

Kyungseo Lee / *Phosphenes*

10.05 – 08.06.2024

Everything, and nothing but sunscreen

by Ashik Zaman

Recently at an artist talk at another gallery in town, the artist, a figurative painter, thanked me publicly for having been among the people in the art scene to have pushed for figurative painting at time when its presence was evidently very scarce. It's been soon ten years since the first headlines in international press began seeing daylight announcing the "resurgence of figuration", after which point, they just never stopped coming. If a pendulum swings "cyclically" between abstract and figurative in art, I surprise even myself with the irony of how much I'm really longing for more abstraction in art again, so much so that all I really wanted during an Easter trip to the US was to devour in the abstract female "trifecta" that is Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell.

Interestingly, the one out of the three I did not get to see this time, and whose painterly spirit is evoked significantly by the work of Kyungseo Lee is Frankenthaler. Lee's abstract register is "loose", stretchy and free, and not confined to one mere signature style permeated stubbornly through each of her paintings. This is evidenced by the fluid oscillation from at times a more unison palette saturating the whole surface (the fiery reds!) or the sunny mango or zesty yellows more boldly interjecting darker areas with vivid brushstrokes and gestures of starker colours. Lee at times exhibits restraint and suffices with lighter concentration amid naked surfaces, closing in on the colour field tradition of Frankenthaler, rather than bouts of full spontaneity. Lee's work invites modes of looking and interpreting, and while the abstract landscapes certainly are there too, as a fan of eroticism in art it is the concealed voyeuristic windows that have the strongest hold on me. While Lee to some extent evades binaries of "masculine" and "feminine" in abstraction; supple figures and tender gestures acted out by an arm or the soft gaze on a face that begin dawning before the eyes are what disintegrates the work from more masculine undertones/overtone of abstraction. I'm able to find two kinships in this regard; I think of both Celia Hempton and Cecily Brown; two painters who successfully have prompted forward corporeal eroticism in contemporary painting. Lee's work certainly is less confrontational and demurer than Hempton in terms of the male and female sex overtly on view, but her *Sweet Regrets* unmistakably bears aspects of both these painters.

In a *certain* visual culture that I'm part of where "face down, behind up" is a normalized greeting between individuals, and nothing is left to the imagination in dating image grids anymore, this painting is rather and very titillating to me. Titillation comes down to the right amount of suggestive allusion and "modesty" to crave and fervently look for more than you are getting in an image. To have your curiosity spiked up so much that you can't stop looking.

The recent years have forced me to look so much that I think for a while now, I'd like to be looking, without looking, if you *know* what I mean?

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Kyungseo Lee (b. 1995 in South Korea) is an artist based in London. She earned her MA at the Royal College of Art in Painting (2023) and BA at Hongik University in Painting and Visual Communication Design (2020). Lee was selected as an artist in residence at Cité Internationale des Arts (France, 2016), and PADA Artist Residency (Portugal, 2023). Her works have been shown internationally including solo exhibition at LKIF Gallery (Korea, 2021), and a number of group exhibitions including shows with: OSH Projects, Soho Revue and Blue Shop Gallery. She recently had a solo show in Europe, at Makasiini Contemporary (Finland, 2024).

Within her practice, Kyungseo Lee explores the conflicting emotions and values towards the human experience. The erotically charged images serve as a stressor to the viewer, challenging one's own ambivalence on the topic of 'body image'. Grey areas in between the binaries of bodily celebration and objectification, right and wrong, good and evil have been a continuing topic and interest for the young painter. She has experienced certain social circumstances such as the polarisation in Korea, especially in her generation, which is one of the main factors that influences her paintings, as well as her genuine curiosity and admiration in how each one has their own universe of values and experiences.

The figures in Kyungseo Lee's paintings morph into abstraction from form to expression; Lee has been specifically working on the fluidity in her paintings. In order to achieve this, she chooses to pull back and restrain the brush by leaving the canvas empty in places, bringing the ambiguity to the fullest extent by letting the colours flow and merge themselves. Worked with a loose painterly style, the figure soon dissolves into surface mark and gesture.