Sunhee Kim Jung

The Korean-born painter Sunhee Kim Jung, who received her higher education in the U.S., where she has lived for more than two decades now, creates a kind of art that is immediately appealing to the senses—and to the great majority of the general public—while posing a dilemma to critics. What is one to make of floral compositions that are so pleasingly designed, so chromatically lush, so smooth of surface and yet—in their interplay between naturalistic observation and abstract patterning, between sweetness of demeanor and potentially disturbing subtext (bones, unborn babies, soldiers in combat gear)—clearly deeper in intent than their immediate effect might imply?

This is ultimately a question not just about one painter who has chosen to foreground beauty in her work but about the underlying premises of current artworld discourse. Since the 18th century, when Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant eloquently heralded the idea of the Sublime, art historians and critics have largely accepted, almost as dogma, a tripartite hierarchy of esthetic worth. At the highest level is art that elicits the Sublime (the infinite, the overpowering, the unknowable), whether we think of the Sturm und Drang movement preceding Romanticism, the spiritual transports of Jackson Pollock, or the brooding historical guilt expressed by Anselm Keifer. In today's

parlance, the Sublime is equated with art that "challenges," "subverts" or "transgresses." Below it, of only secondary interest, is work endowed with beauty (Classical clarity of form, profoundly gratifying to the rational mind) or work that affirms conventional values regarding family, community, or nation. And at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, disdain immediately greets artworks exhibiting mere prettiness (formal simplicity drenched in the sentiments of innocence, hominess, and comfort à la Thomas Kinkade).

The notion of the Sublime was born in an age of revolutions and (ironically, given Kant's strong legalism Burke's loathing of the French Terror) has perpetuated a taste for continual revolt: the endless displacement of one artistic movement by the next. Only at the end of the 20th century did the paradigm marked by a "cutting edge" and a progressive "march of the avant-garde" give way to a new globalized reality: digital-age simultaneity, the instant, menu-like availability of myriad cultural expressions from all times and places. This rampant pluralism grants equal validity to many forms at once: traditional landscape painting and new media experiments, pottery and performance, sculpture and Conceptualism.

Thus we can now easily find antecedents for Jung's pictorial approach. Her sinuous forms recall the flowing lines and visual rhythms of turn-of-the-20th-century Art Nouveau. And

surely she has conceptual links with the Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s, which reasserted the value of relatively content-free visual pleasure of the sort associated with Islamic decorative motifs, African fabric design, Oriental rugs and other repetitive formats.

Jung's painting series, from "Plants" (2004) to "Nostalgia" (2010), are rife with close-up studies of blossoms and other vegetation that might well have their origins in flower painting, East and West, or in vintage botanical drawings and prints (and, more recently, photographic seed catalogues). Such imagery has long been popular with artists and the general populace alike. But Jung brings something more than antiquarian interest or scientific scrutiny to bear on these subjects. She frequently employed arbitrary color and enlarged the scenes to viewer-embracing size, occasionally even creating Eastern-style folding screens that suggest an exotic garden or an enveloping jungle. Taming nature with art, Jung has, in a sense, transplanted to American soil a very traditional Korean belief in natural harmony and order, beauty and calm.

Yet that is not the whole story. Jung's work, in fact, reflects some of the more boisterous pluralism of her adopted home: an American-style dynamism that features diverse forces contending within a stable overarching structure, one requiring not homogeneity but mutual tolerance. Look closely at her

pictures. There are bones in the garden: death lurks among the fragrant blossoms, and perhaps an unseen evil serpent as well. The fetuses shown in their mother's womb (in the series "Bone and Fetus," 2005-07, and "Born Heroes," 2007-08) may suggest new life, evolving human potential, ongoing hope—yes. But painted in the current sociopolitical climate of the United States, they also call to mind highly divisive issues—and heart-rending moral choices—concerning population control and ecology, fiscal crises and public education, the unborn and abortion.

This rich dualism is most striking in the two recent "Camouflage" series (2011 and 2012). Here vegetation and shadows, unnaturally hued, mix and mingle in patterns that partially disguise the presence of single soldiers, each fully equipped to fight. In her artist statements, Jung has said that these paintings were made to honor the U.S. troops engaged in Afghanistan. She is nearly alone in that artistic endeavor—since gratitude to the military is far from being a fashionable theme in contemporary art circles. One might ask why these pictorial tributes to a desert war are filled with foliage more appropriate to, say, Vietnam. Perhaps the answer is that, at some level, combat is essentially the same everywhere: butchery and beauty side by side, intermingled. Moreover, Jung's vegetation—rooted and growing—suggests that our lives continue

to flourish precisely because of the sacrifices of these faceless soldiers.

Jung's work, with its extremely shallow depth of field, its flat patterning, has always functioned more as *sign* than as naturalistic representation. Her images are graphic emblems of post-9/11 conflict, not realistic depictions futilely attempting to match nightly battlefront footage. The difference is clear when we compare Jung's images to the "Angel Soldier" photographs of Lee Yong Baek, who represented Korea in the 2011 Venice Biennale. Jung renders her soldiers-hidden-by-flowers in flat space, as silhouettes, using a relatively muted palette—as though constructing a message poster—while Lee works to create the illusion of depth (his combatants are virtually buried in blossoms) and to distract the viewer with dazzling color.

Distraction and disguise are, of course, the purpose of camouflage, the titular theme of Jung's newest series. The technique—a systematic breaking up of the visual field in order to hide or misrepresent shapes and volumes—originated in the military during World War I and has been used (on ships, planes, tanks, trucks, buildings and even individuals) with increasing refinement ever since. Arshile Gorky, Roland Penrose, László Moholy-Nagy, and Ellsworth Kelly are among the well-known artists who helped develop camouflage methods in wartime and later applied them in their work.

The fact that Jung uses the title “Camouflage” suggests that she is deliberately hiding something, changing its appearance and thus its apparent nature. She has beautified the horrors of war, but this is no act of denial. On the contrary, camouflage by definition is a visual lie; one must note its surface effect and then seek out the truth beneath. That reversal places Jung firmly in the art-historical mainstream. For the whole modernist enterprise—since the reportorial Impressionists first clashed with the mythologizing Academy in late 19th-century France—has advocated the exposure of concealed facts. Modernism concerns itself both with the way things are and with the way we (often falsely) perceive them. Thus the complementary emphases of its two major currents: naturalism, examining social facts; formalism, exploring visual properties and apprehension.

Yes, Jung presents attractive images, but they testify to an important difference between false consciousness—based on ignorance or self-deception—and an informed, therapeutic choice. “Life, as we find it,” Freud famously argued, “is too hard for us.” Sometimes we need a dose of reality, sometimes a measure of sheer beauty—to save and fortify ourselves, in order to be able to go on. If the world were as beautiful as Jung’s paintings, there would be no need for her art—or for those shadowy soldiers among the leaves.

—Richard Vine

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