

**“Comfort Women Wanted”:  
Uncovering Violent Past And Entering New Age of Activism  
Through Visual Language**

**Yae-Jin Ha**

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University of Pennsylvania

Every Wednesday, in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul, a mob of people of all age, gender and ethnicity led by a group of elderly women assemble around the statue of a young Korean girl. Together, they protest and demand the Japanese government of official apology and legal compensation for the crime they had committed to the Korean comfort women. Comfort women, a euphemism for a group of about 200,000 girls that were coerced into serving as sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers during the Japanese Occupation of Korea in early 1900s, and their supporters have been gathering in front of the Japanese Embassy since January 8, 1992 for a protest known as “Wednesday Demonstration.”<sup>1</sup> It has been more than 60 years since the end of WWII and more than 22 years since the beginning of the protest, yet the comfort women issues remains unresolved.

Approaching the issue from an art historical point of view, my paper explores the crucial presence of art in the comfort women activism and important role art has been playing in advancing awareness of these women and the issue. I argue that art provides clues to the Japanese’s attitudes toward the comfort system and treatment of women in their own country, art is used as a mechanism for healing the comfort women’s wounded soul and understanding their lives, and art has been at the forefront of the on-going battle against the Japanese government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before I lay out the arguments, I want to give a brief background on the issue and contextualize it within modern Korean society and history.

During World War II, Japanese army established a so-called “comfort station” all over East Asia. The first military comfort station was founded in Shanghai by the Japanese navy during the First Shanghai Incident and following that, but the first “confirmed” military comfort

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<sup>1</sup> “General Timeline of the Japanese Military “Comfort Women” System,” Voluntary Agency Network of Korea, accessed April 5, 2014, <http://korea.prkorea.com/wordpress/english/2012/10/26/general-timeline-of-the-japanese-military-comfort-women-system/>.

station was established in Pingquan, China in March 1933 under the name of “Disease Prevention and Hygiene Facility.”<sup>2</sup> The purpose and justification for the comfort station are outlined in two documents approved by the Ministry of War, “Matters Concerning the Recruitment of Women to Work in Military Comfort Stations” and “Measure to Enhance Military Discipline in Light of the Experiences of the China Incident” issued on 1938 and 1940 respectively.<sup>3</sup> In the latter document, the necessity of military comfort stations is denoted as “essential to raising the morale of the troops, maintaining military discipline, preventing looting, rape, arson and the massacring of prisoners, and preventing sexually transmitted diseases.”<sup>4</sup> They were also used as means to provide “comfort” to the soldiers during an aggressive and unjustifiable war. What is also worth noting about these documents is that the Ministry of War’s awareness and involvement in comfort women policies are made explicit in them.

Many girls between the ages of 14 and 16 were either lured by a promise of a job that would pay them generously or abducted off the streets. Yoshimi claims the government-general of Korea must have been involved in rounding up of and transporting comfort women for it would have been impossible for the Japanese army to accomplish the task on its own.<sup>5</sup> These comfort women were then taken to various comfort stations around East Asia and were forced to provide “comfort” to the Japanese soldiers. Each woman allegedly served an average of 30-40 men each day. Many died of sexually transmitted diseases and those who managed to survive through the atrocities and returned to Korea were treated like criminals by their family and a strong patriarchal Korean society. Many of them resorted to concealing their past life and trying

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<sup>2</sup> Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): 45-47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 63.

to lead a normal life, hiding in seclusion and living alone for rest of their lives, or never returning to their homeland.

It was not until 1991 when one of the surviving comfort women, Kim Hak-Sun, finally stepped forward to speak out against the Japanese government and share her story.<sup>6</sup> This incident was when most of the Koreans became aware of the existence of comfort women for the first time. Japanese officials have apologized numerous times since then, but insisted that the issue was settled in the 1965 treaty that normalized the relations between the two countries. The problem is that the full provisions of the 1965 treaty, in which Korea gave up the right to seek further reparations from Japan, was not made public until 2005.<sup>7</sup>

One could blame the nature of the Korean society being embedded with strong gendered patriarchal ideology for the lack of support from the Korean government over the past decades. After all, similar to these women, many Korean men were conscripted to fight for the Imperial Japanese Army or work in the military industrial sector during the War. However, upon their return, they were welcomed as heroes and were generously compensated for the sacrifice they made for their country. Even the current President of Korea, Geun-Hye Park, who is the first woman to be elected as president in South Korea, has been indifferent about the issue. Because of the inherent nature of the comfort women issue being political and not wanting to strain its diplomatic relationship with Japan, Korean government has not been able to get fully and actively involved in the issue, as some argues. Nevertheless, in August 2011, the Korean

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<sup>6</sup> "General Timeline."

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Williams, "The Empty Chair," *Seoulist*, March 12, 2012, accessed February 15, 2014, [http://seoulismag.com/columns/read/the\\_empty\\_chair](http://seoulismag.com/columns/read/the_empty_chair).

government was ruled as having violated the “basic rights” of comfort women by remaining inactive on the issue for so many years by the Korean Constitutional Court.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, some Japanese leaders have offered their formal apologies, expressions of remorse and in 1995, offered to set up \$1 billion fund for the victims.<sup>9</sup> However, the comfort women were dissatisfied with this plan and rejected the funds because the money would have been financed by private money and not by the government, which is what the victims want; a government reparation.<sup>10</sup> However, even to this day, many older Japanese officials refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoings and take responsibility for their actions. This is evident in the remarks made in 2007 by then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who denied the direct involvement of Japan in forcefully drafting women to work as sex slaves.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Toru Hashimoto, a popular Osaka Mayor, stirred a huge controversy last year by suggesting it was necessary to have “comfort women” during the War for the “battle-stressed soldiers.”<sup>12</sup> Recently, the head of

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<sup>8</sup> “The Empty Chair.”

<sup>9</sup> Kirk Semple, “Monument in Palisades Park, NJ irritates Japanese Officials,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2012, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/nyregion/monument-in-palisades-park-nj-irritates-japanese-officials.html?action=click&module=Search&region=searchResults%230&version=&url=http%3A%2F%2Fquery.nytimes.com%2Fsearch%2Fsitesearch%2F%3Faction%3Dclick%26region%3DMasthead%26pgtype%3DHomepage%26module%3DSearchSubmit%26contentCollection%3DHomepage%26t%3Dqry200%23%2Fcomfort+women+statue&version=&url=http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/?action=click&region=Masthead&pgtype=Homepage&module=SearchSubmit&contentCollection=Homepage&t=qry200&r=1&gwh=C625C9D35DBAF0925AA44E3D1FCC0B6D&gwt=pay#0&version=&url=http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/?action=click&region=Masthead&pgtype=Homepage&module=SearchSubmit&contentCollection=Homepage&t=qry200>.

<sup>10</sup> Sang-Hun Choe, “Statue Deepens Dispute Over Wartime Sexual Slavery,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2011, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/16/world/asia/statute-in-seoul-becomes-focal-point-of-dispute-between-south-korea-and-japan.html?action=click&module=Search&region=searchResults%230&version=&url=http%3A%2F%2Fquery.nytimes.com%2Fsearch%2Fsitesearch%2F%3Faction%3Dclick%26region%3DMasthead%26pgtype%3DHomepage%26module%3DSearchSubmit%26contentCollection%3DHomepage%26t%3Dqry200%23%2Fcomfort+women+statue&r=2&gwh=7A11F9A89272E60E24E70C39C1184CC2&gwt=pay#0&version=&url=http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/?action=click&region=Masthead&pgtype=Homepage&module=SearchSubmit&contentCollection=Homepage&t=qry200>.

<sup>11</sup> “New NHK Head’s “Comfort Women” Remarks Stirs Controversy,” *Japan Today*, January 26, 2014, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.japantoday.com/category/national/view/new-nhk-heads-comfort-women-remark-stirs-controversy>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Japan's public broadcaster NHK, Katsuto Momii, made a similar comment by saying the military comfort system was "common" in any country during World War II.<sup>13</sup>

The "normality" of comfort system in Japanese culture can be detected from studying Japanese erotica known as *shunga*, a type of ukiyo-e that was popular from early 1600s to end of 1800s.<sup>14</sup> Showing ordinary men and women in consensual sexual relations, the purpose of *shunga* was to portray married life as a happy state in which both husband and wife can enjoy a rich and pleasurable sex life.<sup>15</sup> Besides the scenes depicting violent sex and rape, women were always shown enjoying sexual activity; they were not depicted as inferior to or in submission of the men but were treated as equal.<sup>16</sup> In pre-modern Japan, sex was considered to be natural part of human experience and there was no sense of shame or sin associated with sex or its representation.<sup>17</sup> This kind of acceptance and natural attitude toward sex was rooted in ancient phallic worship that emphasized fertility and the importance of procreation in Shinto religion.<sup>18</sup>

The subject matter of *shunga*, however, became increasingly violent towards the end of the Edo period. Among various factors, such as the fact that artists was not able to find anything new to portray, or that implementation of color of woodblock gave rise to varied themes and subject matter, "a growing empowerment of women in society" was cited as a cause for this trend.<sup>19</sup> Feeling anxious and hostility toward women, men saw violence as one of the way to assert their dominance over women, and this kind of thinking can be seen as reflection of Japan's

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<sup>13</sup> "New NHK Head."

<sup>14</sup> Linda Gertner Zatlín, "“Comfort Women” and the Cultural Tradition for Prostitution in Japanese Erotic Art," in *Legacies of the Comfort Women of World War II*, ed. Margaret Stetz and Bonnie B.C. Oh (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2001), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Ofer Shagan, *Japanese Erotic Art: The Hidden World of Shunga* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2013), 61.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Rosina Buckland, *Shunga: Erotic Art in Japan* (New York: Overlook Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Shagan, *Shunga*, 235.

gendered patriarchal society. This idea of men as superior to women became even more prominent in Japan's Imperialist Era during which masculinist sexual culture became prominent.

Gendered sexual violence had become a defining characteristic of modern warfare for the symbolic nature of rape; the act of invading the body enforced the domination of man over woman, the occupant over the occupied.<sup>20</sup> However, what distinguished Japan's comfort system from other military controlled prostitution was the organized government involvement and a prostitution that was forced upon Korean women without their consent.<sup>21</sup> To the Japanese, Korean women's body was metaphorically seen as the occupied Korea and a successful invasion of the body symbolized a successful invasion of the country and damage to Korean identity as a whole. Objectifying women's body and controlling it through the gaze was seen as affirming one's masculinity. Like many scholars, I argue that if the Japanese did not learn to objectify their own women, they couldn't have exploited foreign women like that during the war.

Not only has art been used to examine the Japanese society and its culture, it has also been used for a therapeutic purpose to treat the comfort women. Art therapy uses art making as a means to resolve one's internal conflicts and promote self-growth through self-expression and sublimation.<sup>22</sup> This usage of nonverbal communication helps to relieve one's anxiety, rebuild one's destroyed self-esteem and achieve a sense of happiness and satisfaction that creates a new motivation, among other things. For the comfort women who have had to live in seclusion and

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<sup>20</sup> Joyce P. Kaufman and Kristen P. Williams, *Women and War: Gender Identity and Activism in Times of Conflict* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Yoshimi, "Comfort Women."

<sup>22</sup> Sun-Hyun Kim, *Art Therapy for Comfort Women: Art that Became History* (Paju, Korea: Korean Studies Information, 2012), 5.

hide their past for much of their lives, art is an acceptable means of communicating to others exactly how they feel.<sup>23</sup>

Art therapy treatment for the comfort women began in 2005 at the House of Sharing, a special place located southeast of Seoul that is served as a home for seven of the surviving comfort women that was built in 1995.<sup>24</sup> Its initial goals were to treat their PTSD(Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), to have a better understanding of and sympathize with their lives during and after the War, and most importantly, to provide an opportunity for them to express their pain and sorrow through art.<sup>25</sup> During a session, they would be asked to draw or paint about such topics as their lives before, during and after the War, their wishes, people they miss, and what they would do if they could live their lives all over again. Because of the nature of art as a window through which we can see a person's submerged thoughts and feelings and of the pain of reliving their nightmares, many of the comfort women were hesitant about doing the art therapy at first.<sup>26</sup> However, by easing them into the therapy by starting out with simple projects like drawing about spring or doing a self-portrait, many soon became interested and found joy in creating art works and telling their stories.

The art works produced by the comfort women have also functioned as an important historical document. Because many of them are illiterate, besides their spoken words, these art works are the only other form of historical evidence that act as testimony to what happened. Like the comfort women statue that is going to be discussed in the next section, they validate the veracity of the historical event that many have tried to negate.

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Adamson, *Art as Healing* (London: Nicholas-Hays, Inc, 1984): 19.

<sup>24</sup> "House of Sharing: History," accessed March 10, 2014, [www.nanum.org](http://www.nanum.org).

<sup>25</sup> Kim, *Therapy*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



On the 1000<sup>th</sup> day of Wednesday Demonstration in December, 2011, a statue of a young Korean girl representing the Comfort Women was erected at the site of a weekly gathering. This seemingly innocent teenage girl dressed in a traditional Korean dress, *hanbok*, has been at the center of many disputes, controversies and lawsuits ever since day one. With the plans to put up more statues like this around the world in the future, the outcries and controversies are expected to escalate. However, this is exactly what the supporters and activists want: for the world to take notice and become aware of this issue, in the hopes of getting one step closer to restoring these women's honor.

At first glance, one might not find anything unusual about this statue of a young Korean girl sitting on a chair. However, a closer inspection will start to reveal something odd, such as her jaggedly cut short hair, clenched fists, bare feet that are on a tiptoe, and a shadow that clearly doesn't match her outline. All of these little details are a culmination of a careful study of hundreds of photos of the comfort women during the Occupation by the sculptors, Kim Eun-Sung and his wife Kim Suh-Kyung.<sup>27</sup> This sculptor-couple wanted to make sure the statue would embody the comfort women and their painful past to the fullest while honoring them. The jaggedly cut hair symbolizes the horrifying situation in which they were stuck, clenched fists represent the anger towards the Japanese government, and her bare, tiptoed feet symbolize a sense of abandonment they have felt and experienced in the cold, unsympathetic world, including in their own country. The little bird that sits on top of her left shoulder symbolizes peace and freedom and the shadow doesn't match her outline because the shadow is of the present day comfort woman who has aged over the centuries while also referring to her dark past.

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<sup>27</sup> Description of the statue in this paragraph referenced from Young-Ju Kang, "Interview with Creator of Comfort Women Statue, Sculptor Kim Eun-Sung," *World Korean*, October 22, 2013, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.worldkorean.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=11901>.

Finally, the empty chair besides the statue represents not only all of the comfort women who had already passed away, but also serves as a place for people to sit and sympathize with the girl sitting next to them.

The comfort women statue in Seoul has since paved a way for erection of many similar memorials, notably a small brass plaque on a black stone honoring the comfort women in Palisades Park, New Jersey in 2010<sup>28</sup> and an identical comfort women statue was unveiled in Glendale, California last year, in 2013. The Glendale statue, especially, has created a huge uproar; the Japanese delegates have requested the removal of these two monuments and a lawsuit was filed earlier this year against the city of Glendale by two Japanese-Americans and a non-profit educational group for erecting a comfort women memorial in a public park.<sup>29</sup> They have asked the court to remove the statue, but their wish to put the comfort women issue out of public interest backfired. Their actions have only created even more buzz and garnered more attention of the public surrounding this issue.

The introduction of the comfort women statue to the campaign has not only pushed it to new it phase, it has also been a strong force that has been keeping the fight alive. It has several functions; first, it serves as a physical proof and reminder of the crime the Japanese has committed and of the victims, the comfort women. I was once asked by someone if the memorial would have been as powerful and controversial if it had taken an abstract form as opposed to a figurative form. Because of the subject matter of the memorial, it would have garnered strong reactions either way. The inherent nature of war memorials is to provoke debate.<sup>30</sup> However,

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<sup>28</sup> Semple, "Monument," 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Brittany Levine, "Lawsuit seeks Removal of Glendale "Comfort Women" Statue," *Los Angeles Times*, February 22, 2014, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/feb/22/local/la-me-ln-glendale-comfort-women-statue-sparks-lawsuit-20140222>.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Brandon, *Art & War* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 129.

what is especially compelling about the comfort women statue is the evocation of the pain and the crime through the literal physical and emotional scars on the body. Once existing only in old, faded pictures from the War and in our distant memory, a young Korean girl who served as sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers has been revived through its doppelganger. Its physical presence in public space is as powerful, if not even more so than a comfort woman herself. As the site of Japanese Imperialism, the body of the statue is a physical manifestation and remnant of the atrocities committed by the Japanese.

The statue also symbolizes the Korean government's neglect regarding this issue, as mentioned earlier in the paper. The comfort women would not still be fighting for their rights and reparations if the government had been more active regarding the issue. The memorial is not only targeted towards the Japanese government, but towards our own as well. It is demanding them to take a more active stance while confronting the Japanese government at the same time.

The presence of the statue will become even more important when there is not any more comfort women left. Our body is ephemeral and our memories are fleeting, but a statue is immortal; the physical and spiritual presence of the comfort women inherent in the memorial will stand in their place and forever remind us of the dark past even when the comfort women are no longer here with us. It will forever keep the history alive. As a site of collective memory, this war memorial makes us "remember things that we have never seen or experienced directly, but that have affected us."<sup>31</sup> For people of younger generations who never experienced the War, the statue serves as perpetuator of memories and a reminder that this is part of our past and history and that we have a responsibility to end this long overdue fight.

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Sontag, "Looking at War," *The New Yorker* (9 Dec. 2002): 94, quoted in Laura Brandon, *Art & War* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), 119.

Art was used as a gateway to explore the past, the present, and the future of the comfort women activism. Not only has art informed us of the gendered patriarchal society in Japan and the normality of comfort system there, it has also been used to heal the comfort women through art therapy and to keep the history alive and raise awareness of the campaign to restore the rights and honor of the comfort women. Now with only 55 of these comfort women surviving, the need to raise awareness of their existence and experience has never been greater. Leading this fight in a country with equally strong patriarchal values has been an arduous task. However, with younger generations and people from around the world becoming more interested in the issue day by day, light at the end of the tunnel seems to be getting brighter each day.

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