

YOOYEON NAM

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How has your move from South Korea to New York influenced your exploration of alienation and belonging in your art?

Moving from South Korea to New York deeply shaped my exploration of alienation and belonging. In Korea, I painted without formal training, focusing on technical skills and discovering my artistic preferences. My transition to Pratt Institute in New York—a city rich with artistic opportunities—shifted my focus to self-expression. Being an outsider in both Korea and New York heightened my awareness of alienation. In Korea, transitioning from studying business to pursuing art set me apart, while in New York, differences in gestures and behaviors reminded me of my foreignness. This dual experience led me to reflect on historical and structural alienation, especially from the perspective of a Korean, whose country transformed from dictatorship to democracy through collective efforts. Paradoxically, leaving Korea deepened my understanding of my identity and inspired my work. My art now depicts fantastical, eerie worlds where the alienated belong, capturing the paradoxical tension between exclusion and inclusion.

What inspired the creation of your characters, and how do they represent your cultural heritage and personal displacement?

The creation of my characters stems from my fascination with paradoxes and the uncanny nature of the world that is full of alienation. Everyone, at some point, experiences otherness—whether due to culture, gender, race, or simply the human condition. Yet, even in estrangement, there remains a connection to the surrounding world, creating a paradoxical in-between state. I aim to capture this tension in my work, embedding it into the essence of my characters. They exist at the boundary between human and monster—familiar yet unsettling, evoking fear and cuteness simultaneously. Their baby-like, noseless faces convey innocence but also raise questions about survival, adding a layer of eeriness.

These characters reflect both my cultural heritage and personal experiences of displacement. As a Korean, I became acutely aware of cultural differences when engaging with people from other countries. While I strive to maintain eye contact and smile in such interactions, I am reminded of Korean norms where politeness involves avoiding direct eye contact, focusing on the philtrum instead, and expressing emotions subtly. These cultural traits inspired my characters' features: downcast eyes, neutral expressions, and, in some cases, a lack of pupils. Even when

pupils are present, they avoid direct eye contact, and strings emerging from their eyes obstruct the view. By combining these cultural nuances with universal themes of alienation, I try to make my characters transcend personal experiences, embodying the tension between familiarity and otherness.

Your characters' juxtaposition of cuteness with suffering and violence creates a powerful sense of uncanniness. What drives you to explore these paradoxes, and how do you want viewers to interpret these emotional contrasts?

My exploration of paradoxes, such as the juxtaposition of cuteness with suffering and violence, reflects my interest in the world's complexities. From a young age, I was drawn to politics and structural violence, intrigued by how cruelty operates on a national or systemic level—often beyond individual control. While I have not directly experienced traumatic or historical violence, I have symbolically expressed these themes through metaphors. Early in my artistic journey, my work leaned heavily on horrifying imagery. Over time, I recognized the counterforces to violence—humor, beauty, and resilience—shaping my focus on paradoxes and dualities.

I aim to depict these opposing forces simultaneously, creating images that embody both grotesque and familiar qualities. My characters, such as cute, blank-faced figures with unsettling features, represent this tension. Their calm, under-expressive faces symbolize acceptance of extreme situations, much like one recalling a tarot reading or oracle with detached understanding. These figures reflect the world's dual nature—violent and tragic yet also beautiful and laughter-inducing.

I encourage viewers to interpret these emotional contrasts through their own perspectives, applying personal narratives to my symbolic works. My hope is that they approach their contradictions with greater flexibility, finding resonance in the strange yet relatable. By exploring the duality of beauty and uncanniness in my work, I aim to inspire reflection on life's paradoxes and the acceptance of its complexities.

In what ways does your admiration for Buddha sculptures and their idealized forms influence your work? Are there other artistic traditions that also shape your practice?

My admiration for Korean Buddhist sculptures significantly influences my work, particularly their abstracted, idealized forms.

These sculptures simplify and refine features, such as smooth fingers without visible joints and flowing drapery that transcends natural fabric folds. I apply similar distortions in my characters, whose sharp-edged eye sockets and nearly round faces evoke both humanity and otherworldliness. This abstraction allows me to create figures that feel both familiar and strange, echoing the serene yet surreal qualities of Buddhist art.

Color also plays a crucial role in my practice. While I draw inspiration from the reds, greens, and indigo blues in Korean Buddhist art, my color palette also reflects the influence of Post-Impressionist painters like Gauguin, Vuillard, and Munch. I embrace intense, vibrant hues to build fantastical worlds and often explore rich dark tones to vividly depict dimly lit scenes.

I also incorporate Post-Impressionist techniques, such as rough brushstrokes and impressionistic lines, while juxtaposing them with areas of detailed rendering. This combination adds depth and complexity to my work, allowing viewers to engage with different styles within a single piece.

With your recent residencies and artist visa, how do you see your art evolving? Are there new themes or collaborations you're excited to explore?

With my artist visa, I have gained stability in New York, which has allowed me to collaborate with galleries and secure more

exhibition opportunities. This sense of stability has provided me with the mental space to focus on my art, and I have set a goal to create new works for each upcoming exhibition. During my residencies, spacious studios and ample time have allowed me to experiment with varied compositions in a more open and relaxed environment. I used to feel compelled to make dynamic, maximalist works, but through these experiences and by meeting artists from diverse backgrounds, I have freed myself from those constraints. I now believe I can explore a wide range of ideas simply by painting more.

In my latest series, "In the Face of", I have simplified my compositions to entirely focus on my characters' large faces with strings, which marks a shift from my previous work. Additionally, creating smaller works, like those for the "5x7 Show," has allowed me to execute quick ideas that I previously left undeveloped.

Looking ahead, I am excited to expand the "In the Face of" series, exploring the hidden emotions between two or three closely connected individuals—such as a mother and daughter, sisters, or lovers—and including interactions between characters in dynamic poses. I am also looking into Egon Schiele's dramatic poses for inspiration.



Heavy or Light, oil on canvas, 18x24in