

Familiarity transformed into the unfamiliar, The ordinary perceived through the exotic eyes, A foreigner's portrait of a Korean house - Ingo Baumgarten

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Localler

Culture Vanguard, who discovers and integrates emerging cultures, is another cultural feature of Kia Design's creative philosophy. Kia Design Magazine presents the stories of foreigners living in Korea, local Koreans living abroad, and local Koreans living in foreign countries under the title of "Culture Vanguard" through the Localler menu.

When we become familiar with a landscape, we often pass by it without much thought or feeling. Yet, there are those who, through careful observation, manage to transform the familiar into the unfamiliar and the ordinary into the beautiful, expressing it through drawing. One such individual is the German painter Ingo Baumgarten. He explores the structures and materials of architecture in everyday life, weaving his unique imagination into a distinct storytelling style. Encountering Ingo's artwork feels like being drawn into a new world, much like being pulled into "Alice in Wonderland." This prompts us to revisit the landscapes we once overlooked. And this is the beginning of the story of Ingo, who has been observing Seoul after living in Korea for 16 years and interpreting its houses and buildings in his own way, and engaging with the local people.



untitled (jutaek gable, door, Seogyodong, Seoul), 80 x 100, 2011

“Doesn’t it resemble hands clasped in prayer?”

-Ingo Baumgarten

Born in Hanover, West Germany, later raised up in a small town close to Düsseldorf, Ingo spent his school days there. He always longed for the rich culture of the big cities and set off for Paris to pursue his dream of becoming an art student and a young artist. After ending his studies in Germany, Ingo was accepted and invited to the Institute of Higher Studies in Visual Arts Paris to study. Not limiting himself to Paris, he also traveled to Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. Embracing a multicultural perspective, Ingo settled in Korea in 2008, becoming a professor at Hongik University to teach fine art. Captivated by the concrete houses built between the 1970s and 1990s, he brings Korean homes and architecture to life on canvas.

Ingo Baumgarten’s fascination with Korean houses can be traced back to his upbringing in Europe. In most parts of Europe, houses are built uniformly, with specific regulations governing aspects like roof dimensions and room layouts. There are strict laws in place, and houses typically require about 20 years to undergo renovations. In contrast, Korea displays a stark contrast between tradition and modernity, with each home having a unique structure and design. This contrast and unique features of each house caught Ingo’s eyes. And he was inspired by the roof, something many Koreans might pass by without a second thought. “It felt like hands clasped together in prayer,” he remarked. From the foreigner’s point of view, Korean homes were a source of inspiration. By magnifying particular elements of Korean

houses and buildings, and blending them with his own imagination, he portrayed the landscapes of Korea in his art. was curious about Ingo Baumgarten's unique world, one that feels both distinctly Korean and yet not, through the eyes of a foreigner. What was it about Korea that attracted him? How did he translate that allure into his work? And how does Ingo perceive the country?



untitled (sulphur yellow balcony, Seogyodong, Seoul), 2013

#Korea

Blade Runner, the source of inspiration in Korea

1993 – the year when Ingo Baumgarten first encountered Korea while visiting Daejeon Expo. He was especially impressed by the country and its dynamic developments in economy and culture. Because the director of the Institute of Higher Studies in Visual Arts Paris had organized the art-exhibition of the Expo '93 in Daejeon, organizing a "school trip" to explore Korean art and culture. And that's how Ingo first came to the country and witnessed the 'dynamic Korea.'

"During the trip in 1993, I was deeply struck by the stark contrast of old traditions and massive modernization. On one side, there were mudang cults at Inwangsan, and on the other side, the horizon filled with modern high-rise apartment buildings. Dongdaemun Market amazed me with its large variety of goods, products, and services all gathered in one place. The sheer size of the market, which was much larger back then than today, and I remember that I got lost between walls of color TVs, various food stands offering also meat of dogs and baby birds, and textiles of all kind so that I felt like I was in the set of the movie 'Blade Runner.'"

When Ingo returned to Korea in 2008, he wandered through alleys in search of the contrasting impressions of tradition and modernity he had once experienced. At that moment, the sight of Korean houses caught his eye.



#Inspiration

A collective attempt to harmonize tradition and modernity

Q1.

Was there a special reason you decided to settle down in Korea?

There wasn't any particular reason. I settled in Seoul in 2008, when I started my work at Hongik University. Staying here until now has just happened naturally. Teaching fine art at an important school is nice, and Seoul and Korea continue to be a source of inspiration for me. My work was also one of the reasons to stay on.

Q2.

Are you referring to your works with Korean houses as motifs? What attracted you to Korean houses?

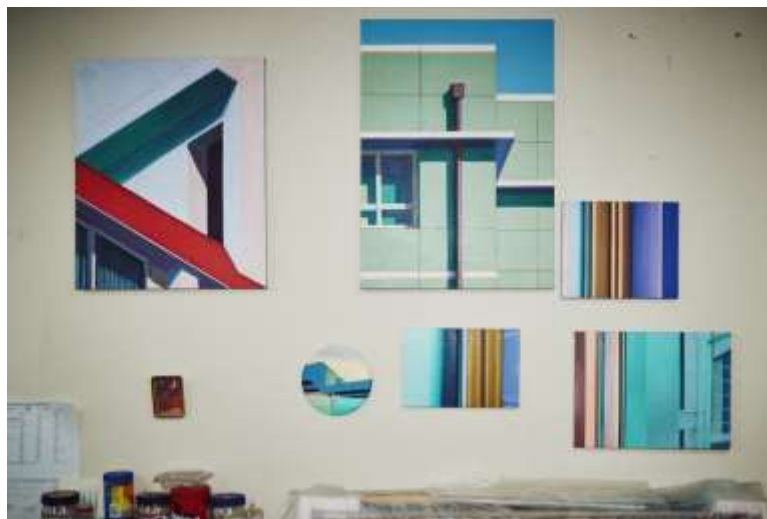
Yes, that's correct. When I first visited Seoul in 1993, the cityscape was dominated in many areas by hills full of houses, made with red brick, with white horizontal structures from concrete. It was quite striking to me because it was so different from the landscape in Germany or Europe where I lived. Now there are just some of those areas left with such houses, like Dongdaemun or Itaewon, but it seems they will also soon disappear due to urban restructuring or at least through remodeling.

Q3.

What aspects of Korean houses seemed different to you?

After I settled in Korea, I began to take a closer look at the city and its houses. In the areas where I lived, such as Seogyo-dong, Yeonnam-dong, and Yeonhui-dong for example, I was fascinated by the fusion of Western and Eastern ideas and concepts of the houses and buildings. It resembled the Prairie Style* techniques of Frank Lloyd Wright, the founder of American housing. Korean houses used modern Western materials and construction techniques while incorporating traditional Korean methods such as gated gardens and extended veranda spaces. Many decorative elements were executed in concrete but inspired by forms of traditional wooden constructions.

*Prairie Style refers to a construction method where a gently sloping roof with slab structures, protruding just below the roof, extends out to create a veranda-like space on the second floor.



#Observation

Approach from the perspective of visual anthropology

Q4.

It seems like you are very interested in everyday things of Korean houses, like the roof, railing, and terrace.

Do you interpret those elements as a fusion of Eastern and Western styles?

Yes, that's correct. Since architecture embodies the culture and sentiment of a society, I aim to reimagine composition, color, and proportion to bring new aesthetic value to ordinary spaces. This is why I approach my work from a "visual anthropology" perspective. This is the term I first encountered around 2002 on the website of a German university. It refers to the practice of exploring daily life, culture, and society through continuous observation while maintaining a certain distance, and translating them into expressions.

Q5.

Please elaborate a bit more on visual anthropology.

In Europe, the concept of a "house" is something for 'eternity,' which reflects the associated social and cultural aspects. In other words, the home becomes a lens through which society and culture can be explored. For example, in the image below, there are two connected houses. The building on the right is estimated to be built in the 1970s, while the one on the left appears to be more modern. I began to investigate why these two different buildings are connected by an arcade. I looked into how this unique structure came to be and the stories of the people living inside. This process of exploration through observation, focusing on my perspective, and creating my own interpretations or narratives is what I would consider visual anthropology.



untitled (connected houses, Sangsu, Seoul), 100 x 120 cm, 2022

Q6.

It seems that your work begins with observation.

What comes after that?

As I walk around neighborhoods, observing houses and buildings, I gather data by taking photos or making quick sketches on the spot when I come across a building that catches my eye. In these sketches, I emphasize elements that stimulate my aesthetic sense, focusing on asymmetrical structures, diverse construction materials, and the color scheme. When I decide to paint a motive, the impression the real motive gave me is the starting point. From these sketches, I begin to think about the background that led to the creation of this architectural style and search for the meanings hidden beneath the aesthetic surface. Second, I try to produce a painting with a certain aesthetic autonomy. While based on my sketches, in order to achieve certain aesthetic effects in my paintings I adjust the proportions, the colors, and the details to the formal ideas of composition and image design.

Q7.

Your paintings often feature warm colors that stand out.

Do you have a specific criterion for selecting colors?

I primarily base my color choices on traditional Korean colors, such as turquoise, mint, and green. These are colors commonly seen in Korean temples, and they continue to be used in contemporary architectural designs. While the colors are based on what I see, they are adjusted and modified during the creative process, so that the paintings have their own independent aesthetic effect. And when spectators can recognize things which appear somehow unfamiliar, it is often this shift or difference that attracts and engages them.





untitled (green roof- edge, Juteak decoration, Hapjeong, Seoul), 80 x 100cm, 2012



#Perspective

Korea seen through the eyes of the 3rd person

Q8.

You focus on certain aspects of Korean houses in your work.

What kind of aesthetics do you find in that?

For me, in the process of reconstructing the houses or buildings I've seen and transferring them onto the canvas, I enjoy a playful and creative beauty, while also capturing the changes that occur in the houses. This, for me, is the aesthetic of Korean houses and buildings. For instance, the way outdoor spaces, like balconies or terraces, are brought into the interior, or how multiple units within a house are divided depending on the inhabitant or as I mentioned earlier, how different homes are connected together. I would say it's the aesthetics found in the discovery of such changes.

Q9.

There certainly must be cultural differences between the Europe you lived in and Korea.

What are the differences from an architectural perspective?

Germany has also built many buildings due to the destruction of houses during the war. However, the difference with Korea is that in Germany, buildings are approached with the perspective that once they are constructed, they should be standing there forever. In fact, the house my family member lived in was built two years before Columbus set sail for the Americas, and the house I lived in Berlin was constructed in 1906. Because of this, numerous regulations have emerged, making it difficult to demolish or alter buildings. While the historical value of houses and buildings is preserved, there isn't much change. This stands in sharp contrast to the dynamic changes taking place in Korea.



untitled (apartment rooftops, Seoul), 100 x 140 cm, 2011

Q10.

What perspective do you hold regarding the dynamic changes in Korea?

Korea is similar to the environment in Germany. Many buildings were destroyed due to wars, and there have been processes of rebuilding. The houses captured in my paintings were constructed during the period of economic revival, and over time, these buildings have gradually transformed into new houses and buildings. While this dynamism brings innovation and progress, providing space for the 'new,' it carries a duality where the old aesthetics is destroyed. A massive change acts as the negative aspect that undermines the roots of social and cultural identity. Perhaps we could say that traditional elements or traces of history are disappearing?

Q11.

You've mentioned the duality of change. What are the differences between houses in Europe, where change is difficult, and those in Korea?

In Korea, due to high population density and expensive housing prices, there is a tendency to pursue convenience through apartments rather than to build a house with a garden. The layout of apartments is indeed quite practical. On the other hand, let me give you an example from Europe, where change is minimal. In Paris / France the demolition of old buildings from 19th century and earlier is difficult because old buildings are seen as historical monuments as well. So it is quite common to remodel the interior of the building. For instance, my friend's apartment in Paris has a unique layout where opening the door leads directly into the bedroom, from which you access the bathroom and the kitchen. This is the damage that occurred when the old building was left as is and only the interior was renovated.

Q12.

You said that there are aspects that undermine our roots. If you were to name an ideal architectural structure in Korea, what would it be?

I would name the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts. I think it exquisitely combines modernity and tradition in Korea. I hope that such aspects are well preserved and not lost over time. My small wish is for redevelopment in Korea to focus on recreating from what already exists rather than creating something entirely new. I believe this way, it will allow us to maintain our traditional aspects while still pursuing new changes.





untitled ("Reados Chigwa" Seoul, Yeonnamdong, Seoul), 180 x 120 cm, 2017

#Communication

A conversation through visual language

Q13.

You capture the duality of Korea and aspects that often go unnoticed by Koreans in your paintings.

What do you hope the audience feels when viewing your work?

When Koreans look at my paintings, I think they will be reminded of memories or experiences, especially since I often depict houses from the 1970s to 1990s. However, since I don't replicate exactly what I see, I wish that spectators of my work first enjoy the colors and proportions, the harmony and the tensions of the composition and that then they become aware of my different view upon the shared reality and start rethinking their own views. With every new piece of art, the artist grows a little bit, because that new work is expanding his or her spheres of knowledge and experience. When spectators get engaged with artworks, their spheres of knowledge and experiences expand too, and this way, art can strengthen the social cohesion and cultural identity. I hope that those processes of

artistic communication will function well and that they will have positive effects on the development of society.

Q14.

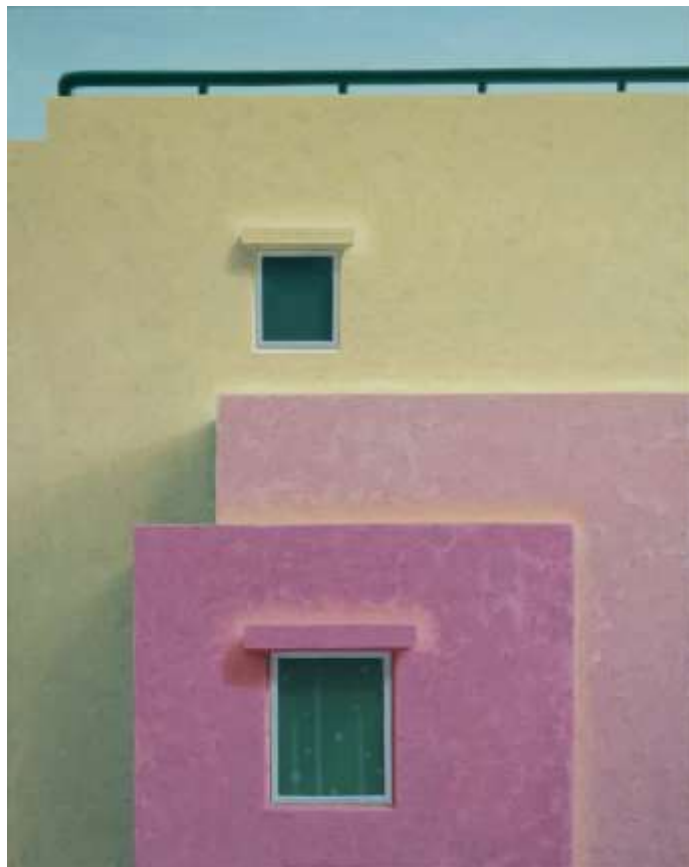
Would it be appropriate to interpret your words as communicating with the audience through visual language?

Yes, I believe so. Language is the bridge for communication, but since my interaction with Koreans is limited due to my lack of language, I consider my paintings as my way of connecting with people. In that sense, it can indeed be described as communicating through visual language. Interestingly, my lack of fluency in Korean has had a positive influence on my creative process. It allows me to maintain a more neutral in-between perspective, giving me a unique vantage point to have a different view upon things. From this position, I believe I can discover and highlight aspects that Koreans themselves may overlook.

Q15.

What are your future goals for your work, and what do you plan to teach your students?

Since my student days, I aimed to create a connection between me (my perception) and the spectators through my work by referring to the reality we all share. That is something I do not want ever to abandon. Based on that goal, I want to continue painting and communicating with my audience, all while enjoying the creative process. Teaching students is also something I find very exciting. In university, I want to focus on helping students to develop their intellectual, manual-technical and sensual skills, which are all basics for creative work.



untitled (beige and pink walls; Segyodong, Seoul), 100 x 80 cm, 2015

Ingo Baumgarten

Born in 1964 in Hanover, West Germany, Ingo Baumgarten received art education in Germany, the UK, France, and Japan. He has exhibited his works in Germany, Portugal, France, Japan, Taiwan, the United States, Korea, China, and Australia. Since 2008, he has been living in Seoul, capturing Korean houses on canvas and teaching art at Hongik University. He has held various exhibitions, such as Ingo Baumgarten: Just Painting, Space & Color, Urban Details, and 住宅 (House). Recently, in 2023, he held the exhibition Compromises.



Epilogue

The interview took place in his office and studio. At first glance, it had the square structure typical of any university professor's office. Yet, much like his paintings, the space captivated me with a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The plants occupying one corner of the window grew wildly, yet blended in naturally. The large canvases, palettes filled with vibrant paints, and brushes left mid-stroke evoked the atmosphere of an artist's studio. Fish relocated from the pond at Hongik University, books piled haphazardly, and a coffee maker and coffee complemented by creamer, gave insight into his personal tastes. Just as Korean houses appear familiar yet foreign in his paintings, with their ordinary yet exotic color palettes, Ingo Baumgarten reinterpreted the conventional Korean professor's office from his own perspective. This interview made me realize that a "space" can contain and express the same elements in ways that feel both similar and entirely different, depending on how it is presented.