

GaHee PARK

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GaHee Park's Cave People In a Modern World*

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The Korea-born, Queens-based artist's latest solo show at Perrotin New York is an ode to the surreal, erotic lure of—where else?—private space.

It's pouring rain on the day that artist GaHee Park and I videochat via WhatsApp.

"I'm actually really glad to see someone," she tells me. "I haven't seen someone in a while."

Park, 35, makes paintings of surreal figures and surreal objects, all puffy bodies and rich foods and distinctly biological flora, almost cartoonish in their decadence. During quarantine, she moved out of her studio in Williamsburg into a spare room in her home in Astoria, which she shares with her husband and cat. "We have a very big, run-down house," she says. "It's kind of fun, you know? It's big, so we don't really see each other during the day."

"Everyone I know is in Brooklyn, so living here sucks," she adds. "I biked to Manhattan a few days ago. It was very nice."

The artist, who grew up in Korea, is showing me around her in-home studio in preparation for her second Perrotin solo show, called *Betrayal (Sweet Blood)*, on view now through October 17. The show was supposed to take place earlier this summer, so I ask her if the pieces she sought out to make in the beginning feel different than the ones she's making now.



"BETRAYAL (SWEET BLOOD)," 2020. OIL ON CANVAS. PHOTOGRAPHER: GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN.

“I was going to make really big paintings, and I made two,” she admits. “I feel like psychologically, I couldn’t do it, you know? I couldn’t work for a few months, during the pandemic and [when] the George Floyd [protests] happened. I had to pause and think, ‘What am I doing?’”

Park is interested in sexuality, guilt, and pleasure, refracted from “a very female point of view, [an] Asian woman’s point of view living in a man’s world, reflecting on my upbringing from a very sexist country and very Catholic parents.” Through her portraits, she’s “using a lot of layers to talk about my narratives and about identities and even race, but it’s still like, is that going to work in the world right now? Are people going to be able to read it? That was my concern for a while, but I decided to just keep going.”

Before attending art school in Seoul, Park taught Bible studies until she was 21, eventually “mentally breaking off [from] my parents to really find out why I [was] so depressed and repressed, in a way.” Though learning about art opened

her mind, even with this show she felt herself pushing back against her own learned conventions of the nude. “I have a [difficult time] painting Asian figures,” she says, recalling how she rarely saw artful or sexual depictions of Asian women growing up, nor during her Eurocentric, white-male-extravaganza art history education. “I’m trying to shift. I can’t really shift immediately, but I think it’s also a cultural phenomenon that [affected me], that everything is very white-centric even in Asia, when girls grow up.”

“I love looking at bodies,” she says. “I want to paint genitals in a way that I can say, ‘I can paint that. I’m a woman and this is my point of view.’”

Park is also considering, well, the things genitals can do, and the intimate scenes and spaces in which those things occur. Frankly, she absolutely delights in imagining people doing perverse stuff in private spaces, and timely enough, many of her paintings take place indoors.



"EMPTY ROOM WITH ANTS," 2020. OIL ON CANVAS. PHOTOGRAPHER: GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN.

Does being inside all of this time make her want to break outside of the rooms in her paintings, or does she even feel more at home in them? Looking at Park's works on a laptop screen very much feels like peering through multiple panes of glass—the proverbial window that separates subject from viewer; the cybernetic window that separates me from my device (and from whoever is on the other end); the literal, figurative, and cosmological windows that separate us all at all times, especially now. During our WhatsApp call, a banner that reads “End-to-end Encrypted,” featuring a little locked padlock icon, floats at the top of our screens. I wonder if I am projecting the convoluted horniness of the COVID era onto Park's figures. I wonder if they, entwined together in their weird little rooms, exist in our cursed world, or in a world all their own. *Does the novel coronavirus exist in their dimension? Or are they just allowed to have sex all the time and it's fine?*

“I think about them as cave people in a modern world,” Park muses. “Maybe they [could] get COVID, but let's hope not. I don't know.”

A few moments later, she says: “I've been painting a lot of fish and shrimps these days, I don't know why. I feel like I get very emotional when I see seafood. I'm not even vegan or vegetarian.” There's just something about them. “When people serve seafood, they don't really trim so you can see the face, and I think they're very beautiful. Shrimps are so beautiful. They're like, wearing a dress or something. Maybe that's because of corona.”

I mention her painting *The Catch*, a piece that's sort of an outlier in the rest of the *Betrayal (Sweet Blood)* mix: a headless figure floating in the sea, overlaid with a fish skeleton with a red rose in its gaped mouth. It's a continuation of an ongoing fascination of hers, inspired by “some pseudoscience article about [how] humans used to be fish millions of years ago, and now we [eat] them.” The impulse to reconcile our earthly connectivity—between time, beings, and beyond—felt pertinent after a summer of strife over equality, and the lack thereof. “When I get mad, I want to believe that kind of stuff, that we're the same people. You know?”



"THE CATCH," 2020. OIL ON CANVAS. PHOTOGRAPHER: GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN.

There are many living and nonliving things in Park's artwork; even her portraits of human figures, with their clay-like bodies, can feel a bit like still lifes. Kinky leather boots, voluptuous vases, inky acrylic nails, steak and chocolate and croissants and kale salad. A stiletto heel pierces a red cherry. Wine spills from goblets into yonic pools on the floor. And then there's the moon, beaming in through an open window. (Is the moon alive? I'd like to know.) Lest we forget those nonliving things that were once alive, like foods and fish bones.

There's something unsettling about the gluttony of it all, and sure enough, her scenes are often teeming with critters—ants, snails, and spiders scuttling on surfaces. Life and its living things always find their way back in. The complications of existing in the biosphere tend to loom, ready to encroach. Like, say, a virus, or catching feelings, or shame.

Particularly when crafting her still lifes, Park thinks of the early-20th century metaphysical surrealism of Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico. "I just think about this huge space and these little human statues," she says. Oftentimes, in his

paintings, “it feels like you’re walking around some man-made place, [with] a little bug’s point of view.” Zooming out, zooming in. Looking up at the sky and wondering, *How is it possible that we’re all here?*

“It’s a little bit dorky,” Park says, “but I think we need that anyway.”