

Koak

CoBo Social,

*"My Biggest Inspiration Is Just How Incredibly Immense The Act Of Living Is": In Conversation
With Koak*

July 2022

“My Biggest Inspiration Is Just How Incredibly Immense The Act Of Living Is”: In Conversation With Koak



Koak. Photo by Maria Kanevskaya. Image courtesy of the artist, San Francisco.

11
JUL

The expression of emotions is central in the works of San Francisco-based artist Koak, characterised by intense colours and figures in deliberately constructed lines, loaded with psychological and physical tension. We recently spoke to the artist, who opened her first show in Asia with Perrotin Hong Kong, diving into her artistic practice, her experimental techniques and her influences.

TEXT: Kate Lok

IMAGES: Courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

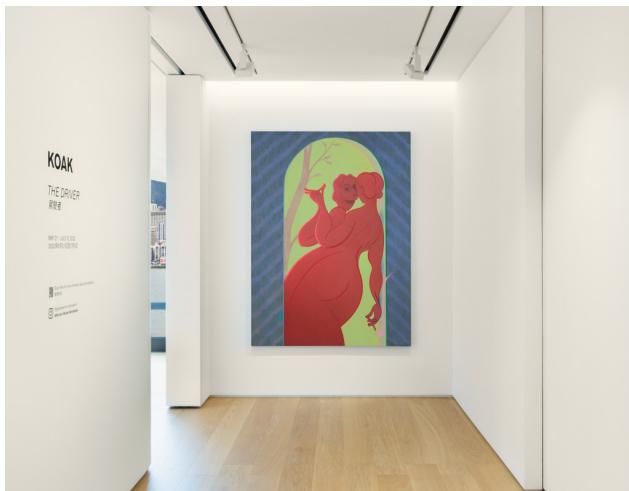
AUTHOR



Kate Lok

Kate Lok is currently an editor of CoBo Social who writes about...

[VIEW PROFILE](#)



View of Koak's exhibition "The Driver" at Perrotin Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Ringo

Cheung. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

One of the greatest pleasures of viewing art in person is the chance to engage in conversations without words. I have always found it an incredibly intimate experience to explore an artwork through its personal narrative, to see the artist's vulnerability materialise into visual manifestations through deliberate choices of mediums, materials and colours.

Coming across the works of San Francisco-based artist, who goes by the moniker Koak, does exactly that. Her new body of work, which are currently taking up the walls of Perrotin's gallery space in Hong Kong, speak to the universal angst that we have all come to be so familiar (even comfortable) with over the past couple of years. In bold, curvaceous lines and saturated tones, the subjects of Koak's canvases—namely feminine figures and felines—look as if they're trapped in a world of their own. While their jewelled tones and meandering bodies appear almost calming to the eyes at first sight, it does not take a genius to pick up on their ominous undercurrent—limbs twisted in unnatural angles, eyes swept with weariness wandering off aimlessly. The intensity of their psychological state juxtaposes the domestic spaces they take up, recalling the sense of pressurised space and isolation that is shared among the collective consciousness.

Her paintings involve a painstakingly lengthy labour of love that, in the case of larger work, begins with a pencil sketch which then gets redrawn, often up to 20 times or more, through a cycle of scanning, drawing, projecting and digital editing. Responding to specific moments that weave together the collective experience, it is not surprising to find out that Koak had conceived this body of work entirely during the pandemic, as a sort of "stand-in for the fear we might all be having about the outside world", says the artist in a recent interview with *Hi-Fructose Magazine*. Apart from tapping into themes of loneliness and dread from long-periods of cocooning indoors, the deliberate use of neon orange as a backdrop in some of the paintings recalls the blazing fires that swept through the northwest of San Francisco in the early autumn days of 2020.



View of Koak's exhibition "The Driver" at Perrotin Hong Kong, 2022. Photo by Ringo Cheung. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.



In fact, the title of this exhibition, "The Driver", which is taken from the headline work of the show, points to the conglomeration of different "personas" we take on that constitutes our identity through internalising different aspects of the surrounding world—and how we take control of the various identities on a daily basis. While developing this exhibition, Koak read cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter's *I Am a Strange Loop* (2007), in which he discusses how the self becomes a feedback "loop", or a subjective construction of disparate experiences that fold back and reflect on our psyches and thus impact the formation of the self. The book eventually inspired the only sculptural work that is displayed in the show, *Strange Loop* (2021), a large-scale bronze sculpture comprising three elongated feline figures, each with a distinctive character, whose bodies coil and curve to complement one another in a visually endless loop.

It's easy to find resonance in Koak's latest body of work, and perhaps that is the exact quality that makes them so captivating. We recently got in touch with the artist via email, and asked her to share more about the process of her art-making, and where she hopes her art will take her in the future.



Koak, *Strange Loop*, 2021, ferric nitrate patina on bronze, three figures; overall (approximate): 180 x 160 x 130 cm, Grumpy Cat: 95 x 72 x 134 cm, Happy Cat: 78 x 192 x 62 cm, Sleepy Cat: 180 x 60 x 110 cm. Photos by Ringo Cheung. Images courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

What are some of your earliest memories of art making?

I've been told by my mother that it was always a part of my life—like so many children who grow up to be artists, it was just something that existed and never really went away. So in that sense, there isn't anything I can pinpoint...just a wash of memories—felt marker sketches on endless reams of perforated paper; an early version of a digital tablet designed in the 80's by both my parents so I could draw on the computer screen; the first experiences of sharing work through hanging drawings in the basement during my dad's band practices to get the group's critique. There were really so many forms of making art that permeated my early life.

How has your artistic practice evolved since and how do you see it evolving in the near future?

Well, I think it snowballed, as it would for any child who loved creating and continued to do so into adulthood. But maybe the biggest shift came when I forced myself to stop and question why I thought it was an important thing to do, or essentially, what my purpose was in doing it. I think it's very easy when we're tumbling forward in life—acting like little snowballs, collecting bits as we go along—to forget what sort of trail we're leaving behind and where exactly we're heading. And both of those are incredibly important questions.

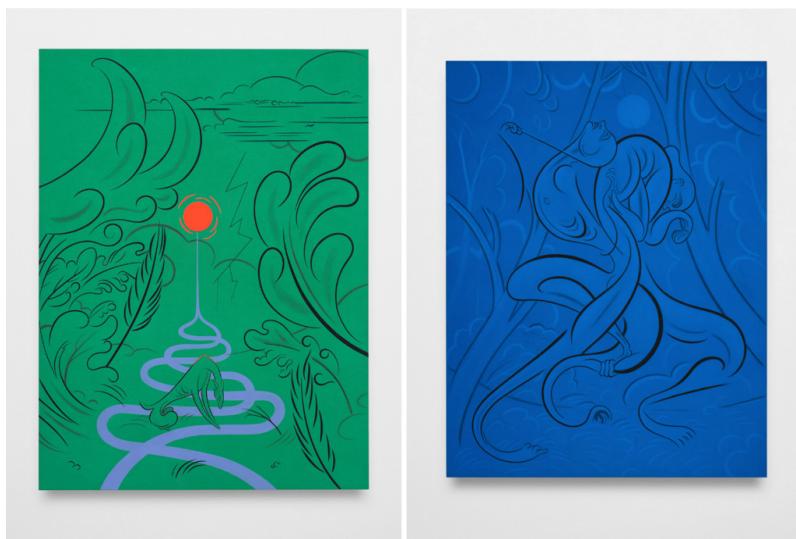
My answer was very clear. I've always wanted to make work in order to communicate with others visually what felt difficult to say through words. Even looking back to when I first started exhibiting, it was always about using art as a form of dialogue. And once I was able to name that as the essential part of why I make, it felt like a weight was lifted off of needing to prove myself. Like in those moments when I felt lost with a piece, I was able to ask myself if it

achieved that goal, and if it had, I'd done my job. Which was quite liberating because it allowed me to get the seriousness out of the way and to open up to being a bit more explorative and playful.

As far as the near future, or whatever futures lie beyond that, all I can hope is that I continue to fulfill that purpose with a sort of increasing strength.



Koak, *The Driver*, 2022, flashe and acrylic on canvas, 177.8 x 264.2 cm. Photo by Chris Grunder. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.



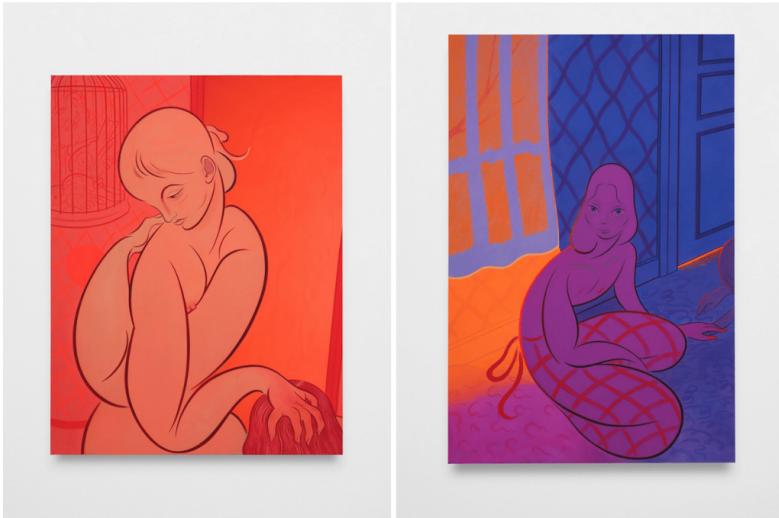
(Left) Koak, *Safely*, 2022, flashe, acrylic and graphite on linen mounted to panel, 168.9 x 140.3 cm; (Right) Koak, *My Teeth*, 2022, flashe, acrylic, chalk, and graphite on canvas, 149.9 x 115.6 cm. Photos by Chris Grunder. Images courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Who or what is your biggest inspiration? And how do they inspire you?

Unfortunately I don't think I can fully answer that question. The idea of having a single big inspiration has always been a little problematic for me. There's something about it that entails a certain form of idolization that glosses over how fallible everything (and everyone) inherently is. I tend to find myself more inspired by random small moments...the little glimpses that run the gamut of life. Brave moments when I've seen my friends steady themselves through a difficult time; the tender way two figures touch in a painting, the curl of a smiling lip in a sculpture; a line in a poem, or the colour of the sky as it meets the ocean...Maybe I would say my biggest inspiration is just how incredibly immense the act of living is, to be able to take in all of the things we are, to magpie the moments around us that move us, to hold them, and to build new things out of all we soak up.

You are experimental in the use of mediums, techniques and tools. Do you have a favourite?

I would say right now that it's the system I've built for filtrating my paint water, which in some strange way falls under all three of those categories. Essentially, I collect my acrylic waste water and then use a chemical process to flocculate out the paint, which allows me to throw the cleaned grey water down the drain without releasing plastics back into the environment. The process leaves me with a kind of paint sludge, which then dries out into a chalk in a range of colours, depending on what was currently being worked on in studio. I've been storing this chalk with the hope of incorporating it back into cast sculptures in the future.



(Left) Koak, My Cage, 2021-2022, flashe, acrylic, and graphite on linen mounted to panel,

149.9 x 115.6 cm; (Right) Koak, The Cocoon, 2021-2022, acrylic, Flashe, oil, chalk,

pastel, graphite, and casein on canvas, 243.8 x 162.6 cm. Photos by Chris Grunder.

Images courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

How do you view the role of colour in your art?

For me, colour is the quickest form of achieving emotional resonance. It's generally immediately read and instantly felt, and because of that, it's a bit like the first impression—giving the viewer the first note or mood before the content of the piece is taken in, and in turn hopefully can then enrich or challenge the tone or narrative of the painting.



Koak at work in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San

Francisco.



Koak working on *The Cocoon*, 2021–2022. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

What are some of the most indispensable items in your studio?

Possibly my pencil sharpener? Which beyond its intended purpose, also plays a major role in creating a bin filled with shavings that I sift in order to create my own graphite powder, which I then make paint with. I do this, rather than using store-bought graphite powder, because I like to keep small fragments of shaved pencil wood in the mix, by using a particular flour sifter, which then adds a bit more body to the paint.

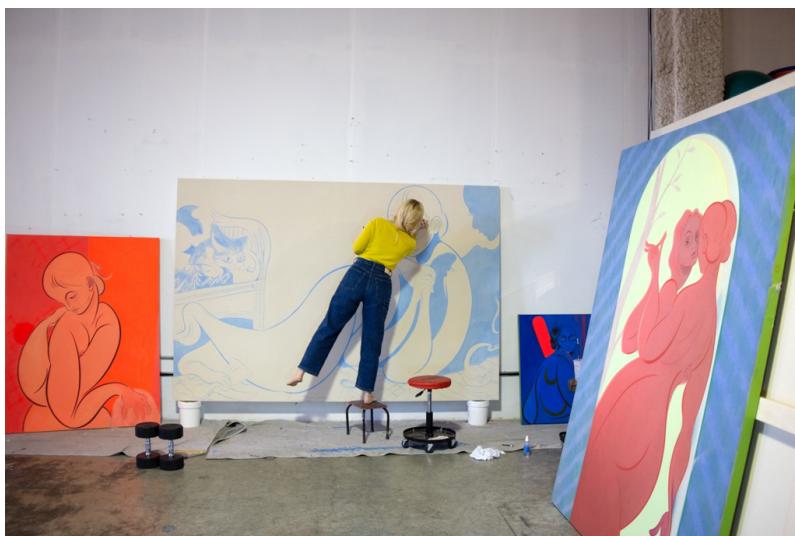
How did female and feline figures become the main protagonists in your artworks?

It’s what I know, femininity and cats. Those two things have been a steady part of my life for as long as I can remember, and in that way they are a sort of framework for how I view the world. I would

say, however, that I generally don't see my figures as distinctly female; it's more that they're a discussion about femininity, which is something that is not inherently tied to gender.

If you could travel back to any time in art history, which period would you choose and why?

I would stay here in this moment. Part of the beauty in looking back at historical periods in art is that we're looking back at them through the context of our current time. The work from those eras is changed by our experience of living now—romanticized from a sort of longing across distance—and I think that longing does a great deal to inspire us and push us into new ways of seeing. So I would rather stay here, in our fresh moment of the unknown, looking back at past movements with an eagerness to explore what's next.



Koak at work in her studio. Image courtesy of the artist, Perrotin, and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

“Koak: The Driver”

21 May – 30 July 2022

Perrotin, Hong Kong