

Chung Eun Mo is a Korean painter. She lives in Torre Orsina, a village on top of a hill near Terni in Umbria. I have known her a few years now and everytime I go to her place I am impressed by the perfect ease with which she mixes *mondaine* behaviour (she is an elegant woman, a good cook, and likes conversation and company), with a very rigorous and precise way of thinking and painting. I know it does not have to be in contradiction, but still, there is a contrast between her minute figure and the strength that emanates from her.

She has lived in this particular house for three years now. The first time I accompanied her to visit the place, she had only recently moved in and it was very neglected. I remember wondering how my precise friend would install herself

CHUNG EUN MO

Korean memories, Italian reality

INTERVIEW BY NATHALIE DU PASQUIER
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there. She had been forced to leave her previous home in which she lived for ten years, and through a curator of the Terni Museum (where she had had an exhibition), that huge house in Torre Orsina was proposed to her. It had been the studio of a locally renowned sculptor, Aurelio De Felice who built it up over the years. It was intended to be not only his studio, but also a meeting place for artists and a centre for cultural activities in Torre Orsina – which explains the size! The house is big, built on three levels, and has a good light and a lot of studio spaces. However, it is also a convivial house. It has a huge fireplace, a lovely garden surrounding it, and a pergola for summer evening conversations.

When I came back to visit Eun Mo, the place was completely inhabited again; by an artist.





Eun Mo, you seem to be very well installed now?

Oh yes, I was lucky enough to have been helped by Signor Domenico and three very good workmen. Without them I don't know how it would have been. You remember the mess... I guess the spirit of Aurelio De Felice wanted the place to be worked in again. I hope I don't disappoint him. I often think about the thought and effort the Maestro must have put in to building this house, and I hope my present use of it respects the spirit of the place.

So you have organized your studio in several different spaces?

Yes, in the studio upstairs I do all the preparation work for the canvases and I also have a drawing table because in winter it's not as cold as in the painting studio, which is next to the library. Then there's a space for storage.

Lucky painter! But it must be quite cold... It is a nice day today, but I can imagine the freezing days that are quite frequent in this part of Italy. All those windows...

Oh yes it gets cold. But one also gets used to it. I wear layers of clothes. "Warm feet, warm head," is the saying of a painter! If it is very cold I wear a woolen hat and I always have these great felt shoes from Trentino. But you know when the sun shines the big windows reflect quite a lot of heat during the day. Of course at night, or during grey days, it's different, but I have the big fire place in the living room that I have going all day. If I'm cold I can go and have a warm cup of tea or a whiskey in front of it!

Speaking about cups of tea, your kitchen is tiny.

The kitchen is a kitchen thought out by a man who perhaps did not care too much for cooking. It is very small indeed. At first I thought I would miss my big kitchen in Santa Maria La Rocca, but actually it's quite handy and I also have a big pantry, at the end of the day I got used to it, and I manage to prepare big meals here as well.

In the summer there is a big barbecue construction in the garden and it is nice to prepare the dinner there and have the meal under the pergola, it's a bit like a big summer kitchen.

The garden is lovely with all these sculpted figures that appear mysteriously in different corners, very much like an Italian garden.

Aurelio De Felice was a talented sculptor and also quite poetic. I like having these presences around. Did you see on the little road, before entering the main gate, there is a space. In fact, it's like a little Italian garden, overlooking the valley with a series of his sculptures. It's a space that the city of Terni has dedicated to his memory. As I said, he was born here and that little construction at the end of the garden was his first studio – the place where he started planning this big house that we are in now.

I did see it. It made me wonder whether they were all his works. Very robust pieces in bronze... Real outside sculptures.

You know it was strange when I first arrived here. His presence was so strong that I was always thinking that I had to do things in a certain way, things that he would not dislike. Now I have been here three years I feel very peaceful in the house, and I think even though we are so different he is not discontent with the way that I use the house.

I have known you for about 15 years but I know almost nothing about Korea, where you were born and where you spent the first part of your life. We seem to always talk more about the years you spent in the USA, apart from our conversations about painting.

My childhood in Seoul was in a period when Korea was building itself as a modern republic after regaining independence from long years of Japanese rule. Independence came in 1945 with the arbitrary division of the Korean peninsula into North and South, a condition mediated between the victors of World War II. In the ensuing Cold War climate, the Korean War broke out in 1950 and the division became permanent when that war ended in 1953.

To me, Korea appears to be half way between Chinese culture and Japanese, just as it appears on the map...

Recorded history of Korea begins in the 12th century B.C. when a Chinese scholar built a colony in the northern part of the Korean peninsula. Over the centuries the Chinese colony had a strong cultural influence on the native Korean tribes.

From the 1st century A.D., the entire Korean peninsula was ruled by successive, native kingdoms. The last kingdom of the Yi Dynasty reigned from the 14th century A.D. until 1910 when Japan annexed Korea into her rule.





Ancient animistic beliefs, various sects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism were practiced together with the traditional ancestral worship and, from the mid-19th century, Christian faiths were added. Society was ruled by moral code based on Confucian Ethics: respect to authority and social order, obedience to elders, proper conduct befitting ones station, etc. Learning was held in the highest regard. Throughout its history, Korea was influenced by Chinese politics and culture, and harassed by small and large wars with Japan. The first half of the 20th century was consumed with struggles for independence, and as a part of this activity and in continuation of the efforts of modernization began in late 19th century by the Yi Dynasty, the study of Western culture became important. After the Korean War, defence against communism, the reunification of the country, and learning Western ways in order to enter the modern world were the aim of the new republic. There you have a potted history of the Korea of my childhood.

What did Seoul look like? I know you went back a few years ago and you found that everything had changed after your long absence. Korean architecture was once predominantly composed of wooden constructions that were easily destroyed by fire. Many were destroyed



by the Japanese in order to be replaced with their version of Western neo-classic architecture. In my childhood some palaces and private homes of the Yi Dynasty still remained in Seoul. The palaces were turned into public parks or museums (or simply closed down) and the large private homes with their varying number of interlocking courtyards for different family living quarters began to be divided into smaller units to accommodate the modernisation of the city.

My grandmother's house was near one of the old palaces known for its extensive parklands. Our house was a traditional one with several living quarters set in separate courtyards connecting through small gates. In one of the courtyards, there was a squeaky two seated swing which was a favourite of all the children, and in another, an old lilac prized for its fragrance for which my grandmother gave special instructions for its care. The inner courtyard had a raised platform on one end where large earthenware jars for sauces and pickles stood, and stone basins in different levels flowing with water from an iron pump near the kitchen. This was the household's centre of activity. The main rooms and the connecting hall looked over that courtyard. In the summer white starched covers for the furniture and woven straw mats came out and big blocks of ice were delivered for cooling fruits and ice cream making, and in the





winter there were warm heated floors and colourful cushions to sit on and brass braziers with glowing ambers, fascinating to children but forbidden to go near. It was a lively household; young aunts and uncles busy with their studies and friends, people that worked for the house bustling about with their various tasks, and my grandmother receiving visitors and keeping everything in good order.

So you grew up in your grandmother's house?

I grew up in mostly in this house under my grandmother's care. My mother and sister lived in a separate house. I saw them regularly and often, but only occasionally lived with them. My father was always travelling abroad for the newspaper he directed, and for other affairs of the country. When he was with the family, it was a treat for everyone. My fondest childhood memories are of those occasions. The lively games he took part in with us, listening to him on the radio waiting for the special messages he had put in for us, his friends and reporters coming and going from the house that always told amusing stories, and so on.

What happened to your family when the war started?

When The Korean War came all our family gathered in the house of the eldest uncle in the centre of the city where he had a clinic. The explosions and the menacing soldiers were frightening, but I was a small child and mostly I remember playing with cousins, listening to stories, and having pictures drawn for us in a darkened room. Then there was this long journey wrapped in my grandmothers fox stole, which had two bright eyes. We took refuge in the southern part of the city in a Western style house of a family friend. Stairs with long banisters were completely new to me, and the children played there all the time until my cousin fell sliding down the banister. In the garden there was a pomegranate tree with shiny red fruit. Once some ripened fruit opened and the seeds fell on my clothes leaving dark stains, so after that I wasn't allowed to play there anymore. There amount of things



Sculptor Aurelio De Felice, the former inhabitant.
Circa 1970.

we weren't allowed to do grew and grew.

That was war... It all sounds very strange to someone like me who has never lived through war. And for children, peace and war are all new anyway. How did your education proceed with all this going on?

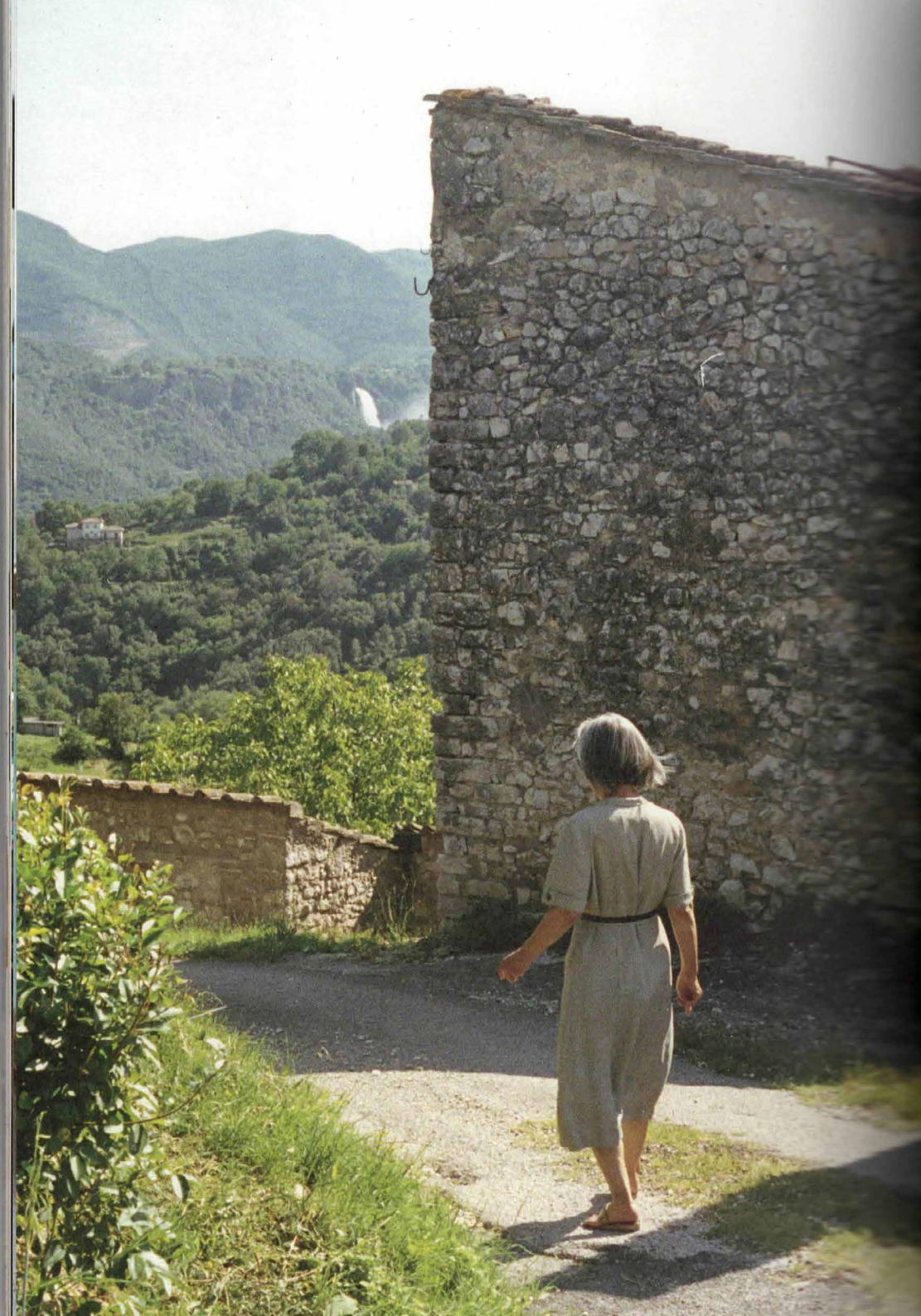
At the end of the war, I

started elementary school in a large prefabricated building with a semi-circular metal roof. The sound of rain and aeroplanes flying above rattled everything inside it. I remember being taken to school through bewildering streets with a folded white handkerchief and a name tag pinned to my jacket. The crowded streets were full of stalls selling all kinds of strange and pungent food, which burned my eyes. There were streams of people carrying huge bundles of their possessions seeking shelter; angry wounded veterans, beggars, porters running with cartfuls of paper money, and everyone shouting and shouting. It was a harrowing time for everyone.

When we came back to our house, the inner courtyard was a huge gaping hole from some explosion. While the house was being restored, there were endless curling wood shavings and big basins of flour paste to play with after school. My aunts and uncles took turns in accompanying me to and from school. They were going back to their universities or preparing to go abroad to continue their studies. They often read to me from their books, and took me on their outings with friends to old palace grounds and other parts of the city. The elementary school was very crowded, and there was a lot of queuing up in hot sun for vaccination shots, which made me dizzy. I was often home with one illness or another. Actually, I have more vivid memories of home than school in those years.

Once I entered middle school I began to like it all much more, and I made close group of friends from the beginning. It was an all girls school with spacious grounds. There were old trees and lawns. The middle school was comprised of old brick buildings and there was a large modern one for the high school. We had a big amphitheatre for assemblies and





tennis courts and fields for sports. The school was known for innovative education, and we were made to study very hard and do a lot of reading in addition to the lessons at school. There were trips to historical sites, exhibitions and concerts, and many lecturers came to visit. In this period I began to take private lessons in drawing and painting. I drew from plaster casts and nude models in charcoal, and I painted in oil. I remember liking the paint and the smell of it all more than the actual paintings.

Your father was the director of a newspaper, so your family must have been particularly involved with the turmoil of that period.

In those years the country was fraught with turbulence, economic hardship, and political strife. The government became more dictatorial and oppressive. There was severe censorship of the press. We often saw my father's paper come out in blanked columns, which gave us a sinking feeling.

Our family circumstance began to change as well. Uncles left to study abroad, my aunt married and moved to another city, my father was taking longer trips to Europe and America... My grandmother's household became much smaller, and it felt empty. Only when my father was back from one of his trips did the family gather cheerfully. I was either at school or passing the time in the old palace grounds, wandering around the deserted buildings. After the student revolution, and following the turmoil in 1960, the government fell and there was a brief period of hope with the new liberal government. Then the military seized the power in May, 1961.

The sudden death of my father later that year left us all devastated, and the world of my childhood ended.

Then you went to New York with your mother and your sister, you studied art, you did a lot of things, you even became American and then you came to Italy at the end of the '80s.

I went to America to join my mother, who had decided to do her post graduate studies and also work there.

Initially I went solely for a period of study abroad; I never imagined that I would remain in the West. It still seems that I just found myself in a situation and tried to manage as best as I could, maintaining the images and notions that had formed early in my childhood.

Your biographical course has certainly influenced your development as an artist.

It is the continuation of culture which interests me more than the examination of specific cultural differences. There are of course distinctions between Eastern and Western cultures, but casual generalisations are not always appropriate.

You seem to have a predilection for a very rigorous type of composition...

My disposition for order and balance may well originate in the Korean tradition and affect what I choose to look for and what I value in the West.

Recently I read about your work in a publication. The text was written by Ángel González, who has known you for many years. I'd like to end this little conversation with a quotation of this brilliant Spanish art critic, it seems appropriate to me. I like the humorous tone which, even though it may not be so obvious in your recollections, is not absent from your personality. It is also a nice way to come back to the house after this long journey in time.

In some way, the canvases of Eun Mo, that immediately evoke habitable constructions, have, at the same time, something of those more humble constructions that constitute furniture. Therefore, in the same way that Erik Satie dreamt a 'musique d'ameublement', perhaps Eun Mo has uncovered an unexpected and intriguing 'musique d'ameublement'. Although there is a point of humour in both cases, above all there exists the solemn proclamation that art has as an inescapable, most urgent and imperative task: to make the world habitable.