

HYPERALLERGIC

Drawings of Migration and Pandemic

by John Yau
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Mie Yim, “#77” (2020), pastel on Suizen paper, 11



Mie Yim, “#105” (2020), pastel on Suizen paper, 11

In her dozens of pastels on handmade paper, Mie Yim seems to start each one over, never attempting to make a variation on a theme.

On March 20, 2020, Governor Cuomo ordered the state of New York to shut down.

As quoted in the *New York Post* (March 2020):

The restrictions take effect Sunday night at 8 p.m. and will shut down all nonessential businesses across the state, leaving just grocery stores, pharmacies, and other essential operations open. All non-solitary outside activities, like basketball and other team sports, are also banned.

The lockdown also requires all nonessential government

and private sector employees to work from home.

For many artists I know, who work in studios separate from their homes, adjustments had to be made. As I wrote in my piece about Anton van Dalen last April, an artist and widower who lives alone on the Lower East Side:

What does a man in his early 80s do with his time, especially during this time of self-isolation and social distancing?

My interest in what artists are doing during the pandemic — especially when they are unable to go to their studios or, in van Dalen’s case, compelled to work in extreme isolation — is one reason I was motivated me to see *Psychotropic Dance: Mie Yim* at Olympia (January 2 – February 6, 2021).

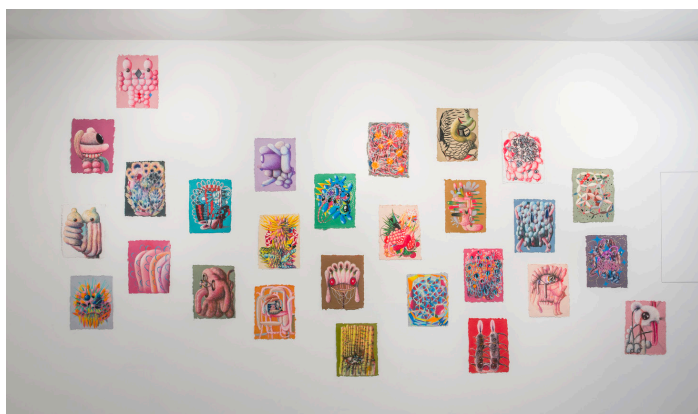


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I first learned about Yim's work from a friend who told me I should check out her website, which I did. I learned that she was unable to go to her studio and was working at home. I did not expect to see her artwork in person until I got an email telling me about the exhibition.

Part of what caught my attention when I looked at Yim's work online were the many examples of what she calls "Quarantine drawings" done in pastel on colored sheets of handmade paper measuring around 12 by 9 inches.

I wondered what they looked like in person, which is to say, the materials and her obvious commitment to drawing made me want to see them up close. There was something contradictory about them, which I will address later in this review.



Installation view of *Psychotropic Dance: Mie Yim* at Olympia, New York

On another gallery website, I read this statement by Yim:

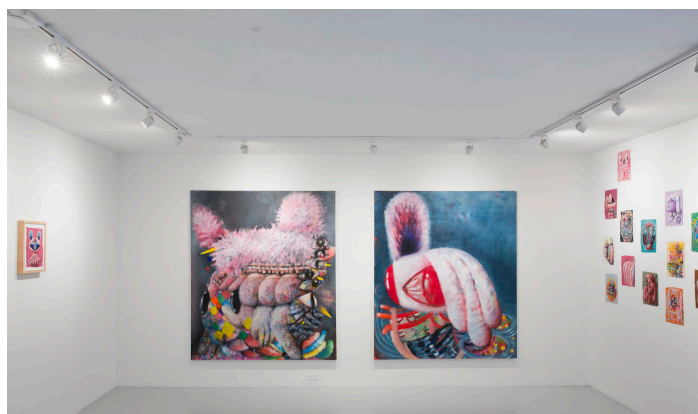
When making work, I start from an emotional space of the past, my childhood years. Abrupt migration from Korea to Hawaii when I was a young girl left an indelible impression of disconnectedness and longing. Making art is a way to reconstruct some kind of meaning and purpose of fragmented identity [...]

At a time when many artists are encouraged to pursue or are defined by an essentialist identity, Yim's statement suggests that she is going down a different path.

The exhibition features 27 pastel drawings on colored handmade paper pinned to one wall, salon style. Two large oil paintings measuring 70 x 60 inches, both dated 2020, hang on the adjacent wall. A row of seven framed pastel drawings spreads across two adjacent walls, and a large, irregularly shaped painting — somewhere between a rectangle and an oval — was done directly on the wall

adjacent to the stairs leading into the gallery. It was a lot to absorb while standing in a small gallery space, hoping no one else would enter that space until I had had a chance to look carefully at everything. This was not a show you could see quickly, which immediately won me over.

Imagine a constantly changing amalgamation of floral forms, fuzzy stuffed animal shapes, spiky viruses, beady eyes, teeth, volumetric forms, and patterns, and you'll begin to get a sense of what I see as Yim's daily drawing practice. In each pastel drawing (dated and numbered, from #16 to #120) she seems to start over, never attempting to make a variation on a theme. She works on different-colored grounds and changes her palette for each drawing. The feeling is one of improvisation and impulse guided by years of devotion to drawing.



Installation view of *Psychotropic Dance: Mie Yim* at Olympia, New York. Left: "SPQR" (2020), oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches; right: "Mudang" (2020), oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches

"#68" is a portrait of a pink, fuzzy creature with a large head, one row of big, widely spaced incisors, and short, jointed legs, but no body, against a mauve ground. What is the green pickle-like shape dropping out of the space between the head and legs supposed to represent?

Drawn on a red ground, "#77" depicts an elliptical, pink, soft-edged face containing a parallelogram in which we see an ocean and horizon. A red teardrop hangs down from the apex of the parallelogram. Two fuzzy blue and turquoise ears point straight up, while the pink head is connected directly to a cluster of stubby pink protrusions.

In these two animal-like drawings, Yim brings together the saccharine and the malignant, the familiar and the mutated, to create an animated creature whose purpose eludes us. What memories of childhood do they stir up?

In "#105," Yim draws black lines and elongated semi-circles, descending — like feathers — from the top of

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the paper, evoking the scales of an unnamable animal. Whereas she seems to have started with an abstract form in the other drawings I have described, in this one she seems to begin with abstract marks.

live. That sense of isolation goes beyond the physical to the imaginary.

Psychotropic Dance: Mie Yim continues at Olympia (41 Orchard Street, Manhattan) through February 6.



Mie Yim, “#67” (2020), pastel on Suizen paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

In such a large group of drawings, you might expect a certain amount of repetition, a return to the same form or mark, but that is not the case. Yim continually expands her vocabulary; she pushes the marks and forms beyond what she has already done with them.

Another strength of the drawings is the way Yim combines the legible and the opaque. In each composition, whether as simple as “#68” or as dense as the largely red “120,” which is made of overlapping lines and clusters of circular outlines, her configurations compel us to look with fresh eyes, to be open to the places in our imagination and memory where the work might transport us. Comfort and discomfort coincide in the sweetly colored creatures the artist conjures up with pastel; they seem vulnerable, innocent, alienated, and made of mismatched parts. As we have no sense of the world in which they exist, it seems — like a turtle — they carry with them the house in which they