

Art is a Verb

By David Tanner

Mee Shim - "Acculturation"



couple of talks with her during the past few years and I always come away vitalized about eastern culture, western art and even some things temporal.

There's a kind of fresh, wry quality that percolates in conversation with the artist Mee Kyung Shim. I've had a It was here that I found her again recently, this time preparing for her upcoming solo exhibition, "Acculturation" set to open May 12 at the Kachmann Gallery, one-floor below. The 38-year-old Korean-born artist's scene may have changed but her painterly themes continue along lines drawn early on in her life.

Since her youth, Mee's self-imposed challenge was and remains that of carving out identity. Is she a Korean artist? An eastern artist exploring her heritage mostly using western ways and styles? A female artist addressing notions of beauty and mythology? A narrative painter contrasting images that provoke cross-cultural examination? Are her works attempts to integrate or assimilate her native background into western aesthetics? Whatever definition one assigns to Mee's works it definitely invokes the spirit of inquiry and as such they describe some of her latest pieces as she takes on two icons of Renaissance art.

Mee emerged from a Korean, make that "South" Korean, generation left adrift in a collective cultural identity crisis in the aftermath of what is now referred to as the "Korean Conflict" which ended in the mid-1950's. Fortunate in a way that as a woman she was gifted the opportunity to pursue an education--long an exclusive male domain-- she was to learn first hand that centuries old Korean art and culture were victimized along with 1.7 million Chinese, North and South Korean and American soldiers plus another 3 million civilian casualties.

Interestingly her chance at formal learning (private, high school and university) did not include syllabuses concentrating on Korean folk and cultural history. Most, if not all, my

professors were themselves educated in Europe or the U.S." recalls Mee, "Their focus was strictly centered on Western Art. Their bias excluded eastern thinking. It was mostly about Renaissance works; so much of what I've come to learn about my heritage is based on my own experiences and studies.

"So a lot of my work reflects the differences in an 'Eastern' versus 'Western' tension. There are universal themes of nature incorporated like water, flowers, animal life and so on but I want to celebrate as much as contrast the differences in perception." And so she has done with her renditions of Botticelli's two most famous paintings, *Birth of Venus* (c. 1485) and *Primavera* (1477-78), often said to epitomize for modern viewers the spirit of the Renaissance.

According to one source Vasari described *Primavera* as "Venus as a symbol of spring, being adorned with flowers by the Graces. But the complex allegory and symbolism of the painting is still being debated in art and history circles. One thing that is agreed upon is that the work is inspired by the classical texts of Ovid and Lucretius." Likewise the *Birth* painting is alleged to have been inspired by the writings of Virgil and Homer and represents the fusion of spirit and matter.

In Mee's interpretation the figures have been morphed into Eastern portraits wrapped in robes like Buddhist monks. An androgynous Venus is substituted, still in her familiar pose but lacking breasts and flower-embroidered gown. The ever-confident artist recognizes she's entered a precarious place with these new paintings. She admits she's been influenced by the work of writer Wendy Steiner, specifically her 2001 book "Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20th-Century Art". Yet she is all-trusting of her innate ability and unfettered vision.

No doubt these new works are challenging and require some translation skills. But if power resides in putting names on things clearly the artist operates on firm footing as a literal translation of her name is "Beauty, Respect and Depth."

"My goal is to provide a good show for my audience," she adds. "I feel very lucky to be living my dream of being able to work, create art and succeed."