

[00:00:00.550] - Speaker 1

Hi. Welcome to the second episode of our podcast series, Gaining Ground. Hosted by our current curator-in-residence, Annie Jael Kwan. Annie sits down with artists from our current exhibition, Future Ages Will Wonder, to chat about the themes in the show and the artworks on display. In this episode, we'll hear a special performance from artist duo Breakwater, who are Youngsook Choi and Taeyoung. As Breakwater, their work explores social practice across subject matters such as climate justice and the lived experience of migrants. After the performance, the artists will join our host, Annie, in conversation. Gaining Ground and Future Ages Will Wonder is supported by Artsformation. To find out more about the series, the exhibition, or us, visit our website, fact.co.uk.

[00:01:37.490] - Breakwater

We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We are not scared. We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We're not scared. We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We are not scared.

[00:01:45.290] - Breakwater

Let us tell a story of how bears signal the beginning of human history. According to Korean legend, about 5000 years ago, a tiger and a bear wished to be human, so they prayed. Finally, the God of the Mountain advised them, "If you eat only garlic and mugwort in a dark cave without seeing any light for 21 days, you will become a woman." They started a journey of transformation together. The tiger gave up soon after, but the bear managed to endure and walked out of the cave as a woman. Not only that, the son of God who came to the Earth to build his Holy Kingdom was attracted to this bear woman. Between this heavenly spirit and the bear woman, the first king was born.

[00:02:55.770] - Breakwater

Well, that's the story we grew up with. Yes, we are descendant of this hybrid. We have been holding the future since the very beginning. However, we also have our suspicion. Why did the bear woman not become first queen of the nation? She is the one who endured God's horrible test, not her hybrid son. Where is her glory? The story of the human king continues, but we don't know much about what happened to the bear woman. She seemed to exist only to be a bearer of a great man, giving birth to a Holy manchild, and her story ends there. This feels like unfinished business. We are going to find her.

[00:04:09.030] - Breakwater

We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We're not scared. Uh-oh, a forest. A big, dark forest. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it. As soon as I gave birth, Holy spirits and the humans took my child away from me, saying I'm still a bear in a human body. They dismissed me as primitive, uneducated, and inferior, and expelled me from their kingdom. I was deeply despondent. Yet, I was excited about going back to the forest I had missed so much. You know, we bears are true nomads after all. We know where to find the delicious fruits and mushrooms. But the forest was no longer there. Instead, the unbearable horror was waiting. All the trees were cut down. My fellow bears had been hunted down for their skins, gallbladder, and feet, or just for the thrill of hunting down a beast. My life depended on escape. So I became on exile.

[00:05:58.860] - Breakwater

We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We're not scared. Uh-oh, a river. A deep, cold river. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it. I arrived in the land of dreams and opportunities. Looking down on me, people in uniform said, "Thorny skin, thick dark hairs? You must be a bear in a human body." But they didn't expel me. They saw how useful my resilience and patience could be for their empire-building. They gave me a loan and a contract. The deal written in black and white.

[00:06:58.170] - Breakwater

Sailing down the river and across the ocean, I travelled to all the continents, first to the gold mines in South Africa. I was one of the 64,000 Chinese indentured labourers called "coolies." We could not leave the minds without permission. We could not interact with the local people. The government considered us to be criminals if found outside the mining cast. It reminded me of the dark cave I endured, but only worse. Instead of 21 days, you're locked in for eight years, and another eight years

for many. I heard the most dangerous destinations were the guano mines on the island of Peru, where toxins burned the eyes, throats, and lungs. Very few ever returned to China.

[00:08:02.410] - Breakwater

Then I went off to the sugar plantations in Cuba, Hawaii, and Mauritius. In Cuba, about 6000 Chinese workers arrived every year. We were sold for between \$100 and \$500 per head. We were chained without committing any crime. We were humiliated by being stoned on the street. We had no choice but to work day and night, day and night, and day and night. At the farm, at the railroad. We built the cities and bridges. For many of us, this hardworking life and public despair simply continued all the way to the 21st century.

[00:09:13.560] - Breakwater

We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We're not scared. Uh-oh, what tide. A fast, fierce tide. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it. My back was about to break from long hours of harvesting cockles. In Morecambe Bay, cockles are called the shells of gold. I had to collect 25 kilogramme to get paid £5. I walked through the dark, cold, and misty winter night. I was too tired to notice the incoming of the eight-metre tide. Local fishermen warned me the low tide is turning, so I must escape. But they were not my boss. The overwhelmingly fast high tide swallowed me up and washed me away. I tried to run, but the tides were faster. I still remember all the shells of gold I picked that night and how they all scattered through the water bubbles and foam. They looked shinier than ever.

[00:11:06.110] - Breakwater

We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We are not scared. Uh-oh, a snowstorm. A swirling, whirling snowstorm. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it. We were just a bunch of hardworking women who were doing our best to survive and support our loved ones. Then came this man with no hesitation and anger. He said I was evil and my body induced him to a dirty desire. He said I have sinned against him. He pulled out a pistol and punished me for just who I am. Agony, screaming. So much blood and loss of love. It reminded me of the horror in my home forest where my family and friends were hunted down for their skin, gall bladder, and feet, or just for the thrill of hunting. The massage parlour in Atlanta looked exactly like that.

[00:12:56.020] - Breakwater

We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one. What a beautiful day. We're not scared. Uh-oh, a cave. A narrow, gloomy cave. We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it. What's that? One shiny wet nose, two big furry ears, two big goblin eyes. It's a bear. Quick, back through the cave. Back through the snowstorm. Back through the tide. Back through the river. Back through the forest. Get to our front door, open the door, up the stairs. Oh, no, we forgot to shut the door. Back downstairs, back upstairs, into the bedroom, into the bed, under the covers. We are not going on a bear hunt again.

[00:13:57.130] - Breakwater

I became an exile and wandered around the world to find out what it means to be a human. It was a journey of fear and despair. Yet I endured all the tears since wept. My back and shoulders are aching from excessive labour, and full of scars from my master's whipping. My breath is toxicated. My hands are rough and dirty. My bones are broken into pieces by the fierce, high tidal waves. My stomach is bleeding heavily from gunshots. And I am. I am really tired. It all started here in this cave with my dream to be a human. Was it worth it? I don't know. I just endured. And I am walking out of the cave again. This time, I don't dream to be a human. Instead, I will follow the gentle smell of old spring. There. Can you see? The bright yellow dandelions are swaying and waving.

[00:15:36.750] - Breakwater

[singing 00:15:36].

[00:17:18.670] - Annie Jael Kwan

Hello. My name is Annie Jael Kwan. I'm currently curator-in-residence at Fact, and also the curator of

the exhibition Future Ages Will Wonder, which is showing at FACT till the 20th of February, 2022. The project explores the advancements of science and technology in relation to our conceptions of ourselves and our histories. I'm very pleased today to welcome Breakwater, who are Youngsook Choi and Taey lohe, two South Korean artists based in London. You've just heard an experimental performative piece by them, which is an adapted version for our podcast today, and they will be performing this live at FACT Liverpool in the gallery in February. So please do check our website for details on how to register and join us there.

[00:18:07.510] - Annie Jael Kwan

Hi, Youngsook and Taey. It's really nice to be connected. And of course, we are all spread across the world right now, from London to Singapore to South Korea. So thank you for making the time to connect. I thought maybe then I would ask, since we're all apart now, how did we all come together and how did you start to work together as Breakwater?

[00:18:38.990] - Taey lohe

Hi, Annie. Thank you for inviting us today. I think we met about 15 years ago through our mutual friends in Korea. But then life took us apart, and then we were both busy, I guess make a living in London. Then, just before the pandemic, we met through the AAA, one of the meetings that you ran, and we realised our path is coming together, and we wanted to kind of keep in touch. And through the pandemic, I think we realised that our experience living in London as migrants, as a diaspora, made us realise that artwork needs to expand into more solidarity work. And we were quite struck by lack of support for Southeast and East Asian nurses in healthcare, and we simply wanted to make the healing practice, that what can we do. I don't think there was a broad spectrum what can we do in art. We started our conversation talking about how can we make care infrastructure within ourself in the longer term.

[00:20:21.990] - Taey lohe

I live near the forest, and I invited Youngsook to the forest, and we walked a lot together. And through that walk, we talked about how we survived in the country, what we envisioned in our life, what hurt us previously, and what kind of hope we have. So gradually, it formed the collectivity that we want to work under, the Breakwater. And breakwater, that protects the land from the high tide and strong wind, but also, it disperse all the water, it disperse the waves. We are aware that the construction of breckwater can destabilise the seabed sometimes, but we really like the idea of the protection and making the ocean unstable in some way. So yeah, that's how we met and how we decided to work together. Youngsook, do you want to add anything?

[00:21:51.130] - Youngsook Choi

It was also not just of us, but many people have this reckoning that the art world is highly competitive and it's not really endorsing collaboration. And also, we had to put so much effort sometimes in quite wasteful way to compete each other over very limited resources. And so I think the forming the collective is out of this reckoning. Let's not compete, but rather, we can kind of form the force together and find a way collectively to survive.

[00:22:32.930] - Annie Jael Kwan

So when you came together, you made this work, Fermented Flower, for the Future Ages Will Wonder exhibition. For those who have not visited yet, I really would encourage you to come and see the show, and come and see Fermented Flower, which is a large -scale installation featuring a tapestry with soil, and dandelion wine, and a sound component. The tapestry itself is fairly large, and it's composed of different images that are composited. And then you add this wonderful hand-embroidered detail throughout the tapestry. Can you tell us a little bit more about this process of making together, especially in relation to what you've discussed here about wanting to be together in your work in a non-competitive way, working collectively. And I imagine that it has been quite an interesting process since the work is so labour-intensive.

[00:23:33.090] - Taey lohe

I think we started with a conversation about digging up the Earth. I think we started our conversation in winter about the image of digging up the Earth. And because it was winter, we talked about the

burying kimchi into the clay jar and put it on the ground. Because winter is so cold in Korea, the soil itself becomes refrigerator, and the kimchi ferments inside quite deliciously. And burying something and fermenting something, it takes time. It takes energy also. It takes a lot of waiting time. And also, excavating something out of the Earth, that what can we find, not as a person who is looking for the treasure, but the person who is looking for the connection to Earth, what can we get.

[00:24:47.810] - Taey lohe

So that come to the thinking, what if we bury our liquor, take liquor out of the soil, and drink it? So that was kind of started with our imagination. And then we researched into the Chinese indentured labour, on how did they move when that happened, what kind of contracts they had, what kind of records they have, what kind of nickname they had, what kind of infrastructure they built in each country.

[00:25:20.630] - Taey lohe

And when the spring came, we started harvesting the dandelion together, but also separately, in Youngsook's garden, in my garden, on the street, in the forest. And then we took those dandelions into the liquor and fermented them. So we mix them with the soju or gin or vodka, all different kind of substance that we can find. And then we were testing with the different images, with the different colours and different methods, because this is kind of patchwork. We wanted to test what works best in the tapestry, in the fabric. So the idea is that fabric coming out of the Earth to meet the audience. So then once we decide, okay, this is the picture we want, then we started the embroidery work.

[00:26:15.270] - Taey lohe

And because embroidery work is such a high labour-intensive work, we needed to work separately, but also together and see each other's style. And I guess it kind of also shows how you work. And mine was more of a voluminous and three-dimensional kind of style. And Youngsook's embroidery style was more flat and traditional way, much more tidier than mine, and then we combined them together. So once we finished our piece, we exchanged our piece, so that stylistically, they are all combined in each patchwork.

[00:26:59.670] - Taey lohe

And then also, we drew a picture in large that what we want, for instance, for the cockles and trees and different layouts. So then we put them on the floor and see whether this works. And sometimes, we discuss the details of certain parts, like how the dandelion root coming together, and how does the root entangled with the victims who are tied and grounded, and how does the highlight of the blood drawing, and colonisers coming into the pictures, and in what way we want to bring the names of the cockle pickers into the work. And I think at some point, we thought trusting the process is very important in our collaboration, because it's long process and sometimes we have to work separately, sometimes we work together. So it became a little factory routine, which was also lovely.

[00:28:11.670] - Youngsook Choi

The name Fermented Flower is coming from one particular Korean shamanic ritual that heals mental illness, that is supposed to heal mental illness. The process of ritual starts with alluring the madness with the flower. So the ritual uses flower as a medium or even collaborator to attract the madness spirit out of this person who's suffering from these mental issues, and then soak this flower into a bottle of alcoholic beverage. But the interesting thing about this ritual is looking at mental well-being as a community affair, not an individual issue. The ritual tries to understand and accommodate one's mental issues within the socio-political structure, and therefore it is about community interrogation around one's madness. So I think the idea of healing someone's mental issues as a community endeavour is kind of the baseline theme of this work, how we can look at painful and traumatic historical lineage of our diaspora communities in the context of healing. This shamanic ritual is in a way baseline narrative for the Fermented Flower.

[00:29:37.950] - Youngsook Choi

And this ritual believes as soaking the flower into a bottle of beverage, basically kind of locking up, so the madness or even kind of negative spirit doesn't spread around. And therefore the assuring of locking up is also coming through the burial. So you're not just soaking the flower into the bottle of alcoholic beverage, but also you bury whole bottle underground. But in a way, in our installation, the

bottle is half-buried. So we are saying, in a way, we don't want to bury this madness. We actually want this madness exposed to a certain extent. So it was kind of twist out of this shamanic ritual.

[00:30:25.530] - Youngsook Choi

And in terms of aesthetics, at some point, we came to a conclusion that we can get the aesthetical inspiration from the black laquered closet that created with the mother of pearl. In many Asian countries, they have this kind of closet, black laquered or sometimes red laquered, but decorated with shiny pearls. And this type of furniture has very specific collage with the symbolic elements of trees, birds, and flowers, identifying long, healthy life and happiness. And therefore, you hold this piece of furniture with these hopes. And because of that, it was quite interesting that, Annie, you mentioned about the resemblance of our work with the religious murals. And it was quite fascinating, how growing up with these artefacts and everyday forms of our heritage sometimes leads us to the certain aesthetic choices. Yeah. So I think that was interesting about the aesthetical choice of this work.

[00:31:32.990] - Annie Jael Kwan

Thank you so much for explaining a little bit about how the tapestry came together, your different ways of working with embroidery. And you've also mentioned various details, I think, Taey, you were mentioning the cockles, and Youngsook, you mentioned the dandelions. And these motifs also include the coolie cap in the print, and the religious monks that are quite recognisable when we look at the tapestry. So together with the cockle shells, and then you also embroidered the names of the cockle farmers who perished in Morecambe Bay during the disastrous incident that happened actually not that long ago. So can you please tell us more about how you came to bring these motifs together in that layout, and why did you also choose to pick up those names with the [inaudible 00:32:24] thread? It's a very delicate and intentional but also commemorative act of embroidering those names and inscribing those names. And I also wonder what went through your mind as you were doing that.

[00:32:41.590] - Youngsook Choi

When we decide to bring the history of Chinese indentured labour, we also thought it's important to keep reminding the continuing legacy of the extracted colonial structure which replaced the abolition of black slavery with the Chinese indentured labour. I think this profit-making out of abusive relationship towards migrant workers as well as nature is prevalent, even reinforced in our contemporary times. The tragic incident of Morecambe Bay resonates well in this context. The brutal and dangerous working conditions in cockle picking and over-harvesting of cockles to meet the demand in French and Spanish restaurants. And the pressure for more profit led to the loss of lives. And each life behind these names has a desperate story to tell. Most victims were from Fujian Province, where many lost their livelihood by the land acquisition by local authority. But we don't know about this.

[00:33:46.310] - Youngsook Choi

It's just like when 39 people were found dead in the back of lorry in Essex. The media focus was all about people trafficking, hence weaponizing this narrative to tighten the borders and justify hostile environment policies. But most victims are from the two fishing villages where the marine ecosystem has been completely destroyed by the toxic waste dumped by the multinational steel corporation. But how many of us know about these stories? That's always the question.

[00:34:18.970] - Youngsook Choi

Going back to Morecambe Bay, inscribing these names on the shelves was the act of remembrance not only of the Morecambe Bay incident, but also all other similar losses that repeat again and again due to the violent structure of neocolonial operation. And when the audience pays respect to each handstitched name, it becomes a humble solidarity moment we intend to share.

[00:34:49.610] - Annie Jael Kwan

Thank you so much, and also thank you for sharing with us your experimental performance today, which has also been adapted as an extract for this particular podcast. And I was just listening to it and listening to the interweaving of different contextual stories or fables. And I was wondering why you chose to do that, going from a kind of recognisable bear hunt children's rhyme to something that

opens up into, I suppose, a fairy tale that I'm less familiar with, in the Korean context, I would assume. Can you explain how you chose to weave these stories together, and why do you think the mode of storytelling, in particular, is the media that could actually communicate what you're trying to say about the mode of hunting, the mode of searching, the mode of acquisition?

[00:35:50.330] - Youngsook Choi

Storytelling is a gatherer, essentially. We all have memory, the storytelling from mother or grandmother, or we gather around the fire and someone started telling a story. Storytelling is such a great medium for intimate gathering, and also probably one of the oldest methods of transferring community wisdom, moral frames, and ethics. The famous children's story *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* intrigued us as this story tenders the hunting narrative by reversing the adventure of overcoming all the obstacles posed by nature and the eventual failure in hunting down the bear. So here, a bear signifies the human arrival in fear of the beast, the ultimatum of wilderness. It reckons that conquest of nature has a limit. It works probably as a warning message for children not to go about too farther. The point is, whether it's an attempted failure or not, in this story, nature is seen as a challenge and unknown. Therefore, it needs to be conquered and tamed. At the same time, a home in the civilised world is posed as the safest. The father and all the children eventually all scurry back home and in one bedroom, and then feeling kind of secure and safe.

[00:37:14.240] - Youngsook Choi

But home is such a contesting place for diaspora. The sense of belonging is always in question, where we belong. What if there is one who cannot belong neither to nature or the human world, or belong to both? So here comes in the story of the bear woman. As Korean diasporas, we grew up with the national mythology about the bear woman called the *Ungnyeo*, who endured the God's horrible test to become a woman and gave birth to the first ruler of the ancient Korea.

[00:37:51.650] - Taeyo Iho

In the performance, we start with the story of the bear woman, *Ungnyeo*. It's about like 5000 years ago. One Tiger and one bear who wants to be a human. Why would they want to be a human? Mythology has all this wishful thinking that humans are the best in the living ecology. Anyway, God was telling them, "Okay, if you go to the cave and only eat garlic and mugwort, and without seeing any light for 21 days, then you will become a woman." So the bear came out from the cave and became a woman, and that woman gave birth to a son, and the son became first man of Korea. So we grew up with this construction of the nation story, but the bear woman represents nothing but mother of the nation. But we are more curious about what if the bear didn't want to become a human and carry on become a bear, but at the same time, are we still a bear woman? And all these diasporas and people who are migrating one place to another for the opportunity and because of the exploitation, aren't we all bear woman? That was basically the structure of the performance.

[00:39:37.090] - Annie Jael Kwan

Okay. I mean, it's interesting, because the trope of the bear, in some way, is universal, but the positionality of the bear is different in different stories. I think it features, of course, in Shakespeare, in one of the famous exit lines, "Exit, pursued by a bear," which is a retributive bear chasing someone, because in a lot of the mediaeval entertainment, bears were captured and used for entertainment to have bear fights or get attacked by dogs. So it was sort of humorous, but also black humour, to have that in the play. So of course, that was something that came to mind when I was listening to your recording.

[00:40:20.180] - Annie Jael Kwan

And you also mentioned earlier that, in a way, you're trying to counteract the older narratives of extractivism and exploitation which come up with an unbalanced power structure. And also then we would imagine that there are, in those cases, various traumas inflicted, and terror and so on, which of course, is reflected in the hint of what happens with this bear. So I guess my last question is that by weaving then this cosmology, which has been linked to these histories of hunting and abuse and so on, with a different cosmology which is shamanistic and to do with the myths and origins, are you in a way trying to reframe or reconfigure or open up a different kind of ethical code in relation to your artistic practice? And if so, why do you think that's important?

[00:41:20.510] - Youngsook Choi

There has been a kind of positive direction in arts and science that has started recognising the agency of nature. But how we have come to terms with this often involves violent infiltration as well. For example, the needles are injected to check the change of chemical substances and liquid flow to prove that trees talk to each other. It is all good intention, but isn't it always the way how the Western science operates its knowledge system, the evidence-based knowledge production, the number of games. On the other hand, the Indigenous people have been telling us that trees talk to each other for thousands of years without any scientific proof, and we have been completely dismissing. So what has been lacking is not the evidence, we think. I think it's the connection that has been lost in this colonial knowledge system, and that is something we are trying to recover in our works.

[00:42:23.790] - Annie Jael Kwan

Thank you so much. Well, Future Ages Will Wonder is open till 20th of February. So if you haven't had a chance to visit Liverpool and fact, please do. Please come and see Fermented Flower, we'd love to meet you there. We will be doing the programme in February, and Breakwater will also be present to do a live performance in the gallery. Please do look at the website for more details on how to sign up, and we look forward to seeing you there.