Jiha Moon: *Blue Yolo, Yellow Chrysanthemum*

Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA

When I was a kid at summer camp, every Saturday the cooks would toss together the leftovers from the previous week in a concoction they called "train wreck." Despite its unappetizing name, train wreck was a camper favorite, merging the remnants of past experiences in a juicy mélange of flavors, textures, and colors. It's an unassuming metaphor, but the meal and its name suggest not only the ordinary messiness and yumminess of cultural encounters, but also their underlying violence, in which collision shatters and then mingles distinct elements. As cultural experience and phenomena, however, such encounters are anything but unassuming: they are complicated, contested, and confusing. Sometimes when things are thrown together, they seem to make no sense. And it is the question of *sense* that has become an arena of debate regarding Jiha Moon's succulent, multifarious paintings, drawings, and ceramics.

Easily characterized as conceptual and formal mash-up, Moon's work could provoke a critical fault line, one that fissures while interpretations fall into either of two positions. The first view is that the work reflects the identity politics in Moon's hybridization of South Korean and United States cultures. The second—and here the critic can be either strongly favorable or intensely negative—is that Moon's work, as a hodgepodge of signifiers, means little beyond the surface. Moon herself—with a tepid intentionality in which she asserts that she wants her "work to appear to be lighthearted, breezy, and funny" and that she wants "to be a visual interpreter of the mixed-cultural world of [her] generation"—gives impetus to these interpretations.

Moon's recent exhibition at Richmond's Reynolds Gallery, *Blue Yolo, Yellow Chrysanthemum* [April 8–May 20, 2016], provides an opportunity to test the depths of these fissures, and all the more so during a banner year in which a traveling exhibition, *Jiha Moon: Double Welcome, Most Everyone's Mad Here*, has added to her already ambitious achievements. *Double Welcome*, co-curated by Amy Moorefield of the Taubman Museum of Art and Mark Sloan of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art, and accompanied by an essay from critic Lilly Wei, opened at the Taubman Museum in May 2015 before traveling to the Halsey Institute and three subsequent venues. It is set to close at DePauw University's Peeler Art Center in October 2017. Now is an apt moment to consider the question of sense and babble in Moon's work. Doing so takes nothing away from Moon's virtuosic handling of a stunning range of materials, iconography, and methods, but rather places her work more accurately within its theoretical frameworks, where what might seem "meaningless" in fact has significant import, and where cultural dualism can be firmly located—but where neither of these things means quite what they have been said to mean.

Modest in scale relative to Moon's past work, the two-dimensional and ceramic works at Reynolds Gallery combined a kind of furious intensity with delicacy and adroit invention. Collage and appropriation are literally and figuratively Moon's primary means. Referencing a fluid context, though within certain parameters, the work is based on a particular vocabulary of acute coloration, Asian patterns and iconography, commercial images, traditional Korean methods from the fine and decorative arts, and Western techniques, especially expressionistic, impasto painting. Such referential combinations result in a neotraditional sensibility, in both an Asian and a Western postmodernist sense, in which embellishment functions as a kind of anesthetized description of self and culture, a reflection of readymade interpellation.

What might be identified as irony in Moon's work is in fact its indefinable quality that simultaneously acquiesces to and enacts this interpellation while lampooning and resisting it. At the same time, the work oddly asserts itself as untheoretical and apolitical. The intersectionality and hybridity give rise to assumptions, including generalizations about the signs of subalternity in the work and opposing, but familiar, observations of the globalization of culture as unbounded and identity-devouring. The aloof position that Moon takes, promulgated by the criticism surrounding her work, assents to Western notions of universality and neutrality. According to Moon, we are all erased. "The world is so interconnected nowadays," she says, "how can you even tell where someone or something 'comes from' anymore?" The freewheeling mix of commercial and cultural icons in Moon's work reifies a point of intersection between reductive poststructuralist relativism and neoliberal politics: the meaningless, shifting signifier—a concept alternately celebrated and vilified, depending on the analyst's vantage point.

Although it's not her purpose to do so, a question arises about whether the intersectionality in Moon's work (and other work of this kind) challenges the assumptions of transnational neoliberalism. The work's position and reception at the borders of culture and within the context of identity politics force consideration of its iconographies and methodologies. That is, just because multiple structures and experiences are included does not mean that the work is anti-hegemonic, since ideological mechanisms are inevitably operative within pathways of influence.

The trajectory of contemporary art in South Korea since the 1970s has distinct echoes in Moon's work. Moon was born in Korea in 1973 and received her undergraduate degree from Korea University in Seoul in the 1990s; her initial art education took place within a context of European and US modernist and postmodernist influence on Korean contemporary art, accompanied by an ongoing discourse about the relation of traditional Korean arts to this Western authority. Korea's historical interaction with a series of imperialist powers—including its colonization by Japan from 1910 to 1945, and its position as an ally of the United States during the Cold War—suggests a locus for hybridization in Moon's work, which maintains the preexisting order rather than utterly destroying it, a paradox that arises through its neotraditionalist variants.

In 2010, regarding the contested subject of "world literatures" and in the context of Said's concept of Orientalism, Aamir R. Mufti wrote, "In its historically received forms … world literature"—and here, we might just as easily insert "world art"—"is fundamentally a concept of exchange (and, as Marx and Engels

ABOVE: Jiha Moon, *Myo I (Day)*, 2016, cyanotype, ink, acrylic, and rhinestones on paper, 18 x 18 inches [courtesy of Reynolds Gallery]

understood, a concept of bourgeois society)—that is, a concept that recodes an opaque and unequal process of appropriation as a transparent one of supposedly free and equal interchange and communication." In such transnationalist histories, cultural transactions do not merely take place in a poetic sense, but inevitably also in a neoliberal capitalist sense, regardless of whether it is intentional, acknowledged, or desired.

The essentialism with which Moon's work might be seen as a benign reflection of globe-eating hybridization is evidence that the work embodies the Western poststructuralist canon as it has enveloped a globalized culture. At its most glib and deliciously eclectic, this canon does not take into account the high stakes involved or the possibilities and difficulties of postcolonial politics and culture. In it, hybridization, as an aspect of appropriation, is regarded as a fundamental good, an avenue of invention, as in the case of Moon's work, in which the iconography becomes a decorative vocabulary that both inscribes and evades identification. Cultural hegemony is maintained, along with its commodified seductiveness, exemplified by Moon's appropriation of such ubiquitous commercial icons as *Angry Birds* and the Botan dog. The viewer is being asked to buy in, to receive a message about contemporary culture that is seen on the surface as either apolitical or about cultural identity when, in fact, the work is about the commodification and train wreck of neoliberal, postmodern global cultures.

In some of her works, Moon includes an avian-human hybrid, an altered play on images she found in *Munjado* paintings of the Choson period (1392–1910) from the *Minhwa* tradition. Traditional *Munjado* painting includes Chinese characters communicating Confucian principles of virtue such as filial piety, loyalty, trust, propriety, etc. The composite figure in Moon's paintings has a delicate sparrow-like body with a charming female face and carries a letter in its beak. It is a form metaphorically exact for her work: a hybrid creature carrying sealed messages. Like the banality in letter writing—so few are really about anything significant—this communication takes place on a personal, everyday level.

In the current political climate, where hybridity and otherness are under attack even in diversified cultures such as the United States and Western Europe, and inclusivity isn't to be assumed, the conversation about Moon's work should be framed within a context that doesn't omit the Global South and the fact of neoliberal global dominance—and that doesn't sidestep the unraveling of knotty intersectionality. Her work, as exhibited in Richmond, is complex and fresh in this milieu. It offers the opportunity to look at the mix of images that form the discourse of late capitalist culture, to see threads of its interactions over time, and to consider current ideological conditions. This is truly meaningful, as long as we don't mystify the babble or revel in it as playfully indecipherable. If Moon's message appears benign—and perhaps is banal—that is evidence that it is important, and needs to be recognized.

—Dinah Ryan

Mystery and Benevolence

American Folk Art Museum, New York

In *Mystery and Benevolence: Masonic and Odd Fellows Folk Art From the Kendra and Allan Daniel Collection* [January 21–May 8, 2016], an exhibition recently held at the American Folk Art Museum in New York, the material culture of America's fraternal societies was displayed in all its tasseled glory. Focusing on the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and the Freemasons in particular, the exhibition incorporated a variety of furniture, craft, costumes, and art—all part of a collection of almost 200 ceremonial objects and artworks, dating from the late 18th century through the mid-20th century, recently given to the museum.

Items on display included ceremonial axes, staffs with symbolic head carvings, banners, clocks, and ceremonial aprons. Smaller, regional groups—such as Indiana's Order of Owls and the problematically named Improved Order of Red Men—were also represented alongside work pertaining to Freemasonry. Although their pop cultural profile may have faded in recent decades, fraternities like these are still active, and continue to carry strong associations with mysticism and the occult. Formally speaking, the objects on display were characterized by an unsettling combination of mystical symbolism, naïve execution, and an unchecked appetite for pageantry; the overall effect of seeing them was a little like viewing a Renaissance altarpiece, albeit with different dominant imagery. Yet the information provided by the museum about the meaning and function of the symbols and objects on view suggested that these fraternities were more like workers' guilds with a charitable agenda than they were places for (white, middle-aged) men to commune with the spirit world. Walking through the exhibition, then, I found myself wondering: how does a mandate of self-improvement and responsible citizenship become conflated with mysticism?

In his book *Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation* (2009), author Mitch Horowitz states that "early American Freemasons held a sense of breaking with an Old World past in which one overarching authority regulated the exchange of religious ideas and sought to position itself as an intermediary between the individual and the spiritual search." Whereas belief in a "higher power" of some kind was a prerequisite to joining many fraternities, what came through strongly from the objects on display at the American Folk Art Museum was that, by removing that organized religious intermediary, the individual effectively became the starting and end point of the spiritual search to which Horowitz refers. Consequently, spiritual transcendence becomes achievable through self-reliance. As with altarpieces, fraternal imagery was used to remind and instruct believers on how to live a better life, and the exhibition went into some depth in discussing themes that were significant to such fraternities, such as wisdom, labor, fellowship, and charity. Prominent symbols among the fraternities considered include the open hand with a heart on the palm to represent sincerity; an ax with a halberd is used by Odd Fellows to remind them that they are "pioneers in the pathway of life," with beehives symbolizing labor and industriousness among both Freemasons and Odd Fellows.

To me—a Canadian—this approach to the arcane

ABOVE: Unknown, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Banner*, 1900-1920, paint on canvas with wood and metal, 88 1/2 x 71 inches [photo: José Andrés Ramírez; courtesy of American Folk Art Museum, New York]