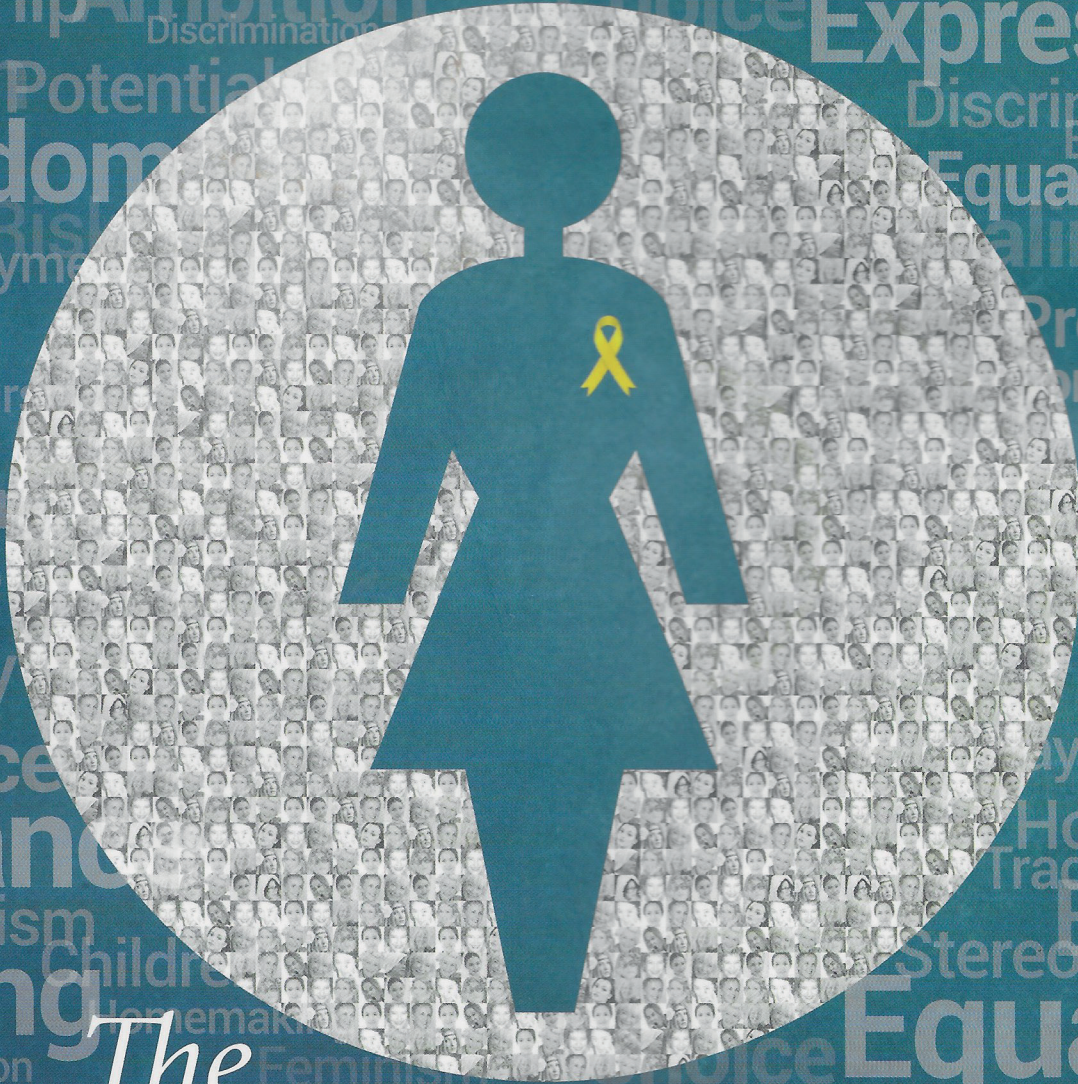


# A NATION MOURNS

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KOREA • Issue 91 / May 2014



## The WOMEN'S *issue*



# Martyn Thompson

Korea through the looking glass

Story by **Dave Hazzan** / Photos courtesy of **Martyn Thompson**

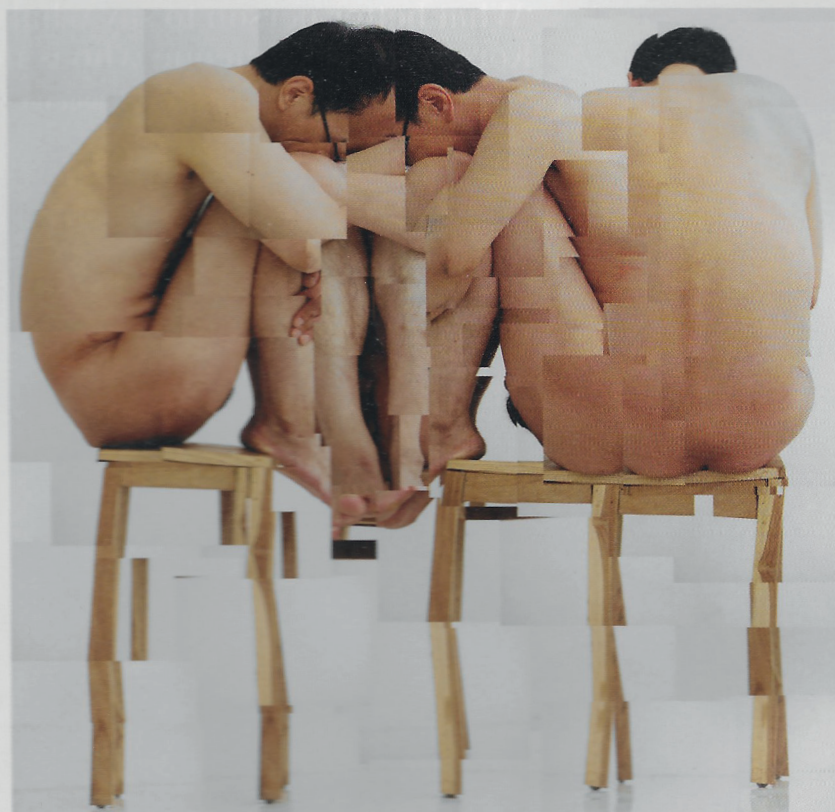


Korea looks a little different through the eyes of English artist Martyn Thompson: The country's animals are encased in glass cages and its people are naked and forced into submissive, uncomfortable positions. Since 2008, Thompson has created works that offer Korea a reflection of how he sees it — as peculiar and twisted a portrayal as that might be.

In his first year as an English teacher in Ilsan, not a lot of art was produced. "Like a lot of expats I drank too much and did little in the way of productivity," says Thompson.

In 2008, however, everything changed. He met Kim Ji-hey, a sunny and beautiful Korean pixie girl he would go on to marry in 2010. He also formed the (now defunct) indie rock band Flying Maru together with Clint Richards and Will Edmund. They played around Seoul and Ilsan for a year and gathered something of a following, including a profile in *Groove Korea* (April 2009).

It was while organizing a Flying Maru show at an expat pub in Ilsan that Thompson had the idea of exhibiting artwork there in addition to playing. He sold every piece he put up, which gave him the kick in the ass he needed to get his act together and do more.



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## Big ideas from small apartments

Next, Thompson started creating sculptures of cats by painting circles on Perspex sheets, stacking them and separating the sheets with bolts so they looked like cats enclosed in glass. His own two cats, constantly trapped in his small apartment, were what sparked his imagination.

The inspiration for his art comes directly from his surroundings. His nudes in cramped spaces are "a commentary on the small living spaces Koreans live in, especially individual Koreans who are not married," Thompson says. "This is the one-bedroom officetel idea that I'm trying to communicate to the audience. A lot of the images are very cramped; they're not a comfortable pose I would put the model in."

In September 2011 Thompson got his first solo show, booking Gallery i in Insa-dong. They featured his Perspex cats and stereoscopic photographs. Since then, he's worked with Gallery i often, curating a show every year and exhibiting there regularly. Thompson says he got lucky: "Art is the No. 1 torture for artists. But it's not through making the work. The most difficult thing is making contacts, maintaining them, finding places to exhibit, finding sponsorship, finding funding, finding all the things you actually need to bring the exhibition together as a showpiece. Being in a country where you don't actually speak the language fluently represents even more of a challenge as well."

## Taking a bow

The work that has gotten Thompson the most attention — by galleries both in Korea and overseas — is inspired by the jeol (Korean bow). Using a remote-controlled flash and shutter, Thompson photographed dozens of subjects doing the full Korean bow, including himself. The figures are overlaid on Photoshop, and look translucent until they are crouched down on the ground.

"This is a very personal project, which signifies the relevance of myself learning to do the Korean bow," Thompson says. "Repeating it, asking my wife to watch me, looking for mistakes. Trying not to make an embarrassment out of myself while I was doing it in front of her family."

Thompson, who founded the Professional Artists Network of Korea in 2012, says he enjoys shining a light on Korean culture and sharing the results with Koreans and the rest of the world.

"What better person to say what a great country Korea is than someone who is not from Korea?" Thompson asks. "I think a lot of people would listen if I said to them, 'I'm not from Korea, but look at all the stuff that's happening here.'"

How do Koreans feel when you reflect their culture back on them, I wonder. "They're actually very, very interested," Thompson says. "They can learn from me by seeing how I perceive Korean culture, and they can understand a foreigner's perspective about how Korea may be viewed from foreign eyes."

## No sleep for the inspired

For his newest project, Thompson is leaving the camera behind and looking at Korean culture through the dojang — the personal name stamp. Using his own and his friends' dojangs, he is creating portraits, including an enormous 2-meter by 1.5-meter picture of a friend.

Each stamp is done "with different pressure, different amounts of force on the paper to make them darker or lighter, to replicate a picture, kind of mosaic style," he explains.

This type of inspiration doesn't happen in a 9-to-5 capacity, so sleep becomes a luxury, says Thompson. "Maintaining regular sleep when you're an artist is nigh impossible. If you have something you've got to do, you have to do it then, when you have that impulse. That time is the prime time to get on the computer, or edit that photo with the thought you have in your mind. If you make notes of it, you never, ever replicate what you had in mind. You have to do it right there, right then. I have occasionally woken up at three or four o'clock in the morning and just got on the computer and worked for an hour and then gone back to sleep."

In the future, Thompson plans to continue exhibiting, curating, designing, taking photos and teaching the English that pays for it all. And maybe he'll sneak in a couple hours of sleep.

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