

Art Now L.A.
December 26, 2021

Kyungmi Shin:
citizen, not barbarian: Juxtaposing Contemporary and Historical Images
Various Small Fires
November 20, 2021 – January 8, 2021

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When regarding Kyungmi Shin's recent work, it is difficult not to think about layering — the layering of experiences, the layering of cultures and even the layering of generations. In her painted photographs, she ingeniously juxtaposes contemporary and historical images, many of which she also realizes as ceramic sculptures. The individual pieces are infused with issues of identity, religion, culture, art and family, that together create a narrative that weaves both forward and back in time. The works are most definitely personal — based on Shin's own family history and Korean ancestry— yet also resonate beyond the specifics of her story.

Centered in the gallery is a large, elaborate shelving unit with openings that face in numerous directions and filled with hand-made ceramic objects ranging from busts to sculpted hands and flowers (poppies) as well as vases and other vessels. That Shin has titled many of these decorative sculptures *Chinoiserie* — a western style of decorative arts that drew upon Chinese motifs and techniques — adds yet another layer to this body of work. *Chinoiserie Hand #1*, (all works 2020 and 2021) is a bright white ceramic arm decorated with a cobalt blue floral design. In *Chinoiserie Hand #2* and *#3*, Shin attaches decorative handles to disembodied outstretched arms, fusing an element of traditional ceramics with the body.

The coupling of disparate motifs and imagery continues in the photographs. In *Loving the Monster*, Shin beautifully layers painted lines depicting flowering plants and exotic animals, as well as traces over of a photograph of her young mother, atop a fragment of Paul Gauguin's painting *Woman in Red Dress* (1891), calling attention to various notions of Eastern exoticism and the male gaze in the history of art. Similarly, in *Carry Dreams Over the Mountains* she uses *Reclining Nude, 1917* by Amedeo Modigliani as a base layer over which she juxtaposes the same photograph of her mother, a yellow line drawing of an animal/monster, as well as full colored renditions of walking and flying blue birds. Modigliani's nude melds with a seascape background while simultaneously becoming a voyeur of the scene.

While Shin does not shy away from appropriation, she recontextualizes the found imagery she uses in her pieces (never taking these elements at face value). Rather she looks beyond the given and infuses each work with a narrative that investigates the trajectory of an immigrant (Shin emigrated to the United States at the age of 19) trying to come to terms with the philosophical and practical displacements and contradictions facing those trying to exist in a new land. In these elegant and sophisticated pieces, Shin embraces numerous facets of hybridity— both artistically and culturally— using her personal experiences to talk about more universal narratives.

As the title —*citizen, not barbarian* — (a quote from Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*) suggests, otherness is not something to disdain but rather to embrace and celebrate for what it brings and how it expands upon the myopia of Western culture and thought. In her multi-layered works Shin creates new ways of looking and thinking about the past, while expanding our understanding of the present.

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