

The Korea Times

Guimi You: "Californian sunshine, Seoul winter inspire You Gui-mi's canvases"

By Kwon Mee-yoo

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Artist You Gui-mi poses in front of her painting "Still Books." Courtesy of the artist and Make Room LA

Korean artist You Gui-mi, also stylized as Guimi You, presents her solo exhibition "Winter Blossom" at Make Room LA, artfully contrasting the landscapes of sunlit California and bleak Seoul, both hold a special place in her heart.

"In my solo show, the one work depicted landscape of California and other five works are based on my life in Seoul," You told The Korea Times during a video interview, Nov. 2. The artist has recently returned to her studio following the opening of her exhibit in the City of Angels on Oct. 28.

This duality of landscapes presents a visual narrative of her experiences across continents. Her time in California coincided with the onset of the pandemic, a period marked by introspective walks in the East Bay Area where the beauty of nature became a sanctuary for her amid uncertainty.

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In the past, You was obsessed with the notion that a painting needed to be innovative, narrative-driven and idea-centric.

"I was constantly in search of something new and avant-garde. Yet, it was during my neighborhood strolls amidst the pandemic that I discovered the understated beauty of nature and gardens," You said. "The life changed by the pandemic and beauty of the Californian landscape both inspired me and I started to put the nature and landscape images into my painting for the first time."

The transition back to Korea brought with it a sensory shift — most noticeably, the color palette of the skies.

"I moved back to Korea last year and I realized that the color of the sky is very different. Seoul's sky is very grey and (there are) too many apartments," she said.



"Spring in the Forest" by You Gui-mi / Courtesy of the artist and Make Room LA

You's artistic evolution was shaped by her diverse education, from studying Oriental Painting at Seoul National University to exploring Painting at the Royal College of Art in London.

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"In Korea, during my bachelor's and master's in Oriental Painting, 'meok,' or black ink, along with Korean paper, were my primary materials for years. It wasn't until London that I experimented with oil paint for the first time."

The artist initially found the transition challenging. "The two mediums felt poles apart. I would often use too much pigment and the excess oil would cause the color to fade away," she said.

"After much trial and error, I came to a realization that both meok and oil serve the same purpose in art and this understanding allowed me to adapt to oil paint easier."

Oil painting, in fact, was a more fitting medium for You as it affords her the flexibility to alter forms and colors or to "improvise," which stands in contrast to the precise and premeditated approach required in Oriental Painting.

"With oil paint, I have the liberty to modify any aspect as I please. My paintings can evolve with my emotions, allowing me to adjust colors or shapes to reflect my feelings. This freedom has been a significant advantage for me," the artist said.

Despite her adaptation to new mediums, the traditional techniques of "sumukhwa," or Korean ink wash painting, continue to influence her oil paintings.

"Rather than applying color in one go, I layer it gradually, akin to the methods of sumukhwa. I believe these layers add depth to both the color and the painting itself ... My work also features an absence of distinct outlines, opting for a softer, more blended edge, which mirrors traditional Korean ink wash painting," she explained.



"Sketch in the Cafe" by You Gui-mi / Courtesy of the artist and Make Room LA

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You's artwork is a canvas of her visual experiences and encounters and she emphasized the emotional connection she puts into her work.

"My goal is to encapsulate the emotions and memories of a moment within my paintings. While I could simply take a photograph, spending hours, even days, painting a single moment allows me to become more intimate with the memory, making it all the more cherished. This process of immortalizing fleeting moments is what I find most enchanting about painting," she said.

"Although my subjects are landscapes, I don't merely replicate their forms or hues. Instead, I interpret the impression they leave on me, infusing my own emotions into the composition and palette."

The largest piece on view is "Still Books" (2023), a diptych offering a glimpse of Seoul's winter landscape as seen through a window.

"This scene unfolded before us during our Thursday ritual of visiting a neighborhood bookstore with my son. My aim was to craft a piece that would serve as a visual memento for my son and me to look back on fondly when he grows up," You explained regarding the bird's-eye perspective with books.

Following her Los Angeles exhibition, which wraps up on Dec. 2, You is preparing for two more shows. She will first participate in a group exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Seoul, slated for next January and, in April, her work will be featured at the Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco.

"I have lived and painted the landscapes of the Bay Area, yet I've never had the opportunity to exhibit those works there. It feels like I am completing a journey, closing a loop that remained open until now," she said.

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