

VOGUE KOREA

Strangeness Elicited by Yaerim Ryu's Paintings #Female Artist 17

In preparation for her solo exhibition at Peres Projects Berlin in November, artist Yaerim Ryu has been residing in Berlin for the past few months, absorbing inspirations from the new city.

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Anyone who views artist Yaerim Ryu's work for the first time will be struck by a peculiar feeling. Unusually large people roam around an exotic neighborhood that seems to be both physically and emotionally cold. Swept by a brisk wind, the streets seem to appear like something has happened or perhaps nothing at all. Beneath the ground lies ghost-like-people and even the dogs exude an air of loneliness.

"I get these questions all the time. Why do your characters always appear as 'foreigners'? Why do your painted backgrounds always seem 'exotic'? Whenever I am asked such questions, I often hesitate, responding with something like, 'Because I want my paintings to reveal the least about myself, I paint subjects far removed from me.' It holds some truth. I've never encountered a big guy with blue eyes and thin hair blowing in the wind amidst various situations happening around him. I'm almost certain that I will never witness such scenes. However, the painting surface on which all of this is painted is as distinct as anything else."

In her 2022 exhibition titled 'Ancestral Wisdom' at Gallery Kiche, Ryu gained recognition with a piece reminiscent of a scene from a David Lynch film. Her work was praised for its originality and the level of

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completion for a young artist in her twenties. This led to her fourth solo exhibition at Peres Projects Berlin which is scheduled one year after the previous one. Consequently, it can be viewed as an extension of her previous exhibition. As paintings inherently imply temporality, the time within the painting always flows forward. Nevertheless, the artist attempts to show a sense of 'time moving backward' in her new series of works. "I believe that simply being in a new environment is a tremendous source of inspiration for artists, even if they don't do anything special there. The apartment where I am currently staying was built in the 1960s in East Germany and its interior has been freshly painted entirely in white. It must have been done to cover up some traces by someone who used to live here before me. The white paint on the rough wall and the stains that haven't been completely removed make me wonder about the person who once lived here before. What they were like, what they cooked in this kitchen on weekend mornings among other things."



Berlin, with its wealth of historical buildings and streets, inspires her tremendously as Ryu who enjoys narratives. However, given her relatively brief stay of about three months in Berlin, her experience in this city may not have had a significant impact on her preparation for the exhibition scheduled in November. In fact, the upcoming exhibition is partially prepared in both Seoul and Berlin. For her, it takes some time for her ideas to take shape and her inputs and outputs do not yield immediately. Therefore, she anticipates that it will most likely be in her next exhibition which will feature artworks inspired by her Berlin experience.

'Over My Dead Body', 'G Is Willing To Pay Anything To Get Her Neighbor's Vintage Lawn Mower', 'White and Hard', and 'The Baby Was Born In a Completely Furnished Room, Feeling Slightly Hungry' Her paintings themselves are interesting but so are the exhibition and artwork titles. Is the title of the work closely associated with its content?

"I'm very much interested in how things sound when pronounced which is why I have a keen interest in foreign languages. When coming up with titles, I consider how they sound when read aloud. When titles are translated into foreign languages, it can be a little tricky to understand the exact nuances. The titles and the artworks are closely related. Sometimes I start paintings with a title in mind while other times I look at my paintings for a long time trying to come up with a suitable title. Titles may appear unrelated to others, yet there is always some connection."

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It is worth noting that Ryu continues to adhere to her creative process which involves collecting available images online to recreate and paint on her own. She usually takes reference images from Google. This is because hiring a model is not only difficult but she is also not the best photographer. The artist often gets ideas from stock images and their extreme generality can sometimes feel peculiar. Even when searching for complex emotions or situations, the stock images that appear are often generalized and simplified, which can be both terrifying and amusing.

In works by a young female artist, only seemingly foreign men are found which piques curiosity. Even though some of the figures are dressed in women's clothing, they still look like men. Is there a reason why the characters in her artwork are depicted as male or gender-neutral?



“They are neither women nor men. I try to portray them without specifying their gender. Even though I am a woman, I don’t think I know yet how to draw women without objectifying them. That’s because I’m more used to seeing objectified images of women. So, I tend to remove the feminine characteristics of the body when painting them which may explain why they could appear to look like men. I hope that my figures are perceived in the same way that we normally do not pay attention to the gender of animals or objects we see.

The rejection of the gender binary seems to be somewhat related to the realities faced by young female artists. Even in the art world of the 21st century, female artists are still evaluated differently than male artists. Ryu, too, has always found it puzzling that despite a substantially higher proportion of women in the art world, the “important” artists typically taught in schools during her childhood were mostly male. Many female artists have been regarded as nothing more than the wives of prominent painters despite their own artistic excellence. It is also a mystery why all the numerous female graduates from art universities in our country seem to disappear.

“More than half the students entering schools are women but the reality in the field after graduation is somewhat different. As in many other industries, the proportion of males increases as you move up the ladder to higher positions with greater influence. This long-standing, unchanging structure feels like a glass ceiling which still holds true even today.”

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Some say that the figures in her artwork are foreigners, although the artist considers herself to be one. All of the people in her paintings have similar faces and Ryu is the foreigner in their eyes. One of the main reasons she paints them differently is her intention not to associate the painted figures with herself. She was concerned that if she painted people who looked more like herself, her paintings would simply be labeled and interpreted as an Asian female artist's 'personal experience as a minority'.

“Even if the message I want to convey may not be everything, I believe that an artist's artwork cannot help but reflect the artist to some extent (of course, there will be times when such categorization is crucial). On one hand, I admire artists who express themselves clearly through their work. On the other hand, at my current stage, I want to maintain a certain distance from my work.”

In the past, Ryu used to think about and question the paintings when hearing that her works resembled illustrations. However, as she prepared for her new exhibition, her focus gradually shifted towards the flat surface of the paintings themselves. The decision to switch from wooden panels to canvas during the preparation for her previous solo exhibition served as a direct catalyst rather than a sudden interest overnight. Due to preservation issues with wooden panels, the artist switched back to using canvas. However, she faced some difficulties at first since she was unable to achieve the desired texture. Ryu liked how wood absorbed the paint and oil, giving the feeling that the pigments adhered to the surface. But, achieving that sensation on canvas proved challenging. It felt as if each thread of the canvas was spitting out paint. The artist made efforts to ensure that the painting didn't protrude in any way, firmly settling the image onto the flat surface of the canvas.



To achieve a flat and even surface, the artist used both fewer brush strokes and reduced color contrast. This look came naturally and effortlessly on a wooden panel, but it was different on canvas which led to many days of contemplation and trial and error. It was during this period of trials and experimentation with canvas that Ryu naturally developed an interest in the surface of a painting.

“Previously I was only concerned with ‘what to paint’ and I had little interest in the surface on which the image sat. When discussing painting qualities, people often mention brush strokes, painting splatters and thick

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matière. I was no exception. However, while preparing for my last exhibition, I found myself appreciating the opposite: the smooth and flat properties of paintings. Paintings that are so flat and dry like building walls that they feel as if they had always been there.”

Ryu used to be interested in images with a more dramatic setting, but now she is drawn to images that are more rooted in reality. These changes in her artistic focus were evident in her last solo exhibition. Since then, not much time has passed and there hasn't been a dramatic shift in her thinking yet. The artist continues to contemplate the 'surface' and wonders if it is possible to create a surface that could be as smooth and flat as possible while also exuding a kind of vibe reminiscent of old houses or train stations.

The fascination with the surface of both cities and paintings has captivated the artist and it is associated with the pathos of death which is one of the reasons that make her work anything but light. Men inevitably think of death and artists are no exception. “I believe that, in the end, most artworks tell a story about death whether prominently or subtly. Even works brimming with life and vitality ultimately have an aspect that reminds us of death. The long-standing interest in surfaces and time has also something to do with thoughts about life and death. When I look at old paintings in museums, they make me contemplate the artist's touch, the dust that sits and piles on the painting's surface, the breath, the gaze of viewers, and much more. These paintings have borne witness to many deaths and births. However, the keywords 'life and death' themselves seem so vast and profound that I often don't explicitly discuss them when explaining my work.”

Recently, Ryu has been painting houses quite often. She has always been fascinated with houses. She paints not only the houses but also the surrounding neighborhood in an intriguing manner. These houses, much like the figures she paints, are not 'home sweet home' but rather a stranger's home where we have no idea who lives in it. Her paintings capture the strange tension that one experiences when wandering through unfamiliar residential neighborhoods. The upcoming November exhibition already seems exciting since it will showcase the artist's unique and mysterious sensibility.