Paper Talk Podcast
Episode 34: AIMEE LEE
Recorded on December 10, 2018

TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

HELEN HIEBERT: Welcome to episode 34 of Paper Talk, a monthly series of podcast interviews featuring artists and professionals who are working in the field of hand papermaking and paper art. I'm Helen Hiebert, and today I'm talking with artist, author, and maker, Aimee Lee. Aimee got interested in paper when she took a class about artist books at Oberlin College. She went on to focus on papermaking at Columbia College Chicago, where she got her master's degree. It was there that she got interested in the history of papermaking, and when she learned how hand papermaking traveled from China to Korea to Japan, she got curious about hanji or Korean paper. Aimee grew up in New York City, as the child of Korean immigrants, and she soon discovered that there wasn't much information out there about papermaking in Korea. We talk about how a prompt to answer the question, "What is your life's dream?", got her a Fulbright to study papermaking in depth in Korea and eventually led to her book, *Hanji Unfurled*, which was published by the Legacy Press. Aimee set up the first hanji studio in the US at the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio, and she's about to open her own hanji studio in Cleveland in 2019. We discussed grant writing, crafting, and running a small business, and you'll learn about Aimee's artwork, which includes Korean wedding ducks, hanji garments, and artist books, and we end with an overview of a new book that she is working on about people who make tools and equipment for papermakers. After all, we are beholden to these people who provide us with the tools to make paper by hand. Enjoy our conversation.

INTERVIEW

HELEN HIEBERT: Aimee Lee, welcome to Paper Talk. I'm excited to talk to you, especially because I feel a kinship in the way that we work with paper. We both make art, teach, and write, and I'm looking forward to talking to you about these aspects of your work. How did you first get interested in paper?

AIMEE LEE: I actually didn't know anything about papermaking until probably about grad school, which is pretty late, but I always, I think like a lot of other papermakers, was drawn to paper, but I was really kind of too busy trying to be a violinist, and I love writing, and I love books. But it wasn't until I decided to go look for book arts programs for graduate school that I found one in Chicago that required papermaking, and then, as soon as I started taking it, which was my first semester, I just totally fell in love with it, and that was with Andrea Peterson. So, that was pretty much doing nothing in terms of hand papermaking and then diving straight in really deep.

HELEN HIEBERT: So, that was at Columbia College Chicago?

AIMEE LEE: Yes.

HELEN HIEBERT: And so, you were interested in book arts, obviously, if wanted to study that so, where did that interest get sparked?

AIMEE LEE: That happened when I was at Oberlin College for undergrad. In my last semester, I took an artist books class with Nanette Yannuzzi, and she just opened this whole world, and they had a great collection at the library, and I just thought this medium that I didn't know anything about, where I could combine text and drawing and images and ideas and philosophy and even performance and music and things that I was interested in, all within this idea of what the book was. And so, we actually did very little, we did almost no fine bookbinding, it was all just exploding the definition of book, and so I just love making artist books, and so I wanted to continue doing that for grad school. And then I went to this program that was actually in an interdisciplinary arts program, and they really encouraged me to bring my violin and perform. Andrea really helped me create parts of performances within the paper studio, and so I loved that idea that it was kind of part of a bigger, just what it meant to be an artist and express yourself in a lot of different ways.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, so can you describe one of these performance projects that had a paper aspect?

AIMEE LEE: I had a show at the Chicago Cultural Center, and I had the entire hall, that was called Preston Bradley Hall, and they use it for a lot of musical performances because it has amazing acoustics. It has this gorgeous Tiffany dome, glass dome, and there are all these mosaics of old authors all over, and it used to be the circulating room of the Chicago Public Library, and so I had this idea that I wanted to fill it with stories, and I wanted it specifically to be about journeys, and the idea was kind of reclaiming this space as a place that books would come in and out of constantly. And first, I just thought, how am I going to fill this whole space with paper? It's a city block wide, and then someone was saying, "Well duh Aimee, you play the violin, you fill it with sound. That's what it's built for." And so, I created a paper train out of abaca, and so it was, we were making 4 x 4-foot sheets, and I would have it embedded with wire, so they made kind of almost like huge flowery shapes because the wire was constraining the abaca as it dried, and then I would hook them together and then hook them to my back, and then there were all these streamers at the end, and I was dragging this around the hall while playing violin, but it was totally contingent on the audience coming in and out. And there were other stations, and they would have these pieces of handmade abaca paper and pencils, and they could write to me stories about a journey they've taken, and they would leave it in like another piece of this huge abaca, you know, exactly what was on the train, but it was just kind of almost folded like a shell, like a receptacle. And then, I would stop at these stations, and I would read what they had written, and then from that, I would improvise kind of a sound motif based on that journey. And then I would walk around, continue playing, and then I would stop and pick another one, and then I would just keep building. So, because I was already trained in some nonclassical, like jazz and improvisation, I could keep bringing motifs back, and then just kind of building those different sounds and stories throughout the, it was a three-hour-durational performance.

HELEN HIEBERT: Cool. And was it a longer exhibit or was that it, just that?

AIMEE LEE: No, it was just that. It was part of a bigger, kind of one-night festival performance art called Sight Unseen that Julie Laffin had curated. And so, it was just one night you would come, and there were performances all over the building. It was really fun because everyone was doing something different, so you could kind of explore the whole space. So, it was kind of one and done, but it was kind of almost like the theater, but the whole, every nook and cranny was full of different people from Chicago performing.

HELEN HIEBERT: Oh neat. And then, so what happened with your studies after that?

AIMEE LEE: Well, I got, it's funny because I went thinking I really wanted to make books, and then I actually postponed the fine bookbinding part because I really wanted to take more performance classes and paper classes, but, I eventually, I mean, of course, I did all the bookbinding and letterpress printing, and that was great, but I was really interested when we got into the history of papermaking how it went from China to Korea and then Japan, and everyone knew all about Japanese papermaking. We were all really well versed, and Tim Barrett's research and Andrea, of course, did a section on Eastern papermaking, but because I grew up as the children of Korean immigrants and always in this space that people being like, "Oh where are you from?" and they would think that I was from China or Japan because at that time, Korea was just not that well known, and so this feeling of always being kind of in the shadows of these major superpowers was always very frustrating to me because I wanted to know what my heritage had to offer throughout history. So, I found research by Dorothy Field and Lynn Amlie and it was great because they had been to Korea in the 80s and 90s, and they had both learned how to make paper, but they had since stopped. They weren't making hanji, and then I essentially just realized I had to go to Korea to learn more about hanji, which is Korean paper, and so I was really encouraged by Andrea and other teachers there to go ahead and apply for a Fulbright. And I didn't do it right away. I did wait a little bit. I got out of grad school, and I did a lot of residencies and a lot of traveling, and then it took a while because I was really serious about putting in a good application. So, I mean I had eight people read my draft, and of course…

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, and this is a great thing. I want you to talk about the nuts and bolts because people listening to this might be interested in applying for a Fulbright.

AIMEE LEE: I basically went, when I was in Chicago, they have seminars that they run out of their New York office, but then they webcast out to other cities, so you just go to this room in Chicago, we'd all be watching a video of the program officer explaining, and then we would ask questions. And I did that in Chicago, and then I waited because I felt like I wasn't quite ready, you know, after I got all the information about what you needed to prepare, it's a giant application. And then, a couple years later, I was actually living in New York, where I'm from, where my family is, and I went to that same meeting, but in person, and I felt like, okay, I feel like I've a better grip on this. And essentially because I was applying for a fellowship that was not just a research one, but a creative arts one, you have to do the entire research application plus submit all of your artistic samples. So, the way they explained it to me is that if you don't even make the cut with your

slides, your artwork, they won't look at the rest of the application. So, it really felt a little crazy that I was going to prepare all these essays and possibly not even have it seen. The other issue is that it goes through many steps. So, you see all of the art, then they decide if you're a good enough artist to even be considered. Then, they look at your whole application. If they decide, the US committee will look at it first, and then they'll send it onto the country that you're applying to. So, for me, the Korean committee had to look at the application. And so, it goes through a series of rounds. And there are two major essays, and one is essentially your project proposal, and then the other one is kind of a biographical sketch. I had talked to a lot of people who had gotten Fulbrights before, and they pretty much gave me the same advice, which was you have to write it in a way to show that the trajectory of your life is naturally leading towards going to this country to do this research. Not like, "Oh I just felt like I wanted to go to Germany and do this random thing." It has to really make sense within the story of your life. So, like I said, I had eight readers, and what happened was the first seven said, "This is great. You're done." And then the eighth reader was Tim Barrett, and he said, "Oh this is an okay first draft." And I was like, "What?" And he said, "Okay, so this is what I would do." And he had a really good way of approaching it, which was to come up with headers, like headings, and then write under that, and then you could pull out the headings later. But he said, the key for me, he said, "What is your dream?" Like what's your dream for your life? And I was saying, "Well it's totally unreasonable." And he said, "It doesn't matter if it's realistic, just you have to know what your dream for your life is, and you write towards that." And so, you have to get really vulnerable with yourself to admit to yourself these are the things I want to do. Because often, especially like as a woman or as a person of color, people are like, you can't be so ambitious, but I really had to sit and think about what I wanted to do, not just what I thought would look good on the application. And to this day, so, of course, it took much longer to finish the writing, but I'm so glad that I had his input. Because I actually think, I probably would have gotten it on the first essay, but it was that second go around that made me really commit to what I wanted to do, and even today, which is like over ten years since I submitted that essay, if I read it now, I've actually achieved pretty much everything that I wrote, which is really incredible. Because usually, I know the way that I write grants, often you think you just write what you think they want ,and it's not necessarily what you want or its just kind of like pandering, and I have so many rejected grant applications that are just like making up things that I think sound novel but really aren't at the heart of what I want. So, I think that was really key.

HELEN HIEBERT: And I want to just say, I do think writing grants to your dream is really the right way to do it, and don't you think sometimes, sometimes you have a time pressure, and you just have to write it really quick, but I find, 'cause I've written a bunch of grants too, the more I can go back and forth and reflect, it gets more polished. Even a book proposal too, I just worked on a book proposal, and I was really struggling with it, but I knew I had to just kind of let it come out, and then you get excited about it, and you have a plan, too, if you get the grant.

AIMEE LEE: Exactly, yeah, and that was what, you know, I think Tim's big thing was you have to really make it clear to them if you know the language, that you know the language, and I did, so that was a big plus, and that you have to demonstrate that people in the country want you there, so you have to have contacts, and I did. So,

you're right, I had a game plan ready, it was just, of course, once you get there, especially [laughs] actually, the more I travel, the more I realize every culture is disorganized because people are just like that. So, you have a plan, but you get there, and it doesn't, I guess in the end for me, it went according to plan, but not at the exact speed or order that I had wanted. But really in the end, it happened that way, and it worked.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, right. And so how long, so tell me the exact name of the Fulbright program that you applied to.

AIMEE LEE: I had applied to the US Student Program, which is for junior fellowships, and I've already forgotten all of the official other pieces of it. But essentially, it is for students, but you can apply. So, I applied maybe, I went to Korea a couple years after I graduated from grad school, so you can apply if you're recently graduated as an at-large student, so you can apply through your alma mater, if they allow you do that and they usually do, but I decided to apply at large. And it is essentially for students to go and spend a year doing research, and it's related to like the ones that people use to finish their dissertation research for their PhD's and things like that. But the creative arts ones are a little different in that you have that added layer of all the artwork and things that you need to send, the imagines or videos and things, and I know actually, a lot of Tim's students have since gotten those, like Tatiana Ginsberg and Steph Rue, and so it's definitely something that I hope more and more people in our field continue to do.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, so you went for a year?

AIMEE LEE: I went for a year. It's technically one academic year, so it's more like ten months, but I had also gotten a Critical Language Enhancement award because the US State Department, which administers all of the Fulbright programs, they have this list of languages that they consider critical for US citizens to learn that are not taught as widely, so they're harder to learn if you grow up in the US. So, they will give you additional funding and time to go and do that. So, I was able to do that and go three months early. I could have gone six months early, but I really just wanted to dive into the research once the fall hit, but I was there in total for a year.

HELEN HIEBERT: Cool. So, let's briefly discuss what you did during that year, and I know it ultimately led to a book *Hanji Unfurled*, which is a wonderful book, and I'm curious to know whether you had that in mind as you were traveling.

AIMEE LEE: I think that I, you know, I should have reread the proposal. I'm sure I said that I was going to write about it, but I, at that point was too scared to say I was going to actually write a book. I didn't want to commit to that. I did say that I would write about it, and I knew that I wanted to write about it, and from the very start, I kept a journal, I had a blog, I kept really good track of everything I was doing. I took tons of pictures. I took a lot of video. I actually cut and edited video immediately when I was there because I knew that if I waited, I just wouldn't do it. And I was just so excited. The people I was meeting, I was thinking no one gets to see this ever, and so I just wanted to share with, at least my circle, kind of immediate circle, of people who knew that I was posting these. I just wanted them to see what I was doing in the moment. And so, I ended up, I think

the first article I wrote was actually for Asao Shimura, who is the Japanese papermaker in the Philippines, and he always had these self-published kind of publications he called "Kami," which is paper in Japanese. And so, I don't know if he does it anymore, and other people had written actually about hanji for that publication in the past, but he had asked me to write something, so I did, and then from there, I wrote a little article for a Buddhism magazine because hanji has a close relationship with Buddhism, and then it just kind of went from there. I wrote for *Hand Papermaking*, and then I wrote for *Bull and Branch* for the Friends of Dard Hunter, and I knew that essentially all of that was preparing me. It was almost like I was getting little chapters ready for a book, and I felt some pressure because people were like, "Oh you're going to write a book?" Or "Are you going to write something?" And I thought, oh, I don't know if I want to because it will be compared to kind of what's already out there. And then, I finally just got to the point where I was ready. I mean essentially, I think it was early 2011. I had just moved to California to do a little bit of teaching for Mills College in their book art program, and I sent a book proposal to Cathy Baker of the Legacy Press in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and she immediately just said, "Yes, I want this book. Let's sign a contract right away." And I thought, well this is way too easy, this is not right, and then I thought, you know what, I'm just going to wait, let me wait, because I just sent her a few chapters. I said, "I want to write the whole manuscript before you really say yes." So, she said, "That's fine." And then, of course, I didn't touch it for almost another year. So that was early in 2011, and then maybe in September 2011, around there, I started writing in earnest. I really put myself on a schedule. I said two hours in the morning, two hours in the evening, and that's all, like there were times when I tried to force myself to write in the afternoon, and I just realized the natural pace of my working schedule makes me like a useless blob in the afternoon. So, it was a waste of my time. So, I would write four hours a day, and within two months, I had a manuscript, and I sent it to Cathy again, and she said yes again, and in the meantime, I had kind of reached out to a few other places, and I hadn't really heard much, and I realized, okay, do I want a publisher who really knows Korean culture or do I want a publisher who really knows paper? And I realized the paper piece is more important to me than having my romanization all correct. And so, I ended up signing with Cathy, and it was great. I know some people are saying, "Why don't you self-publish?", and I said, you know for my first book, I want to go with a real publisher because there is just so much, as you know, there's a huge learning curve. There are so many steps, and I would really like to have the publisher deal with those steps and me not worry about it. So, it was a great experience. She is so, she just knows so much. She's such a treasure to our field, so she's a great editor, she's a great writer, she knows probably more than anyone I know about papermaking.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, and so everybody look up the Legacy Press. We'll put it in the show notes. Cathy Baker, she's published, I don't know, fewer than 50 books, quite a few. So, I want to dive into the content a little bit and hear about your trip and about hanji, like how hanji is made and where you studied.

AIMEE LEE: So, I had thought really my concern when I first went was I just want to learn how to make hanji. And it wasn't even just, it wasn't just I need to know from beginning to end because I already knew a lot of the steps. My big thing was I needed to learn the shape formation technique because that's the thing that no one knows how to do anywhere else, and that's the thing that almost no one does in Korea. Even the

paper being made by hand in Korea, most of them are being made in what we think of as a Japanese style, even though it may have originated in Korea. So, what I wanted to do was the Korean style that originated from China, so, you know, papermaking starts in China. There are a lot of different styles in China, and Elaine and Sid Koretsky documented a lot of those, and if you look, you can see a lot of the precursors to how it would have turned into what it did turn into in Korea. So, I wanted to learn that technique, but then, you know, I had to find a paper mill willing to take me, and I went pretty immediately after I landed to the Shin Hyun Se, who is down in the southern part of Korea, and he does all the conservation essentially that comes out of that country. So Talas, Polistini, all the people who carry conservation hanji, it's all made by him. And so, I went, and it was great, but I realized he speaks this dialect of Korean that I cannot understand. It's so strong that it sounded to me like Japanese, and I though, oh my god, I don't know if I can study with him because I can't understand what he's saying, and I also knew he lives in a town that's become really depopulated, and there are very few young people, and there is no place to stay. You know, there's no kind of motel or lodging, so I'd have to live with maybe someone who worked with him, and I just thought, and it's very remote, and there's only one bus that goes back and forth to Seoul a day. So I thought, okay, maybe it's not a great idea, and from there, I just kept visiting different paper mills. And essentially everywhere I went, I would say, "Can I study?", and they would say no, and I did. The first thing I did was go to the shop in Seoul of my teacher, who is Jang Seong Woo, was at the time the eldest son of the patriarch of the mill called Jang Ji Bang, and they were maybe an hour and half to two hours northeast of Seoul and so not that far from the DMV, and they had been my sponsors originally for the grant, so for the Fulbright, and he had said, "Yes", via e-mail, "I will teach you." But then when I went to the store, his wife said, "No, I can't let you go.", and "I don't know who you are." And so I thought, okay, I guess this is a dead-end, and so I just went all over looking for people. And then it wasn't until six months later, I went to a demonstration he happened to be doing with his whole family with a papermaker from Uzbekistan, and they were comparing kind of, they called it the Paper Road, like the Silk Road, papers from different cultures, and I was able to talk to him and ask, I've been to this place and this place and this place, and they all said no, and do you know where I can learn this sheet formation technique? And he said, "Yeah, the only place you can do it is at our mill." And I said, "Oh okay." And he said, "Why don't you just come visit sometime, and see what you think." And so, I made a trip out there and then I said, "Yeah this is great. I would love to study here." And I think he said, "All you have to do is find a place to stay, and we'll feed you, otherwise just come and learn to make paper." And then it wasn't until I got there, and I was actually, we were out in the snow in front of this wood fire, and I think we were either steaming, we were probably steaming the paper mulberry trees that we had already harvested, and we were just standing there and he said, "Wait, did you e-mail me like two years ago?" and I said, "Yes." And he said, "Why didn't you e-mail me back?" or he said, "Why didn't you e-mail me or get in touch when you got here six months ago.?" And I said, "Well because I did. I went to your store and your wife said no." And he said, "My wife says no to everyone, that's her job." But then he said, "You know what, it's probably just as well" because it was easier for him to say yes to me when I said, "Well Wonju Hanji said no, Wonju Traditional Hanji said no." And she meant, you know, that all these people thought I was a crazy person. So, he, yeah, so essentially he taught me how to make hanji, and then he kind of felt, I think there is a lot of this, and it's almost like benevolent

sexism at play, like, “Oh this poor, young woman who’s not married, who is here in the winter, and she must be so cold and not properly dressed.” Like I came the first day wearing jeans, and they were like, “Tomorrow, you need to wear real work clothes.” And I was like, what are real work clothes? And so, he would say, “Okay, well that’s enough for today in the cold part of the studio. Let’s go to the box container and work on some other things.” And the box container was literally like a box container that would go on a train or like a boat. And in Korea, you can buy a box container, and then you can outfit it. You outfit it with electricity and lights and windows, and you make a little office, which that is what it was. So, it had a heated floor, like all Korean floors, and he taught me how to do joomchi, like texturing the paper. He taught me the rudimentary steps for cording and twining paper, which is iiseung, and he just, I think the more he saw that I was sticking with it, and I was excited, I think all my teachers were that way, he just kept showing me more and more. So yeah, Korea has a very long history of papermaking that starts almost 2,000 years ago. So, they used it for a lot of different things that they don’t use it for now, which is why that market is not doing so well. But, I was very, very fortunate that I found him at the time that I did and also when his father was still alive and was able to also help me.

INTERVIEW PAUSE FOR BREAK MESSAGE

INTERVIEW RESUMES

HELEN HIEBERT: Wow, so how long were you there?

AIMEE LEE: I was there, I was actually at Jang Ji Bang in the winter just for a month.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay.

AIMEE LEE: And then after that, I went back to Seoul, and before that, I had also been doing other, I had studied jiseung, fusing paper with Kim Kyung, who had a huge collection of hanji objects, and I was looking for all kinds of other people. And then after that, he actually insisted that I meet his jiseung teacher, which is how he had kind of learned how to do the cords and the weaving, and I was really resistant at first, but then I thought, okay, I’ve come and done what I needed to, but of course, I had more time left, so I ended up studying with that teacher for five, almost six months in Seoul, and I was living on my own in a studio apartment. I would commute to him every week, and then in the process, of course, of being at Jang Ji Bang and also doing the cording, I realized I needed to learn how to impart color onto the paper. And so, I started talking to my friends about wanting to learn natural dying, and I was pretty quickly hooked up with a teacher, also in Seoul. And that teacher was not specializing in natural dying for paper, kind of the way that Tatiana did with the studio where they really specialize in how to dye paper, but he was very open to me experimenting, so I could bring the hanji I had made, and we would kind of figure it out together, and then very early in my stay, I had met a calligraphy expert, who, you know, in kind of one of those drunken, like it was one of those, I can’t even remember what the gathering was for, but it was a lot of people just eating dinner, and he was making a big fuss like, “If you want to learn about hanji, you need to know about calligraphy because that’s the whole reason they made hanji”. And at the time, I thought okay that’s nice, but it wasn’t until I got back to Seoul,

and I had all this paper I had made, and I started to, I had actually a subscription series when I was out there, so I had people who had paid for yearlong subscription, so that maybe every three months, I would send them something of what I was making, and so one of the pieces I decided to do was ink on hanji. And once I started actually using ink on hanji, I realized, oh my god, I have to find this calligraphy teacher again because he's right. I mean, this paper takes ink so much better than any paper I've ever used before, and it just, yeah, so then I studied with him for my last month that I was there, and so it was really kind of a process of going and kind of following the leads, and even if I was resistant to something, the most important things would eventually come back. So yeah, it was definitely not organized like that from the start, but I'm really grateful that that's the way it turned out in the end.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, yeah, and so your book is kind of, what do you call it, a memoir, a diary?

AIMEE LEE: I, you know, yeah, I don't even think of it as a memoir, but it is kind of, it is basically a documentation of what I did there, and I tried to weave in history, and I tried to weave in stories essentially about the people that I met, and the teachers that I had, and almost kind of an homage to all of them who made it possible for me to learn all these things, so, the idea was to try to get as much information out about what I had learned as possible without making it just seem like a text book. Because I actually didn't, I wasn't interested in doing that, and I also wanted it to be really clear that this is from my perspective…

HELEN HIEBERT: Right.

AIMEE LEE: I'm not an ethnographer, I'm not a historian, I'm not like a technical specialist. I'm an artist, and I'm a papermaker, and a person who is essentially part of the Korean diaspora, and so it's very uniquely from my perspective, so in the hopes that actually there would be more books from other perspectives. And so since that actually, there is a book that Lee Seung Chul had translated. He had a book out about hanji, but it was all in Korean, so I believe it's something like *Everything You Need to Know about Hanji*. There is now an English language book of his research, and he had done 20 years of, you know, just going all over the countryside and studying with different people. He's an art professor in Seoul. But yeah, I mean I knew that he had set up a studio, he never let me see it, but obviously I was really inspired by what Tim Barrett had done in Iowa. This idea of going to Japan, coming back, and kind of recreating as much as you could for an American public and for students, for non-Japanese students to learn and really appreciate Japanese paper. And so I wanted, and of course, his book was an inspiration, there is no way I was going to make something like his book because he is very good with the technical stuff, but I was really inspired by Sukey Hughes' book, *Washi.* I just thought it was so beautiful, and I, the drawings especially, and obviously the photographs were important, but I wanted to try to make it, I guess, into more of a relatable story. I mean it got awarded in the reference category for the Eric Hoffer Book Award, so it is considered, I guess, a reference book, but I didn't want it to be really dry, I guess. And again, I have friends who are like real scholars, and so I didn't want to pretend that this is some kind of heavily footnoted, you know, kind of book, but it's really a distillation of that experience, and then the epilogue goes into what

I did immediately afterwards, which was build the first Korean papermaking studio in the US at the Morgan Conservatory, so it was this idea of just again, bringing all of this information home.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, and it's a fantastic book, and it's still available from the Legacy Press correct?

AIMEE LEE: Yes.

HELEN HIEBERT: Good.

AIMEE LEE: Yes, definitely buy it from the Legacy Press and not Amazon because it's too expensive on Amazon, so don't fall for the Amazon prices.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay.

AIMEE LEE: Buy it from the Legacy Press, and they have discounts for libraries and nonprofits, so just take advantage of that.

HELEN HIEBERT: Cool, cool, cool. So, let's talk about what you're doing now and since then in America to bring hanji to the masses.

AIMEE LEE: Yeah, you know, it's funny, when I was in Korea, my natural dyeing teacher, who was hilarious because he loved me because he knew that I was pretty much like left wing in politics because I was related to a now deceased past president of Korea, South Korea, and who he adored, and he was part of, essentially at the time their resistance party, and so he said, "The reason that the United States is such a great, powerful country is that it sends its citizens out into the world, you know, like on a Fulbright and have them take the best parts of other people's cultures, and then they bring it all back to America." But in a way, it's really true. I mean, I'm not going to talk about what's happening now, but at that time, there was a real sense of how much you can learn from the people out in the world, and for me, it was so important to essentially fill in this gap that we had in papermaking history, that we had people working on Japanese papermaking. I wish actually, we could get more people right now working on Chinese papermaking, but we did still have that, you know, Elaine's book came out, *Killing Green*, a few years before mine, or maybe even, yeah, I don't remember, I think it was 2007, but I wanted to be able to fill that in, and I thought the best way to do that is I have to be able to teach. So first, I just tried to teach and lecture everywhere I could, anyone who would take me, and then pretty early, the Morgan had said, "Oh that sounds great, and we'll keep you on the mailing list." And then they asked if I would teach a workshop and what my supply and equipment needs are, and I said, "Well I'd need a really big vat." And they said, "Okay sure we'll make a really big vat." And I thought you would make a really big vat for a two-day workshop? And I thought, wow, this is a weird place, but let's just run with it. And I said, "Okay well, I'd need more than a really big vat, but let's do this. I'm going to raise money on my end, you raise money on yours, and let's build out the whole studio" because they had already gotten a kozo garden going from cuttings from Tim's plot in Iowa, and so they already were interested, they just didn't have an outlet for the Asian papermaking.

HELEN HIEBERT: Let's just mention that this is the Morgan Conservatory. I know you mentioned it before, in Cleveland, Ohio. It is a huge facility that had room also for it.

AIMEE LEE: Right, exactly, right, so they were really dedicated to papermaking, book art, printing, and Tom Balbo was the founder and the artistic director, now, and he especially wants to be like his experience at PBI, Paper Book Intensive, that he got to have, just kind of people coming together and doing this thing that they loved, and so, he started this plot. He had some equipment, and it was a lot of Japanese equipment, and so I essentially used Kick Starter. They got some private funding for materials, and then we had this huge crew of volunteers, and it was an amazing summer. It was 2010. We built it out in five weeks. I taught a workshop at the end of that five weeks, and then every year, I would go back and teach. Yeah, it became pretty much the place to go if you wanted to learn to make hanji. And I think in 2013, I decided I would, because at that time I was still living in New York. It kind of felt a little ridiculous to go back and forth between those cities, and I thought the best for me to really focus on hanji would be to move to Cleveland. We were talking about writing grants, and I told myself I'm going to give myself six months and apply for everything I could find; grants, fellowships, jobs, you name it, and if I don't get anything, it's a sign that it's time to make a change. And I got all rejection letters, and I decided to move, so I went and approached them and said, "I'll for, like pro bono, I'll help you write grants to basically help you get the money to pay me to be here." And so, we were able to do that and get a $50,000.00 matching grant from the county, which was actually using cigarette tax money for the arts, and so it was $100,000.00 project for that year, and we were able to expand it, so instead of just being Korean papermaking, kind of more Asian and Eastern papermaking. So, I did that for that year, I did some more work for them the following year, and then I left, so that I could pursue other, I really wanted to focus on really what I care about, which is not just hanji, but also kind of East Asian traditions and how all of these things are actually globally connected, so like if we think about the bark that we use to make the paper, what were people doing with it in Polynesia and South America and Latin America and Africa and the Caribbean and how that all connects in ways that we don't think about because we're so kind of focused on our, maybe on our own thing. It's so funny. It's actually the Morgan, almost in its limitations was still too broad for me. You know, it was like I didn't want to have to, I wanted to really just have a space where the hanji that was always up and always there and ready to go and not worrying about running some other unrelated classes. So right now, I'm in the process of building a new studio in Cleveland that will be dedicated to, it will be my space to make hanji and do all East Asian techniques but then also open for small workshops. There is going to be a gallery space, and then we made sure to have southern exposure on this building so that we can also grow, I actually don't even mind if we don't grow the paper mulberry trees. I'm more interested in using native plants. You know, you know a lot about that as well, about using plants that are around you that are local, and so I think Winifred Lutz, she has this amazing appendix in Tim's book on Japanese papermaking that talks about this idea where Japanese papermakers said, "Why are you importing fiber from around the world? You must have plants in North America that would work for Japanese-style papermaking." And it's true, and so my favorite plant is milkweed, and it's abundant here. People are happy to get rid of it, so I've been using milkweed for

years now. And I think it was last fall, that I was able to make a whole batch of milkweed hanji, and it pulled actually even nicer than paper mulberry.

HELEN HIEBERT: Wow, and you have a little book, is that little book still available?

AIMEE LEE: Yeah, it is.

HELEN HIEBERT: I just ran across it in my studio today. It's a very sweet book, and where can people get that?

AIMEE LEE: That you would have to go to my website, and it's on the writing section. Unfortunately, I don't make it very easy for people to buy things because I just hate dealing with all the web designs, but people can just contact me, and we'll do it through PayPal. It's essentially a little zine a little comic about milkweed papermaking, so it's geared towards people who already know how to make paper. It's about all the steps of how to identify and harvest, when to harvest, how to process, what parts of the plants to use and how to get it ready to make paper, and the deluxe addition has a little paper sample of milkweed. But I love it, it's a very versatile fiber, and it looks so different depending on what part of the plant and when you harvest it.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, and I love that you're going to explore making hanji with native plants. And so where is the studio? Is it at your house or is it separate?

AIMEE LEE: No, it's a separate building, so it's a commercial building that's in kind of a business district, and then it will hopefully, I mean right now, we're in the kind of architect phase, the drawing phases. It will go soon to the City for approval, and then who knows, all that back and forth, but definitely at some point in 2019, it will open. The great thing is I'll be able to have dedicated internships and apprenticeships, so that people who really want to learn more intensively can come and do that.

HELEN HIEBERT: Nice.

AIMEE LEE: Yeah.

HELEN HIEBERT: And you've talked about these innovative funding methods. So I'm curious how you're funding, if you want to share.

AIMEE LEE: [Laughs] Well, that one is basically, that one, I was very, very lucky to have essentially an angel investor come in and fund the building and the construction, but otherwise, I've done a lot of different kinds of grants, you know, either a small family foundation or like the Fulbright, where it's a government thing, or like Kick Starter, all the crowd funding, and I did sign up for fiscal sponsorship, and I actually just shut down my membership because I just thought this a little too much pressure to feel like I always have to be looking for some grant. But fiscal sponsorship is really useful for some people because what it is, it is you as an individual are sometimes not able to apply for certain grants because they're only for nonprofits that are incorporated as such, and so if you go through an intermediary that already has a nonprofit designation, you can then apply for grants that are reserved for them, and they're usually bigger grants. So, I really

wanted to do that, and then I just, yeah, things just kind of went slower than I wanted, than I thought, and I've also talked to some other really interesting people about maybe nonprofit is not the way to go, so like Zea Mays, out in Western Mass, Liz, oh my god, I forget her last name, but she started this print shop that is pretty much the hub now for green paper making. People can go there and learn all about how to do nontoxic printmaking, and then they also will send people out to your print shop to teach you how to convert your shop, and Zygote Press in Cleveland got a grant to do exactly that, so they shifted into green printmaking. And so Liz has created this amazing business model, where she actually said, "I don't want to deal with fiscal sponsorship", because they take a cut of your money that's how that works, and she said, "I want all the money, and if I can make it work that way, this is a business I need to make money." But she said she always only bit off as much as she could handle, so it started with one press in her garage, and she had a full-time job, and then she would transition slowly. You know, you slowly go to part-time, get another press, you actually get a building, and eventually, she got to the point where she could be working and employed by there and her husband, I think, and then they were able, with the support of all the community members that essentially want to have a space to print safely, they all pitched in and they actually bought a building, and so it's great. And now they have space for workshops, for community members who pay to be, you know, pay to have access for residencies, and so, I think it's a really smart thing to realize that you don't have to be beholden to only, to thinking people will only donate to you if they get a tax write off. I think people are still, a lot of people are willing to forego the tax write off.

HELEN HIEBERT: Oh yeah, I totally believe that, and I do think, yeah, you build a business, it takes time, you can't just, it doesn't happen overnight, but as you build it, you make more money, so that you can experiment with different ideas and work towards different goals. That's cool, so I want to talk a little bit about your artwork too. So tell me about your artwork, and I think you use this cording technique, I can't remember.

AIMEE LEE: Yeah, it's called jiseung.

HELEN HIEBERT: But is that unique to Korea?

AIMEE LEE: Yeah, it is. It is something that they were doing in Korea. There are examples in Japan. You know, I try not to get too much into or I haven't gotten into the, like the serious scholarships that I would have to, I don't have the language skills, like I don't know Japanese, I don't know classical Chinese. I don't have the language skills to try to get into the point where I could say definitively, it started here or this started there, but Koreans, I think what people don't know often is that a lot of things would start in Korea and then move to Japan. Whether it was just from regular trade or contact or whether it was just from aggressive Japanese coming and kidnapping people and taking them away and saying, "Teach us everything you know", which they did with papermakers, they did with potters, and so it's something that I've seen a lot of examples of in Korea, and so they would essentially just take pieces of paper and it came out of, you know, being frugal. You didn't just go to the store and buy paper, so if they were off-cuts from books, you just have slivers of paper, and you start twisting them, and they already had basketry as part of the vocabulary in Korean craft and life,

and so you could just apply basketry techniques to this paper instead of using kind of raw fibers, and then they could make things out of paper that they could then waterproof with different kinds, you know, they could use natural lacquer, which comes from the sap of lacquer trees, which grows all over certain parts of Korea, or you could use fermented persimmon juice, and then you could use these things like we use, you know, plastic, essentially, these days, and so this is all before plastic and the Industrial Revolution. So, I learned how to do this technique and it's very, actually I just saw my physical therapist, and she really wants me to stop doing it because she said it's really bad for my body, but it's really hard, it is really hard, though it's also very simple. The idea of it is so simple, but it's really hard to do well, and so what I learned to do were to make traditional objects, because my teacher was really interested in taking historical objects and looking at them and then being like okay, let's copy it, and so I started by making chamber pots, and like a lantern, and what was the last thing, I don't even remember, but it was all based on actual things that Koreans would use. And then, of course, once I left Korea, because I'm an artist, I just made whatever I wanted. But I still kind of, kind of stuck with the usual. I would make gourds and different kinds of containers, and I would just play with different colors and proportions. Then it wasn't until, I think, a few years after that I saw, I saw that they used to actually make wedding ducks out of hanji, and so in Korea, there is a tradition that you actually give a carved wooden pair of ducks, so male and female, and they're carved out of wood, they're painted to look like mandarin ducks because mandarins mate for life, and so it's to promote marital fidelity and fertility, and so I saw this version, an imagine that was all woven out of hanji, and I thought, oh my god, this is just so, well first of all, it was just very funny. It was a really weird proportioned duck, but it was very clear what it was. Like if you know what wedding ducks are, you know that's what that was. And so, I wanted to make one, and it was really hard for me to do it based on the techniques I already had, and I tried really hard, and my first few versions were really weird. And then I finally got a grant to go back to Korea for three months and go back to my teacher and say, "Okay this is what I want to do, please help me." And he said, "Okay. Now you just basically need to learn how to make these curves." So, he taught me some more advanced techniques, of course, all by teaching me again how to make traditional objects, so then we made a teapot, and that would teach me how to especially, then I could sprout wings off the body or open the beak, and, you know, he taught me how to make a kind of asymmetrical gourd that you would drink water out of. Then I knew how to kind of shape the head. So, I've been making a lot of these ducks, and they're kind of the most popular things lately because of this kind of connection. Like, I've had a lot of people actually get them as wedding gifts, but they just have been really interesting because you think that you know what it's going to look like, and then it very much, the duck, as it grows, is very much like oh no, like I'm going to just become what I want to become, so, and it's been a great way to kind of integrate. You know, in the beginning, I would just make them out of plain hanji, and then I would dye them. Then over time, I would play with using dyed cord, so that I could build in the color right away. And that went into figuring out other kinds of issues, like as an artist, you have to be able to display these, and some of them would kind of fall over. So, first I started weaving out a set of palm leaves, and then I, luckily when I was teaching at Haystack one summer, the small metal studio had a teacher who, and we collaborated on a piece for the auction, and he made a little brass stand for a duck, and I thought it was so great that I decided to keep trying to make my own. Now, I know how to do it on my own, but I also found a

great, cause Cleveland has so many artists, a great steel worker, who is an artist, but he was a professional mount maker for a museum for many years, so I can also just hire him to make them. So, that's one, you know, like one piece of what I do. I've been making a lot of garments out of hanji, and then, I've still been doing a lot of, or maybe not a lot, but going back into doing artist books. So, it's kind of like going full circle where I've been making a lot of garments, like dresses that were out of hanji that were a mix, sometimes just Western dress, but then also based on Korean dress forms, and it was all based on the inspiration of a teacher I had in Korea, who told me that this was what the purpose of learning joomchi was so that I could learn to make garments. So, I started doing that, but then this year, did an edition of artist books called *Peculiar and Commonplace*, and I based it on a few different themes, but one of them was looking at old needlepoint instructional manuals from Ireland in like the 19th century, and there was an image of a book that had been sold at auction that literally had a dress that was sewn into it. It was like all folded up to fit into the book, and then you open the page, and it would just kind of open, and on the facing page it said, "Oh how to sew the bodice" and like a little mini version of the bodice, and I just thought, oh I can sew the dress into a book. So, it's not just that, but it was really gratifying. I had this idea for years and to finally make it and then have it pretty much sell out almost immediately, I mean it was very small edition, but I had two dealers and myself working on it, and we were able to move it pretty quickly, so that's been really, really fun to kind of go back, like because for a while, I wasn't making books, and so I knew its always there. It's like people always ask, "Do you still play the violin?" And I say, "No." But if I wanted to, I could pick it up and do it again. So, you never know when and where, you know, it's going to resurface.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, yeah, I love that. I spend years thinking about things before I actually manifest them, and so I totally can understand that. Okay, we need to wrap this up, but, so tell me your website address, so people can look at where you're teaching and where you're exhibiting because I know you exhibit quite a bit as well.

AIMEE LEE: Yeah, it's aimeelee.net its a i m e e l e e, and you can also go to the .com. I own that domain too, but.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay, and I know you're working on a new book. I just want to hear it.

AIMEE LEE: Yeah, so the new book I'm researching right now ,and it's all about people who make tools and equipment for papermakers, so looking at people who make moulds, who make beaters, who make all the way down to hand tools, like mallets to beat fiber, and then all the way up to major pieces of equipment like hydraulic presses. And so, I've been traveling around the US to do this. There are people I need to meet in Canada. I'll be going to Europe in March to interview some more people. I have another grant out. Hopefully, I'll get it ,and I'll get to go back to Korea and Japan to visit some people, but the whole idea is that I want, we are so worried about papermakers, but I'm more worried about people who make our tools because we can't do anything without them, so, yeah, that's what I am, that's the next book.

HELEN HIEBERT: Excellent. Do you have a publisher for that?

AIMEE LEE: Yup, the Legacy Press. [Laughs]

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, great, great, great. Well Aimee, it's been such a pleasure talking to you, and thank you for everything you do for our field. It's amazing.

AIMEE LEE: You're welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcription by Elva Svendsen, May 1, 2021.
With editorial input by Mina Takahashi.

This is part of a transcription project undertaken by Hand Papermaking, Inc. and Helen Hiebert, as a supplement to the Summer 2021 Oral Histories issue of *Hand Papermaking* magazine (vol 36, no. 1), which features an interview by Nicole Donnelly with Helen Hiebert about her *Paper Talk* podcast. Transcripts of a selected number of *Paper Talk* episodes are available on Hand Papermaking's website (https://www.handpapermaking.org/post/summer-2021-issue-oral-histories) and on Helen Hiebert's website (https://helenhiebertstudio.com/podcast-episodes/).

Episode 34 aired on January 25, 2019. This episode and all episodes of Helen Hiebert's Paper Talk podcast are available for listening on Hiebert's website, http://helenhiebertstudio.com/podcast/. While the interviews are best experienced as audio recordings, Hand Papermaking and Helen Hiebert collaborated on this transcription project to serve as a research aid.

For citation of quotes and excerpts:
Paper Talk podcast interview with Aimee Lee, December 10, 2018. Episode 34, https://helenhiebertstudio.com/podcast/aimee-lee/. Transcription by Elva Svendsen, for Hand Papermaking, Inc., https://www.handpapermaking.org/post/summer-2021-issue-oral-histories.

Hand Papermaking, Inc. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing traditional and contemporary ideas in the art of hand papermaking through its print and online publications. (www.handpapermaking.org)

Helen Hiebert is a Colorado artist who constructs installations, sculptures, films, artist books, and works in paper using handmade paper as her primary medium. She teaches, lectures, and exhibits her work internationally and online, and is the author of several how-to books about papermaking and paper crafts. Hiebert writes a weekly blog called *The Sunday Paper*, interviews papermakers and paper artists on her podcast *Paper Talk*, and holds an annual paper retreat and papermaking master classes in her Red Cliff studio. (helenhiebertstudio.com)