Private Conversation

GaHee Park
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Private Conversation

by

GaHee Park

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thesis Statement:</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Private Conversation</em></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of exhibited images</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images of works exhibited</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images of installation</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### ii. List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Cat Watching a Couple</em></td>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>Lithography on Paper</td>
<td>8 x 11 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>Face on Butt</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>22 x 18 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Family Dinner</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>70 x 65 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Couple Dinner</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>36 x 24 in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Skin Disease</em></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>24 x 20 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Still Life with Flower</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>18 x 24 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Humping Dog</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>26 x 20 in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Saying Grace</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>18 x 24 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Potluck Party</em></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>52 x 54 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>Cave Feast</em></td>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>68 x 56 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Fuck You Woman</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>41 x 53 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Fly</em></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>Head Transplant Theory</em></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Pencil on Paper</td>
<td>5 x 7 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Reflection II</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>54 x 54 inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Reflection III</em></td>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>Oil on Canvas</td>
<td>68 x 74 inches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Private Conversation

Art... can and should upset reality, take it apart into elements, build illogical new worlds of it and in this arbitrariness is a hidden law... that destroys our external sense leads us into our internal meaning.

Witold Gombrowicz, Diary

My paintings and other works are based on scenes and situations that have affected me emotionally, scenes that I’ve witnessed, experienced, read about, or imagined. Often they use elements of satire to depict narratives and characters that reflect on certain interpersonal and social issues. Although the subject matter is not always directly autobiographical, the themes, images, and narratives I explore come out of my experience of the world.

This relationship between my life and my work is a good place to start in trying to summarize how I think about my own practice as an artist.

I was born in Seoul, South Korea, in a strict Catholic family. In South Korea, because of the influence of Confucianism, the Catholic religion can be very strict and authoritarian, especially when it comes to children whose behavior is controlled by

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parents, teachers, and authority figures. As a child and adolescent, I never had any privacy. I felt like I was a plant that does not need sunlight but gets too much. I loved to draw when I was young, but many times my mother found the drawings I’d made of naked people and burned them because they offended her Christianity. At the time, physical punishment was common for Korean children, both at home and at school. There was a widespread belief that corporal punishment was the only way to discipline and control children. When I was nine, my teacher slapped my face because I misunderstood her instructions and it was my parents who had to call and apologize to her. It was also a common occurrence for male teachers to spank female students with a baseball bat in middle school and high school. The experience of being subjugated to this kind of power dynamic left a strong impression on me, and even though it was considered normal at the time it always seemed wrong to me. Although the physical punishments stopped in college, the institutional authoritarianism was still prominent. After high school, I started art school in Korea, but I ended up dropping out because the hierarchical system was suffocating to me. It wasn’t until I moved to the US that I felt free enough to explore my true voice as an artist. Once I left Korea, the absurdity of the abusive power structure I grew up with became very obvious to me. I continue to be fascinated by how behavior that is
completely acceptable in one culture or context can appear so perverse and wrong when viewed from another vantage point. This remains one of the main themes in my work.

One idea I often explore is the need for a private sphere, the need for people to hide parts of their lives from society in private utopias in order to feel fully human. I started to think about private spaces when I read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, shortly after moving to the US. She writes, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” Woolf’s baseline requirement of a private room plus money represent both security and freedom from the oppressions of patriarchal society that a woman needs to develop her own ideas. Based on my experience growing up in a rigidly patriarchal culture in Korea, I have a keen understanding of how public and private spheres are fundamentally expressed through gender roles. Public spaces, such as the workplace, institutions, even the sidewalk, are traditionally male-dominated, while women are relegated to the domestic spaces of the home or hidden away in private realms and back rooms of public spaces.

Although I related to Woolf’s ideas, I also recognized it was her social status that allowed her to even hypothesize the importance of a room of her own. Due to class and race, this dream has been unimaginable for most women (and men) in the 20th century – or even today. So, while

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I have more intellectual and creative freedom since moving to America, I am also now in the position of being a member of a minority. I feel marginalized and experience a kind of sustained racism that is new to me. As an Asian woman living in the US, I am viewed as inherently "domesticated" and submissive. Whether their intentions are kind, insulting or simply oblivious, Americans often rely on Asian stereotypes, making me again feel invisible or marginalized in the public sphere.

In mainstream American culture the private sphere takes on a different, but related importance compared to its Korean counterpart — it is the only space where minorities and marginalized people are allowed the freedom to be themselves. This private realm is fragile and its existence is easily interrupted because it’s embedded in the hierarchical structure of the dominant culture, and therefore always secondary to the public realm. So, the longer I live in America, the more I understand that for a private space to be truly
utopian, for it to be truly free, it has to be fictional. This idea has become central to my work as I attempt to imagine and depict fictional utopian spaces that sometimes succeed and sometimes fail.

My work is a critique and commentary on the world we live in. Because my images are often violent and/or sexual, I’ve had to distance myself from my Catholic family and friends in Korea. After I moved to the US, I could finally be vocal about the unfairness I see in society, especially the traditional community (family, school, church) I grew up in. I want to satirize this kind society and deflate its seriousness and repression in my paintings. Expressing my anger and discomfort about living in a society designed to control people like me is essential to my work. Unfortunately, this feeling of discomfort did not disappear when I left Korea and came to America, it just changed its shape. I have found, however, there are certain advantages to having an outsiders’ perspective. Because I am invisible, my gaze is also invisible — I am free to be a voyeur. I can study people’s behavior without them being conscious that they are being observed.

In the discussion that follows, I have divided my work into a few distinct categories. This is primarily meant as a way to identify certain recurrent themes, impulses, and ideas. It’s important to note that these categorizations have been made mostly after I’ve already finished the paintings. These categories are not something I was conscious of while working, they are meant as a way of analyzing and describing the works in retrospect. As such, there is a fair amount of overlapping between works and categories.
Plants and Animals – Still Lives and Animated Bystanders:

The first time I strongly connected my emotions to my painting practice was when I was in art school in Philadelphia and I made a painting about my dog who was dying back home in Seoul. I got him when I was in middle school, but I had to leave him when I moved to the US. After I left, no one took care of him regularly and he became very lonely. I felt like a failure for abandoning him, and it was extremely painful to know he was dying so far away from me. The painting I made about this, *Skin Disease*, (2011) was an important moment in my development. It showed me that I could express complex feelings through my painting, and I wanted to push this farther in my practice. This painting also got me thinking about an idea that has become one of the recurring themes of my work, the notion of “failed domestication.” To me, the act of “domestication” involves a connection between an individual’s dependency and the demands placed on the dog. Due to my upbringing, I empathize with the condition of being dependent, especially as it operates in the domestic or familial realm. I have explored this in many works, often through the way I use images of plants and animals.

When I moved to the U.S., I started making still life paintings so that I would have work to show my family back in Korea, since I couldn’t show them my more sexually explicit and/or violent works. But after making a few of these, I realized I enjoyed the way I could infuse the still life with subtle emotions. This was around the
same time as *Skin Disease*. I began making a series of uncanny still lives using domesticated plants and flowers. I was interested in how these plants and flowers exist both as sentimental, commodified objects and as living entities. The spectacle of their life span—from bud to flower to dead, brittle husk— is what defines them as decorative objects. Failure (death) is built into their domestic role. I worked on a flower farm when I was very young. They suddenly lost the farm and had to move in with my family, which changed the way I saw them. When they had the flower farm they seemed vital and alive, but after they lost it they suddenly seemed old, frail and dependent. It was as if they became domesticated the same way a flower would. I’ve continued making still lives, and they’ve become an important part of my practice. In contrast to most of my other works, I like having to elicit emotion and mood primarily through the color and compositional treatment of my subjects, without any narrative elements.

Animals are another subject of my work that I use to explore domesticity and other, related ideas. As a woman and a minority in America, I sometimes compare my point of view with that of a dog or cat watching their owners’ embarrassing moments. The relationship between human and domesticated animals has always fascinated me because of the animals’ outside perspective on human behavior and the social structure of
the human world. The animals’ “innocent” position lets them transcend barriers between private and public. In several paintings I’ve depicted animals as bystanders to human activities. For example, *Humping Dog* (2013) is about a dog in a garden enjoying a great time without shame or self-consciousness. *Saying Grace* (2012) shows a dog observing the strange behavior of his owner, complacent and clueless about what’s going on. Similarly, *Cat Watching People* (2014) depicts a fat cat calmly watching a couple having sex. These works satirize human valuations placed on sexuality while the animals represent a separate, ideal perspective to me.
Domestic Tableaux

Related to these animal paintings are works that present tableaus of “domestic” scenes. These include the paintings *Studio Visit* (2015), *Potluck Party* (2015), *Couple Diner* (2014), *Family Diner* (2014), and *Cave Life* (2013). These also play with the divide between public and private, depicting couples or families engaged in private domestic activities such as eating, breastfeeding, having sex, etc. In these works there’s no separate viewer stand-in like the one the animals provide. Instead the scenes are presented from a more distanced, “objective” perspective. However, this “classical” proscenium arch form of presentation is undermined and subverted because the domesticity on display is made to seem perverse, or grotesque, and the “objective” point of view feels voyeuristic. This is due to one or more of the following: the unnatural combinations of activities (*Couple Diner*), the odd nature of the activities (*Ant Eater*), and finally the fact that the settings are either only semi-private (*Family Diner*) or completely unexpected (*Cave Life*). These works contrast a culturally transmitted fantasy of domesticity (which is generic, theatrical, and staged) with a more realistic version (which is messy, unpredictable and highly specific).

Figure 9
For example, *Cave Life* (2014) depicts a future caveman’s life. The idea was inspired by American survivalists who store up food and supplies to prepare for the apocalypse. I imagine their fantasy about reverting to a caveman life. This is an idea I can relate to. There is something appealing about existing in a protected private space after the earth’s decay. But of course, in reality it would be a brutal way to live. So the painting is a darkly comic representation of this fantasy.
The Female Subject/Subjectivity

This group of works focuses on female subjects, from a perspective that investigates female subjectivity – in a way that contrasts with and challenges the “objective” tableaux compositions, that I associate with the male gaze as addressed by art and film history. In these works I again take up the idea of the private sphere, but in a way that has more to do with a subjective, psychological, or interior realm than an actual physical or social space. An early work in this mode is *Fuck You Woman* (2012), which shows a woman standing in a swampy body of water raising her middle finger on the hand at her side. The woman’s body is on display and she knows it – there are even some parts of her body that are invisible to her but that are reflected in the water for viewers to see. She is trapped in a way, but she still fights back against this objectification with a subtly aggressive phallic gesture of her own.
My poem *Fly* (2015) combines the animal bystander and female subjectivity themes using apocalyptic, sci-fi imagery to play with traditional gender roles. It tells the story of a pregnant woman imagining how she would survive in a dystopian world. She decides that, when there is nothing left to eat and no other humans alive, she will devise a science experiment to turn herself into a fly. Then she will lay her eggs on her dead husband so that her children can get nourishment from his corpse. In some cultures the fly symbolizes survival, persistence, transformation, and adaption. In the poem, the male body assumes the biologic role of the female body and becomes an object for feeding babies. The female body becomes a heroic figure that has power to control life independently. I also explore the sci-fi notion of gender-swapping in my series of drawings *Head Transplant Story*, in which a man and woman swap heads and experience the world from the perspective of the opposite gender.
In my *Reflection* series, women expose and observe their own bodies through partial, abstracted, or fragmented reflections. Thematically I’m interested in exploring how an individual recognizes her/his existence through her/his body in various ways – psychologically, sexually, socially, politically, etc. *Reflection II* (2015) depicts an unpopulated, imaginary space in nature and therefore outside of human judgment. The female figure looks down at her own vagina reflected in a pond. My picture does not engage in the version of female genitalia that male artists over the centuries — Gustave Courbet and Carroll Dunham to name a few — have created for the viewer. Instead, the genitals are represented as part of a private, self-reflective gaze that I represent as transcending the social gaze. The vagina is placed in the center of the canvas to bring the viewer’s perspective in line with the figure’s own point of view. By portraying the vagina
as an active power aligned with but distinct from nature, I seek to remove the vagina’s image from its history of objectification and spectacle to picture it as something subjectively possessed, with agency.

_Reflection III_ (2015) presents the flip side of the intimate, contemplative experience portrayed in _Reflection II_. In a sense, it returns to the “domestic” tableaux mode as a contrast to Reflection II’s subjective perspective. While _Reflection II_ is set in a gorgeous, superabundantly natural private space, _Reflection III_ depicts a more mundane indoor setting that is not private. The woman is not alone, but is shown with a man, who spreads her legs in front of a mirror that reflects her genitals back to her. In this work I wanted to explore repression and shame. Unlike Reflection II, here the woman is in control of neither her body nor her gaze. Her male partner is literally forcing her to view her body through his perspective. This kind of objectification is the opposite of the freedom and self-awareness depicted in Reflection II.

Both _Reflection II_ and _Reflection III_ present titillating yet uncomfortable experiences for the viewer. In Reflection II this discomfort comes from being confronted with an extreme close-up of a woman urinating instead of taking a stereotypically
pornographic pose. In *Reflection III*, the discomfort comes from the violence of the man imposing himself and his gaze on the woman. If *Reflection II* aligns the viewer with the subject in a disorienting or shocking yet empathetic way, *Reflection III* objectifies the woman and forces the viewer into the perspective of the objectifier. *Reflection II* can be seen as a fantasy of a woman really looking at herself with a kind of uncontaminated gaze. *Reflection III* is then a nightmare about a woman who cannot access herself or her body through her own gaze, but only through that of the man. However, some ambiguity arises in *Reflection III* because we don’t know the extent or nature of the woman’s participation in this scenario. She might be playing a role or have more control in the situation than it seems. Since we can’t see her face, we have no access to her expression. We can’t tell if she is experiencing pain or pleasure (or both), or whether she is even conscious. This uncertainty, implicit to the image’s fictional quality, is a reflection of a woman’s role in patriarchal society – her interior life, self-consciousness, and self-awareness are always, to some degree, invisible from society.
2. Bibliography


3. Thesis Exhibition Image List

1. *Cat Watching a Couple*
   2015
   Oil on canvas
   48 x 40 inches

2. *Flowers*
   2014-2015
   Oil on Canvas
   24 x 30 inches

3. *Studio Visit*
   2015
   Oil on Canvas
   84 x 68 inches

4. *Potluck Party*
   2015
   Oil on Canvas
   52 x 54 inches

5. *Head Transplant Story*
   2015
   Framed Pencil on Paper
   5 x 7 inches each
4. Images of Works Exhibited

Cat Watching People
Studio Visit
Potluck Party
Head Transplant Story
5. Images of installation