

## Hun Kyu Kim: 'I hope my work tangles people's brains'

The South Korean artist's complex allegorical paintings will be exhibited in Asia for the first time at Art Basel



'Funeral on the Beach' (2020) by Hun Kyu Kim © Courtesy of the artist and High Art

*Jo Lawson-Tancred*

The raucous compositions of South Korean artist Hun Kyu Kim have a cartoonish quality that belies their origins in the ancient tradition of silk painting. Jam-packed with anthropomorphised animals caught up in a discordant array of escapades that veer between amusing and dark, the hallucinatory senselessness of these scenes may provoke extreme love-it or hate-it reactions.

Ahead of his solo show with the Paris-based High Art gallery at Art Basel, I visit Kim at his studio in London. He tells me about an old Chinese concept pronounced "wo you" that can refer to the sense of entering a painting mentally to enjoy its landscape. "It makes the painting and the audience work together, and allows me to give the audience a new type of experience," he says. The studio is small, but with these surreal worlds stacked against the walls it seems also to extend in infinite directions. I willingly get lost for a while.



South Korean artist Hun Kyu Kim

Born in Seoul in 1986, when it came to enrolling at the city's College of Fine Arts, Kim opted for the course on traditional Oriental painting, with Aesthetics as a double major. It took almost a decade to graduate because the required techniques take that much time to master.

For a student hoping to make contemporary art, it was an unusual choice. Core to the curriculum was the restoration and faithful copying of 13th- and 14th-century Buddhist paintings of the Goryeo dynasty. Kim was, nonetheless, compelled by the art form. "It was just an instinct. Old paintings come from religious activity so they have an aura inside, and a great beauty. The process is comforting, and I liked the scent of the silk and black ink." Still, he bemoans an education that was "very strict and very traditional". "I tried to get away from it to do what I really wanted to do," Kim says. "I tried to borrow from the past to make a new type of work."



'Signals from the Satellite' (2020) by Hun Kyu Kim © Courtesy of the artist and High Art



'Fake Dragon' (2020) by Hun Kyu Kim © Courtesy of the artist and High Art

He has done this by integrating a dizzying line-up of cultural references from across time and place. Some of these are relatively local. As well as Korean silk painters, Kim admires Ito Jakuchu, from Japan's Edo period, and Wang Ximeng, a Chinese painter of the early 12th century. Other influences include fables, the theories of his favourite philosophers and the western Old Masters, in particular Bruegel and Hieronymus Bosch. Viewers may also spot parallels with anime and video games. "I observe everything in my surroundings and mix them together inside my mind. I keep shaking it and then it comes out through the paintings."

Until recently, Kim would also refer, obliquely, to political events from South Korean history. When he chose to start an MA at London's Royal College of Art in 2015, it was in part "due to the political atmosphere in South Korea, where it was difficult for me to show my paintings to the public". After finishing his Bachelor of Fine Arts, he became involved in activism but refers to this period only vaguely. "I have a few stories, but don't want to mention them because it is in the past and the previous president is in jail now."



'Gallery of Chimps' (2020) by Hun Kyu Kim © Courtesy of the artist and High Art

One lasting effect of this period is Kim's adoption of allegory as a form of communication he considers nonviolent and open to interpretation. "Allegorical painting is a kind of Trojan horse. With it I hide myself, but people can read it if they have similar experiences to me." His works end up so dense because "I have so many things to tell people."

Lately, however, Kim has been rethinking what exactly those things are. "I used to think I was a very political artist, but now I think the language of art is different from the language of activism." An artistic language is something in which Kim is clearly fluent, but his first response to many of my questions is "How can I say?" or "It's difficult to explain in words." I sense speaking is not his favourite mode of self-expression.

Rather, I can trace the complexity of his allegorical narratives to the fantastical metaphors that he uses to communicate his thought processes. On this recent move away from politics, he says, "I feel like I was living in a very strongly formed castle, yelling 'I'm ready to fight!'. Nowadays everything is collapsing and melting like a jelly. It's very unstable, you know what I mean?"



Lee' (2021) by Haneyl Choi © Courtesy of the artist and P21



'Bodyguard' (2019) by Youjin Yi © Courtesy of the artist and Wooson Gallery

Before 2020 maybe not, but now I nod. “Our world is going crazy but our daily routine goes on. In this we can see some kind of hope,” Kim continues. “The castle in my mind is collapsing but there’s light in the gaps between the rocks.” This grounding idea of routine, familiar to many people’s experience of the pandemic, has been the focus of the 12 paintings going to Hong Kong. “Rather than specific news events, I’ve tried to focus on the fundamental things that lie deep inside of our lives.” Among the themes in these works are rituals, marriage and funerals.

Kim’s own daily routine would put to shame many claiming the title “workaholic”. He works ten-hour days, seven days a week and still needs a month to complete larger works, starting in one corner and allowing the details to spill out slowly. Dyeing silk with ink makes any mistakes unrecoverable, and Kim has frequently thrown works away. He reduces the risk through morning meditation to clear his mind.

As time-intensive as Kim’s practice is, in return it asks something of the viewer by rewarding contemplation in an age when we are more used to instant gratification. “I see Hun Kyu’s work as an anomaly,” says Jason Hwang, a Korean-American gallerist who co-founded High Art in 2013. He spotted Kim three years ago, and was first drawn in by the cuteness on the surface. “But the work goes so deep, and gets very dark very fast! It allows him to synthesise things that would usually result in a mess.”



'Relatum – Seem' (2009) by Lee Ufan © Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

This is the first time that Kim's work will be exhibited in Asia, where it will be joined at Art Basel by a particularly strong showing of his emerging contemporaries from South Korea. Examples include Haneyl Choi's strangely formed sculptures, presented by P21 in the Discoveries section, and Wooson Gallery's solo show of paintings by Youjin Yi.

It may also be interesting to consider his work in the context of an older generation of Korean artists brought to Art Basel by Seoul's Kukje Gallery, which presents the abstract works of the frequently associated Park Seo-Bo, Ha Chong-Hyun and Lee Ufan. The latter, born in 1936, dropped out of Seoul's College of Fine Arts to move to Japan, where he continued painting in a highly traditional style. Political activism he took part in after graduating from a Japanese university in the 1960s led to his arrest and torture by the Korean CIA. After this he led the avant-garde Mono-ha movement, or "School of Things".

Some five decades later, by contrast, Kim is responding to the contemporary context with an intricately illustrative art. It feels, equally, as if he has struck on something new. He is sad not to travel to Hong Kong himself, but will be making his presence known. "I hope my work tangles people's brains," he says. "And I really hope people enjoy that instability."

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