

Faces in which to follow nature: Mee Shim's paintings reflect the juxtaposition of two cultures

by Will Bowen
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Monarch Gallery, 1205 Prospect St., is opening a new exhibition of art by a young, beautiful, promising and hard-working Korean-American female artist named Mee Kyung Shim.

Shim's current work concentrates, with a few exceptions, on face paintings. She portrays the faces and shaven heads of her young friends, both men and women. What's unique is that inside each purposely egg-shaped head are scenes of nature, implying the Far East idea of man being a part of nature or unified with nature, as in the Taoist maxim: "Follow nature." This is a stark contrast to Western notions of a split between man and nature — as in man being above nature, or the steward of nature, or nature having been created solely to serve man.



The nature elements within each of Shim's faces include colorful flowers, fish, clouds, mountains, seagulls, eagles, hummingbirds, trees and water. In most cases, there are also splashes of orange which seem to connote the koi goldfish. Sometimes one can see in the pupil of the painted figures a small reflection of an onlooker or perhaps the painter.

Shim's faces are very seductive to the eye, both riveting and hypnotic. They draw the viewer in, focus their awareness and have the uncanny ability to still the mind. The look of each subject is serene, present, and available. The viewer finds themselves becoming very close to the subjects on the emotional level. Shim considers her paintings to be a type of "mandala," an ancient visual image, stared at to



promote states of deep meditation.

“She is an old soul in a modern light,” said Marc Baza, the art consultant at Monarch Gallery. “When you look at her paintings you drop all of your surrounding elements as you are solely drawn into Mee’s artistic world within the canvas.”

Shim’s paintings vary in size from 2-foot-by-2-foot to 3-foot-by-4-foot. Some of the titles include “It Lives in You,” “Zion,” “Aura of Summer” and “My Eternal Joy Temple.”

Shim, now 35, was born and raised in Suwon, South Korea. At age 11 she began studying art with a local artist in her hometown. She completed a BFA in art at Duksung Women’s University in Seoul in 1992 and in 1999 earned her MFA from Wayne State University in Michigan.



“Art without struggle is not good art,” Shim said.

The struggle in her art work is to reconcile South Korean and American culture. She said that her work is an attempt to answer the question, “Who am I?”

“I am not exactly American and I’m not exactly Korean, anymore, either. That kind of ambiguity of identity is a big part of my art,” she said. “My figurative paintings reflect the juxtaposition of two cultures. They also wrestle with the mystic symbolism of Eastern thought — a philosophy that celebrates the intrinsic bond between man and nature. I engrave symbolic universes onto human faces to represent the philosophy that the self is united within the whole of creation.

“What I paint, I hope, will offer the viewer an opportunity for self-

reflection and unification and give people a means of discovering a self-awareness in a multicultural world.”



Leland Williamson, the owner of Monarch Gallery, is very enthusiastic about inviting visitors to his gallery for a formal opening of Shim's work, scheduled for July 17 from 6 to 9 p.m.

“This is a monumental opportunity to see Shim's work right here in La Jolla,” he said. “We will have 20 of her paintings on exhibition. I want to encourage people to come down and meet her in person and hear her presentation. She is well known for her excellent ability to explain her artwork.”



Those wishing to attend the opening may RSVP by calling (858) 454-1231. For further information visit www.monarchfineart.com.



