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A Conversation with Yaerim Ryu in Seoul

Can you introduce yourself?

My name is Yaerim Ryu and I'm an artist based in Seoul. I'm interested in how fiction and narrative are intermediated through paintings.

Can you briefly tell us how you became a painter?

I think I didn't have a special reason though, I was really into drawing as a young kid. This drew me to attend art school. When I was an undergraduate student, I thought I'd prefer to graduate immediately and make money. But the whole year that I spent in Germany changed my entire life. I was in Stuttgart for a year and that was the first time when I could focus on the painting without being disturbed. I think from this experience, I started to feel more comfortable and interested in art in general. When I look back at the time I was in that undergraduate program, I had a lot of pressure because generally, art school in Korea is labor-intensive. It doesn't give you the freedom to focus on your own works. At that time, I thought that I didn't enjoy creating art. But when I wasn't under the pressure, I realized how much I enjoy making art. In contrast to Korea, I experienced less judgment in Germany. This artistic freedom influenced me positively.

What was your reason for choosing painting as your main medium?

I have always enjoyed painting and preferred working individually. During my undergraduate program, I had to ask others for help producing videos or three-dimensional works. This made me feel uncomfortable because I could not complete these works entirely by myself.

We thought your painting style, figures, and background all feel a little 'exotic'. What is your process of coming up with these paintings? Also, we're curious to know your inspiration.

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I develop my figures through the thoughts that pop up in my mind or witty puns. Also, I create paintings that look 'exotic' because I don't want people to create relevance between my paintings and my personal life. Many people immediately interpret my painting as a reflection of me, but I didn't like that. I want my artwork to stand by itself.



The reason I use long sentences for the title of my work or exhibition is that I want the title to flow nicely when you pronounce it. For example, the rhythm you hear when you read through sentences. I don't have specific references for my work though, I usually get inspired by images, essays, and novels that I encounter in daily life. Especially, the word 'Chapman', which was part of my latest exhibition's title, was one of the members of Monty Python, the British comedy group in the 1970s. I love their humor and used to watch their show often.

Is there a major theme or element for your work?

The primary element or theme for my work is 'narrative'.

The images you create for your painting and the title remind us of some sort of 'narrative'.

What do you want to achieve by creating 'narrative' through your artwork? When your audience encounters your artwork, how do you want them to approach this 'narrative'?

These narratives that I create for both the title and painting have no specific meaning. Instead, I would say, it doesn't intend to deliver any message. Each narrative starts with a subject, verb, and object to form a coherent sentence. However, when the audience substitutes the words in the title, it is still coherent. In this regard, these narratives are meaningless and don't convey a message that's connected with the image portrayed in the painting. At times, the title is unrelated to the painting itself. I want to show that the audience's perception of an artwork through its title can be misleading. Most of my work titles create a certain premised narrative for the audience. But after looking at the painting, the audience is encouraged to reconsider the narrative of the painting. I would like to create a narrative that functions as a non-narrative.

What is the most important aspect of your artwork?

I'd like to show people how fiction and narrative are intermediated through painting. In the visual art scene, fiction and narrative are usually presented through moving images (videos). And when the narrative is conveyed through a static two-dimensional artwork, it is usually categorized as 'graphic

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novel' or 'illustration' that differs from painting. If a painting tells a narrative, it is called an 'illustrative painting'. I was confused. By presenting artworks that convey contradicting messages to their titles, I wanted to raise the question: 'What's the difference between an illustration and a painting?' According to the dictionary, illustration functions as a medium that delivers information or support the context of an article, book, fairytale, and etc. If there's an image that is based on the narrative and doesn't function as an illustration, what is this image categorized as? Is this still an illustration? Or is this a painting? With these questions in my head, I wanted to create an image that's neither a painting nor an illustration. The image is based on the narrative, but it unrelated to its own narrative.



We know that you started to create multi-dimensional artwork recently. How do you feel about the differences between painting and sculpture?

I haven't had a chance to show my sculpture yet. I started to make multi-dimensional artworks using clay and painting over them. I've been observing that the pull of gravity weighs down the clay. At the same time, I like having more control over the sculpting material because of direct contact between my bare hands with the clay. Whereas with painting, you hold the tools dipped in paint.

What do you want to achieve as an artist?

I would like to paint a lot and show my work to more people in the world.

Yaerim Ryu is an artist based in Seoul, South Korea. She previously studied in State Academy of Fine Arts in Stuttgart (Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart), and received her B.F.A in Painting from Hongik University. Currently, she is an MFA student at the Korea National University of Arts.

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