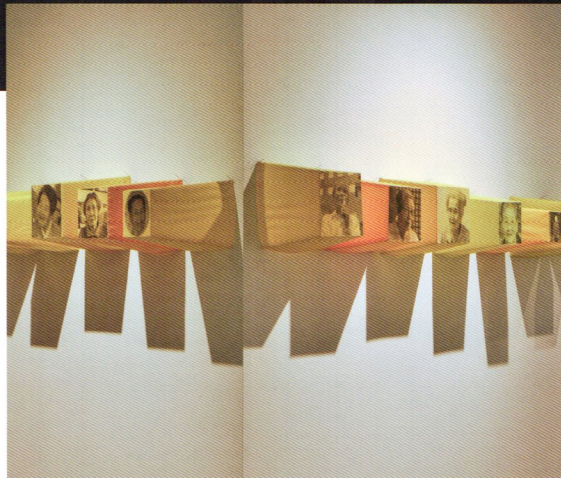


Silent Scream, silk organza, printed text, cotton thread, 2015

Comfort women were sexual slaves of the Japanese military during World War II.

"Comfort women" was a practice that is hard to comprehend, and its profound inhumanity is impossible to accept. Eun-Kyung Suh's *Torn from Home* exhibition tells the heart-rendering stories of these women in a most sensitive and quiet way, so we are able to take a step closer to understanding the lives of these brave women. Our instinct is to pull away when confronted with the raw emotion of these stories, but because of Suh's compassion and artistic brilliance, there is a safe place for us to enter.

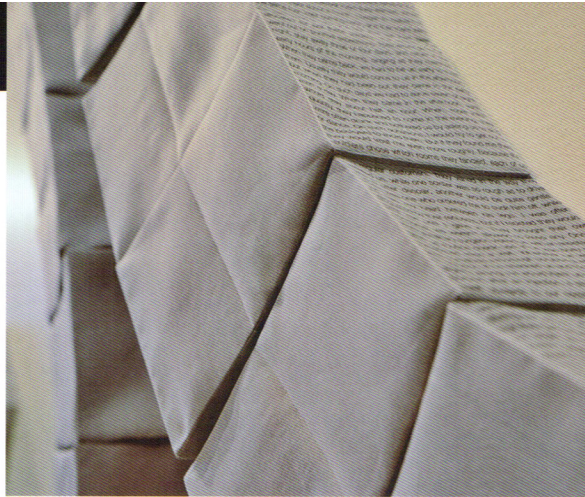
Teenage girls were "torn from home," kidnapped by Japanese soldiers and operatives. Many were deceived into believing they were going to work in Japanese factories where they could make lots of money to help support their families, but instead, they were forced to be sexual slaves in what were called "comfort stations." The comfort stations were set up to conduct the war "efficiently" by providing Japanese soldiers "comfort"



We, Survivors, silk organza, printed image, cotton thread, 2014

and to prevent venereal disease among the soldiers. These stations, run from 1932 to the end of the war in 1945, were located at 2,000 Japanese military bases across Asia. The women were taken from Korea, China, Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, East Indies and Japan. Of the estimated 80,000 to 200,000 women who were forced into sexual slavery, half of them were Korean according to Yoshiaki Yoshimi, a Japanese historian and comfort women researcher. Two-thirds did not survive the war.

If the comfort women survived the bombing, beating, starvation, disease and horrific sexual abuse while imprisoned in the comfort stations, they came home to rejection from their families and society. Often barren because of the sexual abuse and diseases, they had little chance to start a new family of their own. In addition to the long-term physical damage, these women suffered severe post-traumatic stress. Forced to live impoverished lives without any support of country or family, their suffering continued.

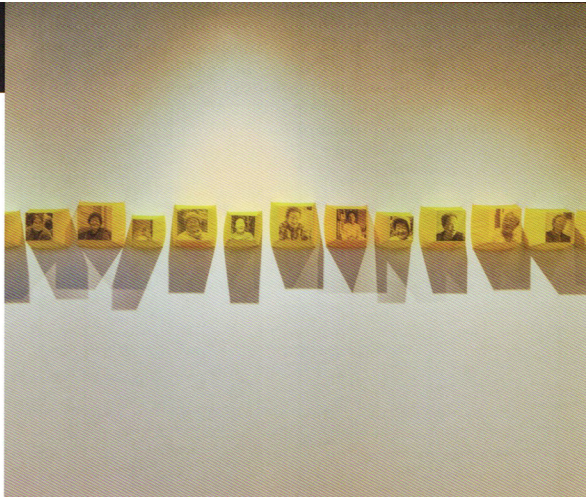


Silent Scream, silk organza, printed text, cotton thread, 2015

In the early 1990s, more than 45 years after the war ended, the first South Korean woman came forward and requested a formal apology from the Japanese government and compensation for the thousands of victims. Although the Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono made a personal apology in 1993, the government has not taken responsibility for these crimes against women. The struggle continues to this day.

Today, only about 50 of the 239 women who publicly acknowledged their experiences are alive in South Korea. In her work *We, Survivors*, images of these women, wrapped in warm, yellow, silk organza boxes, express Suh's deep compassion and support for each of them. Peering out from the boxes, their faces connect us to their lives in an intimate and powerful way.

The testimonies of these women tear at your heart with their recollections of the brutal treatment they had to endure while enslaved in the comfort stations. In her work *Silent Scream*, Suh finds a profound and beautiful way to protect and shelter these women's stories, which



We, Survivors, silk organza, printed image, cotton thread, 2014

have been hidden away for decades. The stories are printed on silk organza and sewn into the interior of geometric boxes floating on the wall. These boxes fit precisely together to form rings that begin unbroken and progressively break apart, spilling out their stories as they move across the room. Just as the secret stories of these women's lives had been kept enclosed for decades, they now are slowly coming open. The complete rings begin white and as the rings break apart, they become increasingly grayer, and we are able to see the tragic stories revealed.

Suh is inspired by an ancient Korean traditional fiber art form, bojagi. "Bojagi is the cloth used to wrap, store, carry or protect everything from precious ritual objects to everyday clothes and common household belongings in Korea," says Suh. "It is usually a square cloth of various sizes made out of silk, cotton or ramie." In *Torn from Home*, Suh uses bojagi as a metaphor to wrap and protect the memories of the women who suffered the horrors of war.

The translucence of the silk organza boxes suggests the fragility of life and the fleetingness of the stories attached to those lives. Suh gives powerful validity to these women's stories and their suffering in her delicate and careful images. In addition to the work being a potent remembrance of torn past lives, it also brings an awareness that sexual slavery still goes on in our world today, and women's lives are still begin torn from their homes.

Born in Seoul, Suh is now a permanent resident of the United States and lives in Duluth, Minn. She is a professor in the Art and Design Department at the University of Minnesota and has exhibited in the United States, Canada, Russia and Switzerland.

For information on the artist, visit her website at: <http://www.d.umn.edu/~esuh/>

Credits

Silent Scream

The testimony provided by E-Museum for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Republic of Korea www.hermuseum.go.kr

We, Survivors

The portraits of the comfort women survivors (military sexual slavery by Japan) provided by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan <https://www.womenandwar.net/>

Research information provided by E-Museum for the Victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Republic of Korea www.hermuseum.go.kr.

"Eun-Kyung Suh is a Minnesota-based artist whose delicate textile boxes are vessels for memories, histories and women's work that span centuries. They radiate tender fragility and mythic strength."

—Dana Self

The Kansas City Star, June 2011

"Eun-Kyung Suh's Silent Scream is both visually quiet and conceptually gut-wrenching. Subtle value shifts in grays and whites attract viewers to large-scale wall sculptures of arcs and circles formed from impeccably constructed silk organza boxes. Absence of color and orderly arrangement of boxes produce stillness and reflect the methodical nature of Suh's processes. Once drawn in by this tranquil visual beauty, quietude gives way to emotional anguish as viewers discover and read stories printed on the stacks of boxes. Arcs and curves conceal the text and force the reader into uncomfortable positions that pale in comparison to physical and psychological traumas in the stories—brutal testimony of Korean 'Comfort Women' who survived their torture during World War II. Awkwardness of reading within a visually quiet installation encourages empathy for the victims."

—Elizabeth Bilyeu, Director

Cascade Art Gallery, Portland Community College, Portland, Oregon, March 2015

Metropolitan
State University



www.metrostate.edu/cas/cwa/gallery



Torn From Home

Eun-Kyung Suh

Curator Essay by Margaret Miller

The Gordon Parks Gallery—Metropolitan State University

April 24–July 23, 2015