



*Large and isolated in the gleaming whiteness of the page...[it] stares back at you, bold, statuesque, brightly coloured. But when you have shut the book, you will never see that bird again. Compared with the close and static image, the reality will seem dull and disappointing. The living bird will never be so large, so shiny-bright. It will be deep in landscape, and always sinking farther back, always at the point of being lost*

– J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine*

Charting the author's ten-year fixation on the peregrine falcons that would winter near his home in Essex, J.A. Baker's non-fiction work, *The Peregrine* (1967), follows these birds of prey on bicycle and foot, tracking their movements and learning their habits in a pursuit that would eventually lead to obsession. As Robert Macfarlane notes, this is not a book about watching a bird, but about becoming, or indeed failing to become a bird. The text is embedded with a deep longing for this creature's deterritorialised experience, its ability to take flight and rise above earthly matters, all the while acting as a reminder of our inescapable anchorage to the land. It was whilst working on the camera movement for their three-minute-long animation, *MYSTERIOUS* (2017)—in which we see a foetus-like creature swimming and floating through a dark, cosmic space—that Koo Jeong A was studying Baker's accounts of the wild peregrine falcons, attracted to the writing's 'pristinated vision, the sudden rapid pull shots, the immense field of vision, the swivelling eye'.<sup>1</sup> The erratic and multi-directional movements of the creatures that Baker describes speak to the artist's expansive reading of our earthly existence and its proximity to celestial and cosmic bodies and energies. In Koo Jeong A's conception of our reality, we can be at once grounded and horizontal, and also weightless and free-floating.

In the exhibition [ *YONG DONG* ], this relationship between ground and sky is explored through the iconography of two central motifs: a three-headed eagle and clusters of stars. The former takes shape within a new series of paintings made by the artist over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which they spent an extensive amount of time living in South Korea. The three-headed bird, rendered in bright red on a yellow background, is appropriated from a familiar symbol within Korean Buddhist and shamanistic belief systems: a talisman (*bujeok*) depicting a three-headed bird that can be carried on one's self in order to prevent calamities from occurring. The triumvirate of heads also relates to the term *samjae*, or the three major calamities of life, as well as to the three years of misfortune that occur in cycles according to one's zodiac birth sign. The three-headed bird is thus a symbol of protection to be held close, pasted onto the doors of households or carried wherever one goes (Koo Jeong A notes that their mother would always carry this image with her). It is a symbol within which fortune and misfortune, life and death, collide.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Macfarlane, 'Violent spring: The nature book that predicted the future', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2017  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/15/the-peregrine-by-ja-baker-nature-writing>>.

The celestial omnipotence of the eagle also summons a more morbid association for Koo Jeong A, who recalls seeing a golden eagle near a pile of skulls in Hakdong Park in Seoul when they were younger. Spending time in the city during the pandemic decades later, this memory was once again triggered, leading to the discovery that several skeletal remains of humans were unearthed during the urban residential development of the Hakdong Park area, illegally buried during the Korean War. Each of Koo Jeong A's three-headed eagles is therefore poised on a mountainous rock, resonating with this early experience. Sinister, all-seeing and at times demonic, their eyes look eagerly in all directions, as if about to take flight from their craggy pedestal.

Through the reconfiguration of this protective symbol, Koo Jeong A questions the various ways that humans seek solace through iconography, capturing and rendering as legible images what is often unknown, enigmatic and more powerful than us. Beginning from Korean folk religion and its associated talismanic symbology of the bird, Koo Jeong A started to form a constellation of icons across time: the three-headed eagle adorning the fence around the Alexander column in Palace Square, St Petersburg; the heraldic bird mentioned in the apocalyptic book *Latin Ezra* featured in later Roman Catholic bibles as an appendix to the New Testament, and the bird broderie that was inside the coat of Abraham Lincoln when he gave his speech during the American Civil War.<sup>2</sup> Conflict, testament, territory and borders are what link these iterations of the three-headed bird. They are, returning to Baker's description, 'static images' found in statues, coat linings and painted talismans, created and carried by us as self-serving emblems. Koo Jeong A's series thus plays into this constant morphing of symbols and the concurrent reconstruction of their signification over time, while also highlighting the limitations, even futility, of this human endeavour to make images in our own reflection.

Where the icon of the bird is a figure that takes flight from the Earth, the clusters of stars depicted in the second series in the exhibition appear to have fallen from the sky, arranged together in a chaotic chain of relations through painted geometries. Part of an ongoing body of work that Koo Jeong A has been developing since 2014 through different colours, forms and materials, including luminescent paint, this series from 2019 continues the artist's interest in the innate connectivity between earthly and universal matter. With the graphic, cartoon-like quality of each carefully composed cluster, the artist again speaks to our attempts to define something as cosmic as the matter we see twinkling above us. Five-, six- and seven-pointed stars can be found across time and in multiple contexts: on Egyptian jars dating back to 3100 BCE, on tablets and vases in Mesopotamia, in letters sent between the followers of Pythagorus as a symbol of their group, as the Star of David, grouped within the United States flag, or printed on a pair of Converse All Stars. As a ubiquitous symbol, it provides yet another example of how the indefinable finds

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<sup>2</sup> 'This 'great coat' was made for President Lincoln's second inauguration, which took place on March 4, 1865, during the Civil War. In his inaugural address, Lincoln urged reconciliation: "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan." He wore the same coat on April 15, 1865, the day of his assassination, just weeks away from the end of the war' (quote provided by the artist).

form through a human lens, like the arbitrary constellations we trace across alien skies.

Linking these two bodies of work are the artist's titles, each taking the recurring term 'ousss' as a suffix and attaching it to the names of different types of fungi and minerals. Used by the artist since the 1990s, 'ousss' can be both a root, affix, stem and suffix, but also a term in and of itself. Critic Kim Jang un describes it as

[...] an unseen reality. It is both matter and energy – and a certain state [...] it is like a sign approaching some indescribable dream [...] it is the mark of a world that exists contrarily in the cracks of our own world, one that has never been realised and cannot be realised [...] 'Ousss' flows like a cloud in the sky and goes to work when it is perceived within someone.<sup>3</sup>

Through its enigmatic, morphing movement, 'ousss' becomes aligned in the titles of these two bodies of work with the connective, mycorrhizal networks that stretch across and under the Earth, and to the layered, clustered vessels of time embedded within mineral structures. Through 'ousss', Koo Jeong A continues their interest in conjuring alternative realities within the material of everyday life. These are the cracks that exist within our known reality, through which the artist traces tacit knowledges and experiences that would otherwise remain unknown and invisible.

Joseph Constable, July 2022

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Jang un, 'Koo Jeong A: Stories of an Ambiguous World Transforming', *The Arto*, 11 December 2017 <[https://www.theartro.kr/eng/features/features\\_view.asp?idx=1309&b\\_code=32](https://www.theartro.kr/eng/features/features_view.asp?idx=1309&b_code=32)>.