

Desirable Fairy Tales: Between Fantasy and Reality

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As children, our way of thinking and acting were heavily influenced and systematically shaped by what we saw, read and learned from fairy tales, cartoons and playacting. In this childhood world, princes were portrayed as handsome and courageous, and princesses were beautiful and obedient. This 'formula' or 'concept' was taken for granted, slowly idealized, and understood as truth.

With age, we now know that these ideas are ill-placed. Attempts have been made to create an alternative narrative, to shake up familiar childhood narratives. One way has been to introduce new fairy tales, loosely based on the traditional stories, yet reinterpreted or parodied to inspire creativity and imagination in the minds of children. A retelling of the Snow White tale in Korea for example, depicts the princess in an unexpected plot where she longs to be a brave knight. Her parents' stern disapproval of her un-princess-like plans sends her running away from home and into adventure. The run-away Snow White meets the seven dwarfs, falls in love with one of them, and the two live "happily-ever-after"...practicing martial arts together in order to defeat the evil prince in the neighboring country. The Disney animation "Shrek" similarly deconstructs stereotypical fairy tale personages with the character of Fiona, a newly-imaged princess who breaks the traditional mold of princesses before her. Fiona is tough enough to protect herself and can independently chose her lover even if he is no longer a white-horse-riding prince.

These examples demonstrate how idealization (whether of princesses or our mothers) works to create a socially constructed imagery, myth, and media models far from the reality. Contemporary fairy tales and Hollywood movies may entertain us with their witty versions of the new order of childhood concepts, but what lies beyond that? The current exhibition "**Desirable Fairy Tales: Between Fantasy and Reality,**" takes a further step in revealing the absurdity of socially-accepted behaviors and the fabricated universality in our lives, which are often rooted in childish "ideals". Based on their personal experience and memory of childhood play, the exhibiting artists **Mina Cheon, Gilbert Trent, Satomi Shirai, Hye Rim Lee**, create works which are collectively themed around girly toys such as paper dolls, doll houses and the ageless Barbie doll, and yet each deals with different issues within geopolitical, autobiographical, cross-cultural and virtual circumstances. While some of them attempt to refute postulations of societal norms that are taken for granted, the other artists encourage audiences to question these stereotypical formulas, ideals and concepts and see them from a different perspective. An exciting dynamism pervades the exhibition through their various languages of contemporary art-making mediums: painting, installation, digital print, photograph and 3D animation.

Korean American artist **Mina Cheon** explores how South Korean paper dolls of the 1970s reveal the way in which her country was Westernized, especially in the way little Korean girls came to idealize the American life style. A part of her series, "*Dresses for Different Events*" and "*Party Dresses & Home Dresses,*" is featured in this exhibition,

and depicts various Caucasian and Victorian women's attires for different functions. Producing a Western fantasy, the images are, to a certain extent, detached from the real life of Koreans in that period. One particularly arresting piece in the series is called "*Miss Korea*," which shows an image of a dress worn by a 'jin', the winner of a beauty contest. The piece is a statement on women's issues during Korea's modernization, in particular, the commodification of the female image and the notion of feminine beauty. Cheon perfectly captures these ideas within the scope of the beauty contest – a flesh parade that has been criticized as being controlled by capitalistic logic wherein physical beauty is derived from Classical Western ideals.

Cheon's method of selecting and enlarging original images of paper doll dresses appears to be very simple yet straightforward. The "*Untitled*" pieces from the series "*Dresses for Different Events*" depict exuberant Victorian dresses reproduced in human scale and showcased in fine glass frames. These life-sized, paper-doll dresses appear to criticize again, the dominance of capitalism in which art becomes actively commercialized. Cheon also exhibits one prototype and two pieces from her installation "*99 Miss Kim(s)*" which originally contains ninety-nine identical handmade female dolls in North Korean military uniform. Displayed and viewed together with her paper doll series, "*99 Miss Kim(s)*" creates a strong contrast to the cultural, political and ideological differences between South and North Korea since the Korean war in 1950.

Deeply inspired by the Buddhist philosophy of the human being, **Gilbert Trent**, explores in his art, his own identity in the context of race, sex and gender, which are general devices to categorize human beings. Trent revisits his memories and captures the unsettling feelings he had as a child who attracted to playing with "girly" things. These experiences serve as cathartic inspiration for his canvases, many of which use acrylics to present limbless or headless human figures, which at a first glance appear somewhat grotesque, but when closely observed, reveal themselves as representations of paper dolls. Interestingly, his depictions do not quite speak to the Caucasian influence we saw in Cheon's works, but rather include figures of black girls and boys that strongly relate to his ethnic background. Paper dolls are not only used as a medium to deliberate on his gay identity, but also to demonstrate his Buddhist belief in which everything in life, our health and disabilities, parents and children, life and death, can be chosen by ourselves. The outer body, like clothing, is separated from the inner person and is not fundamental in judging a person's character. The philosophical notion of 'choice,' a major concept in his body of work, challenges the absolute value that Western culture places on race and skin color in order to create institutional hierarchy.

Mainly trained as a painter, Trent has expanded his artistic practice to include installations since his first installation exhibit in 2009 at the Hillyer Art Space in DC. For "*Desirable Fairy Tales*", he introduces a new installation entitled "*And It Began to Snow One Saturday Afternoon.*" that is conceptually laden and delightful. This installation centers around a mannequin of a boy on a pedestal wearing a girl's dress, introducing the conflict between a boy's desire to be a girl and the reality, represented by a toy train set far away from his grasp. The mannequin appears to signify two distinctive ideas: it mimics the heroic image of a statue on a museum pedestal, and at the same time brings to

mind the image of commodity behind a shop window, further reinforcing Trent's recurrent concept of 'choice'.

Japanese-American artist **Satomi Shirai** is primarily interested in the "assimilation and transformation of culture in migration and passage of time" and her photographs cull from her own experience of relocation and separation between two distinctive cultures: Tokyo and New York. Capturing the interiors of domiciles, her photographs represent Western architectural structure and Japanese domestic life style. Looking closely at her photographs, we realize that they are not scenes from real life, but fake ones staged with miniature plastic toys, from a doll house kit. When she was young, Shirai, like other Asian girls, was fascinated by a Western style doll house kit imported from the US, and exposed to the apparent "lifestyle" represented by the doll house. However, after moving to the US, her body inhabits New York but her spirit yearns for Tokyo. In what seems like a reflection on this shift in paradigm, she obsessively collects miniaturized toys of Japanese household items: tatami (a woven straw floor mat), floor table, oriental curio, tea pot set, traditional rice cooker, etc. and places them into American doll houses with Western styled doors and windows.

Shirai also highlights the typical Japanese way of life. Limited living space in Japan necessitates that various household activities such as eating, drinking, reading, relaxing, drying clothes, etc., occur in a single space. As we pay closer attention to the details in her works, we begin to feel the presence of the person living in that doll house, with all his/her activities captured in real time. One of the most interesting and uniquely Japanese items she stages is a 'kotatsu', a floor table frame used extensively in Japan during winter with a heating system attached underneath, and is covered by a blanket. In real life, we might feel invited to, but cannot participate and interact with what we see in Shirai's photographs because they do not exist. However, using our imagination we are able to feel the Japanese life she tries to represent and come to accept that imagined living entity in a non-material sense. As a result, both the artist and the audiences can experience to actually reside in this 'life world' in the phenomenological sense.

Hye Rim Lee, a Korean multi-media artist based in New York and Auckland, New Zealand, explores the aspects of popular culture, in particular cyber culture and video game in relation to notions of femininity. For this exhibition, she presents two 3D animations: "*Lash*" (featured only on opening night) and "*Crystal City Spun*". At a glance, her animations appear to follow in the voyeuristic tradition, due to the main character in Lee's animations – a sexually appealing female cyborg named TOKI (which means "rabbit" in Korean.) Wearing a flamboyant rabbit headdress and calling to mind a Playboy 'bunny', TOKI has lived through a cyborg childhood and adolescence. Now "of age" she represents the universal sexual desire and fantasy of men. Lee constructs her as a dual figure: the face of an immature girl carried by an exceedingly mature and highly sexualized body. This (arguably grotesque) transmogrification however, de-legitimizes the usual 'subject-object framework' where the male objectification of the feminine figure is solely for his enjoyment, because here we have a female artist who has created an eroticized female figure for the pleasure of women as well.

In “*Lash*”, the close-up of TOKI’s face in a circular frame directs audiences to focus on her repeated eye-blinking/winking action. As they blink, the exaggeratedly long eye-lashes demand attention and function as a seductive trap for men, but also make women covet an unattainable beauty. Projected on an exterior wall of the KORUS House, “*Lash*” also introduces Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical concept of the reversibility between ‘seeing’ and ‘being seen’. Passersby who unexpectedly encounter TOKI may experience a ‘reverse mirror effect’: it is not they who see TOKI, but TOKI who sees them. In the playfully humorous “*Crystal City Spun*”, we find a cyberscape, more specifically a fantasyland where various women’s sex toys are moving and spinning around in an amusement park-like setting. The glassy yet jelly-like tenderness of the surface of the toys seems to stimulate a sense of sexual excitement. Moreover, when Dragon YONG, another of Lee’s animated creatures, titillates TOKI’s nipple, she begins spinning as if in orgasm. In that sense, “*Crystal City Spun*” challenges the conventional taboos in Korean society, where virtuous women were expected to conceal themselves and repress their sexuality.

Most people do not see the way artists see. They tend to believe socially-accepted rules, traditions, and cultures as absolute truth. On the contrary, there is no absolute truth for artists who seek to always question, challenge, deconstruct, reconstruct, and reinforce those rules, traditions, and cultures. Many philosophers believe that changes in art signal a shift in our orientation of the world, and thus often discover their own philosophical work through art. In discovering these changes we can perhaps get in touch with a deeper level of consciousness and experience a purer meaning of our daily lives. Through their works of art, the four artists in this exhibition show us a way of reconstructing and reinforcing sense of humanity and encourage us to abandon common prejudices and observe our world with different eyes.