

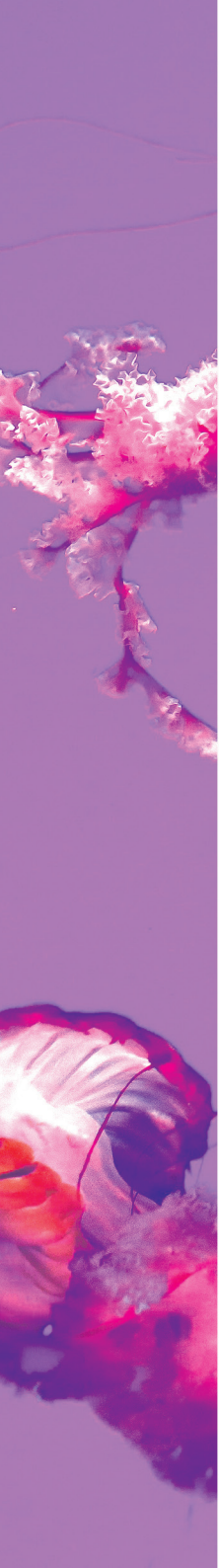
A person is shown from the back, wearing a blue dress with long, flowing, jellyfish-like appendages. The background is a soft, ethereal mix of pink and orange, with faint, glowing jellyfish-like shapes floating around. The overall mood is dreamlike and artistic.

RACE, GENDER AND EXCESS CHI: The Greem Jellyfish Dance Colony Experience

The light is scattered. The crowd is a sea of bodies in rapid motion. The sounds coming from the stage roll over you like soft ocean waves and the air is thick with sweat. There's a circle of women dancing up front, their curvaceous bodies a blur of translucent fabrics in hues like seafoam, silver, butter cup and mother of pearl. Their rhythm is too vital for choreography, and the sheer fabric draped upon their writhing bodies hits the air as if submerged thousands of feet below sea level. At the center of the circle, as the ladies fan open like a flower, emerges Greem Jellyfish. She is singing. She is vibrant. This is Bushwick.

Beneath the surface of what some are calling "the world's current hot bed of youth culture", there's a whirlpool of contemporary consciousness around gender, sexuality and spirituality. Radical creatives of Bushwick represent a new paradigm, a vacillating constellation of sacred and ancient truths. It's a zone of cultural nomads who refuse to privilege any orthodoxy or historically situated certainty.

Having made my home in Bushwick, Brooklyn, New York for nearly a decade and called myself an artist amongst many other names, I engage an investigation of the intersection of community, art and the sacred. In this article I look deeply at the work of Korean multidisciplinary artist Greem Jellyfish, combining personal reflections that relate the artist's work to Mina Cheon's 2009 book Shamanism + Cyberspace. As a friend and peer of the artist, I trace the nascent sacred



geography Greem Jellyfish navigates as an artist coming up in Bushwick today within the underground, pan-sexual, pan-global networks we define loosely as new age, punk, queer, hip hop, radical, sex-positive feminist culture.

Art writing proper is consistently limited and vague in its linkages of the spiritual to Art, and more often than not the art writer omits or ignores the crucial context spiritual metamorphoses rely upon- a receptive community with knowledge of the sanctity and interconnectedness of humanity, the earth and the cosmos.

As an NYU graduate with a long time presence in Bushwick, Greem Jellyfish is recognized for excelling in various mediums such as live performance, multimedia visuals, costume, sound and participatory art. Also a DJ, musician and vocalist, Greem is perhaps best known for the interactive dance experiences she facilitates in billowing, handmade Jellyfish costumes. In looking at Greem's work, I'll preface with a triple canopy of truths which I feel are central to the youth arts culture of Bushwick: the dancing body as spiritual medium, sound-vibration as integral as well as healing, and a resurgence of divine feminine energy borrowing power from white, western, patriarchal society.

Part disguise, part animalistic archetypal play, Greem's costumes occupy a pivotal role in her appearances on stage. Her collection of hand-sewn water bubble viber suits, typically made from sheer fabric, with some type of

fringe to fly out and signal to the spirit world, allow the wearer to take up a huge amount of space. Greem and her Jellyfish colony always appear to "float" in outfits that sway to the beat of the music. The artist remarks that her performances offer a "complete transformation of self." Her costumes offer a spiritual phantom limb of sorts, a tangible extension of the electromagnetic field that allows the performing artist to resonate with the twists and turns of the sound current.

Greem states in her artist statement: "[My] process is related to my Korean heritage, and forms of indigenous Korean shamanism which view anger as a type of fuel for spiritual and ritual experience as healing. When I perform, I invoke these supernatural energies in my work, providing a cathartic experience." According to Cheon, Korean shamans are unconditionally "practitioners in the field of misfortune", an aspect of the folk culture Western anthropology continually fails to grasp from the point of its "disembodied case stud[ies]." [1] Greem echoed this sentiment when she explained to me that back home in Korea, shamans were most associated with the energy of "anger," what she later exchanged for "the word resentment".

As a white female, I do not aim to ignore or dismiss my privilege, and problematize my own authority as a writer, particularly given the United State's less than favorable history as an occupying force in Korea. I do eschew the Art world's fetishistic relationship to Otherness- an age old

merry-go-round of alienated, elite Caucasians in search of a displaced part of themselves they have culturally projected onto the "Other" through the colonial imaginary looking glass.

"I thrive in the realm of experimental, socially engaging, and environmentally conscious acts..."

In ruminating about Bushwick artists, there's a complex interplay of factors. For many, their hybrid "radical" acts cosign what some academic feminists have called "a collapse of boundaries in the rhetoric of New Age and neo-pagan movements". Along this line of thinking, in certain forms of contemporary performance art indigenous spiritualities become "homogenized and then blended with references to nature and environmentalism, all in opposition to mainstream culture." [2] A youth tribe largely facilitated by social media, nightlife and the web, there's no doubt that Bushwick is part pan-sexual wasteland, part ashram. Yoga by day, delirious sinning by night. On a good day, the right filter will make your skin glow like a new world leader.

Cheon's argument that the internet's "techno-orientalism" serves to promote and reify the West's imperial visions, feeding the commodification of spirituality (defined by the West as primitive, mythic, and irrational) [3]

rings true for the culture of Bushwick artists in many respects. Although Cheon was writing before the internet girl and feminism got married, her concern that technology is the outfit of a spiritualism that is self-serving advertisement and entertainment [4] within a false climate of "post-racial cyber-meritocracy" and "cosmetic multiculturalism" feels even more relevant in the age of instagram. [5]

Greem Jellyfish, being Korean and female, has been carefully self-conscious about identity politics in her life and work since I met her. When I first came upon my favorite work of the artist (Greem Jellyfish at Jeungsimsa Temple in Mt. Mudeungsan, Korea), it was a reproduction of a reproduction on a deck of net girl playing cards that circulated for sale on the web several years ago. Featured with some of the original net girls such as Labanna Babalon, Greem's work nonetheless made an impact. It planted a seed I would harvest at a later time.

In 2011, Greem exhibited the full Jeungsimsa Temple video along with a large digital collage of herself posed before a waterfall at MOMENTA ART in the exhibition Nu Age Hustle. The flatness of the waterfall print, its scale and glossy perfection juxtaposed with the provocative cut-out of Greem posed subtle questions about art, marketplace and desire. A complicated image, Greem explained that the work played with the concept of the fantasy woman poised to service you at the Korean Mega Spa, as well as the consumption of female



bodies and feminization of Asian cultural identity at large. She was treading popular culture's aesthetic territory, which the feminist scholar bell hooks calls "eating the Other".

While Korea may be a country "actively Westernizing", Bushwick is by many accounts a former hood "actively Easternizing," with witches, yogis, shamans and otherworldly creatures roaming about like gypsies coming down from good plant medicine. A few are getting 15 minutes of fame, others are falling asleep at the social media wheel. Most of Bushwick is grinding its teeth on the algorithms of our times, a monstrous feedback loop of information and imagery that fuels and feeds on itself. Like the kundalini shakti, it's a snake shaking its tail and eating it too.

When looking at Greem's work, I turn to the culture and history of Korean shamanism to not only outline what is clearly an historically relative, parallel practice, but to attempt to suggest that "Fine Art" in fact is just another closed system operating against art as a breathing species of lived reality. Integrating, interrogating and attempting to name the subversive power of the performative, queer body at play is a practice of opening Art back up to art. And it begins with taking the magnifying glass off the web and into the embodied reality of artists.

"I thrive in the realm of experimental, socially engaging, and environmentally conscious acts of creation", writes Greem Jellyfish. "When I dance

free-form, there's a special power. A choreographed dance piece just doesn't give me the same fire." As lead singer of the popular techno outfit DUST, she recalls the band's recent European tour, saying, "Techno is underground. It doesn't require complicated dance moves or professional dancers. Human beings need to move. The best techno dancers have the most fun with big moves, big energy and repetition." According to Cheon, to engage in the magic of shamanism one must depart from this world into the space of "non-knowledge, non-place and non-culture." [6]

As Greem creates, she is constantly wrestling with her own sense of "disorder, confusion, loneliness and frustration". As the only female in DUST, a front woman with two straight white males, she confides that she often feels the weight of intersecting sexism and racism. "My vocals and my body are used as instruments. My creative vocal expressions are animal-like, otherworldly, freakish and in defiance of typical gender norms." In the lineage of Yoko Ono and Josephine Baker, Greem wants her "audience to feel sexy" and insists that within the space of rich and rhythmically complex experimental sound with ample "high and low frequencies" is a meeting point for folks that transcends nation, culture, race, class, gender and identity.

According to Mina Cheon, shamans practice rituals "for the community" in an effort to "renew current social statuses, disrupt past orders, and reintroduce change as the premise of

life." [7] In the work of Greem Jellyfish in all its fluid forms- Jellyfish (Water Bubble Viber), DJ Big Black Poodle, Cosmic Caver- there is a subtle queering of fixed social boundaries at play, a most ancient form of anti-authoritarian power and sensuous (spiritual) pleasure. It is a power that routinely surfaces for exclusive use by bodies situated at the borderlands of gender, race, class, pleasure and power.

In 2014, Greem related how she invented DJ BIG BLACK POODLE (Greem's stuffed "party dog" that became DJ BLIG BLACK because he likes "watching boys and girls dance") to DJ for her so she could dance along to the music during a gig. "It relates to the root chakra; when you hear the bass sound girls just really want to dance". This comment, as well as her later remark about "high and low frequencies," arguably a mainstay in any form of music that can rock the club, recalls the shaman as anchor of two worlds, earth and sky, nature and cosmos.

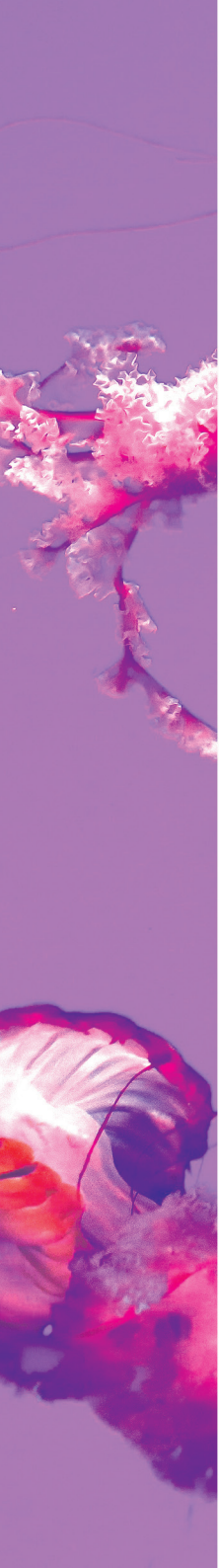
What the West African tradition calls "trickster" , the "guardian of the crossroads" , in Korean language, they call it "mu". A Chinese word, mu actually depicts two people, dancing between heaven and earth along a vertical axis or "God Pillar," and signifies community, transformative possibilities, and a plural identity that is terminally ambiguous. The God Pillar called "Musingan" also takes the likeness of an erect tree, long stick, or mountain. [8] Greem confided that it was in her piece Greem Jellyfish at Jeungsimsa Temple in Mt

Mudeungsan, Korea, that she most felt connected to shamanism, and that that day on the mountain she had felt an energy come over her while dancing at the gilded Buddhist shrine.

In Korea, as well as Japan (where the old mountain women are called "Yamamba," translation "witches"), the reputation of the mountain as being holy accounts for the shamanic societies who lived there historically. "Shamans in Korea are really scary," spoke Greem, "[but] shamans in Korea were doctors long time ago". [9]

It's curious that the Korean government banned shamanic healing after the civil war [10], and that mostly today Shamanism exists as an underground healing art and public cultural property sold to tourists as a commercial product "most befitting the needs of capitalistic drives". [11] As Cheon accounts, the Korean female shaman is marked as spiritually superior and socially inferior [12], with "excess chi" and a mysticism so wildly feminine and powerful it is socially marginalized. [13] Korean shamanism itself is often referenced by the womb. [14] The Korean female shaman is ensconced in an historical narrative positing female bodies as "vessels of the universe". [15]

As in Japan, female shamans were equally if not more prominent in ancient Korea. During the early Silla period (3rd-10th century A.D.), Kings were themselves practicing shamans. [16] Shamanism was at one point closely linked to Buddhism, with its reverence for nature. When



shamanism dropped out of favor, around 1477. Buddhism associated itself more closely with Confucianism, weighing in as a more traditional and noble religion within the developing sacred hierarchy. [17] Shamanism in Korea became considered a dark art akin to worshipping spirits and ghosts and made illegal, while its practitioners were exiled to the periphery of the city where “excrement, sewage and other refuse” was dumped. [18] Female shamans were tortured and socially ridiculed to the extreme in the same sense that oracles and witches of the Middle Ages were in Europe.

Not only did the status of all females drop, agricultural systems working for and with the land were destroyed, an effect only enhanced as Korea increasingly strove to become a globally competitive First World nation. [19] Cheon concludes that shamans were from then on linked to the “obscene, immoral, wicked, and hysterical,” and thus, closely linked to women, nature and the Other. [20]

In 2015, I attended Noodles Beaches for Meeting Witches at the Tarot Society, an annual art happening curated by Greem Jellyfish and Alex Patrick Dyck. Having occurred in different iterations since 2012 at Bushwick venues such as Secret Project Robot, Body Actualized Center, Fitness, and SIGNAL, Noodles Beaches features primarily site-specific installation and performance. The show’s press release states that it brings together a community of artists interested in the mystical, transcendental, ritualistic and

consciousness-raising elements of art practice. During the 2012 installment at the Tarot Society, amidst all forms of totems and talismans turning the small gallery space into an alchemist’s kitchen, Greem Jellyfish led a group of us in a dance ritual that had men and women howling at the moon, body slamming the gallery walls and drumming on the floor. A toy dinosaur I bought from a friend’s garage sale earlier that day came alive, moving and making strange sounds.

Cheon writes that in hearing the shaman we are “hearing the alien unsaid”, and I think this rings true for the underlying vibrational medicine inherent in Greem’s work. Her art practice is uncanny, beautiful in its basic motive of bringing together the tribe and seductive in trappings (fashion, costume, melody, mayhem, music of the spheres). Like a crystal of sugar melting on the mouth of a beast, her creativity glows with leaping garlands of flame. As for Cheon’s cynicism around the commodification of spiritualism and the shallow, techno-allure of the racial Other, I think her exhaustive argument in effect unnecessarily obscures the magic and the power of what we might call contemporary shamanistic art practice. Call it what you may, Greem Jellyfish is clearly running energies.

Like the feminist artist in America, cutting through the thorns of white male patriarchy with her vision and voice, the Korean female shaman is both a community leader and a hysterical woman. [21] It is she who is

ostracized for her ecstatic transition, she who is “spirited away” to perform the real magic of shamanic healing. [22] As a Korean female artist living in Bushwick, Greem is a hybrid of each. One thing the artist routinely emphasized in speaking to me about her music is how her interactive dance projects are “for her friends.” The nomadic jellyfish colony is a space where she and her community vibe and play. Spirituality works where there is a shared, common belief. And what I can’t emphasize enough is that like any system, the magic of shamanism occurs with the consent and support of the community. For ancient shamanic societies, the communal aspect of ritual was a social obligation, not a choice. [23] The real power and centrality of women’s spiritual leadership was correlated directly with art’s social function.

Regarding her latest creation, Cosmic Cavers, Greem writes, “The work is about dynamic interactions and trivial encounters. Ordinary meets extraordinary, and simple gestures are displaced into a bizarre and otherworldly context”. Made from simple materials, as basic as chicken wire and fabric, Cosmic Cavers offers participants an immersive, otherworldly and interactive experience. It is the viewer who becomes the “Cosmic Caver,” the one who puts on the mask and transforms. Greem says, “Cosmic Cavers open unto chaos and extremes”. Through the channel of art, participants activate less-socially appropriate emotions. Cosmic Cavers “embrace destruction, violence, anger

and madness”. Like Yoko Ono and the Fluxus group, active participation of the audience completes the work. In a world much sicker than we are willing to admit, Greem Jellyfish serves “madness” as an escape into something potentially less mad.

In the sincerest way, I’ve attempted to write about Greem Jellyfish’s work without the normal dose of disbelief that keeps the miracle at bay. I posit Greem as a young artist with ancestral yearning and folk feet for soaking up elemental energies. Here is an Art that naturally straddles genres, a profound language forging a pathway between worlds. Calling her a shaman (or not) matters much less than how the power of her combined affinity for dance, masked appearances, ambient sound and participatory art approaches a zero state where the names and forms of false consciousness disappear. Greem’s art is an art that entails sacrifice, courts the supernatural, the archetypal realm and the divinity found in the mind and nature.

I write these words not to etch out another cultural hero, mythology of spirit-media, art star or “it girl”, but because we need now more than ever rituals that harness and focus the energies of the people. We need sacred values in common so we can act as a global community boasting a universal and visceral- not speculative- connection to the Divine. And I believe that we can achieve this through Art, but not as we know it.

**Words
by Katie
Cercione**

