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## A Rising Art Star Who Draws From His Korean Past

Visitors to Art Basel Hong Kong have the chance to discover Hun Kyu Kim's paintings, which are both amusing and unnerving, executed in a blend of contrasting aesthetic styles.



The artist Hun Kyu Kim's studio is in a communal artist space in the East London area of Bow. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

**By Farah Nayeri**

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LONDON — On a gray spring afternoon, the artist Hun Kyu Kim welcomed a visitor into his small London studio, a curtained-off enclosure stocked with pigments, brushes and

tools. Resting on an easel was a half-finished painting featuring a menagerie of cartoonish creatures — a dog wielding a gun, a dragon biting a cellphone — all meticulously drawn and painted over in a profusion of colors.

Visitors to Art Basel Hong Kong can see a selection of other works by this 34-year-old South Korean at the stand of the Paris-based High Art gallery. His paintings are part of the Discoveries section of the fair, dedicated to emerging artists.

Unlike other young talents whose careers take a while to lift off, Mr. Kim was spotted early: He got gallery representation as soon as he collected his M.A. from the Royal College of Art in London in 2017, and three months later, was exhibiting work at the Frieze Art Fair.

Mr. Kim’s paintings are both amusing and unnerving, executed in a blend of the two contrasting aesthetic styles he was immersed in from a young age: traditional Korean silk painting on the one hand, and Japanese pop culture and animation on the other.



Hun Kyu Kim combines the styles of traditional Korean silk painting and Japanese pop culture and animation in his art. Credit... Andrew Testa for The New York Times

“My work is a combination of the fantasy world and the real world,” Mr. Kim said in an interview at his studio, in a communal artist space in the East London area of Bow. “Everything we see in my painting — the past, the present, the future, East, West — is very chaotic. I try to put everything inside, like Lego blocks, and say, ‘Let’s play.’”



Mr. Kim said he wanted to be an artist from the time he was in kindergarten. His mother, a high school literature teacher and aspiring writer, encouraged her son's artistic inclinations. She would come home from school, carrying sheets of paper that were printed on one side and about to be thrown out. Her son would use them in his drawings and watercolors.

As a young boy, Mr. Kim had an eye-opening moment when he was taken to a museum and first saw 14th-century Buddhist scroll paintings that were made in Korea during the Goryeo dynasty. He was mesmerized. "I could see the very thin lines and the very delicate colors," he said. "I could feel the time and labor that had gone into it, and it really overwhelmed me. I thought to myself, 'I want to do that kind of thing.'"

Another major turning point in his formative years came in his teens, when South Korea, until then under strict rule and something of a conservative and closed society, he said, suddenly decided to open up to the culture of its historical enemy: Japan.

"So many Japanese animation films and pop stars came to South Korea," Mr. Kim recalled. "I'm of the generation that was very much influenced by Japanese culture."

The great Japanese animation filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki was a major source of inspiration, in particular his "Princess Mononoke," a 1997 epic fantasy that features gods and other heroic types in a forest, fighting against humans using up natural resources.



Hun Kyu Kim's "Origami Circus" (2021) is on display at Art Basel Hong Kong. Credit...Hun Kyu Kim and High Art

On his mother's recommendation, Mr. Kim attended a secondary school specializing in the arts. There, he started learning traditional Korean drawing and silk painting, as well as art restoration. He continued his education in Oriental painting at the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University, where he also studied art theory.

"The training was really strict," he recalled, noting that it sometimes took more than a decade of instruction to become a restorer of traditional painting. "But I really found a kind of beauty in Oriental painting, and I enjoyed applying it to contemporary art."

South Korea at the time was a politically and socially stifling environment, Mr. Kim said. But he was able to save enough money to move to London in 2015, where he enrolled in the painting master's program at the Royal College. He was suddenly in a completely different atmosphere from the one he had left behind in Korea. Britain was "a center of contemporary art," he said — the place where those in the group known as the Young British Artists, like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, still ruled the roost, and where people lived more freely. At the Royal College, for example, he watched his fellow students cast off centuries of art-making tradition and engage in a giddy mix of disciplines: painting, sculpture, performance, installation.

When the director of the Approach Gallery in London saw Mr. Kim's work in his class's graduation show, the gallery immediately signed him. Mr. Kim went on to have a series of solo exhibitions, and now has a small but growing international collector base.

Mr. Kim described himself as a "workaholic" who spent 10 hours a day, seven days a week, at his studio, and took only three days of vacation last year. He acknowledged that his work "makes people uncomfortable"; his own wife said she didn't particularly want to hang one of his paintings in their home. Yet he maintains a connection to his training in Korean silk painting, crowding his works with supernatural and phantasmagorical figures.

His ambition, he added, is to show his art in "super-fancy galleries" in London and around the world. But the delight Mr. Kim takes in his work outstrips that ambition. "I love my work, and I love drawing, and I love this kind of small life," he said. "I just want to keep doing what I'm doing."