

The Art of Mee Shim: Portraits, Place, and Identity



Summer, 2003. Oil on canvas. 80" x 36"



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Mee Shim was born in Suwon, South Korea and studied art under Lee Jung Ji who was an adjunct professor at Hong-ik University, Seoul during her high school. Shim earned her BFA at Dukung Women's University in Seoul in 1992 and an MFA at Wayne State University in Michigan in 1999. She later taught at Indiana University, and has exhibited her work in the United States, South Korea, and Europe. The artist has lectured at several universities and her work belongs to collections throughout the states (Shim, 2010). Shim works in acrylic, oil, graphite, charcoal, and photo transfer.

Having grown up with Buddhism and Taoism, Shim seeks to combine her concept of unification between self and this world through her paintings which mix portraiture, elements of nature, and visual culture in multiple forms. Her exploration of people's connections to the natural and spiritual world culminate in realism and surrealism, rich in symbolism and cultural references. As a young child, Shim described learning the art of calligraphy in school, being taught to feel the energy and motion of creating "one beautiful stroke" (personal communication, March 16, 2017). In college, the artist was primarily exposed to Western art, specifically Renaissance, and three-dimensional rendering. After college, Shim independently studied Asian folk art which more so employ two-dimensional depictions, focusing on line and shape. Describing her use of both Eastern and Western art paradigms, Shim (2014) says, "my concept of the Western world of analytical and objective thinking contrasts with my cultural heritage. I have combined the two antithetical concepts into my own creative order in which I define my personal state of identity" (Shim, Artist Statement section, para. 2).

Buddhist and Taoist tenants embrace unification of humans within nature while Western concepts embrace the idea of man's dominion over nature. Often in Asian art, nature

is depicted with open spaces for rest, contemplation, and meditation, while Western landscapes often emphasize foreground, middle ground, and background. Shim's compositions incorporate both perspectives, layering and juxtaposing images, playing with perception. "I have been influenced by traditional oriental paintings which emphasize infinite space in which the viewer's intuition can connect or disrupt meditations on one's place in that space" (Shim, personal communication, March 13, 2017). By closely examining her work, one can see that Shim has been influenced by and embodies multiple historic and aesthetic traditions. The artist often calls her work self-portraiture and an "intercultural exchange" within herself and with those who view her work. Shim's work explores identity, often using herself as a model. Her layered concepts of identity encompasses culture, spirituality, and aesthetics, and she believes cultural identity is continually in flux, blurred, and that culture is meant to change in our global world (M. Shim, personal communication, March 16, 2017). When asked about the cultural influences on her work the artist invites the viewer to participate in making meaning, knowing that cultural assumptions will be made. Shim states:

Between my own inner psychology and what I paint is a cultural consciousness informed by the conditions of being trained both in Korean and American artistic environments and a product of Korean heritage and living in America. In this way, my paintings of myself becomes more than an affirmation of my own experience, but an act in which others can participate in intercultural exchange. (Shim, personal communication, March 13, 2017)

The observer makes connections between the visual images based on their own life experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. Likewise, students can experience a mix of Western and Eastern concepts through the work of Mee Shim.

Globalism, Multiculturalism, and Intercultural Aesthetics

As young learners are accustomed to the internet, media, and an increasing diverse population of peers, they are capable of exploring issues of globalism and multiculturalism in the art classroom. Sometimes used interchangeably, Manifold, Willis, & Zimmerman (2016) offer definitions of globalism as a worldview that unifies all of humanity and multiculturalism as the dynamics between cultures in a local place. Both definitions can ground students with a current understanding of broad concepts about society. Shim's descriptions of her identity as layered and in flux echo the ideas of Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr (2001) who describe personal cultural identity as in transition and dynamic. Yi and Kim (2005) describe traditional Korean aesthetics that is based on "unification of humans and nature, subjectivity and objectivity, and ego and spiritual concentration" as well as insight through intuition. They also state that art educators can and should discuss "cultural confluence" of multiple cultures in art with students. Likewise, Davenport (2003) discusses that intercultural understanding has not gained a significant presence in art education. Including artists who incorporate cross-cultural influences can validate students with multiple backgrounds and help all students to understand ideas of globalism and multiculturalism. Mee Shim's work is rich in visual culture from her home country of South Korea, as well as China, Japan, and India. One can see images of koi, lotus, flowers, landscapes, Chinese warriors on horses, the Minwha Tiger and Magpie story, meditating monks, Hindu gods, and Western religious icons. Discussing these images and their original sources with

students requires art educators to consider suggestions of Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki, and Wasson (1992) who propose anthropological methods of understanding art in terms of aesthetic expression and equitable representation of our diverse student population. By understanding the sources of the imagery, art teachers can convey spiritual concepts of non-Western thinking to students who may be unfamiliar. This can help students understand how art reflects the lives, places, and cultures of others.