

Korea Town

This academic year, Wimbledon Space is taking a new approach to its exhibition programming, scheduling three major shows, all of which will respond to the theme of Community.

Writing in the previous issue of What's On, Lois Rowe, Programme Director for Fine Art at Wimbledon College of Arts, explained how this approach will allow the gallery to open its doors to welcome new collaborators: "For 2016/17, the focus on the theme of Community will enable us to look anew at the Community or Communities that have come to shape and inform us. Many of the projects in the programme could be called 'relational' in approach as they foreground human relations and their social contexts rather than physical objects within space."

The second of these exhibitions to address the Community theme is Korea Town. Curated by Richard Layzell and opening in January 2017, it involves the college working with residents of nearby communities of North and South Koreans living in New Malden, just two train stops down the line from Wimbledon. More than 10,000 of the 29,000 people living in this part of London are Korean, and Richard's research involves interaction with the public facing elements of these communities: shops, cafes and hairdressers.

We spoke to Richard about the preparations for the exhibition.

Although he lives in north London, Richard Layzell talks about the high street in New Malden as if it is his local. "Somehow I must have heard about the area and started researching it," he explained. Having initially visited with a Korean student and her large SLR camera, he found that people seemed to find the presence of the camera intimidating so they had to rethink their approach. Instead, he went back and visited a few times, alone: "I quite like the idea of being an outsider looking in."

What he found was really interesting. "It's a significant community – the biggest community of Koreans in Europe - and it's very close to the college, so it appealed to me as a way of looking at Wimbledon differently."

"As a college, we can feel like we're on the edge sometimes," he continued, referring to Wimbledon's location in south west London, the furthest of UAL's colleges from central London. "But with this huge community down the road I realised we're actually near the epicenter of something, too, so I thought it would be interesting to maybe build a link there to make it better known."

As a practicing artist, Richard has undertaken residencies in China in the past, and credits these experiences with sparking the connection he feels with the East Asian communities and students at Wimbledon, as well as his drive to engage them and the wider University community in his research in New Malden, "I've always looked for new audiences and new contexts for art."

Reflecting on his past projects, this is clear. His seminal piece Tap, Ruffle and Shave which opened at Glasgow Museums in 1995, which invited people with sensory impairments to physically interact with a large-scale installation and was experienced by 100,000 people during its tour of UK venues, along with pioneering work which looked at children as an audience for live art have both led him to think about community engagement as an area of research.

It was work in China on the 1 mile² residency from Visiting Arts that he links most directly to Korea Town, however. This opportunity invited British artists to different cities all over the world to make work in just the immediate one square mile around their host organisation. Richard's residency took place in Shanghai, in an area with several big transport hubs and industrial buildings. "The whole idea of really focusing in on one place became a big experience for me" he recalled. "The longer I was there, the more I was exploring in depth - and the more I didn't want to leave my square mile! It was a profound experience for me in many ways and Korea Town is similar. I feel that I am drilling down into somewhere that's British but not British at the same time."

The exhibition will feature video projections of documentary and performance works and the walls will be decorated with





allusions to Korean popular culture and some text pieces. Featuring in the video works, Richard has walked the three miles from the college to New Malden, stopping on the way in places of interest seeing it as a pilgrimage and filming them for the exhibition. He has also researched an ancient Korean poetic form called Sijo that dates back to the 10th Century and is older than Japanese Haiku. Intending to write some Sijo verses for the walls of the gallery, Richard likes the link he sees between these and the way that song lyrics run across a karaoke screen.

"Karaoke is a big thing in Korea" he explained "- that there are two Karaoke bars in New Malden is not a surprise." These two venues are called Han Karaoke Bar and Sing Sing. The latter located in an "extraordinary" building that used to be a silent movie house and a billiard hall which has since been taken over by a local Korean family. Kpop Noraebang (karaoke) is a national obsession but it is not a very public activity. "To me, it kind of reflects the culture in a way." For the exhibition, the centrepiece of the gallery will be a reconstruction of one of The Han Karaoke Bar's private rooms: an interactive structure where audience members can participate in karaoke, with a mixture of western and Korean songs available for visitors to perform, reflecting the mix of choices he's found on Han's own song lists. "Singing will be encouraged!"

Richard has been to Han twice with students from the BA Print and Time-Based Media course that he leads at Wimbledon. "You have a small room that seats about eight people that you hire by the hour, and it's a lot of fun. I like the idea that it can be an intimate thing, unlike the British tradition of singing to a larger room or pub full of people."



His students will be involved in the exhibition in other ways, too, with some working on it as part of their professional development placement and referring to it as a model which demonstrates ways of working beyond the gallery, relating to audiences and the public in different ways - "it's an aspect of the course that I am a champion of." He is also keen, of course, to involve as many Korean students as possible. "For me, the communities we're addressing with the exhibition are not just New Malden and those Koreans who study here" he was keen to point out when we met. "The communities include the college and, beyond that, UAL. I'm also working with Mark Dean, the Chaplain at UAL to reach Korean students in Universities across London."

In order to develop a connection with some of the older members of the New Malden community who have lived there longer and established their businesses in the area, Richard is also planning to work with the Chaplain to reach the large number of Christians that are part of the community. "It's a separate kind of place, and very much has its own identity. On Saturday 4 February we will be having an Open House afternoon for the exhibition for the Korean people of London and New Malden, with special guests and a video message from our partner institution K-Arts in Seoul."

"In many ways, the Korean community has saved the High Street there. You can tell when you walk down it, that besides the shops, the department store and a few other exceptions, much of the rest is Korean-run. For example, Sing Sing's building is in a state of disrepair but the Korean family that own it have taken it on and saved this historic location - I think that has happened all over New Malden. In terms of regeneration of the area, they have given it a new energy and new life."

Richard feels strongly that this should be celebrated, along with the Korean communities that already exist within the college, and University as a whole. "Working on the research has given me an exciting new perspective on contemporary Korean culture. I'm learning about a number of new female Korean writers such as Han Kang, author of *The Vegetarian* which won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize. The exhibition is a vehicle to create connections and see what ripples it can make across UAL and beyond."

Korea Town runs at Wimbledon Space from 19 January – 10 February 2017, with an opening event on Thursday 19 January, 5 - 8pm. Find out more on our listings pages, or visit the event page online: arts.ac.uk/Wimbledon/events