

KIWA

Bongraesan–Formosa Project

Na Hyun

The Mythic Mountain of Bongraesan and the Human Error of Navigation

For many years, Na Hyun has pursued projects that expand personal interpretations of reality through rigorous investigations of historical events, mythology, and botanical records.

The Bongraesan–Formosa Project begins with the ancient Chinese myth of Bongraesan—the legendary mountain sought by Emperor Qin Shi Huang in his quest for immortality. Rising from the middle of the sea, Bongraesan was imagined as a realm of immortals, where phoenixes descended and miraculous herbs flourished.

The artist does not approach this mythical space as mere fantasy. Rather, he sees within it the origins of humanity's long-held belief that nature is something to be mastered, and the record of misguided expeditions that attempted to control it. The countless pursuits that followed Qin Shi Huang mark an early point in the imbalanced relationship between human civilization and the natural world—an accumulation of “navigational errors” that lead directly to today's ecological crisis.

The Order of Survival Preserved by the Gaoshan Tribes and Their Botanical Records

Opposite this mythic starting point, Na Hyun turns his attention to the Taronak and Paiwan tribes of the southeastern mountains of Taiwan—historically known as Formosa. To escape foreign invasions, these communities settled in the highlands, where nature existed as an extension of the divine, the ancestral, and the self.

For them, survival required strict taboos and codes governing the boundary between humans and the living environment; violating this balance meant the collapse of their entire social and spiritual order. Nature was both fearsome and instructive, a responsive being that reacted directly to human action.



Bongraesando
Mixed media on archival pigment, hanji and neutral matte paper print
135 x 100cm
2024

The artist collected and catalogued various plants used by these tribes in everyday life and ritual. These include plants for survival tools, those used in ceremonies such as Maleveq, and those tied to traditional practices like Chut-chau (出草). Carefully documented on archival prints, each specimen reveals how their worldview was intricately interwoven with the natural world.

Meanwhile, a series of drawings based on historical Korean, Chinese, and Japanese depictions of Bongraesan (Penglai) reexamines how myth was idealized as a utopia. These images, paradoxically, reflect a longing to escape the hardships of reality. Through collage, stamping, and textual intervention, the artist interprets the conceptual and psychological distance embedded in the way Bongraesan has been imagined.

Visualizing Ecological Tension and the Collapse of Balance

At the center of the exhibition stands the large-scale installation The Shelf of Headhunter, which lays bare the precarious equilibrium between nature and humanity. A seesaw structure holds, on one end, an uprooted tree discarded during road construction and, on the other, a canary cage cast in gallium.

Gallium—a metal that melts just above 30°C—embodies physical instability, where minute environmental changes trigger collapse. The canary recalls its historical role in mines as an early-warning species detecting invisible threats. Here, the cage becomes a visual signal of the ecological dangers that surround us.

The plant specimens, Bongraesan drawings, and the central installation gather fragments of human–nature relations from different eras and geographies into a single space. Together, they reveal that the histories of mythic desire and ecological survival ultimately converge on the same outcome: the collapse of balance.

The Bongraesan–Formosa Project weaves mythology, plants, customs, and archival practices into a single plane, urging viewers to reconsider the foundations of humanity's relationship with nature and reminding us that we already stand at an ecological threshold.



Formosa Project-P11
Mixed media on archival pigment print
180 x 120cm
2021



Golden Canary-Cage
Mixed media on archival pigment print
110 x 80cm
2024



Exhibition View



Exhibition View



Exhibition View



Exhibition View



