

Effigies

An Exhibition Statement Submitted to the
College of Graduate Studies and Research
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
In the Department of Art & Art History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

By

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my graduate committee: Alison Norlen, Graham Fowler, Allysson Glenn and Tim Nowlin for their encouragement and support. I would especially like to thank Alison Norlen and Graham Fowler for their tireless support, trust and understanding through difficult times.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff in the Department of Art & Art History for their support and assistance throughout my studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

Thank you to my fellow MFA graduate students for their friendship, inspiration and encouragement: Wing-Yee Tong, Olga Dermendji, Levi Nicholat, Donald Roach, Biliانا Velkova, Shanell Papp and Michael Farnan.

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Effigies

The purpose of this writing is to reflect upon my recent and current studio practice in order to identify the cultural and personal elements from which it emerged and relate it formally and conceptually to contemporary art practice. As an immigrant from South Korea my cultural background played and still plays an important part of my art making. Since I came to Canada in 1995 I have strived to assimilate into Canadian culture and society. For many years I feel that I had tried to ignore a huge part of my Korean self, which resulted in a sense of displacement. I found myself not belonging to either Korean or Western culture fully. At this moment in my life, I have a strong urge for culturally rooting myself in what I could call home. Nonetheless, this writing isn't entirely about my cultural identity. By reaching back into my early memories of Korean culture I hope to revisit the paths I took to become who I am as an artist and stand on a firmer platform for my future endeavor as a creative human being.

I was born in Busan, South Korea and raised in Seoul, the capital city of the country, with a population of 25 million people. My parents were non-artistic in their professions. Even though



Figure 1. Seoul, Korea

my father studied architecture, he only worked in a related field. It wasn't until I was 16 that I decided to seriously pursue an artistic career. My first art training was part of the university entrance exam preparation, which was highly competitive at the time. The drawing lessons were four to five hours long and were held in the evenings 5 days a week. The focus of the lessons was to teach students how to render three dimensional illusions and create depth on two dimensional surfaces. Soon after I started taking drawing lessons, and much to my surprise, my family immigrated to Vancouver, Canada. I was 17. My first years in Canada were a time of frustration and change. Coming to a foreign country in my late teenage years kept me from readily learning the new language and culture. I feel that I lived those years well within a cultural bubble disconnected from the push and pull of experiences in the outside culture.

Adopting and adjusting to a new culture is a slow process. This is still an ongoing cognitive shift for me no matter how subtle it might be compared to those early years in Canada. Because of that initial cultural isolation, my focus

on figurative paintings and drawings as experienced in Seoul remained uninterrupted during my first years in Canada. My disconnection from the culture and, more specifically, the art world enabled me to single-mindedly focus on the technical aspect of drawing and painting; that is, my eye and hand co-ordination. I entered OCAD in 1999 and became immersed in the model studio sessions and classes. A lot of them were nude sessions which I found extremely challenging. By the end of my years at OCAD I was calling myself a figurative painter and a portraitist.

The years following my graduation from OCAD in 2002 were probably the most difficult times I have experienced as an adult. I soon found myself not being able to economically support myself with my art and had to join the work force to pay my rent and bills. My particular focus on art seemed irrelevant to the rest of the world. I wasn't educated enough in any other related field to earn a good salary, and my art wasn't strong enough to earn me the living I had hoped for while in school.

My job situation improved slowly, however, and I was finally able to rent a shared studio and start painting again. My ability to render human form fluently in my paintings was a source of both insecurity and obsession. I began to realize the need to distinguish myself from other traditionalist painters even though I still wanted to paint human forms in a representational manner. I began to paint with more emphasis on the material itself; oil and pigments. Between 2006 and 2008 I had created a large enough body of work to be able to apply for major grants

and graduate schools. Eventually, I decided to attend University of Saskatchewan's MFA program in 2008.

Looking back, the cultural landscape of Seoul in the 80s and 90s as I experienced it as a teenager was quite different from that of Canadian cities, to say the least. Similar to other major cities in Asia, influences of Western pop culture were evident externally. However, the racial homogeneity and the Confucian tradition combined with the economic boom in the 80s resulted in two very distinguishing cultural characteristics.

Firstly, it is a society that promotes uniformity amongst people. The idea of "standing out" is conceived of as a faux-pas. Also, most of the population has identical goals in life such as entering the top three universities and finding well-paying jobs. The pressure to succeed is very high and students who fail to enter universities are regarded as social outcasts. Also, one's identity within the society exists only through their relationship to others. This is reflected in Korean language. - For example, "oori umma" meaning "our mom" is used even when the only child speaks of his or her mother. In Korean, it is grammatically wrong to say "my mom", denoting ownership in a Western individualistic sense.

Secondly and as a result, this promoting of uniformity creates social hierarchy and intense competition. A good analogy would be everyone trying to climb a single ladder. There isn't much room for diversity. For students, everyone tries to enter same universities. This is also reflected in human relationships amongst Korean people which are strictly based on a hierarchy of

age and class. When people first meet, they ask your age in order to determine their position relative to you. I have often found myself in a situation, even in Canada, where neither I nor the other Korean person knew how to address one another or start a conversation in a friendly manner until we found out who was older and thus had the seniority over the other. Once this is established, certain linguistic conventions are required when addressing others. Complicated levels of address based on social hierarchy exist in the Korean language.

Korean culture, with its emphasis on hierarchy and competition, generated a type of secondary art education that valued technique over creativity. The entrance exam for the fine art department of any university in Seoul was a 2 ½ hour drawing session of a plaster bust randomly chosen from 5 well known Michelangelo sculptures. My first formal

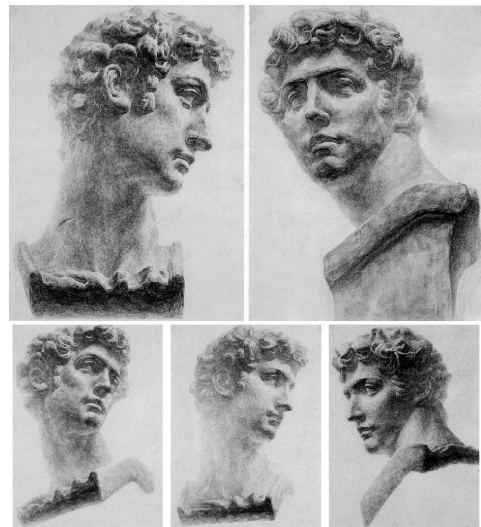


Figure 2. Student drawings for university entrance exams in Korea

drawing lessons were preparations for these exams, which are meant to measure your ability to render three-dimensional images onto two-dimensional surfaces using strictly 4B pencils. In other words, creating the illusion of depth or a window of pictorial illusion. Even though I know the intense competition and the sheer number of applicants made Korean universities use these methods of admitting new students, the idea of attempting to measure one's creativity only

by one's ability to render three dimensional objects now seems outdated and absurd.

Regardless of how I think of my first art education in Korea now, I realized that it gave me a huge advantage over most of other students when it comes to eye-hand co-ordination. I was faster and more accurate when it came to rendering forms and was able to see a wider range of tones disguised in colour. I enjoyed drawing what I see tremendously since it gave me satisfaction that I could do it better than everyone else, thus placing myself higher up on the ladder. My obsession with technical virtuosity was also fuelled by looking at works by painters such as Diego Velasquez, John Singer Sargent and Edgar Degas. These "old masters" were an important source of influence in my art practice for many years during my time of cultural disconnection.



Figure 3. Joshua Choi *Bonny*, 2008

My background has influenced my work in two ways; I work with human form which is conducive to displaying my technical capability and I paint nudes because it represents a social transgression, that is, a means to transcend hierarchy. When a person is rendered without clothing in a painting to be viewed in a public space, the person depicted is removed from the

social norm we live in. Even though depictions of naked human bodies are usually associated with sexuality, my long painting process, often up to twelve months, precludes the depiction of any erotic charge. As a result, my nudes are neither erotic nor pornographic. For me, the naked bodies and the detailed rendering of them have no other purpose than to serve my need to see more flesh and depict it using my technical skill. Once a subject and a composition are decided, my focus is to sculpt the actuality with every single brush stroke. My approach involves investigating the relationships between various textures within the picture. However, my use of impasto does not have so much to do with the actual texture of skin or the surfaces of objects; rather, it is the result of layer upon layer of reconstruction including the shaving off of overly-textured surfaces. A finished painting is a result of my repeated and accumulated attempts on the picture plane to create images animated by the tension between the visual and the tactile.



Figure 4. Joshua Choi *Painter in his studio (Self-portrait)*, 2009

My studies here at University of Saskatchewan not only allowed me to continue and enrich my previous studio practice but also allowed me to conceive of other possibilities in my work. My later paintings in the program include *Painter in his studio*, 2009 and *Gauguin's Interior*, 2010. The first is a self-portrait

with a bird combining symbolism and the surreal. This is the first work that depicts an active figure acknowledging and utilizing the fact that my paintings are done from photographic sources not painted from life. The bird symbolizes the fleeting nature of creativity and the hard work I was putting in at my studio. The extension cord serves both as a compositional element and serving to evoke the idea of being “plugged in” to the creative source. The second piece is my attempt to recreate Paul Gauguin’s pictorial reflection on human existence, *Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?*, 1897 and to relate

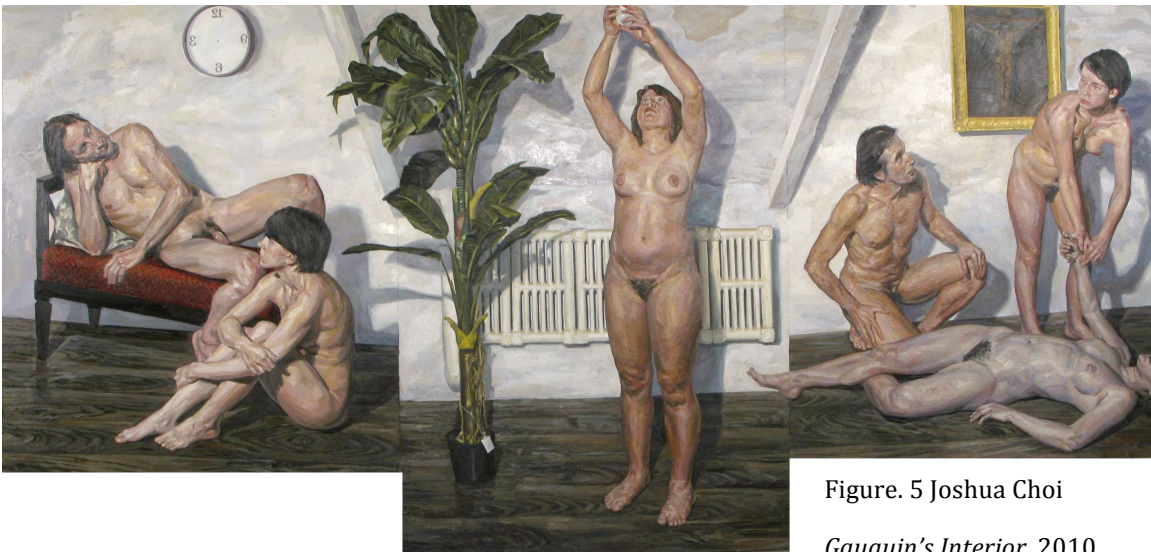


Figure. 5 Joshua Choi
Gauguin's Interior, 2010

it to my own experience of the world. It is a satire of our western society in which consumer culture, sex and violence rule together with a backward religious belief system. The scene is brought indoors with the central figure replacing a light bulb instead of the original figure picking the forbidden fruit. The figure is standing next to a fake banana tree with the price tag still attached. Formally, it

serves as a compositional entry point for viewers' gazes into the painting. The plastic fakeness of the banana tree and the cold modernity of the light bulb are in satirical juxtaposition to the weighty contemplation of human existence in Gauguin's painting. The left panel alludes to sexuality and infidelity as suggested by the proximity of the woman's face and the man's genital area. However, the man's gaze is directed towards another woman in the central panel. The right panel represents violence committed in the name of Christianity. I intended to depict the trauma and panic it caused in us. Overall, in this piece, I focused on the ambiguous narrative and took interest in distorted time and space bound by a cross-shaped format.

As discussed above, considerations of deliberately ambiguous narratives combined with symbolism were the areas I explored in my recent work at University of Saskatchewan. In *Gauguin's Interior*, questions regarding the use of nude figures outside of formal or technical reasons resulted in the creation of narratives. I was no longer interested in the figures' individual characteristics and wanted to use them as empty vessels. They stop being particular individuals but become entities through which we project ourselves. The source of psychological intensity shifted from the individual depiction of a person to the narrative itself created by the relationship between the figures in the painting and the symbolism of various objects within the painting.

Gauguin's Interior is about the history and tradition of painting as much as it is about the physicality of paint. While attempting to separate myself formally from traditionalists' ideas of paint handling, I intended to create a conversation

with a widely recognized work in the Western history of art. By creating my version of the widely recognized painting, I wanted to be compared to the well-known painter and situate my studio practice within the current landscape of Western paintings.

I've always considered tradition as a starting point for a painter, a safe launching pad that offers fundamental visual knowledge and thus possibilities for other new ideas. The two years at University of Saskatchewan provided me with opportunities to focus on this aspect of my studio practice; improving in overlooked formal areas such as the utilization of high quality pigments. Cadmium and cobalt colors have become an essential part of my color palette, making color mixing more efficient and the three-dimensional atmosphere more convincing in my work. My photography skills which are an important technical aspect of my painting process have improved as well.

I am looking back and yet looking forward. I consider the rectangular space of a canvas as infinite, which could be reworked repeatedly despite some contemporary discourses on painting that claim painting is dead. And I intend to continue painting as I take delight in the solitude of creating objects in a studio.