Jinny Yu

I Like My Countries and My Countries Like Me

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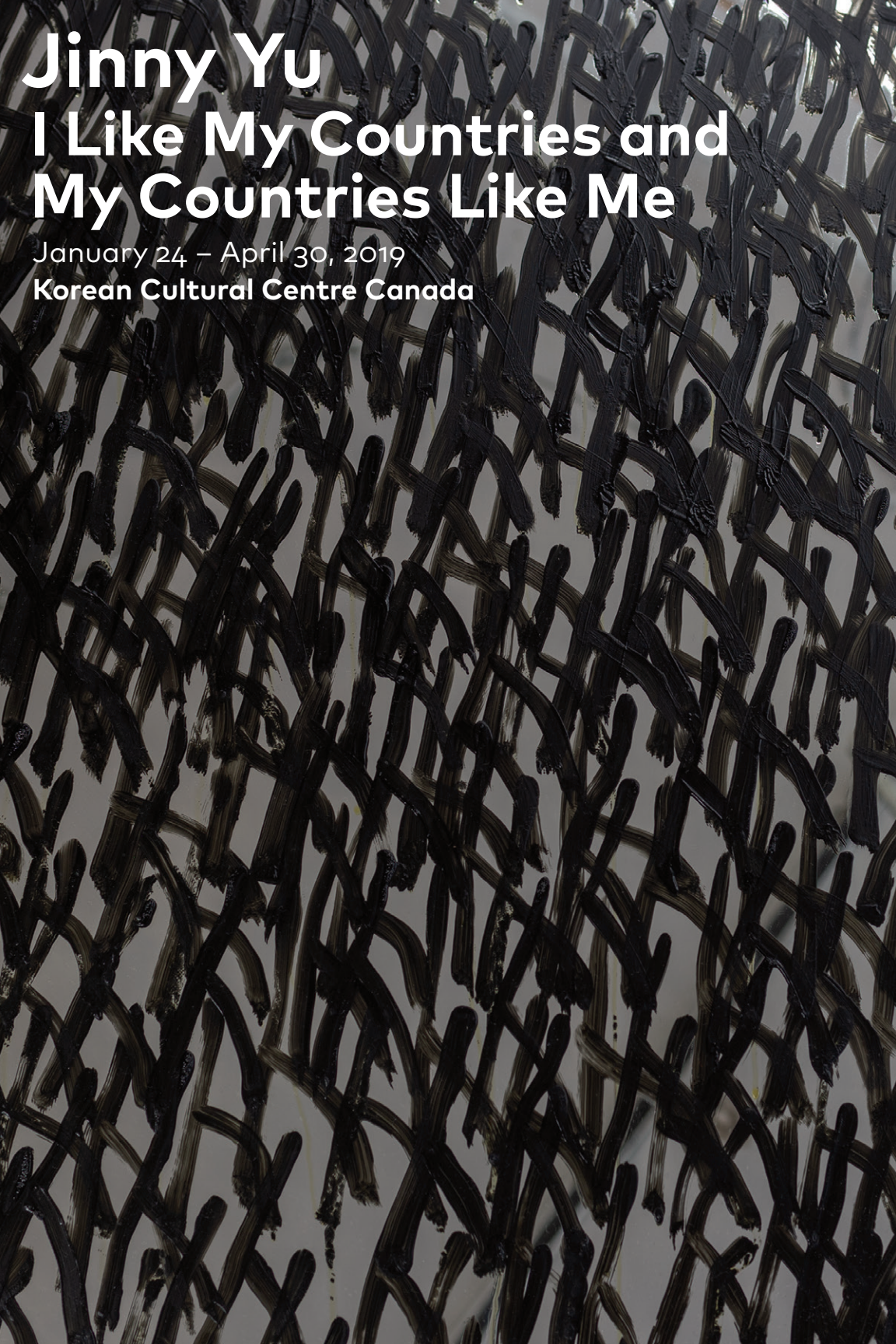
Korean Cultural Centre Canada



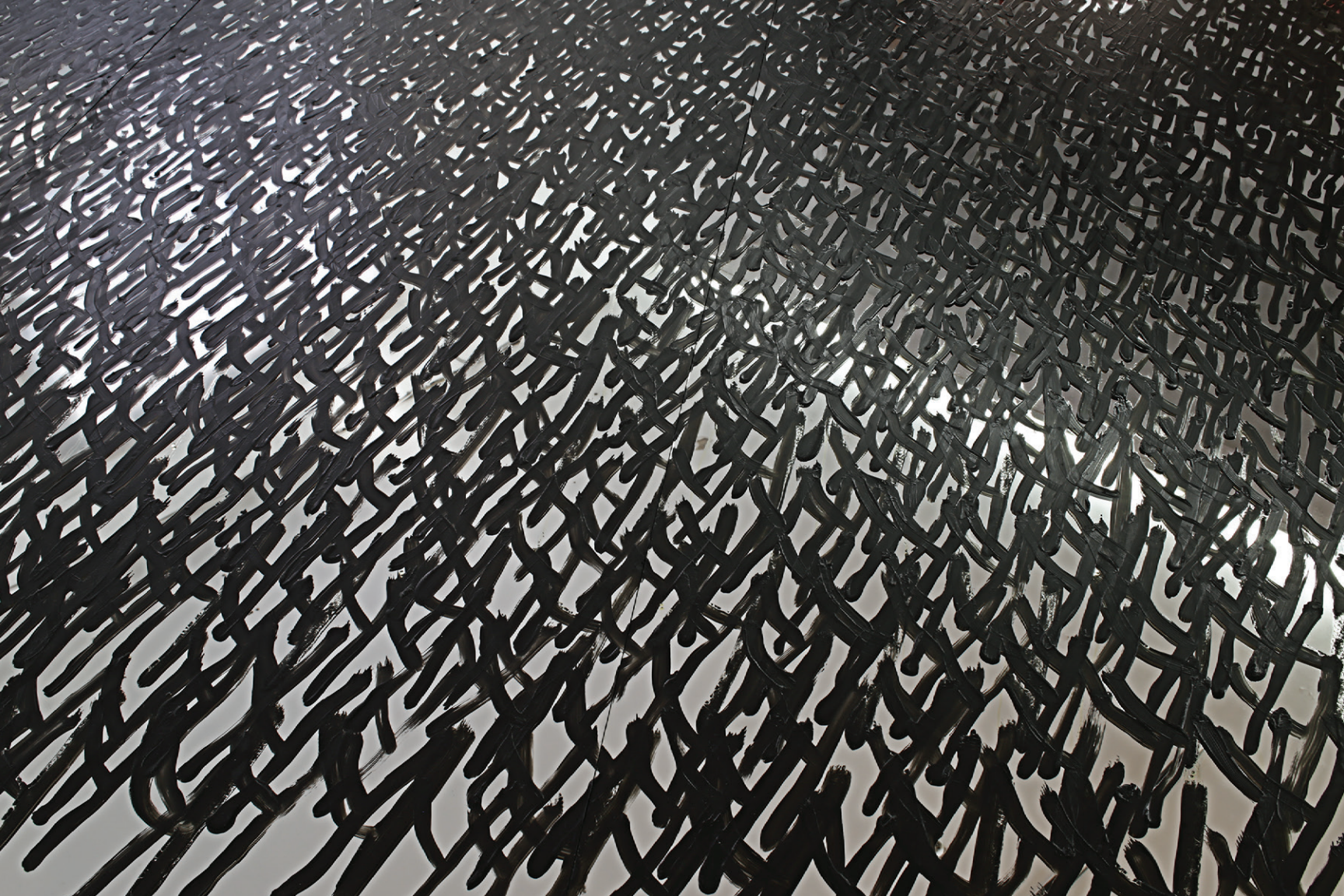
Reflections on Walking

Let us begin from the place of walking. Agnes Martin noted, "walking seems to cover time and space but in reality we are always just where we started. I walk but in reality I am hand in hand with contentment on my own doorstep."[1] I'm curious about this impossibility in walking that Martin, the secluded monk-like artist talks about: it is impossible to traverse time and space, as existence always pertains to the present moment; it is impossible to walk forward, to make 'progress', like Zeno's paradox. As I confront the event of looking at a painting, it seems like an appropriate place to start: the impossibility of conceptualizing past the present moment. Painting unfolds itself between the space of my gaze and its presence. And let us note that in this same moment, as I write, a body of people walks across a landscape, across the Yucatan Peninsula to reach the US border. (A real thing at stake in this walk, leaving behind an absence, a disappearance, forging ahead for occupancy of space.)

Walking in the dark: the sentiments of black oil paint on this mirror demonstrates this desire. The thickly crowded and layered marks are headed in one direction. These marks seem like a mysterious shorthand shaped like '人', a Chinese character for 'human', a hieroglyph taken after the image of a human form. Their limbs are splayed in the mechanism of walking. The black marks, like a murmuring, fill this painting surface loudly, something akin to the sound of a crowd. The collection of marks delete individuality. We learn how to hide in a crowd.

To be precise, the marks are incredibly individual, no matter what. Each beholden to the imperfection of the hand, none of these shorthands are the same. The sheer number of marks do not negate individuality. Each mark's subsumption into the order of a crowd only engenders the particular way of seeing that masks difference. And the painting begs us to see in a way that unmasks. Let us ask how to write across differences.

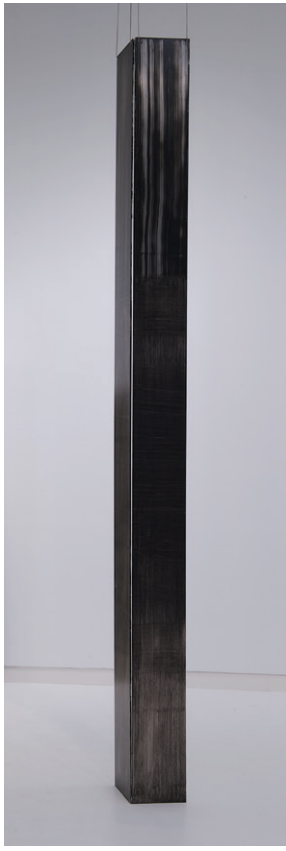
A linguistic distance is traversed. A mirroring of amorous sentiments: *I like my countries and my countries like me*, says Yu through the umbrella of the exhibition title. The declaration gently twists the expected singular — "my country." There is an implied adventure of geographical and cultural amplification and travel, as the 'I' claims a multiplicity of homes. The 'I' professes her amicable feelings towards these 'countries', which is (thankfully) reciprocated. There is a certain power in claiming first to belong through an amorous declaration. *You can't spit on a smiling face*, says a Korean proverb.



The 'I' oscillates between borders of nation-states, between the stifling confines of a national identity. The '人' marks enter their relationship with the painting surface with a sense of indeterminacy and transience as they hold the potential to be scratched off.

In the symmetrical comfort of this sentence, *I like my countries and my countries like me*, I am driven to pick at the notion of empathy. As Sara Ahmed points out in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, it is love, not hate, that lays a greater hold on a group of people to formulate collective action against another group. For Ahmed, the front-facing face of xenophobia is the framework of love for one's own country, rather than a hatred for foreign bodies.[2] Liking sways authority. Yu's work carefully treads this treacherous territory of liking. On one hand, we rely on these varying senses of belonging, as we cannot ignore the essential role identity plays in providing a vocabulary with which we speak. But there is also a careful scrutiny, one that can be read by the light the painting gives off, via its material constituencies: the transient, indefinite relationship of paint to its surface, inside-outside overflowing in and out of the mirror, the crowd-mentality of the marks. Liking *hides* authority. But in this instance, when 'I' claims the sentiment of liking, she scatters some of the authority.

Let us jump back to 1975, to the namesake of the exhibition title, Joseph Beuys's performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*. In this work, Beuys spends his time in America confined in a gallery space with a coyote. The iconic photographic documentation of this work shows the coyote pulling at a half-tattered end of Beuys's felt swaddle. With the title *I Like America and America Likes Me*, it rings with an almost humorous irony. In three days the artist and the coyote achieve somewhat peaceful co-existence. The coyote as a referent to Native American spirituality, Beuys's figures could occupy varying positions between European-settler American and the immigrant. Perhaps coyote is the true "America," rehashing with sovereignty and rightful anger. These fluid, undefined role players ask us — all parties involved — to confront these conflated histories of colonization and migration. (I note that grand symbolic gesture is founded on a violence to the coyote, an unwanted displacement and implication



Column, 2014
108″ × 8″ × 8″
oil on aluminum

VERSO
Walking, 2017
72″ × 120″
oil on mirrors

into Beuys's performance.) In our time in which reconciliation is a dire necessity and intolerance becomes the face of a nation, this is a relevant work to revisit. Yu opens it up further, and takes out the irony; *I Like My Countries and My Countries Like Me* is a sincere offer for considering hybridity and rethinking divisive politics, divisive empathy.

We can turn our gaze upwards, from the painting on the floor to *Column* (2014), the eponymous object of aluminum stands tall, suspended from the ceiling. Two sheets of metal meet at an angle, barely touching one another, at a 90-degree angle. On one side we see a positive image of the column, and on the other, an inverted, concave version of this column. Vertical striations of black oil paint are smeared around the shiny surface. Columns ensure structural integrity, or sometimes they are frivolous decoration. Columns perpetuate power — Egyptian obelisks or Mesopotamian victory steles alike, they commemorate epic tales of authority. However, Yu's columns are composed of thin metal, not structurally permanent, never claiming tales of heroicized identity. Again, Yu's navigation of materiality offers another solution to the idea of the column. A space never final, never closed, never stable enough to make up its mind, without a tone of finality. The identity always in transition, suspended, deferred.

The mantra *I like my countries and my countries like me* appears in an *in-situ* work, written on a glass etched with the first few lines of the Hunminjeongeum Manuscript. Written in 1443, the Manuscript introduces and analyzes the Korean writing system, Hangul, entirely phonetic, much more accessible and democratic than Chinese characters. While this book is written in Chinese characters, the introduction of this book was translated into Hangul, which has become an iconic image that celebrates the invention of the writing system. It gave a tangible, very closely relevant form to the language. Infused with the question of linguistic identity, the work is a gentle bridge between one of the several self-labels and the complex questions of identity, global movements, belonging that are brought up in Yu's paintings. A body of people have traversed the distance and here we are, I, the writer, the curator and the artist, gathered under one of the many names we label ourselves. "Identity is state's authority,"[3] says Lisa Robertson. I cannot deny that authority exists, even outside of any kind of state-enforced control. The tricky one I refer to is concerned with solidarity; an authority that binds strangers into conversations, sharing of ideas, and lived experience together.

Areum Kim

[1] Agnes Martin, *Agnes Martin: Writings* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1991), 18.
[2] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
[3] Lisa Robertson, "7:55 Talk for Eva Hesse," *Nilling* (Toronto: Bookthug, 2012), 43.

Biographies

Jinny Yu's work grows out of an inquiry into the medium of painting as a means of trying to understand the world around us. Denaturalizing the medium and questioning its authority, her project *Don't They Ever Stop Migrating?* was exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale. It subsequently toured to The Rooms and was acquired by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Her work has been shown widely in Canada, Germany, Japan, Italy, Portugal, South Korea, UK and the US, including: Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz (Berlin, 2016); Richmond Art Gallery (Vancouver, 2015); Produzentengalerie plan.d. (Düsseldorf, 2014); Ottawa Art Gallery (2014); Pulse New York and Miami Beach (2011, 2014); Ottawa Art Gallery (2014); St. Mary's University Art Gallery (Halifax, 2013); Kunst Doc Art Gallery (Seoul, 2012); ISCP Gallery (New York, 2011); McMaster Museum of Art (Hamilton, 2011); Confederation Centre Art Gallery (Charlottetown, 2011); Carleton University Art Gallery (Ottawa, 2009); Sotheby's Conduit Street Gallery (London, 2007); Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation (Venice, 2006); and Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art (Kyoto, 2004). She has been an artist in residence at the KIAC, Dawson City; ISCP New York; Seoul Museum of Art Nanji Studios; and the Banff Centre for the Arts. Yu, an Associate Professor at the University of Ottawa, was awarded the Mid-Career Artist Award by Ottawa Arts Council in 2013; Laura Ciruls Painting Award from Ontario Arts Foundation in 2012; and was a finalist for the Pulse New York Prize in 2011 and 2014.

Areum Kim is an emerging writer and curator based in Treaty 7 Territory, Calgary, Alberta. As Korean-Canadian writer, Kim is invested in both prickly and affirming ways to tackle issues of identity. Kim received her BFA in Critical and Cultural Studies from Emily Carr University of Art and Design in 2015. She is currently the Director of Stride Gallery.

Credits
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The Korean Cultural Centre Canada (KCC) is a government institution established in September 2016 under the jurisdiction of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea to Canada. The mandate of the KCC is to enhance Korea-Canada relations by promoting mutual understanding between Koreans and Canadians through the sharing of Korean culture, and facilitating bilateral cooperation between arts and cultural institutions. The KCC aims to connect with Canadians with a variety of cultural activities including exhibitions, performances, film screenings, festivals, cultural and language classes, as well as outreach programs. To this end, the KCC will work to collaborate with various arts and cultural institutions and communities across Canada to provide Canadians with memorable experiences of Korean culture.

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