

VISUALS

# Transmissions, Vol. 4: Scenting the Multiverse

Se Young Au bridges worlds by exploring the throughlines and intersections of multi-sensory experiences.

WORDS AND VISUALS BY SE YOUNG AU



I.

I recently made plans to watch *Return To Seoul*, a newly lauded film by Cambodian-French director Davy Chou that orbits the story of Freddy (Frédérique) Benoît, a Korean adopted person raised in France navigating the notion of origin and challenging fixed ideas of reunion, reconciliation, ultimately confronting limitations of

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four-decade-long massive relinquishment of some 250,000 (+) children I was hopeful but wary of a new perspective entering the often-fraught canon of narratives which more often than not fail to encapsulate the nuance of our experiences and enforce binary tropes.

My friend and I met at the small, indie theater (one of only two showing in Los Angeles) on a weeknight and were pelted by a torrent of winter rain upon arrival. After peeling off our damp layers, we took our seats just after the last flash of previews dissipated from the screen. I would be lying if I didn't disclose that it felt like the moody weather was mirroring the inner tumult of anticipation I felt as the previews began rolling.

It would be remiss of me not to disclose that Chou isn't himself adopted nor is its first-time actor, Park Ji-Min, who plays the film's protagonist, Freddy. Instead, Chou collaborated with several adopted friends in the making of the project. Laure Badufle, who he met in France and whose story served as inspiration for the film, is credited as a writer and consultant. It appears by uplifting stories of adopted people, and viewing them as unique worldbuilders, Mr. Chou found a conduit in expanding what it means to exist in the precariousness of diasporic identity.

We are first introduced to the character of Freddy as she sits with two newly minted friends at a casual dinner after checking into a hostel after her ambiguous travel plans went awry. There, they politely try to explain

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drink (it's read as disrespectful) and it's a younger

person's duty to pour for an elder and never leave a glass unfilled. However, it appears their words fail to impact Freddy, who we quickly learn will not be impressed upon due to her inherently strong nature and how she's learned to survive in the world until ending up, although seemingly indifferent, in Korea for the first time since her relinquishment. This serves as a definitive break in the narrative from the usual, meticulously planned homeland trip many adopted people make. They also gently prod her with questions around the possibility of meeting her birth family—an idea she initially dismisses and before she lets the weight of this query wash over her, diverts into creating an environment of chaos and charming social diversion fully knowing her power to disappear into self-made distractions.

From there, we are taken further into Freddy's journey as she reluctantly begins her search for her first family. When her birth father and his family are finally located, she recruits Tena (Guka Han), the hostel owner to embark on the role of translator and friend. The reunion takes place in her birth father's sleepy coastal town, away from the abundance of Seoul. After experiencing a barrage of overwhelming emotions, Freddy seems to be disconnected and at odds with the outpouring of the distinctly Korean wails. The family peppers her with questions about her life and she musters only curt responses, which are buffered by Tena's softer translation with consideration to social hierarchies and politeness. The emotional chasm is further amplified by the fact that Freddy barely touches any of the obviously

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ultimate bridge of connection, a physical supplement for

the unspeakable. However, here it exemplifies how little comfort these offerings can be in the culmination of life-long grief and facing certain versions of truth. There are no words or gestures that can augment years and worlds spent apart.



The interactions with her birth father are particularly fraught. He is consumed by and wallows in his guilt and

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made after bouts of drinking as if to prove to her that

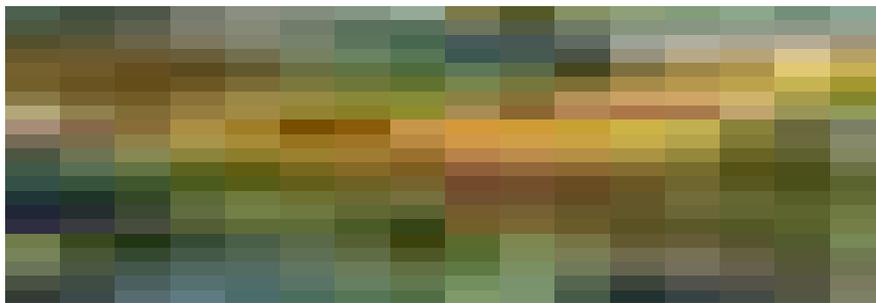
his sorrow is the only currency of his love and possibility for redemption. He is constantly asking her to hold the emotional weight of his suffering, breaking boundaries despite not being able to speak the same language. Freddy does not bend to his desire to be coddled or forgiven but rather transfers those emotions by indulging in different levels of escapism as we witness different points of her evolution while living in Seoul which spans nearly a decade.

Freddy, as the film's anchor, is difficult to define. When we are first introduced to her she appears to be petulant, calculated, and contrarian. I am embarrassed to admit that I wrestled with my own desire to have her appear "likable" to the non-adopted audience, anxious that she might be characterized in an unfavorable light—permanently marking us as a group. But, as the film progressed I acquiesced, giving her grace to be perceived within the full spectrum of her humanity and hoping to channel the same gentleness back onto myself. As Freddy grows to learn more of the language and navigates what it means to be embodied in her particular circumstance, there is a confidence that is no longer rooted in performative swagger but rather from a place of self-effacement. By liberating herself from the pressure of expectations that dictate which world she should neatly fit into, you witness her come beautifully into a full understanding of the freedom of that power. As we trace her development, it's evident that she surrenders to the idea of becoming someone easily definable and embraces the untethered momentum and



I had my own assumptions and biases going into the viewing of *Return to Seoul*. Like most people in underrepresented groups, I didn't want to put too much emotional stock into another media piece getting it gravely wrong. As an adopted person, we often feel beholden to uphold binaries of our stories- be thankful, be good, be sad, or expect to be devastated. I feel like where this film really succeeded was not asking us, "Where are you from" (the perennial question that all adopted people are continually confronted with) but rather, "*How* have you become?"

A radical reclamation of self, indeed.



II.

My mother likes to remind me of the sensitivity I've had with respect to my olfactory sensibilities since early childhood. I am told I had to "smell everything" new I encountered ranging from food to toys to clothes. I

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times misinterpreted as odd or eccentric to other kids by virtue of a few memorable exchanges that I still can recall. Let me be clear; I wasn't taking in a giant whiff or continuously sniffing said objects, but merely inspecting them with a subtle gesture of quickly passing it under my nose.

As an adult, I not only make art often utilizing olfactory components, but I'm also a scent evaluator. So, perhaps it's not so odd that my nose literally led me to these careers. What I do find unique is that there are two distinguishing biological factors that may have also had a hand in how I uniquely perceive the world as an adopted Korean person.

Research has found that the majority of Korean people lack the key gene that creates the strong-smelling body odor found in axillary sweat. A study at the university of Bristol revealed that only .0006% of the Korean population possesses the ABCC11 gene, which is responsible for the bacterial production of underarm odor. This study was co-authored by Ian Day, a genetic epidemiologist who spoke to *Scientific American* in this [article](#) back in 2013.

Axillary sweat is part of our "chemical signature" or a large component of what we group together to refer to as pheromones. They have a profound effect on our early development as children in terms of bonding with our parents and even how we scan for potential partners.<sup>1</sup>

Infants are known for having extremely honed senses of

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attachment to their mother, as they also equate the

mother's smell with their food source and the instinct to survive.

The deep olfactory bond between mother and child can also be conversely observed by the fact that mothers can distinguish the distinct odor of their newborn.<sup>2</sup>

I was adopted when I was five months old. I do not know if my birth mother ever had a chance to breastfeed me. My foster mother took care of me and fed me with a rice milk formula bottle until I came to the United States. My adoptive mother noted I had a difficult time adjusting to the formula here, and had to switch a few weeks into my arrival.

Being that my adoptive mother and I were not related to each other biologically, I do wonder how my young, developing brain came to understand that she was my mother. Especially because not only did she not breastfeed me, but her body chemistry was inherently different than a Korean person's. I could not register my DNA in a reflective relation to hers. Obviously, there were behavioral and environmental signifiers combined with acts of care and love that helped secure our deep attachment as mother and child.

I suppose it's nature vs. nurture, the old litmus test that's always referenced when talking about adoption through a binary lens. But as someone who has, at times, struggled to find their footing because of the lack

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define those parameters when your biology is at odds

with your environment? When you have no genetic blueprint to reference in a primal sense, with what tools do you build your world and relational understanding? And how is that grief suspended in your body—a nagging, persistent, imperceptible presence to the exterior sphere.

Touching back on my proclivity to use scent to help me translate, build, and bring in what felt safe to my emerging world now makes sense on an instinctual level of survival: a tool to orient my un-rootedness within the topography of a third space. Hypervigilance is often associated with people that have been adopted, as many of us are sensitive and attuned to the ways our bodies fit within the framework of an environment due to our deep level of awareness. As adopted people, we construct our lives differently, attempting to bridge deep gulfs of varying realms of translation.

My eccentricities centered around olfaction may have started out as a liability, but I am grateful to my younger self for being able to recognize the potential for new worlds in between the pluralities of each breath.



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### Author

Se Young Au

### About

Se Young Au (b. 1984 Seoul) is a multi-disciplinary artist who received their BA in photography from Columbia College Chicago. Their work is at the intersection of digital collage, installation, photography and olfaction. Se Young employs vivid, atmospheric imagery and color as they explore

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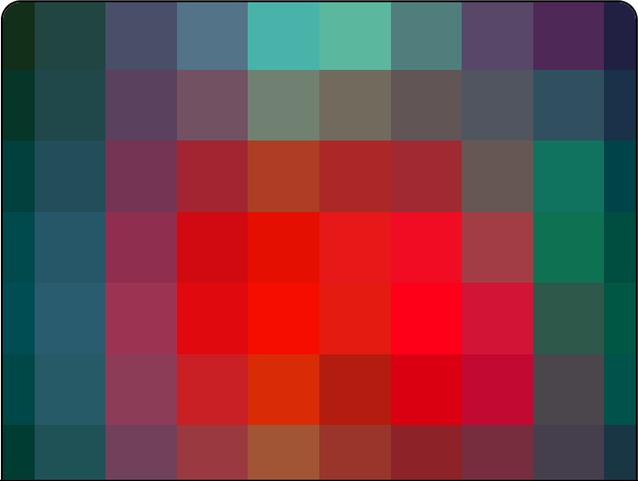
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