

Paradox In Print

Koh Sang Woo's art explores many artistic boundaries to create a striking vision between reality and fiction. His art may appear innocent and idealistic, but it speaks also to how we respond to social and cultural obligations.

By Kate Soden

In the 21st century photography plays a crucial part in the repertoire of contemporary art, but it has also taken on fundamental importance for non-artists. Like never before, we document and advertise our lives, even digitally altering snapshots, a kind of post-production not possible in reality. Within this context, the burden of achieving something creatively unique and conceptually relevant for artists working with photography has never been greater. Not to be defeated, a range of tactics has been cultivated to distinguish fine art photography work, aiming to elevate it from mass culture's efforts. These various strategies are global and include extremely detailed digital manipulations more akin to painting with a mouse; retracing photography back to its earliest artistic roots; purposefully choosing concept over form with a harsh documentary aesthetic, or physically tampering with negatives and prints in the vein of collage.

The Korean-American artist Koh Sang Woo has found his own place within this ongoing battle and has cultivated an approach that adopts painting, performance, documentation, and traditional photographic techniques. His works have an instant appeal, no doubt because of their vivid color schemes and all-

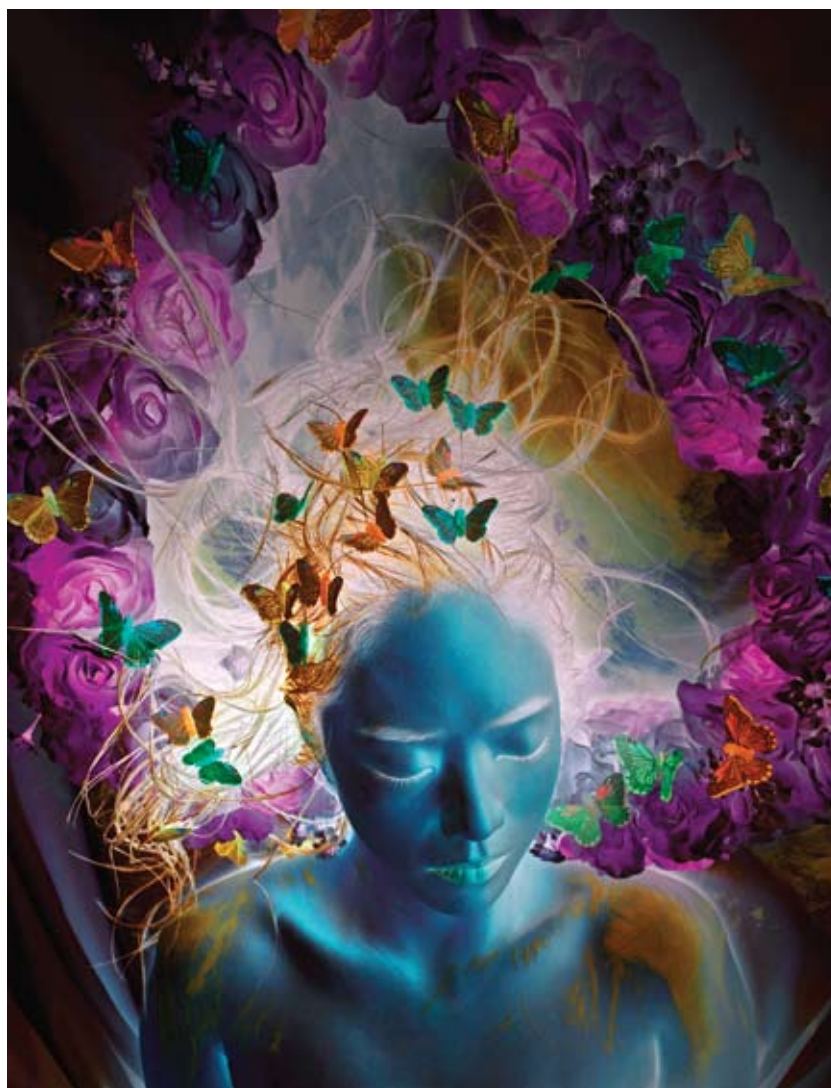
encompassing compositions. However, the images display ambiguous narratives that are not easily comprehended on first sight: they demand attention and further consideration.

What Light Dreams When Sun Is in Love (2009) is striking for its vibrant color palette, which is restricted to purples, greens and blue. We are conscious of the human form, though the main figure is

locked in its own world, psychologically distant and unaware. The figure is holding another person in an embrace and upon further consideration smaller details begin to emerge, such as the butterflies, flowers, and brush marks on the face, arms, and hands. The image is serenely calm, self-enclosed, and yet distinctly appealing to the viewer. Notions of gender, race, age, and narrative are all secondary to the instant visual appeal.

Koh finishes his images as chromogenic prints mounted with acrylic on aluminum, lending the pieces a highly polished surface and an almost untrustworthy contemporary aesthetic. This misleads many viewers into believing that the image is digitally cultivated and a child of the latest technological disciplines. They would be wrong. The artist's prints are the product of a labor-intensive dialogue with his sitters that sees the artist adorn their bodies with props such as butterflies and flowers. Most important, Sang Woo applies water-based paint with gentle brushstrokes across their body and hair. "I usually have paint brushes on my left hand, and a camera on my right hand to capture the moment in the most intense way possible," he says.

The process is more of a performance than a preparation for a shoot, taking as long



Koh Sang Woo, *The Burning Flowers*, 2011, photograph, 52 x 40". All images: Courtesy of The Cat Street Galleries, Hong Kong.

as eight hours and involving a cornucopia of embellishments to the form and experiments with various poses. The performance is directed rather than choreographed by the artist and the sitters (who are, significantly, not professional models) are left to improvise the form and sentiment outlined by Koh initially. He explains that he asks “the models to translate my thoughts into action, reflecting and incorporating ideas like the memory of their first love; this seems to be a powerful memory for each individual.” This dialogue and organic, creative process ultimately lends the work the sense of an unobtainable narrative, the viewer can never fully unlock the image without having been part of what made it possible.

Koh Sang Woo’s photographs act as a symbol of this process and distill the action by the artist’s adoption of a simple act, employing reverse exposure to lend the works the atmospheric quality of a negative exposure. “An inverted spectrum of super-illuminated colors of the human body is the canvas for me to start and finish with. The human body evolves into a gifted musical instrument and a potent vehicle that can be used freely for expression,” he says. So, although the photographs have

an unmistakable contemporary quality bordering on the hyper-real, they actually share most allegiance with 20th-century modern-art practice such as the early surrealist photographers who pioneered film techniques for optimal aesthetic effect, the situation and performance artists who concentrated on the ‘action’ component of their art and also the legacy of artists who have unveiled the mystery of the lone artist and opened their practice to participatory endeavors.

The *Burning Flowers* (2011) is a key work in Koh Sang Woo’s latest solo show [at The Cat Street Gallery], his first in Hong Kong, and gives the exhibition its name. A serene female figure is set against a backdrop of full lush flowers; in fact it is as if she wears them as a festive headdress in the manner of the ancient goddess, Flora. This figure seems to belong neither to our world nor to the classical tradition. She is ostensibly Asian, young, and beautiful. In fact his subjects are mainly women, presented in their own uncomplicated, pure world untarnished by material concerns or human vice. In other words, they are idealized. Koh Sang Woo

describes this process as “an escape from reality and moving toward fantasy, because whatever story they have I am resculpting and rebuilding it into a different world.”

Though the subject seems far removed from the young women that we encounter in reality, she is in fact what the artist describes as an “ordinary person because everyday life events, thoughts, and connections inspire me.” Because the artist spends so much time with his sitters, the finished works could be described as portraits, and furthermore, due to the participatory nature of the work, they display unique personalities, uncontrived by external forces. In this sense there is an enigma in Koh’s practice as he “feeds off their love story” and working with them he “translates their feelings into a fantasy world for others to understand, treading a fine line between reality and fiction.” Koh draws attention to the boundaries between public and private, particularly pertinent when working with two models that are a real life couple. In one sense his works could be described as a form of social documentation, especially in light of the fact that a day is spent cultivating a sense of freedom in front of the camera—the results are intimate rather than theatrical.



Koh Sang Woo, *What light dreams*, 2009, photograph, 64 x 44".



Koh Sang Woo, *Musical Inspiration*, 2010, photograph, 42 x 30".

The psychology and emotional intensity of the work is underscored by the photographic approach. By reversing the color and light in the exposure, Koh confers on the composition unmistakable visual electricity and intense emotional charge. Nowhere is this more explicit than in *Ideal World* (2009) that displays an intense interaction of electric blues and bright white light. As a consequence of this effect his work has been described as hyper-real romance for the digital age.

The intensity of the light and dynamic color is contrasted against the gentle application of paint to the sitter's body and face. In *Eternity* (2009) the artist has entirely covered the hair of his muse in paint, forcing the hair to lie thick and flat, like thick brushstrokes. He has also painted out the eyebrows and left rhythmic lines across the chest, neck, and hands. In *Musical Inspiration II* (2011) Koh makes marks across the face which resemble tribal markings of war paint without any of the associated aggressive characteristics. In many respects his sitters, although real people, are elevated to act as metaphors for the human condition: they come to represent Everywoman.

The metaphorical and mythological aspect of the compositions owes a great deal to the inclusion of the flower and butterfly motifs. Koh explains what the butterflies

mean for him: "To me butterflies mean freedom, the freedom that can push our cultural perspectives and social boundaries." As already indicated, the flowers recall mythological paintings of the classical tradition and are also prevalently used in traditional Asian images of idealized females. These additions made to the body with glue allow Koh to lend his sitter an exalted status within a surreal environment.

Koh Sang Woo (b.1978, Seoul; moved to the United States in 1994; currently lives in New York) has received critical acclaim at a young age and exhibited his work internationally, drawing attention in auction houses and Seoul museums alike.



Koh Sang Woo, *Spring Flower*, 2011, photograph, 21 x 30".

It will be important for Koh to continue to create new departures within his practice, fully exploiting the relationships among the various components of performance, story telling, body painting, photography, and metaphorical allusion. Keenly aware of this, he has started to explore the realm of video art. "I am aware of the natural progression toward video and have been making video work for a few years, but I am waiting for the right moment and venue

to take it further." It would also be interesting to see Koh, as a Korean American, work with Western models also, a prospect he is looking forward to with upcoming commission work: "I am looking forward to working with a range of people from across the globe in the future. So far I have only precluded celebrities as I am concerned that there must be a reality to the work, for the sake of naturalism and emotion."

At the heart of Koh Sang Woo's practice is a paradox between reality and fiction, the biographical and the surreal, and a hybrid form between performance, painting, and photography. The immediate visual impact of his work leads one to believe that his art practice is innocent and idealistic, but at the core of the artist's philosophy is a hard line on how we respond to social and cultural obligations. He shows us the world in reverse, subverting the traditional processes not just of photography and paint, but also deconstructing the way in which we look at others and see ourselves. Δ



Koh Sang Woo, *Ideal World*, 2009, photograph, 29 x 29".

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