



Hyunjin Baik, *The Icided Inhabitants*, 2006-7 oil on canvas, 200 x 200 cm

Seoul Seen

Current South Korean Art

by **D. Dominick Lombardi**

Before beginning my tour of Seoul galleries I stopped at an ancient site in Seoul—Gyeongbok Palace. Here is

where a reverence for the mind—spirit nature connection is abundantly clear. Vista after vista—whether it includes the Bukak Mountains to the north, or the burgeoning city of Seoul to the south—Gyeongbok Palace will give you a sense of history and esthetics that will stay with you for a very long time. After

getting my cultural bearings, So Yeon, my friend and guide, and I first went to see Lee Eun Jee's ceramic paintings at Gallery Doll. Here, the clarity and the optimism in the symbolism, which is peppered with some biting commentary, gave Lee's cute-leaning esthetic an edgier appeal. Next, we went to the

group exhibition of works by four young Chinese women at Lee Hwaik gallery titled *Bizarre Flavor*. This exhibition has great interest to me because it touches on the ever-growing global movement of creepy cuteness. Here, anxiety, sexual allure, even tragedy is softened by pop beauties. Digital photographer Cui Xiuwen uses young, sexy females models to comment on the conflicted state of teen pregnancy. The moody models, which are set in theatrical compositions, reach modern day Maxfield Parrish-like stagings at times. Han Yajuan's paintings of adorable little super-consumers float through life without a care in the world. Here, we have a direct reference to *The Year of the Pig* 2007 since they always seem to be shopping, but never for bargains. Yang Na's paintings take a dark turn by painting young drooling daydreamers. Here, altered states of mind heighten

the symbolism. The dark side emerges once again in the works on paper by Zhang Shuang. She offers a series of representations of a young frizzy haired girl who searches for an identity by playing dress-up. Inspired by weather and holidays, Zhang's subject explores such things as heaven, hell, bat life only to find a materialistic end.

Arario Gallery's one-person show of the multi-talented Hyunjin Baik was the most well thought out gallery exhibit I saw in Seoul. This musician/visual artist not only espouses a strange narrative he also challenges the gallery visitor to reconsider the exhibition experience. Using low-light florescent tubes and constructed corridor-like spaces that in one instance comes to a pointed end Baik offers a new and more intimate and cool way to experience art. His painting style and iconography are equally diverse and multifaceted which to me indicates

this artist lets his freak flag fly, leaving little left unexplored. For what I saw while in Seoul, Baik is Korea's most brilliant artist.

On the Face? an eye-catching show at Gallery I-Sang, features the works of six Korean artists. I was immediately drawn to the work of Han Ki-Chang who raises cut vinyl applications to an art form. Carefully cutting and adhering countless pieces of black and maroon vinyl to a color primed canvas; Han creates potent vignettes that hold together very densely populated narratives. Kim Hyun-Sik's luminous hair portraits present layers of synthetic follicles in swirling masses that are wonderfully precise. Kim Kyoung-Sub goes after lost stars and starlets with haunting precision, while Park Ji-Hye prefers to hide identities behind fanciful veils. In both cases Kim and Park approach immortality in very a compelling way.



J W Lee, *The Changing Contemporary China* 6am, 2007 C-print, 90 X 60 cm



Ki-Chang Han, *Untitled*, 2008, Cut vinyl on canvas, 150 X 150 cm

Lee Gil-Woo also veils his subjects, only here, with painstaking, hole-punched layers that boast floral accents, which cloud reality in an intensely beautiful way. Yoon Gi-Won, on the other hand, makes portraits that are blatant, bold and clean while referencing contemporary animation techniques.

Over at Pyo Gallery South, I found the photographs of J W Lee who places stick on, vertical bands of vinyl onto panoramic, windowed walls that overlook nighttime city sites. Lee then photographs that vista offering his concept of a rejuvenated metropolis that defies gravity and the elements. At Pyo Gallery Seoul, I found two very interesting one-person shows. Wang Ke Ju travels the Chinese countryside in his car, which holds pre-stretched canvases tied to the roof, and a trunk full of oil paints and supplies, as he scours the countryside. When he finds his muse, he paints employing various styles and approaches from quiet, pensive Realism to near Cubist expressions. His best efforts are the Cubist style works that turn the natural beauty into a kaleidoscopic delight of thick paint and vibrant

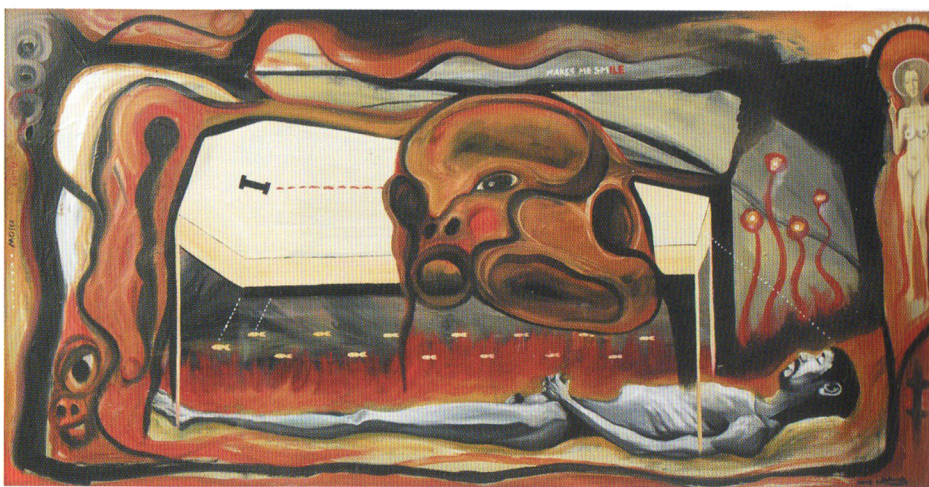
colors. Japanese artist Sachie Horigome has the second one-person show. She paints seemingly simple still lifes of bottles that are often filled with colored liquid. Employing misty gray light that sometimes partially masks her subjects, the glass objects, this artist creates that has a similar casual intensity of a Giorgio Morandi who too found solace in the direct.

D Hwang, who had a one person show at 2 x 13 Gallery, works mostly through a

muddled palette that reflects his mostly dark thoughts. Burning coffins, black voids, bloodless bodies and free-wielding brushwork puts this artist somewhere between Pop Art and Francis Bacon. One work titled *Just Before* (2007), even though it suggests death, made me feel optimistic about the afterlife. Dongi Lee exhibition *Double Vision* at Gallery 2 continues the 15-year saga of his invented hybrid

character Atom Mouse. All of the works are diptychs set one canvas above the other. In the bottom half, we see Atom Mouse (a mix of the character Atom Boy and Mickey Mouse) flying, looking content, hanging out with his black cat or in for maintenance and repairs (sadly, he's a robot). On the top half, the artist paints nonobjective works of thick, colorful swipes of paint that recall the abstractions of Gerhard Richter. The combination of the finely painted manga style narratives and the abstract expressions is pure genius.

Photo. .Photo? at Sun Contemporary features eleven artists who explore the latitude of photography. Koh Sang Woo combines a yellow haired blue skinned Rubenesque woman with fanciful florals and bold butterflies to express a dreamy, liberated sexuality. Kim Joon digitally cuts away the dark flesh of male torsos to create a recessed tattoo that ends up being very elegant. Debbie Han sculpts a multitude of female heads and bodies, and then photographs those so-called ideal-classic beauties to comment on our nearly global obsession with youth, beauty, and plastic surgery. Lee Sang-Hyun creates vistas digitally which vacillate between ancient esthetics and modern clarity while Im Sang Bin digitally stretches and reshapes ages old architecture to imply a new belief or spirituality. Jeong



D Hwang, *Makes Me Smile*, 2008, oil on wood, 244 X 122 cm

Young Hoon explores the body dynamic with off-color anatomical and architectural representations of the inner body, while Hong Sung Do extols the austere or banal by overlapping riveted-on photo segments that ever so slightly distorts the way we see. Bernard Halbherr turns shiny pristine orbs into crystal ball culture. Hung Tunglu reanimates dismembered Buddha hands to show a rejuvenated optimism. And Keisuke Sirota and Ximo Lizana build worlds that promise much, as long as you can navigate the suspicious voids that may hold more than you can handle.

Rodin Gallery had an exhibition of Art Star Atta Kim in a show titled *On Air*. Kim is a self-taught genius who masterfully explores, through superimposing images, or utilizing long, sometimes daylong exposures, our very physical and spiritual existence. I found three works: *100 Countries/100 Men* (2004), *On-Air Project 160-13: Delhi* (2007), and *On-Air Project 042: Sacheonwansang* (2004) to be the most extraordinary. *100 Countries/100 Men*, where the artist overlaps 100 different portraits to make one glowing hybrid, is a stirringly hypnotic work that feels as though it could enter your very soul if you let it. *Delhi*, on the other hand, turns countless passersby into a cloud of mud colored vapor. A dust cloud that

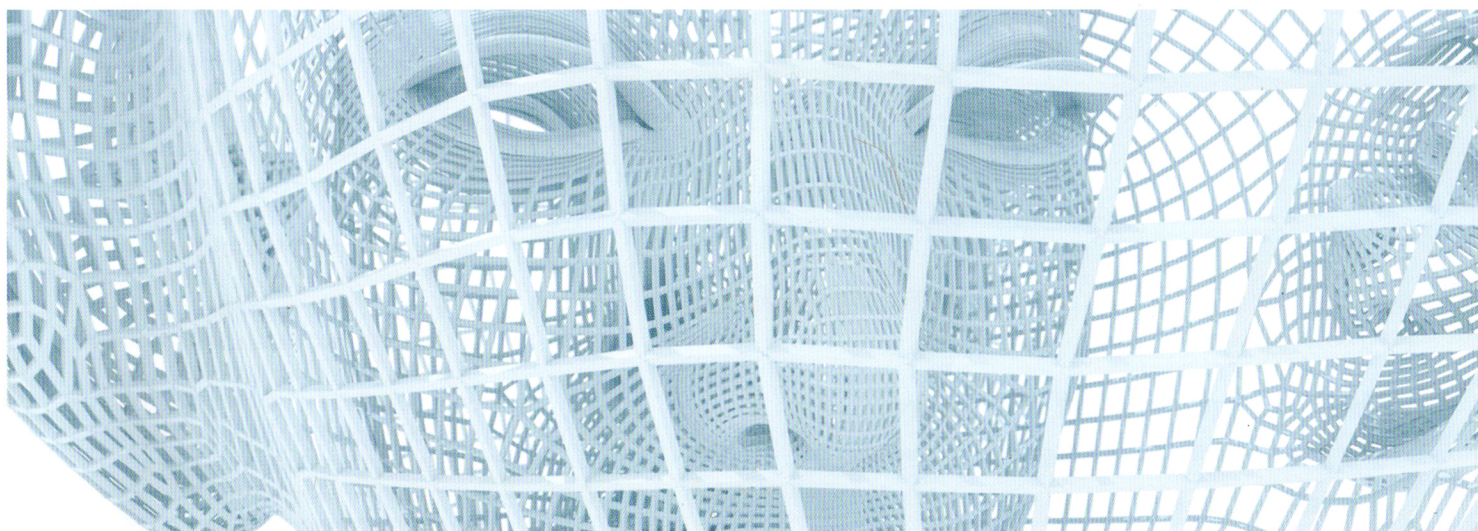
sent chills down my spine. Whereas *Sacheonwansang*, with its electrifying symbolism shows an Idol that seems to extol that anyone's sense of place is up for grabs.

Kwanhoon Gallery has three spaces. In one, Ann Yong-Seon pushes traditional scenic ink painting into a new realm by focusing on abstracted juxtapositions. An accomplished painter with a strong traditional base, Ann is bold without losing his grounding. In a second space, Yang Jae Moon offers photographs that show you can be romantic and still make compelling art by finding a place in the shadows, or the light. In a third space, Seok Yoo-Seon sets her sites on the changing Han River that divides Seoul. A printmaker, she is at her best when she mixes her metaphors to show how undesirable progress ravages her city.

Having grown up in the very conservative village of Ha Ho Hoe, artist Choi Boo-Yun references some very curious questions about customs, and how they relate to gender. For his installation at Noam Gallery, Choi places in the main room of the gallery a number of cast white statues of nude males. Connecting each identical life-sized figure are blue and red tubes that run from the heart and head. Here, the artist uses cloning as a metaphor for the perpetuation of gender specific,

archaic traditions. In the second and third rooms upstairs, the artist offers a video and another installation that further addresses the fact, as he puts it, that "Most Koreans still feel confined by gender roles." In the wall-projected video, he pairs two heads split vertically that blink at different times. Perhaps, this is a reference to the misaligned status of the sexes. In the installation in the next room, we see the framework of a one-roomed house that sports a see-through Plexiglas table that holds two framed DVD portraits of a husband and wife who are speaking, but not hearing.

Featured at Park Ryu Sook Gallery are the mixed media works and proposals for two, presently unrealized projects by Christo and Jean Claude. The first is *The Mastaba Project for the United Arab Emirates*. Originally conceived in 1977 this project, which is designed for Abu Dhabi, would do wonders for this fast growing region. The second project presented here *Over the River, Project for the Arkansas River, State of Colorado* looks to be one of their most beautiful. Suspended flat over a number of large segments of the Arkansas River several translucent, silver mesh curtains would let in just enough sun to create a circular lighting effect that promises its magical.



Jeong Young Hoon, *Deep Gaze*, 2008, C-print, 80 x 200 cm