

M+B

Art

Kara Joslyn – Art in Culture Interview

Issue: May 2023

Magazine Section: Zoom In

Editor: Yerin Joo

Exhibition: *Please Throw Me Back In The Ocean*

Hello Kara, it's an honor to have this opportunity to interview you. Thank you very much for your time. As this is your first solo exhibition in Korea, I've composed a questionnaire to introduce the exhibition and your oeuvre. I look forward to your honest and detailed responses.

1. This is your first solo exhibition in Asia. What are your thoughts?

Hi! Thank you for interviewing me, it's been an honor and pleasure to have the opportunity. Yes, this was my first exhibition and first time visiting Asia. I was completely hooked by the city of Seoul. The museums had top notch shows, the fashion was refreshingly cool and styled-up, and (I'm vegan) the food was amazing. It's cool that vegan food is called "monk food" in the descriptions on the internet. I feel like people in LA would that, haha. There was a mash-up of modernism, tradition, and beautiful landscape in Seoul which I found to be both seductively novel and familiar — not dissimilar to cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco, here in California, where I was born and raised. It made me appreciate the opportunity to show in Seoul, all the more. I can't wait to return. It's an exciting place for art. I loved getting to see the SonGeun exhibition of Chinese contemporary artists from the Sigg collection, and also the LEEUM Museum. At LEEUM, I got to see (not only Maurizio Cattelan's insane show), but also their permanent collection of Korean antiquities, which I thought was important to see. Seeing these and the porcelain show made it clear that the selection of western artists (showing at the big galleries that have locations in Seoul), were greatly informed by Seoul's unique point of view and the centuries-old aesthetic it is build on. Even the show at the Hermès Foundation / Atelier Hermès across the street from my show at Perrotin, made sense curatorially in a different way, after I was able to take in the more historical examples of Art and Architecture in Seoul.

2. Your solo exhibition at Perrotin New York in 2022 consisted of hardcore forms, morphing human and animal bodies with geometric shapes. On the other hand, the compositions in your current show in Seoul are simpler and lighter. What concerns and changes did you experience while making your new work?

I always consider the place and context my work is being shown in when I plan an exhibition, so when showing in a place I have never been, my imagination works in a different way. I have to find how my own touchstones relate to this place, like a stranger I have yet to meet but have chatted with online. My home town, a coastal city in San Diego, California became an anchoring point in making this show. Something formative that I have in common with anyone who grew up in Seoul is a relationship to the ocean, to seeing water and the horizon touching the water as part of your daily existence. From there, the show started coming together around the symbolic space of the ocean, underwater, outer space, and the idea of a paradise lost. I often think about my hometown as a paradise lost because it has a beauty and harmony in the coastal landscape, nature, flora and fauna. But, it has come to be changed by construction/ destruction; terraformed by histories of tech corporations, sub/urban development, colonial occupation and the military. The show may seem lighter in many ways, but as it unfolds, so does the darkness of this dichotomy and how the human spirit is caught between the two.

3. It appears that you depict a certain “Humanoid” in your work. Would it be possible to further elaborate on the figures portrayed in “Love, peace and harmony? Oh very, very nice. But maybe in the next world. (The Decollation of Alan Watts / Grooving on the Eternal Now as Sacrament)” and “Cracked Actor”, and their narratives?

That’s very true. The narratives that inform my figures are based on characters known in mythology as trickster-redeemer, shape-shifter, and psychopomp (a Greek name for a character in myths that can travel between the worlds or dimensions - often between the world of the spirits and the living). To me, it’s referential to both being an artist, and to art itself. To the creative process, which always involves both creation and destruction, heaven and hell. “Cracked Actor” is an 8 foot painting depicting many images of the same mask / face, being constructed and deconstructed. We see the face is the same but looks different in each indexed depiction because it has different hair and clothing. The wigs and hair pieces also appear in the painting on their own, alerting you to the fact that these are interchangeable accessories you can use to create a personality. It reminds me of a quote from the most famous Drag Queen, Ru Paul Charles — “We are all born naked, and the rest is Drag.” Author and anthropologist, Joseph Campbell references this idea in his book, “The Hero With a Thousand Faces.” I’m interested in the way that deconstruction and fragmentation, a condition of postmodernism (or how we now live) can also come back to humanity’s mythic traditions. The painting titled, The Decollation of Alan Watts, is referential to the Philosopher Alan Watts, who, is credited with bringing “eastern philosophy” to California, in the 1950’s/60’s/70’s and who was an academic revered by the rebels, poets and hippies of mid-century America. I wanted him to be depicted like Saint John the Baptist is in paintings from The Renaissance - Baroque era. Both are icons of a new era of spiritual tradition that changed culture, both of these traditions were based on the idea of Love — Love as the jubilation of spirit that reveres all of creation — and both were beheaded. Watts was not literally beheaded, but his teachings that turned Americans on to yoga, meditation, taoism, and “back-to-the-land” movements are now used to make capitalists more productive at Google, depicted in car commercials, and sold back to us in a variety of ways that create the opposite of peace love and harmony. I thought it would be interesting to include him, since my peers, and those who raised and influenced me refer to him in this way still, and because my show is in Seoul, a place he was pulling his philosophical teachings from. Perhaps if he were around now, we would see this as a controversial cultural appropriation, and the hippies and beat poets that changed the culture in California would have never existed. It’s interesting to think about these histories and exchanges and how they mutate as our culture changes.

4. You paint a world of illusion using allegory as your main device. In a past interview, you mention that “everything symbolic is everything real.” What exactly is the “truth” you want to convey through your work?

In Trickster Makes This World; Mischief, Myth and Art, by Lewis Hyde, there’s a great quote in the forward that speaks to this. Although the book is an anthropological study of myth, (aka non-fiction), the forward to the book is written by an award winning novelist, who says, “... before I read Trickster Makes This World I never truly understood that myths are only stories, and that stories are only lies, and that lies are all we have.” Fiction can always reveal truths in a way journalism, research and non-fiction never will. I don’t want anyone to agree with me or hit them over the head with answers I think are correct, nor argue a point through my work. Which is a lot different from my personality, where I want to do all of those things! With my work, I want to speak from a place beyond those egoic concerns that I might not be able to get past in my day-to-day life as a fallible human. My paintings are a fiction where I can reveal my real self, but don’t expect to find me there.

5. It’s interesting to see that you insert song lyrics into the title of your works. I’m curious to know if certain music genres or lyrics also affect the content of the piece. There were a lot of classic rock songs included on the podcast list “What Artists Listen To” in 2019. What kind of music did you enjoy listening to while preparing for this exhibition? Is this music also reflected in the title of the works?

I used to be a DJ and I am a big record collector. I have really good memory for songs and song lyrics. Sometimes, a song will get stuck in my head out of nowhere, and later, I will realize that what was happening in that moment totally relates to that song. I think lyrics are really fun poetry and when set next to an image or as a painting title, they can inform the meaning of that painting. Since we all sing-along to our favorite songs, we sort of become actors, playing the character who wrote/sang that song. I love the way in which that reveals how you are me and I am also you. I pretty much steal everything as an artist - my titles and imagery are found/ appropriated. I think the reason Picasso said "great artists steal" is because when you steal something, you make it your own. It's not the same as "borrowing" something. The painting in my show of the hook is the most obvious in relation to music and its title reflects this. I was thinking about how getting "hooked" is both pleasurable and deadly. And how the "hook line" or "hook" of a song is that addictive pleasurable part of a song that gets you to buy / download / stream the album and keep up with the artist. That hook painting is made to the exact scale of my human body, so it's self-referential/self implicating in that way.

6. During your production stage, you first edit photos and feature your subjects like sculptures in a digital space. Would it be possible to explain in detail the process of collecting these reference images and transferring them onto canvas?

I do not edit my images nor create their sculptural qualities in a digital space. My images come from old books of paper sculpture. The photos I work from are black and white lithograph prints in books that I scan. I sometimes collage/edit/draw over the images— both by hand and in photoshop. The way I paint was actually taught to me by an old-school graphic designer who made his career before computers were the industry standard. The techniques I use were made to create graphic design and illustration before computers. In fact, many of the adobe photoshop tools are based on these actual painting techniques. That's why it seems like it's digital. Because the digital actually copied the analog.

7. Your works are characterized by expressing the soft texture of paper as though it's hard metal. To achieve this, you add on the hologram effect with black acrylic and an airbrush, and the sense of volume and gloss are emphasized. How were you able to develop and evolve your research of materials to perfect your current technique using powdered pigments?

Making my own paint out of optical car paint pigments really changed everything for me as a painter. I was always more into drawing, which I think you can see in my work. Like drawing, the white in all these paintings is the white gesso or "ground" of the painting. I do not paint with white paint. It's like drawing with charcoal on paper where the white is the paper. This helps to create an illusion of luminosity.

My grandpa helped found the optical technology company that invented these optical pigments and I became interested in them conceptually as a material that has a personal / familial component as well as having a "futuristic" feeling. What would paintings in the future be made of? Am I painter in the future? I am attracted to contradictory ideas like retro-futurism or used-futures and how science fiction relates to these ideas. I think that it speaks to how our imaginariness shape our realities.

8. You draw fictional objects and take inspiration from Magritte's iconography and traditional vanitas still lifes. Hooks, flowers, hand gestures, and figurative imagery stand out in the works exhibited in this show. Is there a specific art historical reference you took into account when creating your new works?

Many! As mentioned above, I reference the paintings of the decollation (beheading) of Saint John the Baptist - a trope common from renaissance to baroque painting. I like to hack myths and traditions of art historical painting. I like to

make them mean something else, change the ending of the story, or cast a different character as the star. I grew up with a print of the Magritte painting *Castle of the Pyrenees*, (1959) in my parents house — its of a large rock with a tiny castle atop the rock, floating above the ocean waves. I wanted to have this flower form floating above waves, in my version. The form reminded me of the alien in the film, *NOPE* by Jordan Peele. I loved how these concepts and images unexpectedly have a lot in common. I love combining this idea of outer space and underwater, and that's formally what this show was about in many ways. Magritte, Vija Celmins, Ed Ruscha, Lee Lozano and other lesser known artists like Gee Vaucher, who work in this photo-realism/surrealism/graphic way have always been a major influence for my work. The treachery of images.

9. The main motif in your work is Americana. As someone who was born in San Diego and currently living in California, what does “American” mean to you? As much as you have consistently been exploring the theme of Americana for a long time, have there been any changes in this concept since the beginning of your life as an artist to the present?

Great questions. I am definitely exploring the shadow of Americana in my work. Not simply “the dark side” but how unconscious/hidden psychological desires and motivations reveal themselves to us. I am not only interested in the way things have been, or the way things are, but in the underlying thought-forms, imaginaries, and attitudes that shape the way things are. Each individual has their own journey, but also shares their life with the whole world, so in this way the personal is political, the micro is macro. Being American also goes back to this idea I was talking about earlier, regarding San Diego, of “Paradise Lost.” Americans have also exported the “Paradise Lost” syndrome around the world. Violence, domination and greedy plays for control are really not the point of life. I am really a romantic, I relate with artists, writers, musicians and poets, throughout time that fall under the category of “romanticism.” To have romanticism today, is to have a lot of heart, and imagination, against all odds. I think that's the influence that keeps me and the great artists I admire in America going day-to-day. Americans, in my opinion, are pretty much lost at sea. They think they are still on a pioneering journey of discovery, but in fact, are adrift in ideals of “progress” that are constantly revealed as a dysfunctional farce (at best). I work from photo references from the 50's/60's/70's and I think this was a specific period of American Modernism that has almost become, to people my age, a “classical” period of America. The Classical Period of American Modernism. Or perhaps of American Capitalism. What do these images from this classical period tell me about the culture, back then? Sometimes it's easier to see things that are already in the past and they inform what we might do, now, in the present, as well as our imaginaries for the future. In my studio, I have become so much more free with the way I make work since I began this series during graduate school in 2015. I edit my photo references to make new compositions and allow myself to have a lot of leeway with narrative, now. I am trying to push the narrative aspect without making narrative work. I never want it to be a linear story, since I don't think that's how painting or making a show of paintings works. I really think of making a solo show like a musician making an album, now. Some paintings are hits, some ballads, sad songs, songs that make you want to dance, maybe a secret track, maybe a skit, maybe an intro track that is just sound effects. But altogether, it will be a singular show with a concept that is present from start to finish.

10. You debuted in 2019 and are now in your 5th year working as an artist. What is art to you? What motivates you to paint?

I had my first solo show in 2019. I finished graduate school, in 2016, where I mounted a thesis exhibition and published a paper to get my degree. But, I have only been a working artist since my first real solo show. What motivates me to paint is honestly both loneliness and curiosity— how can I make something exciting for myself and also communicate these ideas and feelings with others in a compelling way? I think it's powerful how painting is real and an illusion simultaneously. Like real magic, it's always more than meets the eye. Music is probably the highest form of art because it has no physical form, is totally invisible, but changes you in seconds. In critical texts, paintings are referred to in comparison to “a window,” “a mirror,” or “a doorway.” On accident, I think these ways of speaking about painting and



its inherent object / image duality, also refers to the manifestation that happens when making a painting. Manifesting something from nothing is in every way magic and spiritual. I also enjoy getting so focused on a painting that I lose track of time. I feel it's a great luxury to lose track of time. I like how painting can surprise me and challenge me. It teaches me that I can attempt to have control, but I never will. Painting has made me feel like I am never really alone. With painting I am a wanderer, and I am never lost. It's sort of my true love, in a way.

11. This is my last question. What are your plans or goals for this year after this exhibition?

I'll be having my second gallery-wide solo exhibition at M+B Gallery in Los Angeles in fall 2023. I am really excited about the show, I am already done planning and sketching the paintings. You had mentioned feeling like my current show in Seoul has a lighter feeling than my small show at the New York Perrotin, last year. The show I have planned for M+B in Los Angeles, where I live and work, will probably be the darkest show I have ever planned. It has an angsty, scorched earth, phoenix-fire mood to it. I hope it will also feel triumphant. Can't wait to share it with you! I will have work in art fairs and group shows as well — you can keep up with me on my instagram @karavaggio ! Thank you so much for the interview!

낭만의 ‘검은 바다’로

페로탕 도산파크, 카라 조슬린 아시아 첫 개인전



카라 조슬린 / 1983년 샌디에이고 출생.
캘리포니아예술대 회화 전공 및 캘리포니아대
샌디에이고 시각예술 석사 졸업. 페로탕 뉴욕(2022),
로스앤젤레스 M+B(2021, 2019), 로스앤젤레스
보조맥(2018), 시카고 LVL3(2017), 로스앤젤레스
마운틴워싱턴유르트(2016), 캘리포니아대
샌디에이고 비주얼아트갤러리(2016), 캘리포니아대
샌디에이고 구조재료공학갤러리(2015),
UC샌디에이고 구조재료공학부(2014), 오클랜드
쉐드프로젝트(2013) 등에서 개인전 개최.

신화와 역사를 비틀어 미국적인 낭만을 탐구해 온 카라 조슬린(Kara Joslyn). 그가 페로탕 도산파크에서 개인전 〈Please Throw Me Back in the Ocean〉(4. 5~28)을 열고 신작 회화 10점을 공개했다. 작가는 오래된 종이 공예품에서 신화적 알레고리를 상상한 정물화, 인물화 연작을 선보여 왔다. 차량용 분말 페인트를 아크릴릭에 섞는 기법으로, 단색조 회화에 홀로그램 효과를 입혀 실제보다 더 실제 같은 환영 세계를 그린다. 이번 전시는 작가가 나고 자란 샌디에이고 해안을 배경 삼아, 은은하게 빛나는 검은 바다에 감정, 무의식, 잃어버린 낙원을 투영했다.

1983년 샌디에이고에서 태어나 미국 대도시에서 성장한 조슬린에게 아메리칸드림은 ‘옛것이 된 낭만’이다. 작가는 ‘미국적인 품물’을 뜻하는 아메리카나(americana)를 염두에 두고 1950~70년대 사진에 주목했다. 조개껍데기, 나침반, 인형, 갈고리와 같이 핵가족이 형성되며 가정집을 장식한 조각품 이미지, 대량 생산된 상품의 전단 등. 이 시기 사진에는 급속도로 성장한 미국의 경제사가 포착되어 있다. 오늘날 미국 사회에 뿌리내린 소비 자본주의 문화 정체성에는 황금기 미국의 낭만적 정취가 배어있다. 하지만 경제 성장이 한계에 다다른 후 아메리칸드림의 존재를 바라보는 젊은 세대의 시선은 양가적이다. 조슬린은 기후 위기, 신냉전, 경제 침체가 지속되는 지금, 고리타분해진 낭만을 냉소적으로 바라보면서도, 경험하지 못한 호시절에 향수를 느낀다.

오래된 미래, 미국적인 낭만

조슬린의 작업에는 종이 인간 ‘휴머노이드(Humanoid)’가 등장한다. 신작 〈Love, Peace and Harmony? Oh Very Nice, Very Nice. But Maybe in the Next World.(The Decollation of Alan Watts/ Grooving on the Eternal Now as Sacrament)〉(2023)에는 1950~70년대 캘리포니아에 동양 철학을 도입한 히피족의 정신적 지주 앨런 왓츠(Alan Watts)의 이야기를 소환했다. 그림 속 왓츠는 주류 문화를 바꾸고 참수당한 세례자 성 요한처럼 묘사된다. 성 요한의 죽음은 히피 정신을 상실한 시대상을 나타낸다. 왓츠가 전파한 요가와 명상은 당시에는 생소했지만, 이제는 캘리포니아를 대표하는 주류 소비 상품으로 자리 잡았다. 성경 속 요한은 부패한 권력에 맞서다 참수를 당했지만, 조슬린이 그린 왓츠는 히피의 아이콘인 장미를 건네받는다. 휴머노이드가 사는 종이 세계는 현실의 거울이다. 바로크 회화 속 성 요한에 실존 인물을 빚낸 알레고리는 낭만이 사라진 미국의 현주소를 비춘다.

작가는 환영이 자아내는 회화의 호소력을 믿는다. 그는 흑백 사진과 종이 접힌 자국에서 과거의 흔적을 발견하고, 그래픽 이미지처럼 편집해 화폭에 옮긴다. 작가는 총 네 가지 방법으로 미국인의 노스탤지어를 환기한다. 첫째, 검은 바탕에 흰 종이조각을 그리고, 모서리와 접힌 선을 따라 검은색 물감층을 두껍게 남겨

