



## Season 2, Episode 2: We Build Our Utopia– with Heesoo Kwon

Michelle Lin: On Saturday, June 11th 2022, join us, Kearny Street Workshop, at the San Francisco Mint for “To Imagine Is To Exist”: an evening of art, live music and performances, delicious drinks and food, celebrating 50 years of KSW and Asian Pacific American arts. It’s going to be an amazing night full of community love and good vibes, and the best part is: all proceeds are going to support our empowering programming for Asian Pacific American artists in the Bay. Please visit [kearnystreet.org/KSW50](http://kearnystreet.org/KSW50) to reserve your tickets. We hope to see you there.

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Michelle Lin: Welcome to We Won’t Move: A Living Archive. A podcast series from Kearny Street Workshop about Asian Pacific American artists of the past, present, and future, whose stories shaped the movement and dreams of San Francisco. I’m Michelle Lin, writer and arts and culture worker.

Kazumi Chin: And I’m Kazumi Chin, poet, scholar, and educator.

Michelle Lin: Today we are really missing our cohost, Dara, she just couldn’t be a part of this episode and really missing her quiet chaos, but she will be back really soon.

Kazumi Chin: Especially because she would really love this question I’m about to start us off with. So Michelle, if you threw a party for your blood and chosen ancestors, what would it be like?

Michelle Lin: Hmm, I feel like, well, okay, so hear me out. It would be a crying party where we practice crying. Yeah, about like, not necessarily sad things, I’m sure there is going to be grief but practice crying over happy things too because just like knowing me and where I come from, there is a lot of like need for practice of healthy emotional regulation and expression and I feel like that would be a really healing thing and we then would just eat really delicious food. What about you, Kazumi?



Kazumi Chin: So I was thinking we have a mah-jongg table and we just play mah-jongg. And then we would eat and write poems.

Michelle Lin: It sounds like something you would just do with your friends.

Kazumi Chin: No, that is actually just the organizing I want to do with my students, I just transferred it to what I wanted to with my ancestors too.

Michelle Lin: I mean, like, people also say that we are also ancestors, we're going to be ancestors one day and you should want to converse with them the way you would with your friends, or students today, so I like that. I like that.

Kazumi Chin: Yeah.

Michelle Lin: I love this question because in this episode we had a chance to talk to artist, Heesoo Kwon. We were so excited to do this. We first learned about her work when we visited the Chinese cultural center last year. And oh my God, what year is it? Was 2020 last year? 2021? Oh my God, what is time in this pandemic? So it was in 2021 we visited the Chinese Cultural Center. They had an exhibit called Women from Her to Here or Woman from Her to Here, it is a play on words, and there was a projection in one of the rooms in the gallery of her video which contained like 3D sculpturing and rendering of herself and her women ancestors dancing, and there's like watery, underwater surreal universe. That was also a mapping of Portsmouth Square Bridge outside the museum in Chinatown and we were so taken for the piece, that we needed to know more about her.

Kazumi Chin: And, Heesoo Kwon decided that she would talk to us and we're very happy about it so I'll read Heesoo's bio. Heesoo Kwon is a visual artist and anthropologist from South Korea currently based in the Bay Area of California. In 2017 Kwon initiated an autobiographical feminist religion, Leymusoom, as an ever involving exploration of her family histories and feminist liberation. Kwon received her Masters of Fine Art from UC Berkeley in 2019 and her work has been a subject of solo exhibitions at Et Al and Studio 2W, San Francisco, Phoebe A Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley and CICA Museum and Visual Space in Gunmulsai, South Korea.



Michelle Lin: She was amazing. The conversation was a joy to have. Her full bio is also really stunning, so make sure you give it a read through in the show notes, so without further ado let's dive into the conversation.

[music]

Michelle Lin: So, can you, Heesoo, can you start by sharing with us what is Leymusoom?

Heesoo Kwon: Yeah, Leymusoom is an autobiographical feminist new religion that I initiated in 2017 and I started it as my personal ritual, like reimagining my family history and my female ancestors lives. Whenever I have a show or whenever I have some performances, there are some audiences contact me and ask how they can convert to Leymusoom. So I started to have some community by the kind of interaction with the audience. So autobiographical feminist religion means like, I, as an initiator I support my converters to initiate their own versions of Leymusoom like reimagining their family history and their identity related to feminism or patriarchy, sexuality, gender, and, yeah, so, and also I am conducting my personal rituals related to my ancestors, especially my female ancestors and family history and personal histories. And before COVID I used to have some physical space like I used my MFA studio in Berkeley as my church so I used to have a lot of regular meetings with the community and like having workshops and preparing for some show and performances together. But after I graduated from the school and also COVID from late 2019, I kind of started to focus on my personal rituals related to my ancestors. So that's how I started to work on digital medium more deeper than before. Yeah, yes, and until now there are more than 170 people converted to Leymusoom. Before COVID it was mostly based in the Bay Area because the interaction between the audience was like mostly was in person, whenever they would come to my show or performances but since COVID I've had a lot of like online exhibitions and online screenings and as I make more video work I'm having some opportunities to screen my videos in different countries. So, yeah, surprisingly, many people like contact me and are just like, Heesoo, I really feel related to your work and I also Korean [diasporate] artist and I feel you and so like, yeah, so since COVID it is really amazing that the community is kind of like evolving with



out in person interactions. And even though I've never met them in person yet but sometimes I have Zoom meeting with them and talk about my work and talk about their work and share our experiences and kind of like I feel really deep, like intimate attachment to them sometimes. Sometimes we just cry. Oh I feel you so much. So it is really amazing to see how the Leymusoom community is involving and inviting other people from different states and different countries.

Michelle Lin: I think we are really interested and because you think of it as also like a religion but how do you kind of define religion and what is your relationship to that?

Heesoo Kwon: Yeah, so when I was in Berkeley, I worked closely with the professors from the Anthropology Department because in UC Berkeley, Arts Practice and the Anthropology Department share the same building. So I have some [tenses] to see how they are working and there is some tendencies to interact with the people there. So one of my, one of my advisors from UC Berkeley was from the Anthropology Department so I was learning how to write the observational or observing diaries, yeah, like how to write the paper, actually the paper that Kazumi read was the professor in the Anthropology Department helped me so much to write it. Yeah, so - at the time and at the time I was researching a lot of anthropologists, research related to like feminism or like patriarchy and always also I was taking some courses too. But, there is a professor in Stanford and their research is about like religion and how religion is working in like, yeah, people's lives and how the concept of religion affects, um, the perspective towards life. The professor, yeah, I got really inspired by the paper called, "Religion Without God" and it was published through the New York Times in 2014. I will send you the link. And, it says religious rituals are not only related to your religious beliefs but like it seriously just affects your prospective towards your daily life, like praying or going to church, that kind of regular ritual. And when like, and when I was in Korea, many of my friends around me and my family members, even, told me like, well, maybe I should talk a little bit. But I majored in business in college and, yeah, and many of my friends were like, really like, you know, like that marketing mindset or business mindset and even though I studied in a woman's university which is quite well known for Feminist Study but what I learned from the business major was really just like analyzing the market



and to like, creating some new product or marketing strategy to make more money. You know? It was a focus of making profit without any critical thinking. So at the time I was like questioning about or questioning a lot of patriarchal family rituals or [indiscernible] in Korean society and many of my friends and my family and even my first ex told me like, why are you testing their tradition? Why do you make your life so hard? And like, I was like at the time I got so confused and I didn't know, like, because I was the only one around me who are thinking like that. But after I moved to the U.S. and like while I am working on my art I realize, oh, I feel like they were born in patriarchy and misogyny. It was their religion. And like, and our daily lives were full of rituals to serve the patriarchy, like how I put on my makeup and how to dress or how to talk or how to think or how to interact with people. It's all about serving the patriarchy and we didn't realize that at the time. So, yeah, one of the first, yeah, my first ex-boyfriend told me like, oh, you were talking about some -- the patriarchy family rituals in Korea and he said like, why do you keep questioning our tradition? You shouldn't do that. He said like that. And I was like, later when I was in Berkeley I realized, oh, he believed in patriarchy. His religion is patriarchy and like, and what I learned from the anthropology, what I learned from the Anthropology Department kind of combined together it was like, okay. And myself too when I was majoring in business and like and learning like, the marketing strategies and everything, I think I just learned how to serve the patriarchy in commercial field as well. And it's just like, we just follow everything without questioning it. So and whenever I talk about or whenever I make some comments about it, people say like, you shouldn't do that, like you should just follow it. Why do you make your life hard? And there was similar -- similar reaction from my grandma. Yeah, because she was really sincere Catholic and whenever a question about Genesis. She was like she usually question it, you should follow it, you should believe it first, and then you will understand it later. That kind of attitude. so I think there is some point -- when I was in the first year of MFA, I had some like turning point to combine all about -- yeah, thoughts related to patriarchy and really changed my life. My family was really sincere Catholic and really like kind of pushing me to go to church and be, like, my grandma especially wanting me to obey my father. The Godfather and my biological father too and kind of like using the same language to discipline me so it was like, yeah, I had some kind of like, I had some a lot of like inner



conflict and I didn't know how to digest it. But later, like, when I was making art in Berkeley I kind of like realized, oh yeah, I was born a Catholic but also patriarchy. And now I want to convert my life to feminist because my daily life is full of the rituals, so I want to create my own feminist rituals to convert my life to like newer version. So it was the concept of Leymusoom.

Kazumi Chin: Yeah, I think -- in your essay you talk about this a lot too, right? I think in the essay you talk about religion being something that you unconsciously believe in sometimes, not even necessarily the conscious parts of the religion. And I think what you said here is interesting too, being able to link in the part about ritual, right? Because it's not just the unconscious beliefs that are part of the religion but it is the rituals that we undergo, the things that we do, everything that we practice in our lives that allow us to really, um, not even allow us but show the work that -- whatever, I was going to say that ideology. But like the work that these different religions do in the world, right? And when we take on the ritual itself, it changes our relationship to the kinds of ideologies, the kinds of religions we are in relation to as we move through the world. So, I guess, the question from me is, um, I guess, no, I think I've another question because I think this is a good establishing question. I want to know a story because we were thinking about stories. I want to know a story about when was the first time someone asked how to convert to your religion and what were you thinking at that moment and how did you respond?

Michelle Lin: Ooh, good question.

Heesoo Kwon: Thank you, it was in my first-year exhibition in Berkeley, at UC Berkeley. So, after my first semester in the MFA program, all of the first-year MFA cohorts have like groups together and at the time, like, at that time, I wrote my first version of Leymusoom Genesis in writing class and had some performance in school. And I had kind of really interesting feedbacks and wanted to work on them more. And besides that I was also making a lot of ceramics. It was my first time to like take classes and I was making a lot a lot a lot but kind of related to the Genesis, so when I was planning, when I was thinking about what to make for the first year show, I felt like maybe it would be great to combine the Genesis and my ceramic practice together and have some installation. So what I did was I



made a shrine installation in the gallery. So I bought a metal shed and installed the metal shed inside of the gallery and named it as Bodurinao's shrine. And Bodurinao's was just a name that I made to describe me. And at the time I was taking an anthropology class and it was a tourism class so and I learned many interesting things from the professor and one of the most inspiring for me, inspiring thing for me was, there was only one way for the tourist to recognize whether the historical heritage is authentic or not, is the signboard because they are not from the population. So, like, if it is just like, they can't tell whether it is an old building or a history important report. So I was like, oh, maybe the sign board is kind of like similar with the label in a museum or a gallery. So what if I make some signboard, (chuckles) something to say like, oh there is a emerging religion in Berkeley. It's feminist religion, and there is a really small community about it and for this specific exhibition, like they allowed us to bring it to the gallery. So this is the shrine, I made this kind of signboard in front of it. And it said like, one person per time can enter the shrine and they can close the door and they can enjoy the spiritual time in Leymusoom word, whatever. And so I installed a metal shrine with full of the ceramics and I kind of wanted to make some kind of like, I got inspired by some other installations related to, like, I merge in religion or cult. And my teacher referenced it like how people are building their own religion and like what I imagined about the shrine was like, oh, Bodurinao, my alter ego, Bodurinao is making the religion by themselves so there should be some work desk to make the statues and also the altar to honor the god spirit or whatever and there will be like some space for meditating or like praying or bowing so I made the kind of like, it was quite small but I made the kind of like categorized like spaces for each of the activities and invited people to see it and kind of try it and they could close the door and have some intimate time with my spirit, with my spiritual statues there. And the opening day, there were so many people, and they were like oh, and they were kind of shocked. Some of them were kind of shocked and grabbed my shirt and they said, Heesoo, are you the artist and is it your religion from Berkeley? And you just brought it here or you just made it from scratch? And they're asking, is it me? So who is the Bodurinao now and where are they? Is it from their backyard? And that they were asking me so many questions. And some of them asked me, like, this is so cool. They really liked the visual of the shrine and because it is kind of like, I wanted to make some really immersive atmosphere, so they really liked





the visual and atmosphere vibes so I was like, oh this is so cool, I want to be part of it, what like, duh, duh, duh, and so I was like oh, interesting. And that reaction made me think like, it was really interesting to see how people react to the concept of art and religion. And like, so some of them are just questioning about whether it is authentic or not like whether it is a real religion or not. And some people are saying, like, I want to convert it. I want to convert to this religion; it is so cool. So they just got inspired by the visual, visual aspect of my shrine and want to be part of it. So I was like, so, some people are kind of like questioning about it really seriously and some people are like, oh I want to be part of it because I like it and it is so cool. And I was like thinking, oh, maybe like it could be quite similar with other religions too. Some people go to church to just sing or to meet friends or they really like architecture but some people have different approaches, but like, you know and I was like oh, I feel like that reaction reflecting their backgrounds, like historical background what or their cultural background or like family and you know, I was like, oh, it's really interesting how it is so different that people are reacting to my work. And even some of them, some audience and even one of my friends warned me, like Heesoo, I will pray for you, like you should, you better be careful. Some people might harm you. (Chuckles) and like, seriously, like, and it is coming from what they experience from their lives and their families. So I was like, woah, interesting. So that was really inspiring and I met several people who wanted to convert to Leymusoom on the opening day. And I got their contact information (chuckles) because I wanted to because I wanted to talk with these people. I wanted to know what made them to like feel like this. So I asked their number or email and after the opening I emailed them, like, oh, I am Heesoo, can we talk a little bit or like, do you want to come to my studio? So that is how the community got started. So the first time is kind of like, doing some experiments, questioning what is religion and what is art. And for some people, art could be their religion, you know? So I was like, like, kind of like exploring the boundaries of the concept, different concepts and what I wanted to figure out with people who are interested in this [indiscernible].

Michelle Lin:

From that story and other ones you shared it seems like there was a lot of participation with folks in physical places. My first introduction to Leymusoom was the exhibit at the Chinese Cultural Center which was a video art that was being projected of the -- kind of like a dance party with





different figures from Leymusoom that is projected really like almost hugely, but that is not a word but like very large in the Chinese Cultural Center and I think it was built on like the Portsmouth Square Bridge in the San Francisco Chinatown and that is what was depicted and I'm curious about what you think about in terms of which projects are being constructed in a digital world or virtual and your relation to the physical place?

Heesoo Kwon:

So, Leymusoom got started, like, all of a sudden. Like, yeah, as I told you before, like people asked me to or people asked me how to convert to Leymusoom and how I started this community like based activities and, yes, I think the way how I develop my work is based on the interaction between people, like me and my audience. And even though - and like, yeah, they inspired me so much and encourage me so much. Kind of like ping pong, they give me some input and I give them some output and it becomes input for that so it's kind of like it's very creative and pretty creative and fun interaction. For example, when I first started Leymusoom I had some kind of like traumatic experiences related to religion and I didn't want to start it because my grandma was so sincere Catholic and always talk to me like, you should do this do this do this, and the community was so like strict and the doctrine was so, yeah, strict for me so I was like, and just the concept of religion was so scary for me, to be honest. I felt really scared to speak about this because I know many people are really serious about it and don't want to, want to discuss about what they are believing in. So I had a lot of like, fear, about it. But the community members like helped me to overcome it and they shared their lives first and I felt like, even though we were having so much different personal background and life experiences, we are kind of like feeling each other and totally understand each other and like, yeah, I think probably it's kind of coming from patriarchy. That is the issue so (chuckles) so that is how it started and because the interaction was important, having some physical space to interact with the people was really important for me. Like, and at first time I kind of like did some experimental approach toward how to develop Leymusoom because I wanted to try it like how other religions are communicating and interacting with their converters. Like having some space, like safe space like church or like shrine or a temple and talk about it and be intimate with each other. So having the kind of space was really important but there are some spaces and people



that I don't have access now like my family in Korea. And like when I started to study my family's lives and my personal family history, like, after I started to work as a community member because they inspired me so much. So I started to look at my family history and now, at the time, I was at Berkeley and my mom and my grandma are in Korea, and many of the ancestors were passed away already. And so I studied some family photos and family videos to understand them and found a lot of like patriarchal family rituals and religious doctrines in the family. So, and so I wanted to recreate something related to that or I wanted to visit it where I wanted to talk with them but I don't have access. They have already passed away and I am in Berkeley. So that is how I started to think about the digital realm to rebuild my memory and 3D model and 3D scan. 3D scan is quite different because I need to be there physically but that is how I started to 3D model myself first and my ancestors and also some imaginary spaces from my past lives or, yeah, some utopian spaces that I want to build. I wanted to experience the kind of, yeah, utopian spaces or some spaces in my past life, yeah, and reimagine it. That is how I build up the Leymusoom universe. I don't make some imaginary spaces actually, it's all about my current life or past life or my utopian dream. It's coming from, yeah, the people around me or myself. Yeah, so if I have the access to 3D scan the actual space, I love 3D scanning more than just 3D modeling because for me, 3D scanning is really ritualistic gesture and Shamanistic gesture because when I am managing the process of 3D scanning I use my phone or 3D scanner and kind of like, like, how can I say? I kind of like go over all of the surfaces of the space or objects. It's kind of like observing the energy or, yeah, and after I process the 3D model, 3D scanning, it becomes a small icon, you know, like the folder, the computer icon. It reminds me of amulet and chakra and Shamanism and when you click it it's kind of like the whole world is kind of like, you can open the whole world and you can archive it in a small folder. So I really love the gesture of 3D scanning and it's, and also it's more, I think it is more personal and subjective because based on the way how I am moving my hands or devices, the visuals are totally different. So it's kind of like capturing my body in the performances as well. So I really love 3D scanning to convert my, yeah, the physical spaces into the digital realm. But if I don't have any access or if I want to visualize some imaginary, some utopian dreams, then I use 3D modeling. Yeah, and my goal is kind of like, I want to -- my goal in Leymusoom is blurring the boundaries



between the visionary utopia and my physical world by having these kinds of gestures like 3D scanning and 3D modeling but and also like 3D print. So it's kind of like going back and forth between the two different realm and blurring the boundary and eventually my world, my physical real world will be like, yeah, there will be no difference with my utopian dreams. And then I can say I'm living my utopian life. (Chuckles) and that is what I imagine it.

Kazumi Chin: So, you have been working with 3D printing too? Is that going to be in your upcoming work in residence, or --?

Heesoo Kwon: I can send you some photo, oh, can I show you?

[laughter]

Michelle Lin: My listeners can't see, so maybe describe it, describe it for the listeners?

Heesoo Kwon: So, I 3D scanned my hand and 3D printed it. So yeah, it is one of the experiments I did, yeah, to see how I can convert my physical body to a digital body and if, yeah, I have some 3D printed sculptures in my solo show at all in 2019. I can send you the photo. But I'm using 3D printer and 3D printed part of my medium. Yeah, I think the model of a 3D printer is kind of some kind of vagina for the digital bodies to this real world, so the process of 3D printing is like giving birth. It is like yeah, in my solo show I had 3D print, yeah, giving birth for my ancestors and I had the 3D printed sculptures too. And I sent it to Canada right now because I'm having a solo show that I'm opening in two weeks from now. (Chuckles) so, it is now in Canada but after the show when you come to CCC, I would love to show you.

Michelle Lin: Yeah, and we will drop it in the show notes to your upcoming artist residency at the Chinese Cultural Center. That's around the time of this release I think it will still be up. So, that would be great. Is there anything that you are working on right now for it? In terms of Leymusoom, what are you thinking about? What are you making right now?

Heesoo Kwon: So, right now I am making a new video piece for the solo show in Canada. And I planned to go there in like, in person but because of



COVID I changed the plan. And instead of going there, I wanted to 3D scan the gallery space and the neighborhood but I couldn't so now I am making some video related to the neighborhood. Yeah, some kind of new video piece and it is my first time to make a piece related to specific location without being there. So it was really challenging because whenever I make some new video piece, I have very intimate feeling to the spaces and locations. Like, for example, the Chinatown. I spent so much time there to prepare for my solo exhibition Et Al in 2019 and, yeah, there aren't so much memories and, yeah. But Canada, yeah, it was really – I've never been to Canada and, yeah, but having, because I am talking with the trader often and I am studying about the neighborhood and like we are having some like video calls to see how the installation is going. I feel like even though I've never been there, like I kind of feel some kind of attachment because it is my show and these people, this person likes my work and invited me to have a show there and trying to introduce Leymusoom to the people there. So it's like, oh, it is so thankful that I'm having these kinds of opportunities. So it gives me some different, even though I've never been there, I am feeling some attachment to it and I am making a new video piece related to that. Like having my ancestors in the neighborhood of the gallery and kind of chilling there and I am describing some kind of Genesis, it's my second time to make a Genesis related to Leymusoom and this is my first time to write to create some Leymusoom Genesis based on my female ancestors so I'm excited about it. And besides that, I am having some solo shows later this year and early next year in SF, so thinking about it. But besides it, actually, I'm doing so many things, actually, I'm, so that's some kind of like, it's plan about the shows but besides the plan, the specific plan, I want to make Leymusoom meta-verse. That's really what I want to make. Leymusoom meta-verse is really what I'm working on and I'm talking with some venues to start this project and also working on some grants but my dream is to make Leymusoom meta-verse where I, me and my ancestor's 3D body and the converters from all different countries, all over the world can hang out together. Without the [leisure] of time and space and I want to invite people to my digital shrine and I also want to go to their shrine and learn about their ancestors and their histories and, like, yeah, yeah, I would love to expand, for now, for now, I am making mostly videos and also interactive 3D website or like 2D the digital diary, I want to make 3D interactive [indiscernible] for the Leymusoom members and when I have



my ancestors there too. It is my goal for now. And maybe like I can share you some exciting news later, but for now it is not confirmed so it's, yeah, it's hard to say when I can show it but I have some venues talking about it now. Yeah, I hope it happens.

Kazumi Chin: Yeah, that sounds good.

Michelle Lin: I hope that speaking this into the podcasts will be like kind of bringing it in and making it real. (Chuckles)

Heesoo Kwon: Yeah, I hope, thank you so much, I will send this link to the group.

[laughter]

Michelle Lin: Now, it has to happen, now it has to happen because we talked about it.

Heesoo Kwon: Yes, yes. Thank you.

[music]

Michelle Lin: We Will Move: A Living Archive, a Kearny Street Workshop podcast. Kearny Street Workshop is the oldest multidisciplinary Asian Pacific American Arts organization in the country. We envision a more just society that fully incorporates Asian-Pacific American voices informed by cultural values, historical roots and contemporary issues. We would like to thank the following funders for their support of this podcast. California Arts Council, Fleishhacker Foundation, National Endowment for the Art, Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center, Sankofa Fund for Cultural Preservation and Grants for the Arts. If you would like to make a donation to help us sustain this podcast and other KSW programs, visit [Kearny Street.org](http://Kearny Street.org). Stay updated on our events by following us on Instagram at Kearny Street. Take good care of yourselves and we'll see you soon.