

FRUGAL BEAUTY

Lee So-Ra celebrates small scraps

Imbued with bold tranquillity, Korean aesthetics and crafting techniques stand out for their deep connection to naturalism. Modern artisans and artists proficiently explore the infinite possibilities of raw materials in elevated designs from natural fibres.

Lee So-Ra offers a compelling example of the current golden age of Korean crafts. Born in 1967 in North Chungcheong Province in South Korea, she is a self-taught textile artist who has mastered the intricate art of Korean patchwork known as *jogak-bo*, or *chogak-bo* (small segments). This technique requires carefully piecing together small scraps of left-over fabrics to produce household textiles, especially the large wrapping square-shaped cloths called *bojagi*, which protect the dining table from insects, wrap and carry gifts, and even function as baby carriers.

This practice spread at the beginning of the Joseon Dynasty in the late 14th century, a period that remains influential in Lee So-Ra's artistic approach. The last and longest imperial dynasty of Korean history, which ended in 1910, it was bound by neo-Confucian precepts. A culture of restraint, simplicity and frugality – virtues embodied by the zero-waste *jogak-bo* technique – was praised in upper-class circles and slowly infused Korean society. While they originally served a utilitarian function, *bojagi* cloths became versatile items equally popular in the daily lives of all Koreans, peasants to nobility alike. These wrapping textiles existed in different styles, divided into two groups: *gung-bo* for the imperial court and *min-bo* for the ordinary people outside the palace.

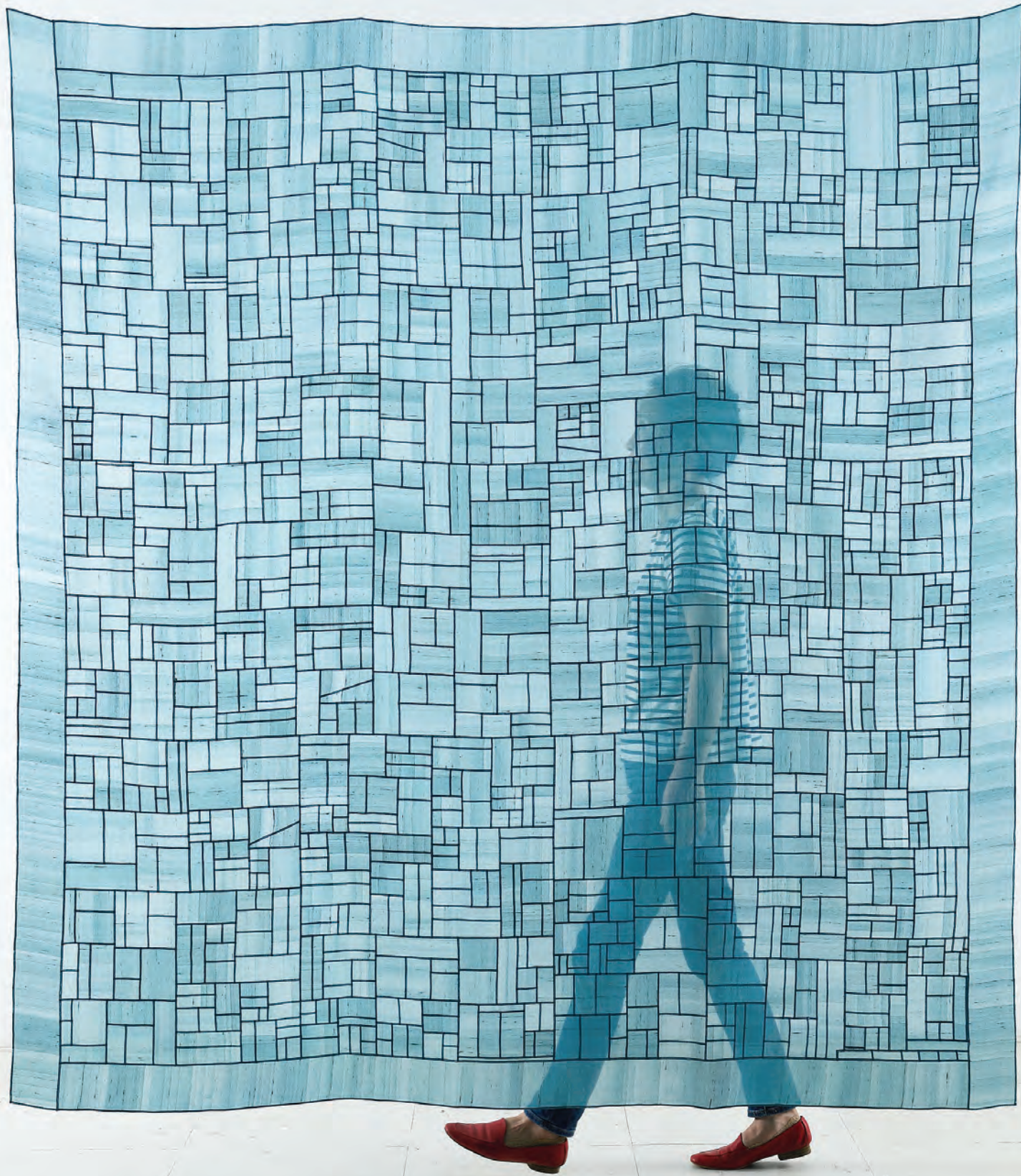
Conventionally, in this patriarchal culture, women were kept in the confines of their homes, taking care of the household, while men dominated the public sphere. Textile crafts became a crucial outlet for personal expression, as a way to clothe the family, limit waste,

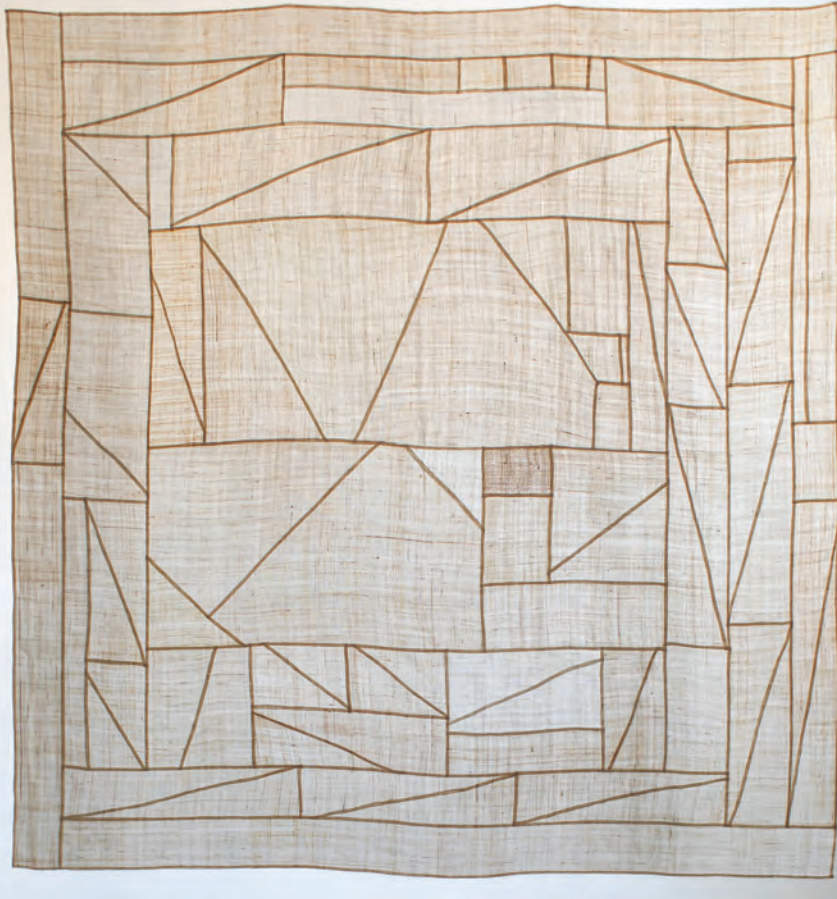
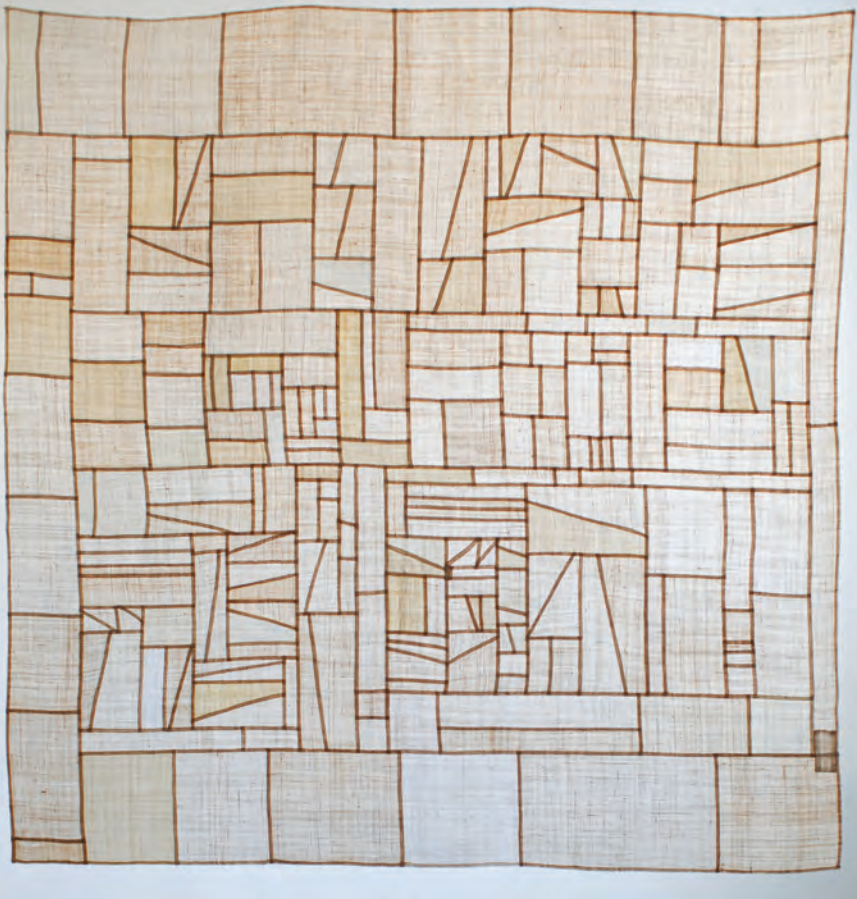
explore creative patterns and colours and improve their sewing skills. Making *bojagi* was a solitary and time-consuming task of constantly repeating the same gestures, cutting salvaged pieces of cloth into geometric shapes, and assembling them into irregular, eye-pleasing arrangements. In their silent diligence, women brought good fortune to the household, embedding auspicious blessings in the textile items directed to their future owners.

Internationally, *jogak-bo* started piquing the interest of Western collectors and museums in the second half of the 20th century for its exquisite artistry reminiscent of abstract paintings by Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian. Since the 1990s, the technique has witnessed a revival in South Korea among contemporary women artists and designers such as Youngmin Lee, Chunghie Lee, Eun Sook Lee, and Lee So-Ra herself, who brought it into fashion and fibre art.

Lee So-Ra studied German literature in graduate school and felt a connection with the early modernist movement, to which she aimed to respond through her textile practice by creating three-dimensional objects playing with lines and planes in space. Based in central South Korea in Cheong-ju City, the artist collects scrap materials from her local *hanbok* (ceremonial dress) tailor shops. She has developed three styles of patchworked screens honouring different natural fibres such as cotton, ramie, hemp, and silk in her pursuit of timeless compositions. While she strives to develop unique interpretations of the ancestral art of *jogak-bo*, Lee So-Ra works alone with simple means: a fine needle and thread will do. To join each piece of fabric, she uses the triple-seaming technique called *gekki*, which results in a flat seam and gives a stained glass feeling to her textile hangings. Interested in hand-sewing processes, the artist proceeds cautiously, devoting countless hours to perfect her pieces, working without pre-determined sketches and arranging ▶

Dan Fontinelli. Courtesy of Lloyd Choi Gallery.





the scraps instinctively until the panels are complete.

In a modest undyed palette, *Moshi Jogakbo*, made of *moshi* (ramie) and *sambe* (hemp) most reflects the Joseon period's sentiment towards simplicity and purity. Ramie, a flowering plant from the nettle family native to eastern Asia, was used in Korea as early as the 9th century to make finely woven textiles for the hot summer season used for clothing, military uniforms, and mourning garments. Assembled with patches made of hemp, a rougher fibre worn by commoners until the early modern era, the artist creates a dynamic interplay between lightweight textures and translucence, symbolically reconnecting the ancient social classes that would have worn those materials.

Lee makes other monochrome screens out of hand-dyed silk known as *oksa* – typically employed to make hanbok dresses. This type of silk dupioni organza is prized for its raw, stiff, and sheer properties. She dyes bolts of silk using fermented home-grown indigo plants over several cycles of cold-dyeing and drying to obtain a subdued palette of blues. She then cuts the fabric into small pieces, using rice starch to stiffen and strengthen the material further. She double-hems each patch before stitching them together into delicate panels. The indigo fermenting and dyeing technique is an ancient craft

in South Korea that has been recognised as a national cultural treasure and registered on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. With the *Okxa Jogakbo* series, the artist demonstrates her deep appreciation of her country's many textile heritage treasures.

Finally, with its busy array of variegated shapes, the *Ottchil Jogakbo* style re-engages directly with the more typical polychromic nature of bojagi. Lee works with the colourful scraps of ramie fabric she collected from local tailors to build vibrant palettes and freehand geometric compositions. Each of her screens offers a unique experience of colour and texture to which she adds the coating of *ott-chil* (lacquer), a varnish obtained from the sap of trees native to East, and Southeast Asia. During the Joseon Dynasty, lacquer was a decorative technique to enhance wood's natural patina. Similarly, Lee gently elevates the art of Korean patchwork by adding lacquer touches to the fabrics to deepen their colourful quality.

Using hemp, silk, ramie, indigo, and lacquer, Lee So-Ra aims to redefine the spirit of Korean folk culture, highlighting what was historically overlooked craftwork. By looking inward, in the quiet of her practice, she conveys worlds of radical humbleness and celebrates the dedication and care of generations of anonymous Korean women before her. ••• **Magali An Berthon**

Image above: *Moshi Jogakbo* #1, ramie and hemp fabrics and fine hand stitched, 92 x 92 cm, 2016.

Image above right: *Moshi Jogakbo* #2, ramie and hemp fabrics and fine hand stitched, 104 x 100 cm, 2016.

Image right: *Ottchil Jogakbo* #7, ramie and hemp fabrics and fine hand stitched, 58 x 58 cm, 2023

