

**SUJI  
PARK  
Noise  
Collector**



Suji Park, *Beatdol iii*, 2022  
Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Jungwoo Lee



**In this new body of exquisitely distorted clay-based sculpture, Suji Park composes, fires, breaks and re-makes her forms—adorning them with paint, beading and light to explore the intersections and slippages of language, place and creative expression.**

**SUJI  
PARK**

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Collector**

5 Nov 2022 –  
2 Apr 2023

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## WHEN YOUR MOUTH MAKES THE SHAPE OF AN O

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*Shaken about the globe, we live our fractured lives. Enticed or fleeing, we re-form ourselves, taking on partially the coloration of our new backgrounds. Even our tongues are alienated and rejoined—a multiplicity that creates richness and confusion.<sup>1</sup>*

In his biographical novel *Two Lives* renowned author Vikram Seth recalls the experiences of his uncle and aunt, a migrant Indian and Jewish couple who navigated a life together in London after World War II, and who—despite their own dislocation—took him in as he waded through customs and histories that were not his own. Though it is set in the twentieth century, Seth's memoir still resonates in the present day. Even with technology to keep in touch with loved ones and social support structures to help you settle, when you must leave the place where you were formed, it remains as a small round crater embedded in your heart.

Suji Park is one of these people, and so am I. When we left home, we became lodged in unknown territories. We don't quite belong in the places we come from, or the places we've landed up. We sit in between, searching for ways to fill the little crater up. I spend my time making connections for people via curating, Suji spends hers melding unlikely materials and forms together in her art practice, which are informed by the commonalities she finds in music, making and writing. As a research enquiry, this body of work, titled *Noise Collector*, focusses on Suji's own complex, personal understanding of what communication can look, feel and sound like.

o o o o°.

*She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter some thing. (One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away. With a slight tilting of her head backwards, she would gather the strength in her shoulders and remain in this position.<sup>2</sup>*

In the lead up to her exhibition at The Dowse, Suji has been recalling her arrival in Aotearoa New Zealand. She was twelve years old, her parents wanted her to get a Western education, and she had very little knowledge of English. Unable to speak to other children, she began to learn the language of classical music and trained as a concert pianist. She dreamt vividly, in colour, of things that were yet to happen and people she was yet to meet. She turned these experiences into drawings at art school, which became figurative characters modelled out of paper clay, which in turn, developed into abstract forms that she titled *DoI* (rock, in Korean) made from materials that technically shouldn't be able to go together. These have been described using the word *plastiglomerate*,<sup>3</sup> a twenty-first century term that refers to rocks fused with plastic waste. Most often perceived as a product of the Anthropocene, I can't help but think of migrant hybridity and standing on unfamiliar ground.

In 2016, Suji returned to South Korea for an exhibition that had been postponed multiple times, and it was on this trip that she realised she was meant to stay for a while. Her story looped back into itself when she decided to take on a Masters in Creative Writing from the Korea National University of Arts in Seoul, in a language she hadn't lived with for decades.

Thinking about how her work could be perceived versus what drives her practice, Suji says to me:

"I could easily be consumed as a Korean immigrant. But this is just the surface level. What I want to explore is bigger than that. My process and work have become a way of questioning the world and making sure I have a relationship with it. There is a great deal I don't understand. I'll sit and listen, but there so many layers I feel. It takes a lot of time for me to process this through making, which is part obsession, part research. It's a way of digging out what's happening in the world and trying to understand it by learning its language."<sup>4</sup>

o O O o °.

***If language were a large net in which reality is contained, then finding holes in it might be a way to let other realities come through and begin to exist...I want a space to insert other stories, room to speak.***<sup>5</sup>

Time is non-linear in Suji's work and her sculptures develop from multiple incidents across her lifetime. In 2015, during her residency at the Colin McCahon House, she was walking down Dominion Road and came across two Chinese "aunties"<sup>6</sup> making dumplings and chatting. She couldn't understand what they were saying, but the experience brought back a buried memory of her mother doing the same thing for her family when Suji was young. She returned to her studio in Titirangi and started making dumplings out of paper clay, "muttering away with [her] hands",<sup>7</sup>

she explains, by pushing her thumb into the clay in a circular motion. "At the time I was thinking about open forms as being in the present tense. These make room for sharing space and are inclusive and transformative. I often made my figurative works in the form of vessels, but they were closed, like the past tense."<sup>8</sup>

These circular, hollowed-out forms have moved with her since then, travelling all the way to South Korea. They haven't made it into an exhibition yet, but they have set off a ripple effect.

In *Noise Collector*, the spherical form that Suji associates directly with these dumplings appear in two series called *Beatdols* and *Feverheads*. These were developed before, during and after a year-long residency (2021-22) at the Factory of Contemporary Arts in Palbok, Jeonju, where she is now based. Characteristically over this period, she broke her sculptures and reconfigured them, exposing them to a plethora of foreign objects, glazes, pigments and firings until each one felt ready to come to Aotearoa.

A made-up word, *빛돌 Beatdol* folds the artist's earlier *DoI* series into a poetic twist on the characters 빛, which when placed together this way sound like 'beat' in English, but mean 'light' in Korean. *Beatdol I* (2018), the oldest of three, is referred to fondly by Suji as 'grandma'. "She has been broken a few times, but she carries on and that's what I like about her".<sup>9</sup> Grandma's circular Christmas lights flash on and off, on and off, in an inviting, rhythmic glow. Like many of Suji's works, the *Beatdol* series is made of unmeasured quantities of paper clay, ceramics and epoxy clay melded together in round units, which engulf found objects that Suji has collected over the years. Like a record of her travels, they visually hum with the environments and people that she has encountered. She reflects:

"It's a musical way of doing things. I start with a note, then add another—connecting two dots. These become a motif for a song, which I make variations of to become a longer piece. I will have a melody in my head, which I layer with other instruments and improvise on. I approach all my thinking and making this way. For me, everything has a noise."

o O O o °.

***"O, the fourth vowel of the modern alphabet, corresponding to the Semitic 'ayin, which represented a breathing and not a vowel".***<sup>10</sup>

O

Make the shape with your mouth. Listen to the sound that comes out. Notice its colour, its texture. Who does it remind you of?

Experiencing the world through chromesthesia, these are the kinds of sensory cues that Suji builds her works out of. In an artist statement written soon after completing

her residency in Jeonju, she reflected that, “often I think of myself as a listener of my work, where materials or modes of working are like different languages. I speak and think in a few different languages, but these are broken and fragmented. The limitations I encounter when using new materials are like physical translations of my experience of language. In making my work, these experiences become something I can touch.”<sup>11</sup>

She sends me a list that shows how the circle permeates through the English and Hangeul (Korean character) alphabets, grammatical symbols and numerical systems.<sup>12</sup>

- – English
- ◯ – capital English
- 0 – number
- – Hangeul
- ° – degree symbol
- – full stop

In Hangeul, the visual profile and sound of the vowel ◯ (E-ung) is a direct reference to the mouth. While circles can be seen physically in *Beatdols*, they appear in the names of the bust-like works of the *Feverheads* series, which all begin in O. This group of nine are each made by folding a flat layer of clay around so that when you peer inside it, it resembles an open, incomplete vessel shape, “just enough clay to make it stand.”<sup>13</sup> Perching cautiously on an exposed, temporary wall-like structure, Suji imagines the *Feverheads* are a choir, where the members are repeatedly singing their names to each other—*Ooji, Oya, Oori, Ora, Oyo, Oeek, Oaah, Oit, Oioi*.

These works are now installed in the dramatically lit space at The Dowse, but Suji is already planning their next life, and informs me that, “they are the night-time version of some more yet to come.”<sup>14</sup> I have no doubt that when these works return to Jeonju they will be broken again and synthesised into new pieces.

After *Noise Collector* has opened, Suji writes to me that, “the concept of brokenness and breakages of self and languages is something I have been thinking about recently. Without the breakages I don’t think things can connect. For me brokenness is almost the same as the openness.” I realise Suji has come to thrive on the instability and fragmentation she has experienced over her lifetime; it is a mechanism she uses to make her way through a precarious world. She is more content than I am to sit with, and make space for, that little round crater embedded in her heart.

I tell her she is brave.

The little dumplings are still waiting for Suji in her studio. Mimicking the shape our mouths make when we say O, they are open to the present and ready for the future.

○ ○ 0 ○ ° .

## Sian van Dyk

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1 Vikram Seth, *Two Lives* (London, Abacus, 2005), 403.

2 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*, (Los Angeles: California University Press, 2001), 3.

This text was originally published by Tanam Presso (1982) and then by First Third Woman Press (1995). This quote is from the first California paperback edition (2001).

3 This term was used by Emma Bugden and Karl Chitham in *Original Unknown*, (Auckland: BN Books in collaboration with Bak, 2016), 72, 119, and Bruce E. Philips in *The Hive Hums with Many Minds*, (Auckland: Te Tuhi, 2017), 14.

4 Suji Park in conversation with the author, 3 November 2022.

5 Irmina van Niele, “Wandering Words: Reflections on Ambivalent Cultural Belonging and the Creative Potential of Linguistic Multiplicity” in *Intercultural Contact, Language learning and Migration*, ed Barbara Geraghty and Jean E Conacher (Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 2016), 214.

6 Suji Park in conversation with the author, 3 November 2022.

7 Ibid

8 Suji Park email to the author, 14 November 2022.

9 Suji Park artist talk, 3 November 2022.

10 “o letter”, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/O-letter>, accessed 17 November 2022.

11 Suji Park *Artist Note*, June 2022.

12 Suji Park, email to the author, 14 November 2022.

13 Suji Park, email to the author, 17 November 2022.

14 Suji Park in conversation with the author, 5 November 2022.

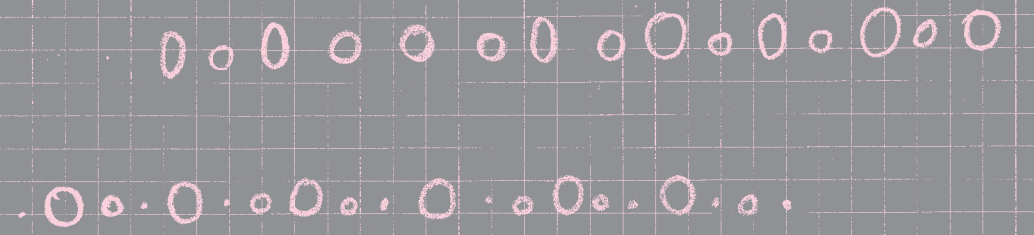








## SELECTED ARTWORKS





속담 거리며  
 재갈 거리며  
 우! 하곤 리나가다  
 흥하곤 다시 온다.

내 피부 표면이 셀 수 없이 많은 얼굴들이 있기에.  
 countless faces on my skin.



**Ooji, 2022**  
 ceramic, glaze

**Oori, 2022**  
ceramic, glaze



Heads





**Oaah, 2022**  
ceramic, glaze

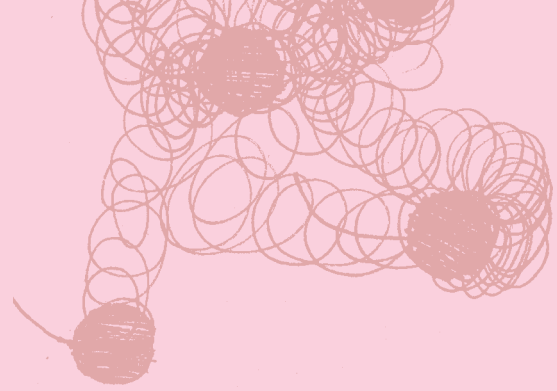
Be headed.  
You be headed, you held it so tight so far,  
let's free what's in it, let my dear  
to five, and ten to ten to  
nine to eight.

Did you think you hands,  
let go of what bbbing  
what's in your even re  
What was it that hold  
why was it ~~nee~~ to  
do you even r ve b  
holdingf o tight



무엇을 손이 쥐고 아끼는지  
무엇이서 바리키고 남았는지  
기  
이것이  
이야  
이것이  
이미 지켜진 프로젝트

**Oya, 2022**  
ceramic, glaze



*Articulation.*



***The Night, 2022***

Fired clay, glaze, ceramic paint,  
acrylic paint, epoxy clay



***Beatdol ii, 2022***

Fired clay, ceramic, plastic,  
foam, epoxy clay, plaster,  
paper clay, glaze, resin,  
acrylic paint





## CREDITS

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# The Dowse Art Museum

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