

PERROTIN

GaHee PARK

Frog,
GaHee Park
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GaHee Park

Y

ou were born in Seoul in 1985, and you lived there until 2006. Is that where you studied art?

Yes. I went to Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul for three years—I didn't finish my fourth year. Instead, I transferred to an American school in Philadelphia.

*Interview
by*

*Éric Troncy,
portrait
by*

Ariel Kliegerman.

—Why did you decide to go to art school?

When I was young, I realized I could draw and that other kids couldn't. I also have very Catholic parents. I love them very much, but they are very pushy! They wanted me to get married, be very Catholic, teach the Bible at church, etc. But I couldn't live like that. It was very sexist in Korea back then. I don't know about now. I guess I never thought about being an artist. I was getting Ds every semester. I was going out, doing other things.

—Was your education quite classical and traditional?

Yes. But I trained to go to art school from the time I was seven; I was in the atelier every day.

—Was that your choice or your parents' choice?

Initially, they wanted me to become a pianist, but honestly, I was very bad at it. Because I was drawing so much, they took me to this atelier run by an old lady. I went to her house in the afternoon every day. She had persimmons in the backyard.

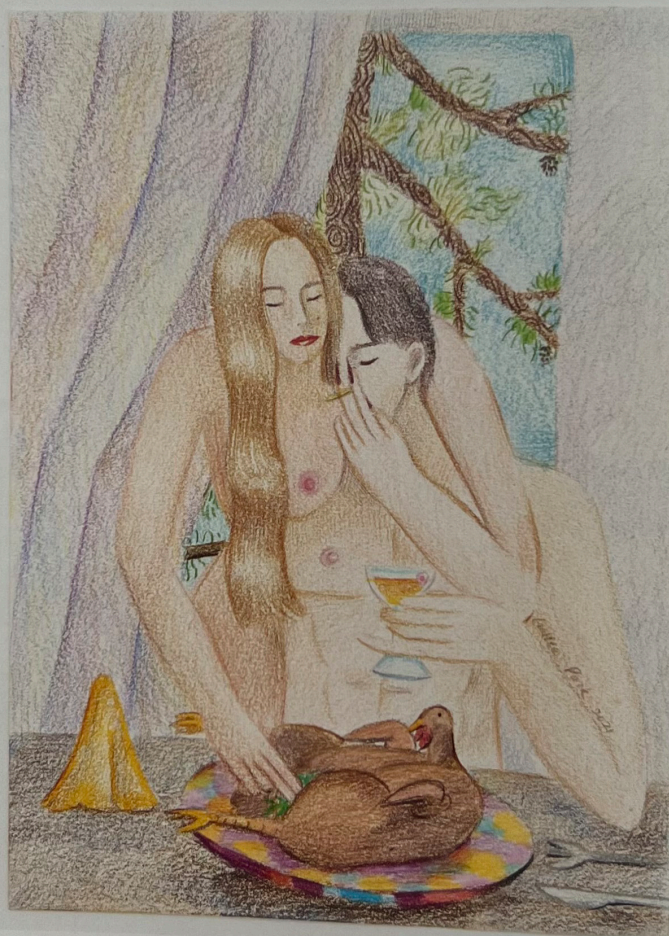
—But despite everything, you decided to be an artist.

Well, I didn't even think about it until I had to deal with my parents when I was in college. All my friends went to America to learn English, and I wanted to go too. When I said that I wanted to learn English for one year in America, my parents said, well, if you teach Bible at church for one year, we'll send you to study English in America for one year. And that's what I did. It was very painful! For one year, I played the organ every morning at 5 a.m. And they sent me to America, to Miami, where, to be honest, I just partied every night, nonstop.

—Do you have good memories of that time?

Oh yes! I was so sad when I went back to Korea; it was very depressing. I realized I couldn't live in Korea like that. So I prepared a portfolio to apply to some art schools in America. I went to Tyler School of Art and Architecture, a really amazing art school in Philadelphia, where teachers were serious artists, living, working artists, and they taught me so many good things. They were all abstract painters. It liberated me so much, and I wanted to be an artist. For the first time, I became very competitive with other students. After Philadelphia, I moved to New York City for graduate school at Hunter College. My parents were very poor at times and rich at others. At that time, my dad owned an aluminum window factory; his bookkeeper committed fraud, and the company lost all its money. My parents sold everything, and I was hardly in contact with them for two years. So I lived by myself in New York, working as a waitress every day to finance my studies. My boyfriend—who's now my husband—also helped me a lot.





—Would you say that there was one teacher who was particularly important for you?

Dona Nelson. She's an abstract painter. Her work was in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. She would teach something and then see something and become ecstatic, happy. I went to the Met with her. She would rent a car—a really fancy American car. And from Philadelphia, she would drive some students who wanted to go with her to the Met, where she was screaming with excitement in front of each and every painting displayed there.

—In fact, she helped you learn how to have a relationship with art.

Yeah. I think I learned how to connect with art. We went there five times a year, and every time she went to the same painting by Balthus (*The Mountain*, 1936–1937), she would yell at the painting that it was the best!

—Who did you admire as an artist at the time?

Philip Guston, Balthus... a lot of them!

—Two painters who became quite controversial.

Guston paints these controversial things that are so powerful to talk about. As a feminist, I guess I have a similar attitude toward fighting against things.

—It's quite ordinary to admit being inspired by Guston these days, but Balthus is more unexpected.

People think he's a bit creepy, but I don't really see that. I also love the way Renoir paints young women; it's very fresh but also rotten. I find it interesting the way the subject is treated, the language, the color palette,

—I can see Balthus in your work, but Renoir... And of course, I find it more interesting to hear that you are inspired by something that does not show immediately in your work. And I don't see Renoir in your paintings.

I don't either! But I think his work brings me to this space I'm in.

—You've been looking at paintings from previous centuries a lot?

I studied art history for ten years, every semester. French Impressionism and Romanticism were my favorites.

—There is also your drawing (*Lovers with Bird*, 2021) that refers to Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* (1943). He illustrated a joyful America, even during the war, and a very white America. Looking at his work from where we are now, he is the least politically correct artist.

I use influences without filtering. People will see me and my work in certain ways, and I will show certain parts of myself. As a woman, whether from Korea or America, you are more exposed to a lot of criticism.

—And you enjoy a very sweet kind of provocation. It reminds me of something John Armleder once told me: artists who jump on tables and trash everything behave exactly the way we expect them to; they simply respect the rules, so their provocations don't necessarily work.

There are two steps when looking at your work. First, we're seduced by what we see, because it's simply beautiful. And then you look carefully, and some perverse aspect shows up. You create provocative works but do not choose a provocative form.

I love beautiful things. I just can't help myself from indulging in beauty. But I can use these beautiful things to fight against what I need to, something that is built, you know, some manufactured idea.

—Did you plan your style, or did you just realize at some point that this was your style?

I was trained as an abstract painter. The style of my work has grown slowly, and this is where I am now. I'm not 100 percent happy with it. I'd like to paint like Renoir! But I can't. People get so mad when I confess that I love Renoir! I used to love my surfaces very polished! Now, I feel I should not be afraid of my brushstrokes anymore. Drawing always gave me confidence, but I've sometimes felt I was not good enough for painting. Sometimes I would make a fantastic brushstroke but flatten it because I'm shy. But as an artist, I became not so shy about myself.

—Your subjects are also very classical. Still lives, portraits, and such. Where do the characters come from? Are they complete creations?

Yes, but I also work with memories, you know; I do sketches, little drawings, and then more drawings. It builds slowly.

—Do you make many studies and preparatory drawings? Or is this all very spontaneous?

It's both! I make many sketches and drawings, but when you are in front of the canvas to do the painting, they're completely useless. With a big painting, there is an emotional relationship to the scale that doesn't exist with drawings.

—So it's a negotiation between you, the sketches, and the painting?

Yes, it's a triangular equation.

—And still, these characters don't show a lot of emotions themselves. They don't show fear or sadness; it's all very subtle. You mentioned coming from abstract painting, so I was wondering if these characters were only elements of the composition. Like a bowl of fruit would be.

Yes, the more I paint, the more I feel that way. I also don't want to express certain emotions. I feel it's not fair for artists to give everything.

—Are you sometimes tempted to do something that is very far away from your regular style?

I am always tempted!

—And who else would you think about apart from Renoir and Balthus?

I've always been in love with Nicole Eisenman's work. I adore what I can't be. I'm not that wild myself, so I love wild people.

—Do you have a studio where you go every day?

Yes, I have a studio, a three-minute walk from where I live.

Someone told me I was a conceptual artist. I said, “Really?”

I work intensely for five or six days, ten hours a day. I can't go out or do anything else. Sometimes I don't even pee!

—*Isn't it a bit perverse to paint flower bouquets and interiors when everyone expects painting to be “political”?* After getting to know you a little bit, I think you like to create storms or disorder, but in a very discreet and elegant manner.

Listen, painting interiors has to do with me being in America, where I never felt safe being outside. Being Asian, I regularly had racist comments in New York. And COVID didn't help. I almost worked with a gallery in New York, and the director told me, “Your name sounds like a masculine name!” I thought, “And you, fuck off.”

—*Would you say you encounter less racism in Canada, where you currently live?*

Yes, it's different here in Montreal than in New York. There's a lot less aggression in general.

—*Some of your most recent drawings seem to refer to the history of cinema. Is that true?*

I love European cinema. Éric Rohmer is fantastic! I've been watching a lot of his movies recently.

—*Indeed! Pascale Ogier in Full Moon in Paris looks like someone you could have imagined and drawn!*

I love that there are so many little things going on in his movies—many, many little things. But I also love Pasolini, Fassbinder, Buñuel, Bresson, Hitchcock, and the Korean director Hong Sang-soo. I'm fascinated by the structure of his movies—this sort of Cézannesque way to approach the subject as both conceptual and narrative. You know, someone told me I was a conceptual artist. I said, “Really?”

—*Well, I can see why. The idea of the avant-garde was to invent something formally new but grounded in art history, except you don't play by the conventional avant-garde rules. This is where the shock comes from. How would you say your work has changed through the years?*

For a while, I thought I was working on identity because my experience really mattered. You know, relationships with my parents, my homeland, being a woman, living in America as an outsider, and so on. But I don't think my identity inspires me as directly as it used to. My identity is in there somewhere, but defining it through my work is not really what drives me. When I'm in the studio these days, it's more about just following the flow of painting from one work to the next, letting my ideas evolve alongside the formal, abstract elements that always intrigue me.

p. 122: *Lovers with Birds*, 2021. Color pencil on paper, 20,3 x 15,2 cm. Collection of Charmaine and Roman Mendoza.

p. 125: *Feast*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches.

Courtesy of the Artist and Perrotin. Photograph: Marion Paquette

