SANG WOO KIM

*S*ang Woo Kim is a Korean-born, London-based artist, working with mediums that range from painting to installation. Last year, his first solo show 'PUBLIC TOILET' in Venice was one of the most memorable pieces of work, outshining even some of the official pavilions in the Giardini and Arsenale; this year, his collaboration with recently relaunched fashion brand MCQ will turn heads and might last far beyond the season's quick run. In his parallel career as a celebrated model, he's had previous experience in the fashion world, appearing in campaigns and on runway shows for some of the most esteemed labels worldwide. In his art practice he's dedicated to creating work that can help change the world for the better. We spoke with Kim about his personal challenges of coming of age in London, how it has influenced his artistic practice, and his new work for MCQ, including a sculptural collaboration with the artist Louis Gibson—the images of which are exclusively debuting on the pages to follow.

INTERVIEW *Emily McDermott*
PORTRAIT *Ian Kenneth Bird*
ARTWORK *Sang Woo Kim & Louis Gibson*

You were brought up in a Western culture within a Korean family and you've previously mentioned developing a "cognitive dissonance" at home. Can you expand upon this?

I only recently asked my parents whether or not they had ever thought about the fact that when I walked into school for the first time I would feel "other" due to my heritage or the color of my skin. They were surprised, as if they hadn't ever thought about it. This made me wonder if only I had thought about it whilst growing up, and it also made me realize how I lived in these two separate worlds: school and home. I always felt "other," being neither fully accepted by the Western world at school nor fully understanding the Korean world at home. This cultural duality alienated me. I didn't have a traditional sense of belonging, which I longed for, but looking back, this experience made me grow a thicker skin. Kids aren't racist, but they are naïve and point out difference, and they can be really mean! *[Laughs]*] As I grew up though, I learned to own feeling different and become one with it.

How did you become one with it? I imagine that's much easier said than done.

As you grow from your teens into adolescence, you start to recognize that people actually do grow up. Your parents also start to empathize with the adult you're becoming, and you start to empathize with your parents as human beings, too. When I was younger, I never understood why I was considered different. I thought, "I am just like

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you," hence why I never backed down from hanging out with the Western crowd at school. It was some sort of challenge for me to be accepted for who I was; I didn't want to be part of the minority group just because that's where I was "meant to be". I clearly did not like getting told what to do, or in that case, what Western society told me to do.

When you visited South Korea, would you feel less "other"?

Visiting our relatives in South Korea for one or two months during the summer holidays was always the highlight of my year. I yearned to feel "normal," so I found comfort in myself there. My western attitude stuck out like a sore thumb, but at least I didn't feel judged for the way I looked. I felt like I was home—a home away from home.

You recently art directed the FOAM campaign for MCQ and also made new sculptures in collaboration with Louis Gibson for it. Can you tell me how this came to be?

MCQ approached me as an artist to art-direct a fashion campaign. Although I had some previous art direction experience, this could've been considered a risk—brands tend to be "safe" and book established art directors—but they did it for the sake of opportunity and collaboration. So it was quite atypical for a fashion brand to take such a risk, and the philosophy touched me. Giving an artist the opportunity to art direct and giving Cosmo Webber—a young photographer who usually photographs musicians—the opportunity to shoot his first fashion campaign, as well as giving the stylist and the hair and makeup assistants the chance to step it up to the next level, was quite refreshing. This energy is also infectious: I ended up following MCQ's philosophy when picking the team; I wanted to give new opportunities to and positively challenge creatives via collaboration.

What's the story behind the title, "FOAM"?

FOAM is a collection that focuses on London and what the city is really about. With workwear and outerwear, it represents London's industrial landscape. The collection puts a twist on heavy industrial workwear and classic workwear styles become a bit strange and unexpected. Borrowing from the language of shipping and construction, its idiosyncrasy comes from the application of materials and fabrics in exaggerated weights, creating a vision of utility that's full of contradictions, hence the title

of "FOAM." For me, this title exuded juxtapositions and I wanted to show this in a visual language.

So you decided to make sculptures?

Right. The visual language was created in the form of clothing by the designers, so then I thought: If an artist got this brief to make artwork, what would the outcome be? I thought the comparison between the two creative visual languages would be interesting. I also thought about how fine art could elevate a fashion campaign and give it more context. As the brief was all about materiality, I immediately thought sculptures would be the best medium. Although my practice is quite eclectic, I had never really explored sculptures, so this was an opportunity to delve into new territory.

And this is where Louis came into the picture?

Yes, I had long admired Louis's work as a set designer, but first saw his sculptures earlier this year in a group exhibition called "Four Walls." The materiality of the sculptures intrigued me; he used expanding foam to mold a sculpture that ultimately mimicked concrete. The immediate contradiction between materials made Louis the perfect collaborator for this series of sculptures.

What was the creative process like?

The process was categorized by the key words for the FOAM campaign: "industrial," "contradiction," "strange and unexpected," "construction," and "concrete poetry". For example, in relation to the word "industrial," most of the objects and materials we used were found, upcycled, and repurposed, which also aligned with the materiality of the clothing: MCQ had commissioned a repurposed textile-waste fiber that was used in clothing for the first time and clothes were filled with recycled cashmere fiber instead of industry-standard down or synthetic. In interpreting "construction," we created totally new objects from found materials; mattress foam and springs were repurposed to make something entirely different—so much so that it became almost unrecognizable. The fine art objects stand by themselves in their own essence but also represent FOAM's ethos via their materiality, juxtapositions and their activation of poetic and metaphorical cues.

Had you ever collaborated with another artist like this before?

No, not to this degree. The project enabled us to work together in a way that the creative input was completely equal. Fabricating this work would have never been

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possible without one another. It was a true and honest collaboration, and a beautiful process: We seamlessly clicked and have since discussed venturing into a sculptural practice as a duo alongside our individual practices. I'm sure you'll see more sculptures from Louis and I in the future.

How do you think this series of work relates to your artistic practice as a whole?

My practice has always been wide-ranging with different projects and artworks representing different parts or stages of my life. When I look back at previous works, it seems as if each piece is a time stamp of my emotions. For example, my first solo exhibition, "IF YOU SEE ME NOW YOU DON'T," reflects a time in my life when I was having some sort of identity crisis due to both alienation as well as conforming to Western ideals. I wanted to explore and express my repressed feelings and face the truth of my past. Going back to your first few questions though, coming of age has clearly influenced my practice as an artist. However, I don't believe that every project or series of work has to relate to each other or as a whole. I'm learning my own artistic practice as I create, and I don't necessarily need to know what my artistic practice is.

Looking at your previous projects, though, there is a common thread: raising awareness about social issues, like immigration and racism. ILOVEYOU, a creative communications agency you started with friends, has also engaged in what could be called activist activity.

Metaphorically speaking, ILOVEYOU is a creative megaphone for causes we care about, which are usually social issues. The first project we did was about Brexit: On both sides of a van, we displayed a billboard with the EU flag, but in the middle of the ring of stars, it said, "U K, U.K. ?", with the question mark replacing the star that represents the U.K. During a crucial EU summit on Brexit, we drove it around Parliament and the European Commission. We then tore it off and marched it through London with 750,000 other people protesting for a second Brexit referendum. We also did a project about panic attacks during Mental Health Awareness Week and a project about climate change for Fridays for Future which was nominated for the 2019 Beazley Designs of the Year award. Being an artist can at times be seen as a narcissistic or selfish occupation, but I think art has a greater responsibility than just being something people go see on the weekends. I believe art and artists can really change the way people view the world. •