

Reaching for the Stars

The exhibition *Miniature* aims to connect the dots between the works of two artists hailing from different generations : Minsu Kim born in the 90s and Lee Myung Mi born in the 50s. At the heart of this showcase lies a shared theme of "everydayness", although both artists began and developed their career in different times and backgrounds with a span of four decades that separates them. Depicting the mundane aspects of life through painting has often been regarded as deeply personal, seemingly inconsequential - a theme that stands in stark contrast to the radicalism that has consistently defined the urgency of the present. It has been frequently marginalized as something trivial, subjective, or even irrelevant, however, this exhibition endeavors to bring the micro-narratives of individuals into the public realm. Here, Kim and Lee capture everyday scenes, moments, and objects, translating them into creative expressions. For both artists, life at times takes precedence over their artistic pursuits. Striking a delicate equilibrium between life and art, they unveil, through their painted canvases, the insights and sensations gained from lived experience rather than theoretical concepts. The very instances of experience that run through the lives of men and women converge into the term "everyday" and seem to tap into the sense of universality. Yet, in this convergence lies the uniqueness of each, fashioned by their distinct individual methodologies. What are they trying to unveil through their creative practice? What is it that they are longing for and holding on to? This exhibition refrains from situating or defining their artistic creations within the confines of normative art history. Rather, it mirrors one another (spanning from the past to the future) while moving alongside the linearity of history. The curatorial journey of preparing this exhibition was marked by the continuous revelation that the two artists intersect more deeply than anticipated. A myriad of narratives and sensations flow like undercurrents through the intersecting temporalities of both artists, who have painted stars and flowers, cups and fruits, animals and people, as well as nature and landscapes. Within the gestures, gazes, and humor they reveal and conceal, one envisions a shared language, a way to reacquaint oneself with the works of Kim and Lee.

Traditionally, the materials and methods have always been considered secondary and instrumental in the discourse surrounding painting, much like everyday life. Nonetheless, this exhibition focuses on the materials and methods that Minsu Kim and Lee Myung Mi have been using in their artistic pursuits, framed with the overarching theme of everyday life. Their methodologies adopt a demeanor of playfulness, challenge, and experimentation. Although they stay within the confines of the medium of painting, they collage an array of elements such as stickers, paper, carpets, paint residue, screws, etc. onto supports, freely bringing various objects into the composition. They also expand the canvas through sewing, patchwork, and other methods. Their playful and freewheeling attitude is daring but not descriptive.

"For me, work is my playground and a tool, a state of mind," says Lee, who participated as a founding member of

the Daegu Contemporary Art Festival (1974-1979), a pivotal juncture for Korean contemporary art, and her creative journey has continued unfettered. At a time when monochromatic paintings and conceptual attitudes prevailed, this exhibition directs its gaze to Lee's oeuvre, an unwavering testament to her own style regardless of the trend: the use of multicolor with a focus on primary colors, a playful approach to her work, and the adoption of everyday landscapes and objects as materials for her paintings. This will be a movement to adjust the historical perspective and reveal the value of women's stories, personal narratives, and micro-materials that have been neglected in contemporary art history. As an attempt to break away from the collective trend and look at life more closely and clearly (not ideologically), the exhibition aims to lay bare the universality of humanity and its complexities and contradictions through "my" stories and everyday practices, rather than throwing out propaganda messages.

Lee's artistic essence boils down to art as a playground. This distinctiveness has persisted since the 1970s, when the artist began her career. Throughout these years, she has titled most of her exhibitions and artworks with the word "play", which endures even to this day. As this straightforward naming tradition implies, for Lee, "play" is synonymous with the act of drawing and creation. She revels in the boundless realm of creations and combinations that can take place within the shapes, language, and colors of her creations. By seamlessly integrating stickers, figures, and stitches into her compositions, and experimenting with painting on dolls, mannequins, and sponges as supports, Lee infuses her oeuvre with both humor and philosophical musings. Armed with the tools "line and color", Lee's paintings brim with recurring dots, lines, hearts, stars, shapes, and numbers throughout the 1970s, evolving to encompass elements like animals, umbrellas, cups, and telephones during the 1980s. Unrestrained and brimming with energy with more raw lines, the canvas propels a dynamic interplay between language and image, existence and perception. Language finds its inaugural appearance on the canvas in the 1990s. Since the 2000s, the linguistic elements within her paintings, which initially took the form of mere words, have expanded to encompass popular song lyrics, poetry, and verses from the Bible. Along her life's journey, the artist has encountered a myriad of joys, sorrows, and highs and lows, including her own illness and the passing of family members, which have catalyzed not only introspection but also an innate comprehension, profound insight, and a yearning for human existence. These factors probably have intricately molded her artistic practice into what it represents today. In this segment, I'll briefly navigate a progression of traits discernible in Lee's artwork over the years, in chronological order, as all the previously mentioned components remain prevalent in Lee's contemporary work. Despite time's irreversible flow, Lee's creations once more engage with the nuances of everyday life, perpetually "expanding" and "repeating" with the passage of time. The *Miniature* exhibition, primarily comprised of the recent creations, seamlessly extends from and integrates with Lee's broader body of work. Unlike previous practices involving dramatic shifts in support, this exhibition centers around the conventional medium of

acrylic on canvas. However, Lee freely replicates (*Play-는, Play-See, Play-Where is he?*(2023)), amalgamates (*Landscape*(2023)), and navigates the temporal and spatial tapestry she has woven over the past five decades. In essence, her creations resemble miniatures that encapsulate both the past and the future, that is, the miniatures of the larger entity called life.

Meanwhile, Minsu Kim meticulously observes reality's intricacies and trivial instances of daily life. People, landscapes, images, and words flow through the continuum of time, capturing its essence and intricately shaping the everyday lives of individuals, while contributing to construction of a quantifiable history, propelling the passage of eras. If narratives (histories) are crafted and built up, then the multitude of fleeting moments that weave between them, often forgotten, equally constitute a facet of contemporary life and time that sustains the history being created. The focus of this exhibition lies in the uniqueness inherent in Kim's work, stemming from her engagement with the universal materials of everyday life and the sense of materiality accompanied thereof. "Sensation" emerges as another critical attribute in her work, wherein rhythm and plasticity stand as integral elements of his artistic practice. Consider, for instance, the piece *Walk*(2013), dating back ten years and currently showcased as you enter the exhibition. At that juncture, the artist aimed to depict the image of a person walking through a pedestrian crossing, focusing on the foot and face (*Walk 2*(2013)). This endeavor seemed driven by a pure aspiration to establish a sense of connection between the canvases – akin to turning a page – originating from a contemplation on how to convey movement within the realm of painting. Although the accompanying painting, *Walk 2*, has since been lost, I've chosen to mention these two works in tandem and present one within the exhibition due to its pivotal role as a "starting point". The interplay between these works provides a key to grasping Kim's artistic trajectory at this juncture. This very approach also finds reflection in the concise works curated around the new piece, *Hiking*(2023), showcased within this exhibition. Painted as she recollected the landscape observed while climbing a mountain one day, this work inevitably imparts a sensation of movement to the viewer, akin to the experience the artist had on that mountain. The artist's gaze trails the streams, birds, and caterpillars adorning the trees around her, materialized as fragmented images and presented within the exhibition space.

A sequence of works, each standing as an independent entity yet also forming part of a greater whole, harbors the potential for an interwoven narrative. This potential mirrors the essence of our perceptions, imagined and inferred. In this way, the "instances" captured within the midst of everyday life intertwine with the artist's painterly experiments. I opt for "painterly" rather than "painting" here due to her daring engagement with materials and techniques. While acrylic and canvas serve as her primary mediums, Kim boldly broadens her material spectrum through a seamless transition between ready-made and raw materials, art supplies, and interior objects. She stretches canvas over wooden panels (*The Star Shadow* (2023) and *Bird* (2022)), opts for interior paint over

traditional pigments, makes collage out of carpets (*Magpie* and *Larva*(2022)), applies stickers (*Upside down*(2019)), and augments supports through paper stitching (*Bouquet*(2023)). These approaches challenge the conventional perception of her work as normative painting, defying established norms of absoluteness, flatness, and completeness. Kim's artistic direction veers away from traditional painterly conventions, allowing the amalgamation of sensations to coexist organically in her work without rigid hierarchies or linear structures. Meanwhile, actions like cutting, sewing, and sticker application have often been associated with domestic and feminine contexts. However, within Kim's realm, they assume roles as the most universal and pivotal elements of her creations. This rationale underlies her approach to paper collages, where she affixes the back of colored paper instead of the front and glues the cut edges and not the cut-out shapes(*Untitled*(2014)).

The title of the exhibition, *Miniature*, may be understood literally, yet I've imbued it with the notion of "miniature" presented by critic and poet Susan Stewart in her publication *On Longing*(1993). "Miniature" stands as the antithesis of something "huge," signifying an internal, domestic, and mental realm of control and equilibrium, and a cultural product. It embodies a metaphor for the interior of everyday life, personal dimensions of space and time, implying "much in little." The essence coursing through this exhibition hinges on the personal dimensions of space and time that Minsu Kim and Lee Myung Mi meticulously unravel and condense through their artistic endeavors."