

'Joseon Dynasty Royal family series Empress#1'

Leaving NO STONE *Unturned*

TEXT: DERVLA LOULI IMAGES: CHONG-IL WOO COURTESY OF THE CAT STREET GALLERY

Korean artist Chong-il Woo is wearing thick tortoiseshell glasses and a big smile. The artist is multitalented and his patience and attention to detail results in work that begs to be touched and explored. At first glance his current award-winning collection embodies ancient mosaics, but a closer look reveals a photograph of thousands of digitally manipulated gemstones and pebbles. The effect is nothing short of mesmerising.

The JOSEON DYNASTY, THE LAST DYNASTY OF KOREAN HISTORY AND THE LONGEST-RULING CONFUCIAN DYNASTY INSPIRED THESE WORKS.

Chong-il Woo was born in Korea in 1957 and migrated to the United States in 1979 where he studied fine art, specialising in painting and photography. He has exhibited extensively in both solo and group exhibitions in Japan, the United States and his native city of Seoul which he returned to in 1998 and still resides today.

His current exhibition, 'Women of the Joseon Dynasty', won the Schoeni Prize in February 2012, an award decided by the Asian public. By combining his flair for photography and passion for fine art, he has created multi-dimensional portraits of beautiful women from ancient times in an innovative and modern fashion. The Peninsula meets the artist.

The Peninsula: Your artwork is complex and beautiful. Can you talk about your inspiration and the process of making it?

Chong-il Woo: The Joseon Dynasty, the last dynasty of Korean history and the longest-ruling Confucian dynasty inspired these works. The women were especially attractive during that time and I was trying to merge ancient and modern beauty in the pieces. The models I used were family, friends, or simply beautiful women that I saw walking down the street, as is the case with most of my work.

The majority of stones are gemstones and there are also a few pebbles. I shot the models first and then captured each stone from four different angles before digitally placing each pebble to create the image.

The Peninsula: Why did you move back to Korea after successfully exhibiting in the United States?

CIW: I was lonely and homesick. I enjoyed my time in Seattle and Washington but I just had a feeling it was time to return to Korea. I love it and I think it's a great place.

The Peninsula: Do you always push the boundaries of photography to create digitally manipulated art?

CIW: I did nude photography for about 20 years and my work started to change about four years ago. I started to do candle work recently. In one piece I used 1800 candles, and I shot it only using the light that was reflected from the flicker of each candle; the effect was really beautiful and very soft.

The Peninsula: Have advancements in technology changed the way that you work?

CIW: Yes of course, but I still occasionally work with traditional forms of photography. It's getting more difficult to find places that develop film, but I really enjoy the process of working in my own darkroom and using natural light to shoot pictures. Retouching has completely changed the way I work when I use digital photography.

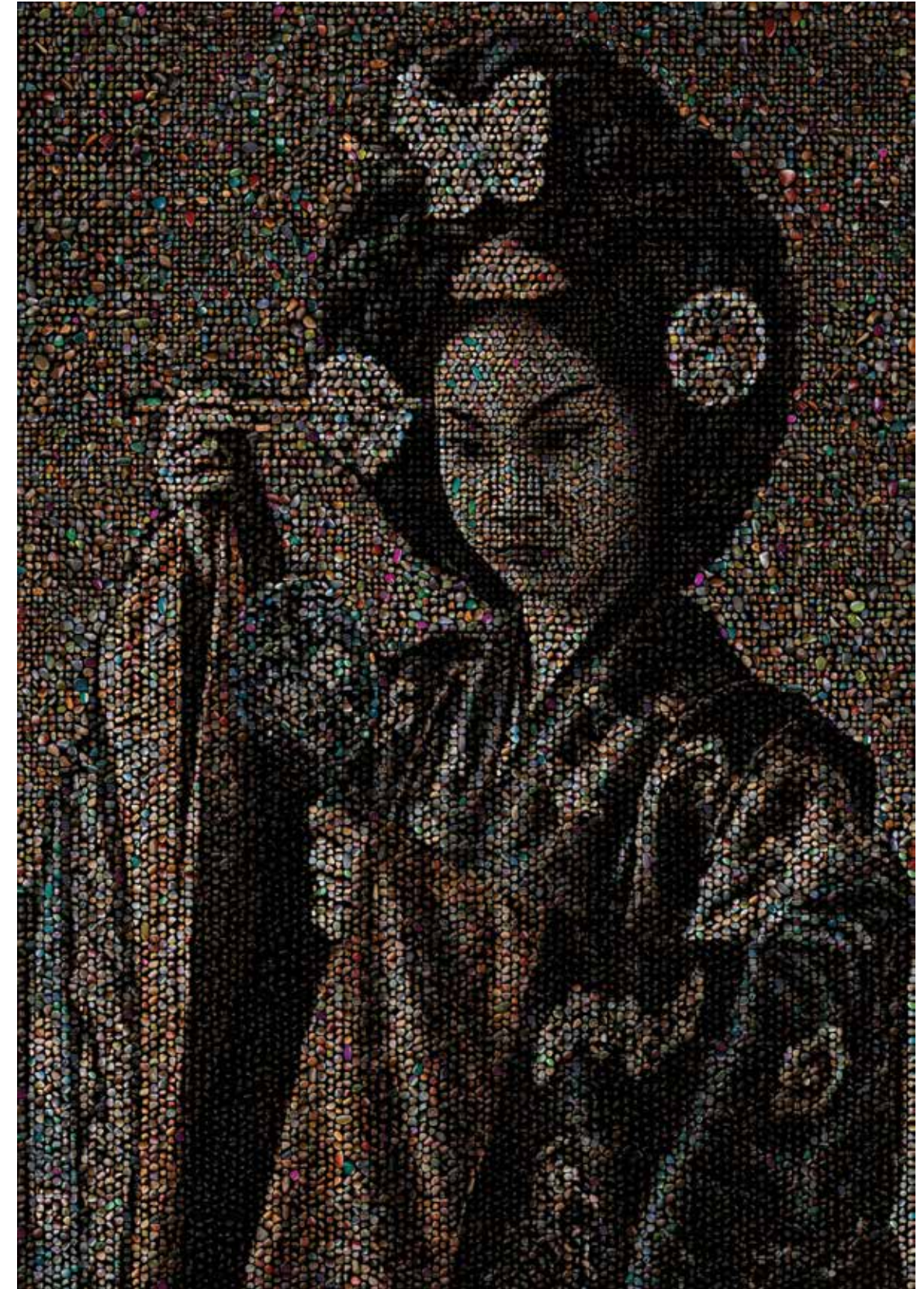
The Peninsula: Why do you think Korean art is becoming increasingly popular?

CIW: People looking at Korean art from outside the country see it in a positive light; they like the art, but they don't really understand all of the hurdles that we have to overcome. Artists in Korea are really struggling; we have to work hard in a difficult environment and that is probably why we end up producing the art that we do.

The marketing side of the art industry is somewhat underdeveloped in Korea so artists are literally trying to merely exist; it's not about making huge profits, it's actually about survival. It's difficult to become known and to make profits in this industry when you live there. If you can make it in Korea, you can make it anywhere.

The Peninsula: How do you define success?

CIW: You have to remember that in general artists are poor and we define success differently than the majority of people in other industries. If I can eat breakfast, lunch and dinner and create art then I am happy. That's fulfilment for me.



'Joseon Dynasty Royal family series Empress #2'