



OUM JEONGSOON

In an art space, the senses typically activated are the visual, auditory, sometimes olfactory, but rarely the haptic. At the 14th Gwangju Biennale, “soft and weak like water,” the inaugural recipient of the now-canceled Park Seo-Bo Art Prize, Korean multimedia artist Oum Jeongsoon, presented a work that emphasized the tactile nature of art that is so often overlooked—and usually discouraged. Here, signage on the floor read: “This work can be touched to feel the texture.” Typically a sight that would send gallery attendants and security into a tailspin, visitors were seen running their hands over three of the four large-scale sculptures comprising Oum’s *Elephant without Trunk* (2023).

Inspired by the ancient parable of “The blind men and the elephant,” wherein each unseeing man describes the giant animal differently while touching its different parts, the vividly colored, monochromatic sculptures were created with Oum’s collaborators from Another Way of Seeing, an ongoing project founded by the artist that works with the visually impaired. Based on workshops they had with elephants at a zoo in Gwangju and at a sanctuary for ill or injured animals in Chiang Mai, the resulting works distill the essence of the large mammal’s form, capturing how those who cannot see might “envision” the animal and inviting seeing people to experience the subjectivity of perception. To that end, Oum invites viewers to touch the sculptures’ wool surface covering the much harder steel frame. Walking while feeling the sculpture, one tries to render from touch what the physical sculpture might look like; it is a disorienting experience. As you are able to merge physicality with touch, you bridge one of the widest gaps in visual arts.

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Installation view of OUM JEONGSOON’s *Elephant Without a Trunk*, 2022, iron sheet and wool tapestry, 300 × 274 × 307 cm, at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023. Photo by Choi Myoung Jin. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

