

METAL

"Gahee Park: Eroticism in a New Light"

By Claudia Luque

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Growing up on a rather conservative household, GaHee Park turned to the arts to explore themes that were taboo or forbidden for her – sexuality, nudity, the female body... you know how it goes. After moving to New York City to attend art school, her universe expanded, and now, she's depicting some of the most compelling intimate, erotic and sexual scenes you could see – including three-mouthed people making out or pets peeking through the window to get a glimpse of what's going on inside – and works at renowned galleries like Perrotin.

However, her way there was not a bed of roses. Being an Asian woman in the United States gave her the "feeling of being invisible", "almost inhuman", which made her realize that "there's no question this is still a sexist and racist society." In addition, the art world isn't as open-minded as some would think, at least when it comes to male sexuality. "I've been surprised by how conservative some collectors and viewers still are, especially about depictions of male nudity and sexuality. Not that people get outraged or offended, necessarily. Usually it's more like nervous snickering or making bad jokes", she confesses. "But having a naked woman in a sexual pose hanging on your wall rarely seems to bother anyone, but a man with an erection... it's still different for some people", she concludes. But after all, staying true to herself has proved worthy, as she's found a way to canalize oppression, express herself and connect her feelings and her view with others.

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You were born and raised in Seoul (Korea), in a strict environment with a religious education. How did this upbringing condition/influence your work? Did you ever feel self-conscious about addressing issues considered taboo for those around you?

Probably, the most obvious way is that because my family was strict/religious I was drawn to art as a way to explore subjects that were forbidden or taboo, like sexuality, nudity, grotesque or weird images, etc. I still explore some of those areas in my work, but more than that, I still tend to see art as a place to explore certain subjects that are difficult to bring up in normal daily life. I used to feel self-conscious about my family seeing some of my more sexually explicit work, and I avoided showing it to them for a while. But that has mostly faded away. They've seen my work now and they more or less accept it as legitimate, even if they don't totally understand it.

Did you feel mentally oppressed during your youth? Is art a way to canalize these feelings?
Yes, and yes.

Do you think it is also something that goes beyond your environment? Do you feel that sexuality is still a restricted topic for many people? Have you had any difficulties in making this type of proposal (because of the themes you deal with)?

I do think sexuality is still a difficult subject for people, and probably always will be. It's just a very complex part of life both in its private and personal sides, but also, just as complicated in terms of its cultural, social and political aspects. Because of all this, I think people are intrigued by work that deals with it. But people can be touchy about it as well.

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Your paintings depict romantic and sexual scenes with still life elements. Not a very common combination. Why did you decide to join these two elements in your work? How do they dialogue in the same art piece?

I didn't really think about this very consciously as combining the two things, they go together naturally for me. Plants, animals, food, human bodies... the stuff of everyday life all relating to each other.

Excessively large hands, interior spaces, naked bodies, tables and food. These are some recurring elements in your paintings. Where do these motifs come from? Are your personal experiences reflected in these key elements of your works?

It's difficult to dissect individual motifs. They all come out of some combination of what they mean and what they look like... how they invoke themes or subjects or moods that interest me, and how

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Sex and sexuality have long been depicted from a predominantly male gaze. How do you think female artists – be it film directors, painters, photographers, etc. – see bodies, sexuality and eroticism different from men? Or how do you feel your approach is different?

It's obviously a complicated issue... But I definitely do feel like my work – especially in relation to sexuality, bodies, etc. – is engaging in an attempt to critique and escape the male gaze that was the 'default' perspective for most of the history of art. That is sort of baked into everything I do, I think.

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Colour is another key element of your paintings. Besides choosing pastel tones, you have also played with colours, for example, using blue to paint a body. What is your treatment of the colour based on?

Using colour is both instinctual and theoretical for me. I study about colour and pigments constantly, but using them in practice is always harder. The more I learn about colour and composition, the more I come to respect the old masters and their use of oil paint.



Do you think that the tonalities you use make your work have a naive look?

People have said my work has a kind of 'naive' look, both in terms of colour and also forms. I can see what they mean. It's not that I'm aiming for 'naive' exactly, more just that I want it to look the way it looks and that's how some people describe it. It's not a word I feel is particularly meaningful, but as a simple descriptor that points people in a certain direction, it's ok.

Sometimes, I have a slight feeling that 'naive' gets used as a short-hand for certain elements of the non-white/non-male perspective of my work. I think people could often say 'playful' or 'brutal' or 'satirical' or 'funny' and it would mean more or less the same thing they mean by 'naive'. But I do like a lot of painters who also get described as naive, so I don't really mind being in that club.

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Besides the colours, your way of representing the body is characterized by distortion. How did you come to this form? Do you ever seek the liberation of the body as one of your goals?

As with discussing motifs – a combination of what instinctually appeals to me visually, what meanings or moods or narrative fragments the representations might invoke, etc. I often like my paintings to be funny, and distortions can be comical.

In your work, there is a clear interest in interior spaces. Do you consider that there is more freedom in private spaces and allow you to depict sensual scenes better or more credibly?

Yes, you could probably put it that way. I've always been interested in the public/private dynamic, and in the kinds of freedoms that are – or aren't – available in private spaces as opposed to public spaces. Because of the way I grew up, I think I became drawn to the idea of private spaces in a psychological sense, and I find it interesting to think about different kinds of private spaces that can exist.



There are other curious paintings, like one of a woman kissing a cat's ass. Cheeky and nasty, I must say (laughs). Is it to open people's perspectives on sexual practices, or just for fun and sass?

Paintings should always be fun, in my view. To me, that painting is not exactly about sexual practices (you shouldn't have sex with your cat!), and more about a kind of gesture of intense affection or love that can appear ridiculous or perverse or crazy, even if it is actually very relatable and common. I'm interested in people's relationships to their pets and how it can expose hidden parts of the person's personality.

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Although you're originally from Korea, you finished your studies in painting at the Hunter College in New York City. What differences do you find between NY and your hometown? Was American culture more favourable for your works?

I left Korea in my early twenties. I was interested in art from an early age, but it wasn't until after I went to Tyler School of Arts in Philadelphia for undergrad, and then to Hunter for grad school, that I started really pursuing a career in art. Psychologically, being in the United States probably gave me the freedom and independence I needed to pursue being an artist. Last year, I had two shows in Seoul with Gallerie Perrotin (one group exhibition, one solo), and from what I could tell, it felt like my work was well received there. In Korea, there's been a wave of feminism throughout the culture recently, driven mainly by young women, which is very exciting. So, I feel like the atmosphere there is better suited to the kind of work I like and make now than it had been in the past.

In the documentary, *Kusama: Infinity*, directed by Heather Lentz, the Japanese artist tells her struggles of living in NYC in the 1960s and 1970s – she was ignored, copied by artists like Warhol who later took credit for her work, etc. Similarly, did you find it hard being an Asian woman in the United States?

I did, especially when I first came to the US and didn't speak English as well. It gave me a feeling of being invisible. I felt almost inhuman – like I was a plant or animal in the corner, observing people. It wasn't necessarily a good feeling or a position I appreciated being put in, but it was a useful perspective in a way. That sensibility definitely found its way into my work, especially earlier work. But overall, there's no question this is still a sexist and racist society, and that affects how you're treated as a woman who is Asian.



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How would you say your time in Hunter influenced your paintings? Tell us more about how art school shaped your vision and artistic practice.

It's difficult to say. At both Tyler and Hunter, I met certain professors that inspired me and encouraged me, and that was very important. And my work definitely got exposure from connections to the schools, which led to opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise. But there were also aspects of the schools I disliked – including a certain amount of institutional sexism and racism. Overall, I appreciated my time in art school, but by the end of grad school, I was glad to be done with it.

Do you think that, over time, you have become freer and there is more of yourself in your current works than in earlier ones?

I think there was always a lot of myself in my work. Being young and excited and kinda dumb gives you some sort of freedom. But being older and more experienced, as well as technically more skilled, gives you a different kind of freedom.

After having achieved such a solid style and career – you've recently exhibited at prestigious Perrotin gallery –, what is left for you to do? Where would you like to see yourself in the coming years?

I just want to continue being able to make art, and to continue being able to support myself with it.



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