

## Artist Kimsooja connects through the glass



By: [Ilana Jacobs](#)

October 21, 2021

*When does an audience stop seeing the artist and start seeing what the artist is looking at? That's just one of the many questions posed by conceptual multimedia artist Kimsooja, whose latest exhibition opens this month in Seoul*



Kimsooja at Yorkshire Sculpture Park Chapel, 2019

Kimsooja is a hard artist to pin down. Over the past 40 years, she has built a huge portfolio of work. While she began her career studying painting, she has branched into performance, film, textile and light. Even in terms of location, Kimsooja never seems to settle. As she lists the many projects she has in the works, it starts to feel like a geography test: there are exhibitions from Argentina to France and the Netherlands, not to mention a hush-hush project coming up in September at the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul. (It will use “the lines and diffraction grade in films” is all she’ll reveal.)

The globetrotting is rather fitting, however, considering much of Kimsooja’s work focuses on residency and migration. For a project in Buenos Aires, she’s planning to install flags on walls around the city.

The flags are a continuation of her *To Breathe – The Flags* series in which she merges flags from recognised and unrecognised nations together in a film.

Kimsooja originally got the idea from a commission for the London Olympics. "I started only with the initial flags [of countries] that were participating in London," she says. "But then after that I was just questioning, 'Oh, but this should be the whole world and not only the participating countries.' So I decided to collect all the national flags... So this is about not only the Olympic spirit, which is limited in a way, but also a bit larger concept of bringing the world together. I think that's my very fundamental attitude towards the world."

Flags touch on a message of global unity that Kimsooja often conveys in her work. In one of her most iconic pieces, *A Needle Woman*, she travelled to the busiest streets in cities all around the world and filmed herself standing perfectly still with her back to the camera. Her figure creates a bubble of calming stillness that permeates every country she visits. People can't help but get sucked into the calm of her space, but Kimsooja thinks there's something more to it.

She describes a sort of "soul transitional moment" between the viewer, the camera and herself. "I don't even know when this happens," she says. "But I assume that when people look at my back they enter it at some point and they start looking at the people on the street rather than my back. We always feel the director's eyes, what he or she is looking at, but the scene to me was all about my gaze that I direct when I'm looking. That direction and my presence looking at the scene is always behind the audience now when I present the video or film rather than my gaze."

However, Kimsooja didn't originally intend to become a frozen looking glass. Talking about her first shoot in Japan, she recalls, "When I was thinking of doing a performance piece, in the beginning I was thinking of just maybe a walking performance. I had a very vague idea and walked a couple of hours in Tokyo to find the right moment and energy. But when I arrived in the Shibuya area where hundreds of thousands of people were coming and going, I had an urge and I couldn't bear the energy that I carried in my body. I had to stop and I just had to plant myself there and watch it."

"I was very vulnerable, in a way, to stand there alone and, in Tokyo's case, people were very indifferent. They don't look at each other. They didn't look at me, as if I didn't even exist on the street. And so my state was slowly recovering a centre and I was slowly filling with affection and compassion towards the people. I had the experience of looking at the horizon of the ocean of humanity and I saw a white line coming beyond that. And in the end I felt complete happiness, complete peace and almost like, I don't know, [a sense of] real enlightenment."



From left: *Galaxy was a Memory, Earth is a Souvenir*, 2014, Yorkshire Sculpture Park; *To Breathe*, 2019, Tour Maubergeon; *To Breathe*, 2020, Boghossian Foundation

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KIMSOOJA

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Asked if that instinctual need happens often, Kimsooja laughs. "Oh yeah!" she says. "I think that urge is the inspiration and the energy that makes decisions for [an artwork]. If I don't have the urge then that means I don't have interest or I don't have ideas. So that's the moment, like the sparkly moment, that I make decisions. It's very zen where you have that urge or you have that inspiration. It comes out of the blue, like thunder. So, I always need that."

Recently, Kimsooja has been feeling that tug towards the sense of touch. "I have some urge right now but I haven't started yet," she says. "It's more physical contact to the materials actually. It's interesting, because I haven't been doing this physical materialistic work for a long time, except my *Archive of Mind* piece that I had with the clay, but that's more for the audiences than for myself."

*Archive of Mind*, which premiered at the Peabody Essex Museum in 2017, consisted of a long elliptic table, where visitors were invited to take a piece of clay and roll it around in their hands before placing it back on the table. "I also had a great connection to it," Kimsooja recalls. "And I experienced that importance of the physical connection to the earth and to the material within my hands. I feel more of that recently and also more about the papers, like Chinese papers, Korean papers... the sensibility of the material in papers and earth or water, these come to me stronger than before and I have an urge to do something with that. I just need my studio."

Kimsooja has been operating without a studio for the past three years, so she's understandably ready to get back to work in person. Add to that a year-long pandemic with nothing but Zoom calls and Kimsooja thinks everyone is looking for physical connection again. "I think most people feel the [urge] much stronger than before and their connection is much closer," she says.

However, she doesn't think we're out of the woods just yet when it comes to the pandemic. "Hopefully. I'm not so sure," she says with a laugh. "I don't know if we will really leave this forever. It doesn't really look like it can end." Nevertheless, the time inside has given Kimsooja a new outlook on isolation. Asked what she would do in either case, she says, "If it's over, well, I will definitely enjoy travelling, doing other site-specific projects around the world and seeing friends. Sharing and communicating with them face-to-face, that will be very precious and lovely," she says. "If it doesn't happen, what can you do? But I also don't care much, because we all have our inner world, so even if we don't go anywhere we always have our own world to discover, to explore and to communicate."

"I can live in one place without too much trouble actually, so if we're not able to [travel], I'll just go into my own inner world and that's my decision. That's the only thing we can do, right? And I think it will create more certain kinds of creative urges from inside. So that's my curiosity, what that could be, and maybe that the creation spectrum around the world will be transformed into something else."