

SAY WHO

GaHee Park: "Painting as Escape, Painting as Power — A Quest for Desire"

By Cristina López Caballer

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"I see my paintings as a library of different moments, each of them is an invitation for viewers to make up their own story"

On the eve of her latest exhibition, *Not Quite Tomorrow*, we meet GaHee Park at the heart of her second solo show at Perrotin Paris. As the Korean-born artist slowly gains confidence, she guides us through her art and the liberating journey painting has allowed her to embark upon. With a love for Impressionist masters and a dream of becoming an Abstract painter, GaHee Park is breaking free from the repressive Catholic environment she was born into, finding her voice through her brushes in a deeply personal and powerful quest for desire.

SAY WHO:

Your first solo show in France was here at Perrotin in 2021. What does it feel like to be back?

GAHEE PARK:

To be honest, at first, I was so scared to show the work and talk about it. I was feeling very insecure, but then I got incredible reviews and reactions, so now I'm like, hi, I'm here again, and I'm very happy to be back!

SAY WHO:

You've titled the exhibition "Not Quite Tomorrow." Is that a hint at some kind of deception or a bad omen?

GAHEE PARK:

I'm very interested in the dusk, because it's very related to still life, to that particular moment in time where life emerges. Take mosquitoes, for instance, it is at dusk that we get bitten by them the most. It marks the moment for animals to start hunting. Even for humans, it's when we gather, have dinner.

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It's also an interesting moment in relation to life at large, because it symbolises how there is going to be darkness and death, yet it is also very beautiful. It is a transitional moment, where many elements that I wanted to evoke come into play, so that's where the title came from.



Incarnation, 2025

SAY WHO:

Your work often draws from European art history, but you were initially trained in South Korea. How has that trajectory shaped your practice?

GAHEE PARK:

I was born in South Korea, but I've been living in the United States since my early twenties, and I recently moved to Canada. Back at the art academy in Seoul, I was taught a very classic and precise kind of art, starting with drawing anatomy. Then I transferred to a university in Philadelphia, where I learned painting in a new way. I had to sort of unlearn what I knew to be trained as an abstract painter, later to move towards figuration.

I'm mostly inspired by European movements, impressionism in particular. Renoir is my favourite — I still want to paint like him, but of course that's impossible (laughs). So I've adapted the core of that style to my own practice. I'm also drawn to the Flemish still life tradition, I'm fascinated by the way it plays with time to capture a moment, to capture life.

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SAY WHO:

Still lifes are traditionally steeped in symbolism. Are you also playing with coded elements in your own work?

GAHEE PARK:

I don't really know the exact meaning of each element, I rather think about them as a part of a human body. Some of them are obvious, like a fruit resembling a woman's breast or the silhouette of a beautiful body.



Blue Thoughts, 2023-2025

SAY WHO:

Many of the figures have doubles, like the negative of a photograph. Are these opposites? Or inner reflections?

GAHEE PARK:

It depends on the painting, I like them to condense multiple emotions. In "Blue Thoughts", for instance, the doubles reflect different inner states of mind, so you could see the lighter figure as the calm one, who is enjoying her time, while the darker is anxious.

SAY WHO:

You often include curtains, framing scenes or half-concealing figures. Are we meant to feel like voyeurs?

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GAHEE PARK:

Totally, I used the fabrics for that element. I'm very interested in this interplay between showing and hiding, to make people curious about what's behind. Because not showing is also a way of pointing at something.

SAY WHO:

Each of the paintings feels like a snapshot of a story. Is there a narrative element behind each piece?

GAHEE PARK:

There's no definite strong narrative. I see them as a library of different moments, so each painting is my invitation to the viewers to make up their own story. To make them psychologically engaged with the image, I place several motifs and elements that may be historical, cultural or politically informed, so a multitude of narratives can arise. Because for each person, depending on their background, the meaning will vary. I don't seek to impose any narrative. Oftentimes, when I show my work, people talk about their own experiences, which may have absolutely nothing to do with what I personally thought about when creating the piece. But I love hearing what they make up of them.



Stab, Shuck, Slice, Filet, 2024-2025

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SAY WHO:

What does painting mean to you?

GAHEE PARK:

It's a very hard question (laughs). I actually never think about it. Painting and drawing were the only things I could do as a child. I was that kid, in the corner, drawing nonstop. For people, it was obvious that I would go to art school, perhaps be an illustrator, but surely make something related to art.

SAY WHO:

Did it help you make peace with all of that?

GAHEE PARK:

It's never quite peaceful when I paint, but yes. Ultimately, it's all about desire, I paint about desire and through the process itself, I strive towards it.

SAY WHO:

Nails appear throughout the series — long, sharp, beautiful, dangerous. Do they reflect the tension within that desire?

GAHEE PARK:

I paint a lot of hands because they are like language, a communicative tool in themselves. I love it when women have long, strong nails. There's also something shocking about the contrast between the sharpness of the nails and the softness of the facial features of some women.

With that kind of memory in mind, I think of hands, just like mouths and eyes, as a way to intrude something, a way to suspend time for a moment. I would describe it as an ominous feeling. It's something that scares me, yet I also find sexy, that's why I place them in my paintings.

SAY WHO:

So you seek to confront the viewer with that ambivalence?

GAHEE PARK:

Definitely, I like playing with contrasts. You could also say that my paintings are almost voyeuristic, in particular "Love Investigations". Figures are giving viewers the back, they are being observed, yet they are also looking back through these "extra" sets of eyes, placed in uncanny spots.

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This creates a reverse gaze, which also speaks about my upbringing. As a woman, it is quite common to experience being sexualized on the street. In those moments, my instant thought is "I also have eyes". I'm being objectified, but I also have some power; my eyes hold that energy and power. By painting that reverse gaze, I'm illustrating the internal, feisty reaction I feel whenever I'm catcalled.



Love Investigations, 2025

SAY WHO:

Would you say painting is your way of responding to challenging situations?

GAHEE PARK:

Totally. I grew up in a very strict Catholic environment, a very repressive community. I felt like I wasn't really regarded as a human, but something closer to an animal or an objectified being. I feel anger towards that situation, but I have enough distance to turn it around and play with that anger with perspective. So, in the end, each painting comes to embody a multitude of mixed feelings.

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SAY WHO:

Can you tell us about the significance of flowers in your work?

GAHEE PARK:

I used to paint flowers because I was scared of my parents; it used to be my decoy work. When I was younger, I would send them pictures of flower paintings so they would see me as a nice Catholic. I still draw flowers and include them in many paintings, I just also add a little bit of pepper (laughs). I'm still learning how to find a balance between the kind of person I was raised to be and what I want to do.



SAY WHO:

Painting seems to be an ongoing process of unlearning and negotiating identity. What does the end of the journey look like?

GAHEE PARK:

My ultimate goal is to become an abstract painter. But we're talking long-term. Again, it's a process I'm learning to navigate, and there's still a lot that I need to figure out before.

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There are also new challenging projects coming up in 2026. I'm one of the artists participating in the creation of a piece for the new wing of JFK Airport. It's going to be a large-scale glass mosaic floor artwork, of around 12 feet, so quite huge. Our proposal needs to speak about the American experience, which got me thinking about the city as a flower, so I decided to create a bouquet to welcome with a joyous feeling those who are travelling. This will be my first public artwork, so it's an exciting project. An intriguing one, too, because I feel like my work is very intimate and interior, so I had to think about how to approach a project that is going to be in the open, seen by so many people.

Speaking of new endeavours, I also recently took part in an incredible artist residency at the Opéra national de Paris, as part of the "PROJET 12" program at the Palais Garnier. Being immersed in that historic space, surrounded by dancers, musicians, and craftsmen, was deeply inspiring and pushed me to explore a very different dynamic from the one in my studio. By the end of the residency, I created an original piece that will be auctioned early next year to help raise funds for the Opéra.

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