



Painting as a phenomenological in between: Mandy El-Sayegh and Keunmin Lee

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In medical terminology, a recombinant DNA is a phenomenon in which pieces of genetic information from separate genes, cells, or organisms, are exchanged to create new forms. Yet, if we were to settle on the idea of re-combining, meaning creating new combinations, we could extend it at large through various declinations that resonate in our everyday life. As humans, for instance, we are re-combined constantly as a result of relational, social, cultural, and political structures. I met with Mandy El-Sayegh and Keunmin Lee at Lehmann Maupin, Seoul, who's show lingers on this precise aspect, reelaborated through the abstract paintings for their duo presentation.

Both interested in the relationship between the embodied self, societal structures and systems of control, the two artists find solace, and negotiate their own liminality through the act of painting. Whereas for Keunmin Lee it is a matter of stripping the body from any kind of contextualisation, leaving it bare and fragmented through the various nuances of sfumato, Mandy El-Sayegh plays with layers of brushstrokes, screen-printed symbols, and signifiers to reflect on the relationship between cultural histories, personal identity and commodity.

In both bodies of work presented at the gallery, the color red is a recurrent, "it is a bridge between the delusional space and the real space" - Keunmin tells us - "and you need bridges like that when painting

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becomes a place where you are allowed to talk about the fragments of your history”. At the core of the exhibition there is an evident research and discussion on the concept of regulation and its implications. It is a reminder of a principle that roots in Foucauldian theory, for which the sole knowledge that systems of control exist and have a discursive property, influences our everyday behavior. For Mandy El-Sayegh, painting becomes a way to legitimize yourself when other societal structures fail you.

Both researches are deeply rooted in the personal sphere, whereas from El-Sayegh it is related to her identity as a Palestinian and the consequent politics of displacement, Lee has been diagnosed with borderline disorder in a country where mental health is still a difficult subject to speak out about. Their work could be thus seen as a result of an ongoing investigation and negotiation of the self as “controlled other”, where every brush is a further attempt to find a space for the self an alternative modalities of representation.

When thinking of the concept of representation at large, which Stuart Hall defined in easy words as “the ability to describe or imagine”, we may realize the important connection between language, culture and symbolic meaning. If culture is formed through meaning, then language itself is a form of representation. As a visual language, abstraction becomes then a space in which the artists re-define and re-think their identity through color, substance, nuances, and texture. For Keunmin Lee, abstraction becomes a place for meditation as well as a way of going closer and closer to one’s subject “like the skin, that from afar seems uniform, yet it unveils textures and complexities when looked closer”. For Mandy El-Sayegh, in abstraction - whereas more or less accentuated - “there is an impossibility of making semantically a cohesive story, where the body is still a very vague memory of a feeling”.



Painting as liminal space is a terminology which is very much over-used, yet it posits a very interesting reminder of one’s need to negotiate themselves through their own found language, when others fail to do so. If systems of control constantly confer categorisations - be they racial, social, medical, emotional - the act of painting itself constitutes the phenomenological possibility to free oneself from attributed significations. At the end of our conversation, Mandy El-Sayegh points out how we are discussing fleeing categories in an art gallery, where art is not only existentially necessary, but very much of a surplus commodity: “I think good work just moves as a resonance, it is capable of being both things”.

Born out of a much cherished relationship between the two artists, which breathes mutual admiration and recognition *Recombinant* is a show that helps to re-think about the very ways we define ourselves in relation

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to our own structural frameworks. When looking at the large-scale paintings of Mandy El-Sayegh and Keunmin Lee, we are able to not only meet the artists, but to find ourselves and our own complexity. Perhaps the fantastic job that has been done here, is that of letting the works be semantic fields themselves, in which we are able to recognize and grasp threads of resistance in the making. They strip back the decorative dimension of abstraction to make it profoundly political, without concealing its commodity-value. Paintings themselves are objects in the spectrum.