

A Kind of Science Friction: Na Mira Jennifer Teets

“I am the second person going,” whispers visual artist Na Mira to me over Zoom. I gaze into the screen in virtual disarray, scrambling to listen and simultaneously jot down notes on Mira’s necromantic summonings.¹ As of recently, the work of the acclaimed Korean American artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982) is a favored subject. Cha is best known for her magnum opus *Dictee*, published one week before her untimely death by homicide at the Puck Building in New York. We are here to talk about Mira’s latest iteration of *Night Vision*, a video installation in various parts that first came to fruition in 2018, and most recently as *Night Vision (red as never been)* (2022), a looped, three-channel infrared video on a holographic screen made for the Whitney Biennial 2022: *Quiet as It’s Kept*. Mira’s animated tone and fractured storytelling enlivens our conversation. Techno animism, the age of Aquarius, Korean shamanism, quantum theory, diasporic narration, and pandemic interludes complicate my notes as I race to keep up, tracing Mira’s confluence of automatic writing and intuitive processes.

Mira first found a glitch in their video footage in 2018 while filming *Night Vision*. They were using an infrared night camera in South Korea on the matriarchal island of Jeju and its meeting point at the 38th parallel with the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Ever since, this accident has surfaced as permanence. Another trope is Mira’s own embodiment of the audio components of their works. In Korean shamanism, I learn, healthy ancestors can be accessed via tubes sculpted in the shape of air, literally at the beginning of time. In this synergistic spirit, Mira’s soundscapes are the result of invocation and meditation, maybe happenstance or not. Take the craggy, singsongy, melodic audio tracks in *Tesseract (test)* (2020): Mira taped a seasoned repurposed tube that had been exposed to mugwort from an earlier installation titled *NWOT C#* (2019) to a microphone and plugged it into their amplifier. “I walk up to the amplifier and turn it up. Suddenly, a cascade of voices spat out, fast and repeating. The voices belled and occasionally bloomed into a phrase or a melody. I realize it is 1540 AM Radio Korea. It has been playing ever since.” In this work, and by extension *Night Vision*, sounds are just at the point of utterance. Mira replicates and generates a space for shared meaning. “So much of Cha’s work is about breaking open language to show its material, beyond the given meanings of words,” says the artist. I realize that Mira does this as well. The glitch has never left the scene.

In 2020, Mira broke their right arm, so they took to penning with their nondominant hand, experimenting with dexterity’s otherness. Their left hand would write and record in red, “think” scientifically, and invoke involuntary questions, only to arrive ostensibly elsewhere in a pool of its unique tonality. The “second person going” was the answer Mira received in Korean after engaging in “riding the knives,” a shamanic ritual of communing with the spirits. Back in Cha’s archives the next day, Mira realized, “Oh, I am Character no. 2, I am the second person going.”² At that moment *Tesseract (test)* was born and realized for The Kitchen in New York. This work is part of a larger collection that Mira is currently staging

and reinterpreting, namely *White Dust From Mongolia*, the final unfinished work by Cha, reimagined by the artist for their Whitney piece and subsequent exhibitions at Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis, and Company Gallery, New York.³

Cha’s script features two narrators. Character no. 1 is in the past and has lost her memory; Character no. 2 is in the present trying to remember Character no. 1. Mira describes Cha’s work as “the physical space of memory as a wound, which is a memory that we all share. A kind of science friction.” Mira’s aforementioned installation “ends” in the DMZ with three projections of the North Korean horizon line. It considers transcending a military border, but also a border dimensionality—a cut in the real forces and actions at the edges of human perception that change the material world. In holographic principle, the whole is in every part and its cuts multiply worlds. The Korean word for the shaman’s ritual is *kut*, meaning “until in all cavities she is flesh.”⁴ Cha thus embodies the void, I am told.

As did Cha, Mira rubs against time, memory, displacement, and eros, making work molded in the shape of kinship and commonality. By invoking Cha, a revolutionary thinker who told the lives of women saints and patriots, Mira’s own crafting of their auto-ethnography meshes two time-space worlds in avant-garde cinema and writing, spelling out a highly subjective view of heritage and the past. The oracular guidance that Cha (and subsequently Mira) has received denotes a fragmentary space-time. In a way it is a film that can never be seen linearly, as it only exists at a liminal space from the fourth dimension. A quantum leap might allow for a magical path forward. Thus, according to Mira, Cha might be able to see the film in its entirety from her vantage point today in the greater universe.

- 1 All artist quotes are from a conversation with the author on February 11, 2022.
- 2 The Korean words for “I am the second person going” are “Na neun dulce sadam ganda” that Mira received in her auto-writing.
- 3 The original rough script for *White Dust From Mongolia*, an unfinished film by Cha, resides with the rest of the Cha Collection notes at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf867nb2c7/?brand=oac4>.
- 4 A phrase from Cha’s *Dictee* features as a spoken line in *Night Vision (red as never been)* (2022).

169 Na Mira, *NWOT C#*, 2019, *Loitering is Delightful* installation view at Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

170 Na Mira, *Night Vision (red as never been)* (stills), 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles

171 Na Mira, *Night Vision* (stills), 2018–19. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles

172 173 Na Mira, *Night Vision*, 2018–19, installation view at Liste Art Fair, Basel, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Park View / Paul Soto, Los Angeles





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