

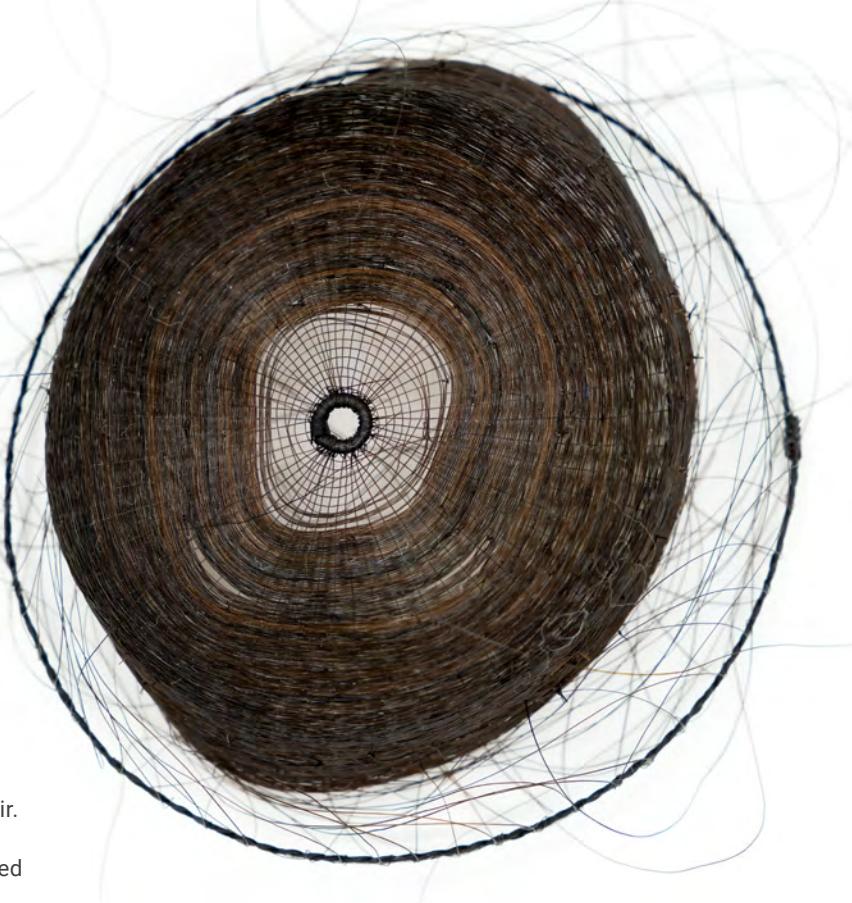
WEAVING PAST AND PRESENT: RITUALS OF CONNECTION IN THE WORK OF ROCHELLE YOUNK

BY FRANCES FLEETWOOD

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED

Rochelle Youk's work at a group exhibition at Southern Exposure in San Francisco titled *Moving Clouds*, curated by Cathy Lu. Three woven hats in various stages of completion were on view, resembling ancient artifacts in a museum display case. I did not yet know that the weavings were studies of the historical Korean *gat*—a woven horsehair hat worn only by the male aristocracy of the Joseon era—or that the pieces were woven with the artist's hair. But I was captivated by the intricacy and commitment to craft of these finely detailed pieces. I would soon learn how Youk's artworks fit into the exhibition's theme of connecting to ancestors, highlighting "histories and cultures that have often been silenced or pushed into the margins."¹

I visited Youk in her studio in the Dogpatch neighborhood of San Francisco—a visit that revealed a meticulous practice of merging historical craft and culinary explorations with alternative materials and contemporary intentions. A first-generation American born to immigrants from Japan and Korea, multimedia artist Rochelle Youk uses labor-intensive paintings, drawings, and sculptures to examine the relationships between Korea, Japan, and the United States. Her work reflects on



the juxtaposition between the violent context of colonization and occupation and the beauty of art and craft that can emerge from periods of turbulence. Exploring and reclaiming cultural traditions and imagery, Youk engages in meditative processes of making that involve repetitive acts over time. She holds her ancestors in mind while engaging in craft: the act of creation becomes a ritual through which to honor and connect with them—as well as to grapple with personal and collective histories.

Youk's first introduction to the *gat* was from an ornament on a Korean charm bracelet given to her by her grandmother. Her interest was reignited in adulthood when she saw the iconic hats featured in K-dramas such as *Jewel in the Palace/Dae Jang Geum* (2003) and *Painter of the Wind* (2008). Upon further research Youk discovered that these items—made for and worn by wealthy men—were made by skilled artisans known as *ganniljang*, who were most often working-class women who would never be allowed to own or wear one themselves.

"*Gat*" is a comprehensive term for a wide range of headwear with a crown and brim, made with different materials to indicate different levels of wealth or status. Originally worn by commoners, the earliest examples of *gat* can be found in murals and literature from 37 BCE–668 CE; these were practical cone-shaped hats made of bamboo, reeds, or arrowroot to protect against sun,

This is a multipart series celebrating artists whose practices illustrate *jewelry thinking*. These artists may or may not have a background in jewelry, but their work exhibits qualities that jewelry artists will recognize, including commitment to materiality, respect of process, and focus on the body.

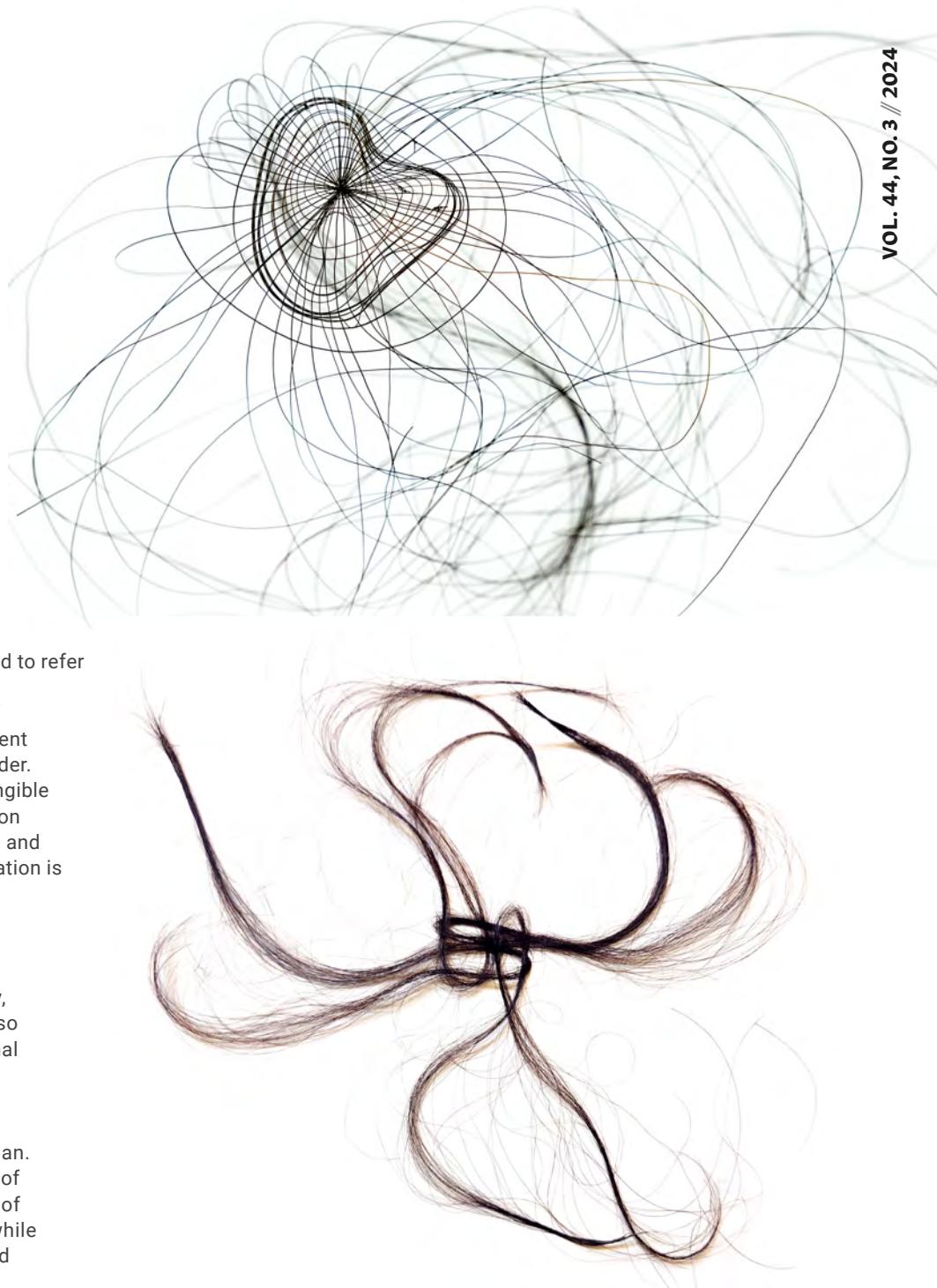
rain, and wind. During the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), *gat* styles began to indicate social status and wealth. The transparent black horsehair variation—*heungnip*, now arguably the most well-known type of *gat*—emerged in the final years of the Goryeo dynasty and was worn by government officials and decorated with various gems to indicate rank.² During the Joseon era (1392–1897), *gat* began to be mass produced, and strict regulations determined which people could wear which style of *gat*. *Heungnip* were restricted to men of the noble class, and now the term *gat* is often used to refer specifically to the *heungnip* variation.³

Today *ganniljang* are revered as masters of their craft—unlike the original makers, who went unappreciated because of their class and gender. Following the 1964 designation of *gat* as Intangible Cultural Property—a local heritage preservation system within South Korea—the intricate skill and complexity of techniques required in their creation is now widely acknowledged.⁴

Youk says:

As a Korean American artist I am drawn to these objects because of their beauty, history, and craft processes, but I am also critical of them because of the patriarchal values inherent in their existence. My “studies” of these hats are my way of connecting to this history through my cultural lens as an Asian American woman. I use my own floppy, fragile hair instead of the usual stiff horsehair and often think of the nameless craftspeople of the past while trying to recreate the weave patterns and shapes of old.⁵

Since Youk used her own hair, which is more supple than horsehair, she was unable to replicate the complex weave pattern of traditional *gat*—so she created her own contemporary weave pattern, and demonstrates the historical weaving patterns in drawings that accompany her studies. With this series Youk connects to crafts and traditions of her culture while both subverting the process of making and challenging patriarchal and classist values. Constructing her own ritual by mirroring the *ganniljang*’s craft, she honors the unrecognized and unappreciated artisans and brings them into the present.



Opposite:
Rochelle Youk
gat/갓 sketch no.4, 2019
 Hair of the artist
 4 x 4 x 4 in.
 Photo courtesy of the artist

Top:
Rochelle Youk
gat/갓 sketch no.2, 2016
 Hair of the artist
 4 x 9 x 6 in.
 Photo courtesy of the artist

Above:
Rochelle Youk
gat/갓 sketch no.5, 2023
 Hair of the artist
 12 x 12 in.
 Photo courtesy of the artist



Youk constructs other craft-based rituals to connect with family members in her series *changho*—named after the patterned style of wooden doors and window screens used in *Hanok*, traditional Korean architecture. Youk incorporates this pattern work into a series of wall sculptures, creating each piece with a specific family member in mind and tailoring her choice of materials to deepen her connection to them.

The piece *changho no.3, cigarettes* takes inspiration from her father. Using his preferred brand, Marlboro Lights, she created an intricate pattern by alternating the orientation of the cigarettes to show either their brown tobacco tips or their white butts. The arrangement depicts a *mugunghwa*—the national flower of Korea—a pattern commonly found in old Korean Buddhist temples. The burning of incense at temples draws a parallel to the smoke of cigarettes, and the act of creating forges a metaphysical connection to her father, who lives in South Korea and has become a symbol of the country and its culture to the artist.

Another piece, *changho no.4, soybeans/된장*, was created with Youk's grandmothers in mind. The piece consists predominantly of *meju*—fermented soybean bricks traditionally hung from the eaves of a house to air-dry—that have been arranged in various shapes to recreate a *changho* pattern. Youk's exploration of soybean as a medium was an accidental by-product of her attempts to make *doenjang*—a thick fermented soybean paste central to Korean cuisine—as a way to connect with her grandmothers and their

Rochelle Youk
changho no.3, cigarettes, 2020
 Marlboro cigarettes
 18 x 16 x 4 in.
 Photos courtesy of the artist



Rochelle Youk
meju/매주 *breeze blocks*,
 2024
 Soybeans, salt
 12 x 24 x 4 in.
 Photo courtesy of the
 artist



Korean cultural practices. During the year-long making process, Youk reflected on the fact that her grandmothers (and great-grandmothers) made their *doenjang* in secret: during Japanese occupation that mandated cultural assimilation; during the instability and violence of the Korean War; and after her maternal family escaped to Japan.

For Youk the process of making *doenjang* is a sculptural practice, and the peculiar, pungent dried blocks of *meju* are art objects in themselves. Youk forges connection to her heritage by liberating this custom from secrecy and sharing it in a gallery setting.

Youk shares:

Because I've never been fluent in the languages of my grandparents or even of my parents, there are a lot of ways in which I feel like I've missed out on experiencing who they are/were. I could never fully understand who they were through their own words; I missed out on stories, jokes, and simple nuances of speech, and I've always sort of felt this wall. But there's something about the physicality of ritual or tradition that has been able to make that wall porous. When I learn how to cook a dish following my grandmother's recipe and do the same steps that she did in her kitchen as a young woman in Seoul, I gain back some of that understanding of who she was. For me it's like that with a lot of traditional craft processes. Fumbling through the haptic learning process of laborious or complex crafts can reveal a lot about the people who created it.⁶

In Korean the title of this series "can break down into two distinctive meanings: *chang-ho*, a window whose key functions are ventilation and lighting, and *ho*, a passage that connects different rooms." Interestingly, "*ho* plays the role of a door only when people pass in and out, and when there is no such human activity, it acts as a window."⁷ In a parallel, Youk's artworks play the role of connective portals, bridging gaps across time and space to connect the artist with her ancestors. By holding them in her mind and engaging in methodical, laborious, meditative processes of creation, she builds rituals of connection. She creates windows to the past and to different countries, activating them into doorways



with the presence of humans—in the form of their cigarettes, cooking, or craft. Weaving together personal and cultural architectures, memories, customs, and traditions, Youk traverses time and space alongside her ancestors.

1 "Exhibition Announcement: *Moving Clouds* | Group Exhibition Curated by Cathy Lu" [press release], Southern Exposure, January 2024, [https://soex.org/sites/default/files/PR_Press_Release_MovingClouds2024_\(1\).pdf](https://soex.org/sites/default/files/PR_Press_Release_MovingClouds2024_(1).pdf). **2** "All About Korean Traditional Hats," Asia Society, n.d., <https://asiasociety.org/korea/all-about-korean-traditional-hats>.

3 Min Bora, "Gat: Korea's Traditional Hats," *National Museum of Korea: Quarterly Magazine* 52 (Summer 2020), <https://webzine.museum.go.kr/eng/sub.html?amIdx=15927>.

4 "Gannil (Horsehair Hat Making)," National Intangible Cultural Heritage, Korea Heritage Service, n.d., available at <https://english.khs.go.kr/>.

5 Rochelle Youk, various personal communications with author, April–July 2024. **6** Ibid. **7** C. Il Chang, "Beautiful Museum for Traditional Windows and Doors: Chungwonsanbang Master," Korea Tour Information, n.d. [June 12, 2013], <https://koreatourinformation.com/blog/2013/12/06/beautiful-museum-for-traditional-windows-and-doors-chungwonsanbang-master>.