



THE MODERN INSTITUTE

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*Looking at a sunset, I sometimes feel like this is my moment in life, its scenery sad and beautiful at the same time. There are things that I have realised over the years, and I think about relationships that are embedded in the landscape.*<sup>1</sup>

The natural world emerged as the defining theme and subject for Kim Bohie in the 1990s, having previously also worked across the genres of still life and portraiture. In the early 2000s, Kim set up a studio and home on the island of Jeju, which lies south of the Korean Peninsula, and its landscape became her main preoccupation – the ocean, the local floral, her own garden. Kim lives in Hawon-dong village near the city of Seogwipo which sits on the volcanic coastline of south Jeju. The Island’s unique topography and subtropical climate have provided Kim with subjects for various ongoing series, ‘Towards’ and ‘The Seeds’ among them. Recent pieces from both series feature in *Beyond*.

Notably, there are rarely people in her quiet, elegant paintings. Her panoramic views and plant studies depict moments of solitary contemplation, with elements part real and part imagined. While rarely spectacular or conspicuously dramatic, each one shows a vivid encounter with nature: the golden disk of the moon at twilight framed by a beacon mound near Sanbongsan Mountain in *Beyond*, 2024; sea water catching the sun in the heat of the day in *Towards*, 2024; and the striking green leaves of her Washingtonia palms in *Towards*, 2019. There is also a warmth and humour to Kim’s approach, as highlighted by her ‘Leo’ series which features her black Labrador Retriever situated happily amongst the trees and bushes of the botanical garden connected to her studio. While these compositions might call to mind the naïve paintings of French post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau (1844-1910) their practices differ in notable ways. Rousseau’s paintings are works of the imagination, depicting theatrical, and sometimes violent, scenes he had never witnessed in real life. Whereas Kim’s work is rooted in Jeju, engaging with the serene and sublime aspects of her experiences of the natural world.

The exhibition title situates Kim’s scenes – their emphasis on what lies outside our individual bodies and consciousness and offers a consideration of the unity and order of nature. Her works are about looking and personal connection to place, engaging with ideas around closeness – spiritually and physically – and the way it effects our vision. Their often wide-angled compositions push against the use of linear perspective in painting, which dominated European art from the Renaissance to the Impressionists. Instead, they take their cue from East Asian

traditions in which sympathising with, rather than studying, the environment is the primary concern. Korean folding screens known as *byeongpung* 병풍 are models of this way of seeing – in them nature is not tightly framed for scrutiny but unfolds before the viewer.

In this regard, a comparison could be made with David Hockney, who, since the 1980s, has gradually turned away from using the camera in his paintings, instead choosing to draw from nature and incorporate multiple perspectives. Hockney’s *May Blossom on the Roman Road*, 2009, is a compelling example of his adoption of this approach – an oil painting executed across eight canvases to produce a joyous panorama of a section of East Yorkshire countryside. Notably Hockney took a special interest in Chinese handscrolls such as *The Kangxi Emperor’s Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Three: Ji’nan to Mount Tai by Wang Hui* 王翬, 1698.<sup>2</sup> In this work, the human subjects are depicted at a modest scale, integrated into the mountains and rivers of southern China.

Kim works across canvas and Korean paper, or *hanji* 한지, utilising sumi ink and water-based mediums to achieve a range of effects. Her individual style of painting involves applying colours on top of traditional ink landscapes. This relates to the *seolchae* 設彩 method which emerged in late 18th century Korean Buddhist painting, and similarly involves painting colour over ink.<sup>3</sup> Kim studied painting at Ewha Womans University in Seoul and was a professor of Korean Painting at the same institution from 1993-2017 so is well-versed in these genres and techniques. And while Kim’s compositions contain a range of international influences, they can be understood in the lineage of *sansuhwa* 산수화, or traditional Korean landscape painting (*san* meaning mountain, *su* meaning water) which emphasises communing with nature and is influenced by Taoism and Confucianism. As Oh Kwangsoo comments,

*Nature has long been deemed as the supreme subject of traditional oriental painting. The nature depicted in Kim Bohie’s works is deeply rooted in the oriental view of nature.*<sup>4</sup>

More specifically, her works can be seen as a contemporary re-engagement with *jingyeong sansuhwa* 진경산수화, translated as ‘true-view landscape painting’. This 18th century approach to painting sought to portray specific classical or in some sense definitive natural sites in Korea. Previously, Korean locations had not been depicted in landscape painting, with artists preferring to follow models from Chinese painting.<sup>5</sup> It is commonly understood today as a style which considers the inherent characteristics of important places while also accounting for the layers of cultural and art-historical activity which have previously interacted with them.

Kim is not constrained by the methods and materials of one tradition and has created a style which refutes the ‘conflict between tradition and contemporaneity’<sup>6</sup>

and simplified binaries between Eastern and Western cultural production. The artist has also cited the landscapes of John Constable (1776-1837) as an influence, and one can draw a parallel with Constable’s emphasis on engaging with and drawing from nature with Kim’s repeated portrayals of Jeju.

Concern for the *sansuhwa* tradition and her Christian faith are at the centre of Kim’s painting. An inspiration for recent series is Psalm 8:9, ‘O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!’<sup>7</sup> There is a similar faith at work in the wider Romantic movement with which Constable was associated. For example, one could consider the poet William Wordsworth’s (1770-1850) descriptions in *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*, 1798, in relation to Kim’s work and beliefs,

*These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
That on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.*<sup>8</sup>

Yun Nanji has remarked that viewers ‘often sense the artist’s humble attitude towards nature in her works.’<sup>9</sup> Kim’s paintings seek to engage with both the mystery of nature – ‘more deep seclusion’ – and the cultural history of Jeju, and to carve out a space of meditation for the viewer. This affect comes from her deft choice of subject and individual style – her striving to go beyond appearances.

Endnotes:

1. Mark Rappolt, ‘Kim Bohie: Look Outside Yourself’, *Art Review* (2022).
2. Philip Haas, *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China* (San Francisco: Kino Lorber, 1988)
3. Oh Kwangsoo, ‘Nature as Whole and Nature as Part: Recent Works by Kim Bohie’ in *KIM BOHIE* (Seoul: Wolganmisool, 2017), p. 205.
4. Oh Kwangsoo, ‘Landscape of Meditation’ in *KIM BOHIE* (Seoul: Wolganmisool, 2017), p.117.
5. Lee Soyoung, ‘Mountain and Water: Korean Landscape Painting, 1400–1800’, *The Met* (2004).
6. Yun Nanji, ‘Looking at Nature with a Humble Attitude’ in *KIM BOHIE* (Seoul: Wolganmisool, 2017), p. 195.
7. Yu Heonshik, ‘A prayer in Green for Peace of the Lands’ in *KIM BOHIE* (Seoul: Wolganmisool, 2017), p. 15.
8. William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798* (1789).
9. Yun, p. 195.