

GaHee PARK

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GaHee Park's Cool Nudes*

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There is a coolness to the way Park paints her figures, as well as a sculptural attention paid to form and surfaces.



GaHee Park, “Shadow Kiss” (2020), oil on canvas, 60 x 68 inches (Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin)

GaHee Park first gained attention in 2016 for paintings that inextricably linked sexual desire and humiliation. Works such as “Ass on Face” and “Butt on Two-Face” (both 2016) were crudely painted close-ups of someone’s butt (of unknown gender) sitting on a woman’s prone head or, in the latter, on two layered heads, the one on the bottom salmon colored and blue eyed, the one on the top yellow, puffy-cheeked, and of indeterminate gender. Whose yellow arms and hands — flat as airless balloons — encloses them?

In an interview that appeared in *Work in Progress* (June 2017), Park talked about growing up in Korea and moving to America to study art:

[...] I grew up in Korea, and my parents are very strict Catholics. I really loved drawing the body, and as a kid I was very curious about sex because growing up in Catholicism everything about that was very distorted and not talked about. I drew images of the body that were maybe a little bit perverse for my parents, and every time I drew something they would burn it. I was about 10 or 11 at the time, but it just made me more and more interested in drawing and art, and also depictions of the body and sexuality. [...]

[...] I really hated staying in Korea as a woman. It is very Confucius and strict, and I felt very oppressed mentally growing up. Physically too — nothing fit me properly. I wouldn't fit into women's shoes, I had to wear men's shoes. It was very humiliating, and I hate to think about that because it was also such an unnecessary humiliation. [...]

Having found a subject early in her career, Park could have stayed within that territory. Thankfully, this is not the case, as proven by her current exhibition of paintings and drawings, *Betrayal (Sweet Blood)*, at Perrotin (September 12 – October 17, 2020). The change that has taken place since 2016 conveys an artist who has neither settled into a signature style nor limited her curiosity by defining the parameters of her subject matter. The paintings, including the space in which the figures are seen, have become more complicated.



GaHee Park, “The Catch” (2020), oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches (Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin)

There are 11 paintings and drawings in the exhibition, with the paintings on the first floor and the drawings on the second. The first painting you see is the oil on canvas “The Catch” (2020, 20 by 16 inches), which is on the wall opposite the receptionist’s desk, before you go down a corridor to the first-floor gallery.

I want to say two things here. First, “The Catch” is an outlier among the paintings included in the exhibition. Park has depicted a limless female torso overlaid by a fish skeleton, whose head caps the top of the torso. Meanwhile, the fish’s head grasps a long-stemmed rose in its mouth. The joined forms rest on the ocean, against a sky of blue clouds. The view is “framed” by a camouflage-pattern band

in various hues of brown and black. This stylized painting captivated me, even though I have no idea what it is about.

The second thing I want to underscore is that all the paintings seem to have been preceded by fairly resolved pencil drawings, some of which are in varying densities of black, others in color. Drawing enables the artist to explore as well as visualize her imagination, to invent her opaque narratives.



GaHee Park, “Betrayal (Sweet Blood)” (2020), oil on canvas, 27 x 22 inches
(Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin)

In “Betrayal (Sweet Blood)” (2020), Park depicts a nude woman from the chest up, beside a small round table, with a yellowish curtain behind her head. We see two large fingers, with long, sharp, brightly painted red fingernails, resting on the

table, a cigarette between them. Proportionally, the fingers are far too large to be the woman's, but their placement suggests that they are. It is these kinds of incongruities that held this viewer's attention. Once I noticed the discrepancy, I kept looking for others.

Why do the fingers seem more animal-like than human? Another hand has come out from behind the curtain, and is covering the woman's face. Its long, red fingernails echo the woman's talon-like fingers. A whitish-gray line runs down the side of her face and goes under the chin, while her eyes seem to have slipped down her face. Four fingers, spread slightly apart, partially cover the face. The line and the position of the eyes suggest that the woman might be wearing a mask of some kind. Is this the fragment of a dream — one about being naked in public? For while no other people are visible in the painting, the circumference of the tabletop implies that this is a public place. Other details — for instance, an insect on the hand over the woman's face — further complicate the scene.

In "Shadow Kiss" (2020), an androgynous figure with short hair lies behind a large-breasted, black-haired woman who has propped her head up so she can look back at the figure behind her. The woman is nude except for a thigh-length back boot, which sports a maraschino cherry halfway up its spiky heel. An anthurium plant, with its bright red leaf and long, yellow, phallic spadix, juts out between the woman's legs, near her crotch. Sandwiched between the two heads is the flat profile of a charcoal gray face with one blue eye visible.



GaHee Park, “Sweet Blood” (2020), color pencil on paper. Framed: 16 1/2 x 13 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches (Photographer: Guillaume Zicarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin)

What “Betrayal (Sweet Blood)” and “Shadow Kiss” share are the mismatches, and all that they evoke. Park compels the viewer to scrutinize the painting and pore over every detail. In “Shadow Kiss,” for example, we might wonder why only one cup of black coffee and a single croissant are on the table behind the couple lying in the bed.

At her best, Park’s mismatches feel deliberate, and do not easily give themselves to an overarching narrative. She is less successful when they seem arbitrary, but I only felt this in one painting.

There is a coolness to the way Park paints the figures, as well as a sculptural attention paid to form and surfaces. Some of the still-life set-ups included in the paintings reminded me of Gerald Murphy. In the 14 paintings he produced during the 1920s, Murphy's stylized still lifes consisted of flat shapes, overlapping forms, and spatially illogical juxtapositions — all elements of Park's work. Her use of multiple perspectives, mirrors, and tight cropping seems to be influenced by film. In her subject matter and in the way she paints, she has defined a territory all her own. It is clear that the boundaries of "The Catch"'s territory are not fixed — though it is unclear where she might go next. It is also clear that the humiliation she felt when she was young has become subsumed into something larger and more nuanced and strange.

GaHee Park: Betrayal (Sweet Blood) *continues at Perrotin (130 Orchard Street, Manhattan) through October 17.*