

## Sun Woo on how her nomadic childhood inspires her painting practice

The South Korean artist talks to us about how her transient notions of home, as well as her relationship with technology, have had a strong influence on her work.

Words Daniel Milroy Maher

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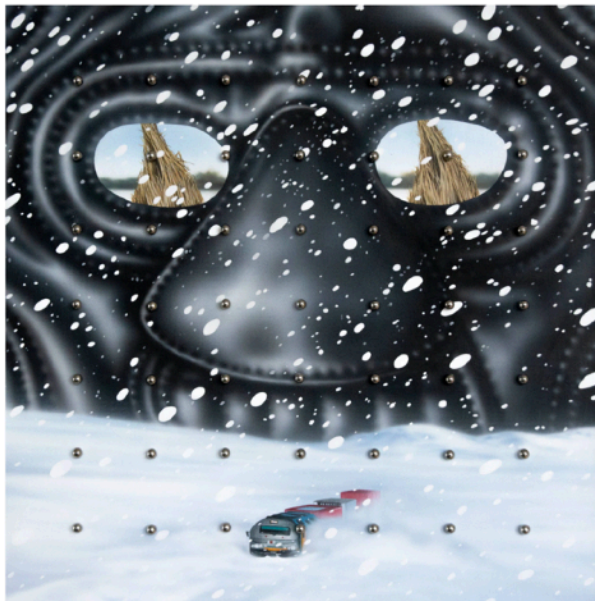
Sun Woo: Glide (Copyright © Sun Woo, 2021)

Born in Seoul but spending most of her childhood moving back and forth between South Korea and Canada, artist Sun Woo struggled for many years to achieve a sense of belonging. Often separated from parts of her family, and confronted with cultural differences at home and in school, she lacked company, communication, and a proper outlet for her thoughts and ideas. However, after discovering art and realising the potential it held for honesty and expression, she soon adopted painting as a substitute for the things she felt were missing in her life. She applied to study at a college in New York and began taking her artistic practice seriously, translating the issues she had encountered in her youth into material for her work, and finding a home for it somewhere other than inside her head.

“My works are informed by my experiences of growing up on the cusp of two cultures and generations,” Sun tells us. “I usually use my personal memories, experiences, and observations as the ingredients for constructing narratives, but also combine them with those of my friends or even strangers I come across on social media and online communities.” The digital sphere in particular holds much importance for Sun, who often draws on her time spent surfing the internet as a child for inspiration. Living in Canada, far from her birthplace, she turned to online South Korean pop culture for comfort and as a way of connecting with family and friends back home, “all the while staying physically tied to the cultures” of her adopted home.

This early engagement with technology also directly informs Sun’s current approach to painting, which incorporates both traditional and digital processes. “Befriending machines as companions and locating home in both physical and virtual worlds played a special role in my formative years, since we often need boundaries to fix ourselves in place,” she says. “This experience naturally led me to integrate digital tools within analogous approaches to painting, exploring themes like identity, consumption, and the psychology behind contemporary society’s growing attachment to technology.” These digital tools include programs such as Photoshop, which Sun uses to produce preliminary sketches which she then projects onto the canvas and paints using a mixture of airbrushing and hand-painting. The result is work that has the softness and tactility of traditional painting, with the defined forms and precision of digital imagery.

Thematically, Sun’s work is also heavily influenced by her childhood – migration as a major aspect of her life is also a primary theme within her practice. Her show last year, titled *A Castle Made of Sand* (a nod to the impermanence of such structures), explored “the migration of digital images that we engage with every day”. Speaking on the concept, she says: “I was drawn to wonder where these images are coming from, what their voyage looks like, and to where they disappear when they leave our field of vision. The resulting works presented in this show ground themselves on such movement, transience, and volatility of virtual bodies.” This material, which Sun first engaged with as images appearing briefly on her screen, has been collected and given a physical form to dwell in, so as to “anchor” it before it slips away.



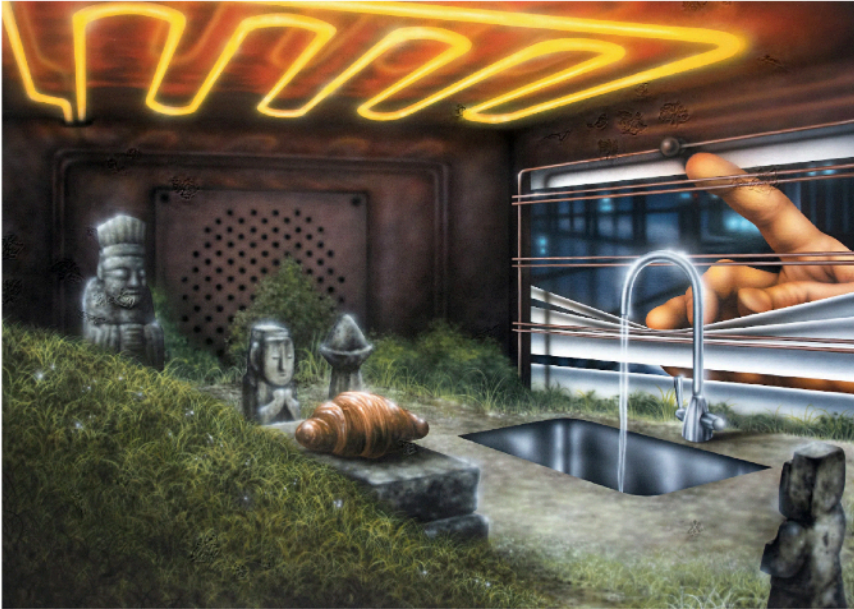
Above Sun Woo: *Snowland* (Copyright © Sun Woo, 2021)



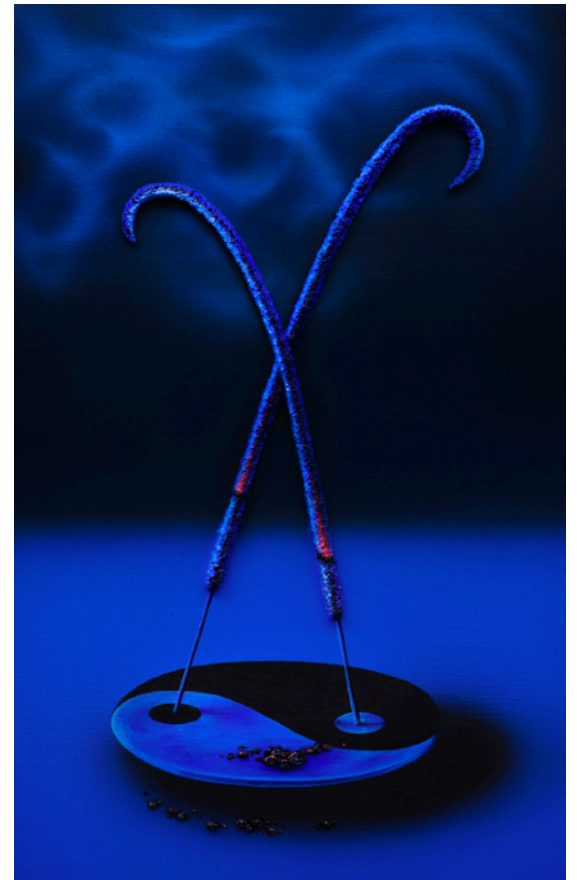
Above Sun Woo: *Clue* (Copyright © Sun Woo, 2021)

In many ways, this body of work encapsulates the driving forces behind Sun’s art and some of the pivotal moments of her life. We witness and feel the presence of movement and migration within the images and are given insightful, though often cryptic insights into her past. In one such example, a painting titled *Ghost*, we see a stationary *pojangmacha* – a type of travelling truck in South Korea that sells food and drink each night and disappears in the early hours of the morning. As a child, Sun was fascinated by these trucks, and wondered where they retired to

during the daytime and if she would be able to see them again, as some never returned to the same spot: “Unbound by physical restrictions, they moved around between neighbourhoods, and left for good when they wanted to.” Within this painting, the nomadic bar is anchored in a virtual setting that resembles “an unknown hinterland” and a reimagined destination for its mysterious migration. As such, Sun is able to tie down the elusive truck from her childhood; the distant memory of it; and the transient digital image within which she rediscovered it.



Above Sun Woo: Morning Hovers at Your Doorstep (Copyright © Sun Woo, 2021)



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