

ROH

In conversation
HYUN NAHM
MIRA ASRININGTYAS

KAWAH OJOL
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Mira Asriningtyas (M): You took a journey around six Indonesian volcanoes, which you explored through your first artist residency program in preparation for your first solo exhibition abroad at ROH. What initially drew you to explore volcanoes? Did the newness of this experience spark your fascination, or has this been a longstanding interest? Could you share how the residency shaped the narrative of your work?

Hyun Nahm (N): I knew little about Indonesia before this opportunity. In a pre-departure meeting with ROH, we discussed possible themes, and volcanoes emerged. I was intrigued by the potential connection to my work. In my practice, I often use synthetic materials, intentionally abusing them to focus their physical properties in extreme ways—overheating, cracking, or dissolving them to generate forms. I started researching volcanoes with a simple, sensory curiosity, vaguely imagining a connection between my work's material qualities and the geological characteristics of volcanoes. But after arriving in Indonesia and seeing these sites—Bandung's Kawah Putih, Tangkuban Perahu, and especially Merapi in Yogyakarta and Kawah Ijen in Banyuwangi—I experienced an overwhelming and rich stimulation that went beyond sensory fascination.

At Merapi, it was a cloudy day, so I couldn't even see the outline of the volcano, but what left a strong impression was the stark contrast in the area. There was a somber disaster archive of ordinary objects transformed by nature, which conveyed an apocalyptic mood, while just nearby,

over-tourism dominated. Kawah Ijen's sulfur mines became a central motif for this exhibition. The extreme relationship between humans and nature, the miners' extraordinary labor, and the pungent, vivid sulfur flowing from pipes all offered a wealth of material for conceptualizing the exhibition.

Beyond volcanoes, Bandung's Geology Museum also inspired me. The museum's stones—natural objects shaped by geological forces—echoed the core idea of my early work that relies on the concept of "miniascape" in Suiseki culture, capturing nature's vastness in small, focused forms. Appropriating this idea of miniascape, I began my work by generating forms through the specific properties of various industrial and contemporary materials to uncover the fundamental nature of our world. In this sense, the minerals displayed in a geological museum, though not collected for purely aesthetic purposes like Suiseki, inspired me to imagine new approaches to understanding the structure of today's world in the pursuit of knowledge about how the earth we live on is composed and formed.

M: You draw a compelling comparison between the precarious lives near volcanoes and the gig economy of miners, freelancers, and drivers. Please elaborate on this connection and how it manifests in your work.

N: While researching the sulfur miners of Ijen, I learned that they are daily laborers, paid only for the weight of sulfur they extract, brokered by intermediaries, without safety equipment or insurance. As a result, the miners are exposed to severe threats to their livelihoods if they suffer injuries or health issues from the toxic gasses emitted by the sulfur mines or from the rugged terrain.

In truth, this kind of story is not unfamiliar to us. We already know that platform service companies, deeply embedded in our daily lives, classify workers essential to their profit model as independent contractors rather than employees, lacking fair wages or protections.

My initial impression of Indonesian traffic was one of chaos, with packed motorcycles—including many drivers for Grab or Gojek—maneuvering shoulder-to-shoulder. Wrong-way driving and crossing the centerline are considered essential skills for drivers here, and every road was designed with no consideration for pedestrians. Watching this precarious fluid—overheated and accelerated like the tectonic instability of an active fault zone—one can't help but notice that nearly half of the motorcyclists are

wearing Grab or Gojek helmets. This highlights that roads here serve as the workplaces of many workers.

This instability, alongside the sulfur mines' volatile environment, spoke to modern labor's vulnerability. My work connects the romanticized hardship of miners, which tourists admire, to the more ordinary but indispensable work of gig laborers, navigating precarious landscapes to sustain their livelihoods under vulnerable conditions.

M: In *The Mine*, sulfur—a volatile material—symbolizes the lives of freelancers and miners. Why did you choose sulfur, and how do its properties reflect the gig economy's instability?

N: Sulfur's extreme fragility and volatility make it unsuitable for sculpting: it shatters easily and crumbles under the slightest impact, emits toxic fumes when melted, and can ignite unexpectedly. Its extreme fragility is a major drawback for creating artwork, as it can shatter into pieces even with thick casting or, in some cases, crack spontaneously when left untouched.

During my recent residency, I visited several junkyards to conduct research and source materials for my work. Countless pieces of debris, from helmets, small plastic fairings, and mufflers to the massive frames of cars, laid scattered or piled up, shattered into pieces. In sequence, these scenes led me to envision images of the dense roads filled with vehicles here, the countless accidents they could cause, and the labor of people working in such a fierce environment.

Sulfur seemed an ideal material to represent the gig economy's fragility. Creating a helmet out of sulfur, an object meant to protect, created an ironic commentary on the vulnerability of temporary labor.

M: You explore towers and communication infrastructure with the *Adhan* and *Iram* series. How do these forms intersect in your work, and what do they signify about community and connection?

N: I first became interested in BTS (base transceiver station) towers after hearing about the wave of arson attacks on them in the UK during the pandemic. At that time, a baseless conspiracy circulated on social media, claiming that 5G signals spread COVID-19, leading many to target these towers. BTS towers have often been regarded as undesirable and unpleasant facilities because of

public fears that the electromagnetic waves they emit might be harmful—though, scientifically, this hasn't been proven. This perception may stem from a deep-seated anxiety about advanced technologies that dominate our lives.

When a user connects to a BTS, personal data like location can be tracked, raising privacy concerns. In South Korea, authorities have used BTS data to monitor individuals during labor strikes and COVID-19 contact tracing. BTS towers' double-edged nature, providing access and surveillance, intrigued me. As a means of surveillance, I wanted to transform the BTS into art forms like sculpture and photography and place them in the exhibition space, thereby reversing the relationship—where the objects do not surveil us, but rather, we engage with and observe them.

M: *Adhan* reflects on religious minarets and communication towers as transmitters. What does this overlap symbolize in your work?

N: Historically, building laws in medieval Europe limited construction heights, emphasizing the authority of churches. My earlier *Gothic* series in 2021, which juxtaposed church steeples and BTS towers, explored this in a Korean context, where these towers and crosses coexist as vertical symbols of power and community. Since starting the *Gothic* series, I've developed a habit: whenever I travel to a new city, I scan its rooftops, instinctively searching for BTS towers.

Coming to Indonesia, I noticed an overwhelming number of BTS towers reaching high into the sky alongside the minarets of mosques, competing for dominance. Unlike church steeples, minarets broadcast sound, creating a more fitting parallel to BTS towers. I paired photos of these scenes with recordings of radio frequencies, capturing the resonance of Indonesia's environment where prayer calls and BTS signals overlap.

In this exhibition, *Adhan* and *Iram* continue the study in my previous work. Yet, the change in the subject matter led me to focus more intensely on sensations conveyed by invisible forces, which prompted a new approach. In *Iram*, I experimented with new material formed by freezing iron powder into shapes created within a strong magnetic field. This unconventional approach mimics the gritty noise of *Adhan* and represents the sense of overwhelming invisible forces shaping our environment.

M: In pieces like *Chain Link Strategy*, materials carry metaphorical weight. How do you select materials, and what role do they play in building themes around connection, labor, and vulnerability?

N: *Chain Link Strategy* uses a network of porous masses suspended by chains in tension, creating a structure that feels precarious yet bound together. This tension is the essence of the work. Initially for the 2022 Busan Biennale, the work reflected on Busan's history as a military supply base under Japanese rule. This backstory inspired a theme of connection, with undersea cables linking Korea to other countries concentrated near Busan.

However, unlike my usual sculptures, which are generally placed on the floor or pedestals, this work interacts closely with external spaces and objects, creating new meanings depending on the environment in which it is installed. This work has undergone three variations of spaces so far: the first was at the Busan Biennale, where it used the structure of a giant abandoned wharf warehouse and rusted anchors over 3 meters long; the second was in 2023 at the Art Sonje Center in Seoul, where it was installed in a ventilation room filled with air-conditioning ducts and plumbing pipes, in a tangled mess.

In this exhibition, *Chain Link Strategy* is placed within a dual space. First, sculptures are connected to a wrecked car, split into three parts, simultaneously closed and open. This connection leads to the gallery's hallway—a passage linking two rooms—and continues into a space previously used as a garage before the gallery was established. Through the physical state of these sculptures, precariously pulling each other while supported by the twisted frame of a wrecked car, I wanted to convey a story about connections, a network in a fragile and threatening state, or a structure that exists by parasitizing a terrible accident.

M: You interacted closely with miners and gig economy workers during your research. How did these encounters impact your artistic approach, and how are their voices reflected in your work?

N: I don't aim to reflect others' voices. I've carefully observed, imagined exaggeratedly, found the most appropriate materials and techniques, and generated forms. This practice as an individual artist may seem old-fashioned, outdated, and even skeptical. Nevertheless, I still think that what one witnesses and creates can resonate universally.

The subject I address in this exhibition is not limited to Indonesia but addresses global labor precarity. In South Korea, platform-based economies like Baemin and Coupang restructure society, creating many non-regular jobs while weakening traditional labor rights. These issues are so pervasive and abstract that they're often overlooked or hard to visualize. I believe that art, as it always has, should pull out the essence hidden behind superficial phenomena and stitch together a vision of the world in a form.

M: Last question: can you please elaborate on the exhibition title *Kawah Ojol* and how it encapsulates the nature of your solo exhibition?

N: The exhibition title combines "Kawah," meaning crater, with "Ojol," a slang term for temporary transportation workers based on online platforms. Through this combination of words, which may sound quite absurd and weird to Indonesians, I want to merge the geological characteristics of Indonesia, located in the "Ring of Fire," with its volatile, dynamic, and dangerous nature and the condition of labor in the gig economy, which is fragile, unstable, and precarious, into a single body.

While exploring the volcanoes here, I noticed that it was not the spectacular natural landscapes but rather the objects and places I encountered that left a stronger impression on me. Things that reflect the evidence and context of life and society surrounding the volcanoes portray the character of the crater and the area where it is located.

Although visitors to *Kawah Ojol* cannot see the grand, imposing crater, they can imagine the volcano's form through the various objects, landscapes, and sounds that exist here.

B. 1990, Goyang, South Korea
Lives and work in South Korea

Hyun Nahm creates landscapes with sculpture. Experimenting with the properties of industrial materials such as epoxy, cement and polystyrene, and employing traditional methods like casting and modeling, Hyun portrays another modern landscape through his explorations of the concept of the miniascape – a scaled - down and independent sample of the natural landscape, reminiscent of scholar's stones. The landscape that Hyun constructs is not based on any particular place or geographic environment, but is closer to a contingent and implicative scene made by variations in matter. As different materials entangle and melt into one another, or break open, they expand, ooze, and swell to create fragments of a landscape, much like magma. The recent *Void Extruction* series is an example of miniascape sculpture made in this method, and demonstrates a situation in which the emptied condition becomes, in fact, the solid.

Hyun Nahm studied Painting at Hongik University and received his MFA in Fine Arts from Seoul National University of Science and Technology. He has held solo exhibitions *Burrowing at the Bottom of a Rainbow*. ATELIER HERMÈS, Seoul (2021); *My Early Adulthood Pilgrimage is Wrong, as I Expected, instant roof*. Seoul (2021); *Miniascape Theory*. Art Space HYEONG, Seoul (2020). He has participated in group exhibitions at Lehmann Maupin (Seoul), Nam-Seoul Museum of Art, Art Sonje Center, Leeum Museum of Art, YPC SPACE, Dorok, Audio Visual Pavilion, archive bomm and many more.

B. 1986, Indonesia
Lives and work in Yogyakarta

Mira Asriningtyas is an independent curator and writer whose practice centers on site-specific, multidisciplinary projects that engage with socio-political contexts and cultural histories within the practice of everyday life. She completed the De Appel Curatorial Program (Amsterdam), RAW Academie 6: CURA (Dakar), and holds an MA in Arts and Society from Utrecht University. Mira has curated projects for a range of institutions, including De Appel, Stedelijk Museum, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, MALLAM, LOOP, ISCP, Our Museum, HMK; and others. Her writing is widely published in international books, exhibition catalogs, monographs, and journals such as Ocula, PARSE Journal, and Stedelijk Studies.

In 2011, she co-founded LIR, an art space turn nomadic curatorial collective fostering experimental exhibitions and alternative educational platforms to transmit knowledge across generations. In 2017, she launched the site specific biennale *900mdpl* in Kaliurang, a village under Mt.Merapi - Yogyakarta.

In 2024, Mira and Dito Yuwono became directors of Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society, Indonesia's longest-running contemporary art platform in Indonesia.

THANK YOU

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