012), pp.769–86.

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