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Drawing In Space: Jeongmoon Choi's Extraordinary Light Installations

Jeongmoon Choi is a Korean-born, Germany-based artist living and working between Seoul and Berlin, known for creating arresting installations from coloured wool and UV light. Here we interview the artist, and profile a selection of her previous works.

Jeongmoon Choi was born in 1966 in Seoul, the city with most art openings per square mile in the world. She studied painting at College of fine arts at Sungshin University in her native town. Then, in 1987, at the age of 21, she earned a B.F.A. degree in painting and went on to pursue a Master of fine arts, which came 3 years later, in 1990, and it was this which kick-started her career as an artist.

After deciding to relocate to Europe for the second phase of her studies, she studied fine arts at Kunsthochschule in Kassel. Jeongmoon slowly started to distance herself from painting, as she sought a new way of expressing herself, but in a less conventional way.

"I was looking for the tools to replace the paint brush and the oil colours and to be able to work freely with planes and colours at the same time," says Choi.

"One day, while walking through town I came across a shop window with threads in various colours and thicknesses. It was perfect and I started using this material to "paint" on canvas. Then I began to port my drawings into the room and to develop two or three dimensional shapes with thread".

Jeongmoon Choi's artistic diversity speaks for itself. Her remarkable installations have always been a subject of fascination, especially considering that her artwork has the ability to transform any environment, maximise any room, and wash away or carefully define all of the edges. Impeccably precise, Choi's light installations create a new, science fiction-like environment that can trick your brain and transport you to a different dimension.

Drawing In Space

A few decades before Choi's birth, and 5570 miles away from her native town, other artists were experimenting with a new technique in creating art. In 1949 Picasso and Gjon Mili, a technical prodigy and lighting innovator, met in Picasso's studio in Vallauris, a commune in the South of France. Mili showed Picasso some of his photographs of ice skaters with tiny lights affixed to their skates, jumping in the dark. Picasso, impressed with what he had seen, took a small electric light and immediately started to, as they called it, "draw in space".

Jeongmoon Choi draws in space as well, but unlike Picasso, she draws using threads. Stretching like a precise laser light from ceiling to the floor or meticulously outlining objects, for instance, windows, chairs or even the whole room, fluorescent threads and black light develop a striking lighting dynamic for the room, interacting dramatically with the impressed visitors.

Lines up . a recollection is a pyramidal outdoor UV light installation in Berlin, located in the center of a U-shaped building. Its dimensions, and eye-catching blue glow, attract visitors and draw attention to the building façade as it shines out in the night.

Another great example, and my personal favorite is the outstanding project named Birdcage. Birdcage is an opulent, exquisitely colorful grid made of threads in various colors, which intensifies the experience. The grid creates walls of light that instantly establish a recognisable visual identity. The installation situates the visitor outside of the conventional perception of space and time, allowing them to enter a whole new world.

Jeongmoon Choi's oeuvre contains a large number of installations that, have to be not only seen, but experienced. And the number is increasing, with the artist currently showcasing her work around Europe, such as in the forthcoming 9th International Festival of Digital Arts & New Media in Athens.

Interview with the artist

UT: What was the turning point in your career that made you decide to turn away from painting?

JC: I started with painting, but naturally developed out of it, since the medium was not giving me enough room (and space) for expression. I did not turn away, I just moved on.

Where do you find inspiration? What inspires you the most?

Living in urban/metropolitan environments, and travelling between big cities, is what inspires me most.

How has your work developed over the years?

I realise I managed to create ever stronger and more minimalistic artworks, yet always establishing a near to perfect match between my works and the places where I installed it. Also, after exploring the interior spaces and characters of many different kinds of rooms, I am now also considering the outside, open and public spaces for my installations.

How difficult it is to turn your idea into an installation?

In my case, once I developed an idea, the hardest part is already done. Turning it into an actual piece of work is not difficult for me.

What is the most challenging part about working with threads and black light?

It seems to hold almost endless room for different interpretation and experience on the side of the spectators. The ambivalence of analog built and digital impression, the special mood which is created within the room I put up the works, and not to forget the meditative state of concentration I experience while setting it up.

How big of a role do colours play in your installations? Is there a special meaning behind every colour or the way you combine them?

Colours do not play a big role for me, they might play a role for the overall experience once the work is done.

What is your favorite aspect of working with threads and black light?

The UV Light brings the spaces in a constant change of inside and outside in relation to each other and shows the paradoxical dual nature of space perception. In my installations I offer a wide range of different perspectives and ways to explain the work displayed. As I described above, people tend to open up when confronted with the installations. I would like them to take this attitude with them, to be open for more than one perspective.

How do people react to your artworks?

The fluorescent threads/lines seem like a laser beam in a dark room. Visitors are initially confused, at the first look of the room they lose orientation. After a moment, they are based, and try to find all offered perspectives and experiences. Oftentimes the visitors are put in a meditative state, and feel very relaxed and at peace. They tend to spend a long time in the room within the installation, naturally changing perspectives, thus interacting with it from many angles. This is a common reaction from the viewer, and this is most interesting to me.

You live between Seoul and Berlin, is there any difference between the two art scenes?

Both are big cities with many opportunities. Of course, Berlin has a more international and very diverse, yet almost overloaded art scene, while Seoul seems to have the tendency to follow trends, which makes it seem more focused and concentrated.

What can we expect from you in the near future?

I am fascinated by the idea of also developing installations in exterior space, exploring the possibilities of public installations.

From June 7-9, Jeongmoon Choi will take part in the 9th International Festival of Digital Arts & New Media, "Athens Video Art Festival". The installation she will present is called "Drawing in Space – a maze". Athens Video Art Festival invited all contemporary artists to get inspired by the urban environment and the unlimited potential of the new media and participate with the aim of experimentation and release from any kind of stereotypes.