

"GaHee Park's surreal paintings at YBCA upend male gaze, critique surveillance society"

By Caroline Picard

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"Thoughts at Dusk" is among the works in "GaHee Park: Behind the Curtain" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco through Jan. 3, 2027. (Paul Litherland/GaHee Park/ Yerba Buena Center for the Arts via Bay City News)

Surreal paintings in GaHee Park's solo show "Behind the Curtain" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco depict close-cropped tabletops, animals and gutted fish, beverages, fruit, painted stiletto fingernails and female protagonists with wandering features: an eye out of anatomical place, an extra pair of lips, or a misaligned hand. Rendered in a cool, winter palette with smooth brush strokes, each composition evokes an ineffable feeling—at first taciturn, then uncanny—for a quiet, hair-raising effect. As Park's figures slump towards repose, additional eyes appear elsewhere in the composition, returning the viewer's gaze.

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The 2025 painting "Table at Dusk" is on view in "GaHee Park: Behind the Curtain" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts through Jan. 3, 2027. (Paul Litherland/Ariel Kliegerman and Remi Janier/GaHee Park/Yerba Buena Center for the Arts via Bay City News)

In "Table at Dusk" (2025), the female figure sits in profile at a round table with a pink tablecloth. She has two eyes, one placed according to the profile, looking away. The second is anatomically incorrect, destabilizing effect the figure's coherence. A gray curtain hangs behind her. A thick white shawl drapes over her left shoulder, exposing a bare breast. As is characteristic of Park's work, visual puns abound. Half of a lemon rests parallel to the breast where the figure's other

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breast could be, creating a formal comparison. In the foreground, an open-eyed fish lies on its side, slit open as two fingers reach up beneath it, pulling back the tablecloth to reveal the figure's pubic hair. Like the fish, the figure watches us with that second, errant eye. We cannot return both gazes simultaneously and thus must submit to being observed by one or the other.

Park was born in Seoul, South Korea and raised in a conservative family with a strict religious education. She was expected to get married and teach the Bible, but found the conservatism unbearable. She turned to art, studying with Dona Nelson at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, and later with Carrie Moyer at Hunter College in New York, both abstract artists who consciously upend gender expectations. Nelson has said, "I think, as a woman, you always have a tempestuous relationship to painting's history. You stand a little to the side of it." Park developed a signature style that inflects domestic scenes with erotic, psychological tension.

Surrealism originally was inspired by Dada and Sigmund Freud's work on the unconscious in the 1920s; Surrealist art explores duplication, juxtaposition, and absurdity to better depict unconscious and palpable realms of experience. While staunchly male in its original formulation, recent attention to female surrealists such as Leonora Carrington, Ithell Colquhoun, Maruja Mallo, Joyce Mansour or Remedios Varo, among others, challenge the presumption that the "femme-enfant" was muse and mirror to the male artist's ego. Park's subjects provide further antidote with a contemporary edge of surveillance. The female subject has extra eyes with which to observe herself being seen. Additional eyes pepper the composition, also seeing.

Something similar happens in "Woman with Cocktail Olives and Caterpillar" (2026), where another female figure shields her eyes with the show's recurring black painted fingernails. This woman slouches down at the table, like someone who wishes to disappear in her drink. Just above her hands, one could almost mistake a secondary, smaller head for the downcast woman's hair. Except this smaller head has a third eye, and it peeks back, watching us look at the girl ruminating on the olive in the drink.

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Curator Dorothy Dávila, left, and artist GaHee Park, right, pose with "Thoughts at Dusk," a painting in "GaHee Park: Behind the Curtain" at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco through Jan. 3, 2027. (Fiona Duong/GaHee Park/YBCA via Bay City News)

At last, the woman lies down on the table. "Thoughts at Dusk" (2024) shows a gray curtain pulled back upon a figure resting on another pink tablecloth, her face more distorted, like a hybrid echo of Pablo Picasso's surrealist figurations and Salvador Dalí's melting clocks. One eye of Park's figure is closed, and another is positioned irreconcilably to the side, open. The face contains two sets of differently positioned lips and rests on oversized hands, one with red-painted nails. A white shawl fills the center of the picture, extending into background mountains. Ants crawl upon the table. A seagull, rendered whole in a previous painting, is now deconstructed—bones on a platter—as though having been eaten. A black cat with a cone on its head on the table looks into a water bowl, where it looks back at the viewer, inconspicuously. But the cat's bowl

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also could be the eye of the painting, the seagull's dish a mouth. A cocktail glass holds another eye, by which we find ourselves surveilled once more, a Frankensteined assemblage of otherwise disparate features.

Park's paintings capture a diffuse state of consciousness through a strategic use of recurring objects and animals. The appearance of scattered eyes creates additional points of awareness that pierce the painting's third wall, as though apprehending the viewer as the female figure melts into her environment. In this final movement, the entire canvas, comprising human and more-than-human parts, comes to represent a watching body, not unlike our own environment, where cameras follow us everywhere.

"GaHee Park: Behind the Curtain" continues through Jan. 3, 2027 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. Admission is \$5-\$10, free for ages 17 and under. Visit ybca.org.

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