

A KIND OF FLOATING HISTORY: PAINTINGS BY SO YOON LYM

The inspiration for this body of work comes from real human figures, encountered in everyday interactions. The artist has photographed students throughout her eight year tenure as an art teacher at JFK High School in Paterson, New Jersey. Each image, then, no matter how abstract or lacking in direct facial features, is a portrait. As part of the history of portraiture in this country, these images play a significant role in the depiction of American diversity, and the effects of popular culture and its newest traditions.

Some of the earliest images of people in the Americas are portraits of important chieftains, scholars, priests as well as pictures of the ordinary folk. Anonymous painters of the colonial period throughout Mexico and South America recorded the likenesses of the people of the new world in grids of figures known as “castas” paintings. These works featured the varied racial and ethnic mixes that resulted when Europeans, indigenous Americans and Africans intermixed. Painters working in the United States often made portraits of Native Americans. George Catlin’s portraits rank among the most well-known, acting as a kind of visual inventory of the breadth of Native American tribes and their various physical characteristics.

A similar interest in recording specificity can be ascribed to the paintings of So Yoon Lym, who bases each of her works on the portrait of a real individual. Taken from above, the portraits become abstracted, the features less visible or completely absent. Each title, however, records the direct relationship between the subject and the object of the image. The dazzling patterns of the braided hairdos, become like an endless series of organic forms. Seen from this bird’s eye view, the forms are incredibly akin to fields of corn and amber waves of grain. These aptly-named braided patterns, known commonly as cornrows, share a number of characteristics with these landscapes of the farm. Evenly patterned, carefully positioned, each section of hair follows a carefully defined line that is intended to organize the organic life of the field.

Since at least the time of the Egyptians, braiding hair has been an important part of the beauty ritual and self-presentation. Images that range from papyrus paintings with scenes of life in ancient Egypt to archaic Greek Sculptures show the importance of the formalized braiding of hair. The modern tradition of cornrowing hair has its origins in West Africa, where both men and women wore their hair in braided patterns. The penchant for cornrows in the United States developed in the 1960s and 1970s and has enjoyed resurgence in popularity over the last five years, particularly in urban areas of the country and in Asian and European capitals where urban American style and culture is emulated.

Ethnicity, race and personal experience all underlie the paintings of So Yoon Lym. Her assessment of the influence of these realities on people is summed up in her idea for the title of the exhibition, *Dreamtime*. For her, dreamtime represents the idea of a suspended moment, of “people’s lives in a kind of floating history.” This idea of the floating history is significant for the artist, in light of her life that roved from Korea to Africa

to the suburban environments and urban centers of New Jersey. Her personal experience as an immigrant helped her to make connections with students who were facing similar circumstances. Hair, the experience of hair, and hair culture in general are race, gender and ethno-specific. The attraction of people to one another’s hair marks, over and over again, preferences and obsessions with “good” or “bad” hair. The difference in the color, texture, length, thickness and coarseness of hair from one person to the next marks its interest across cultural boundaries.¹ It marks, in some cultures, a particular distinction between “good” (or straight) hair and “bad” (or kinky) hair.

In her personal description of leaving behind the work of pressing one’s hair flat and the false intimacy it breeds among black women, bell hooks noted:

Later, a senior in high school, I want to wear a natural, an Afro. I want never to get my hair pressed again. It is no longer a rite of passage, a chance to be intimate in the world of women. The intimacy masks betrayal. Together we change ourselves. The closeness is an embrace before parting, a gesture of farewell to love and one another.²

This discourse around hair and its presentation is an inextricable part of Lym’s work. The braided locks, despite their abstract qualities, despite their perfect, idealized look, underscore the making of particular choices. These choices don’t require the use of a pressing comb or a chemical relaxer. Instead, they celebrate a connection to an historic African heritage, to a power symbol from the civil rights era, and to contemporary pride. Taken together, these images become a powerful series of portraits that take up the difficult task of representing the invisible.

This invisibility is also relevant to things that are overlooked in nature and relates to the artist’s love of organic patterns and the flow of nature. An admirer of the photographs of Karl Blossfeldt, Lym adapts his love of plants and their designs to her own connection to the ebb and flow of nature. Like these patterns that are easily missed, the artist searches out the configurations of beauty, the figures, the forms that go unnoticed in everyday life. Linking the braided patterns of her students’ hair to these unnoticed patterns in nature, the artist makes an astute reflection on hidden beauty. The quiet solemnity of the downturned faces underscores this connection between pattern and identity, form and selfhood, invisibility and presence.

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1 THE ARTIST RECALLS HER OWN EXPERIENCE AS A YOUNG GIRL WHEN AFRICAN-AMERICAN CLASSMATES WOULD PLAY WITH HER HAIR AND FORM IT INTO BRAIDS, AND HOW THEY SEEMED TO FAVOR HER HAIR OVER THE HAIR OF OTHER CLASSMATES (WHO WERE CAUCASIAN, WITH LONG BROWN OR BLONDE HAIR). TODAY, ASIAN HAIR, BUT PARTICULARLY KOREAN HAIR, IS FAVORED OVER THE HAIR OF ANY OTHER ETHNIC OR RACIAL GROUPS FOR THE MAKING OF HUMAN HAIR EXTENSIONS. THE STRAIGHT TEXTURE, DEEP COLOR, AND OVERALL STRENGTH OF KOREAN HAIR IS CONSIDERED SUPERIOR FOR THE TASK OF CREATING COMPLEX AND LENGTHY EXTENSIONS.

2 BELL HOOKS, *MEMORIES OF GIRLHOOD*, (NEW YORK: HOLT, 1996), P. 93.