

Fi Jae LEE

Fi Jae Lee borders to the east with the reverberation of the Korean millenary art. From her trips to the west she collects other influences. For example, in Occident she found the weight and traces of the Surrealism, a movement located in a concrete place and time, but which, for years now, has overcome every kind of physical and time barrier.

A circumstance is imposed in an evident way on her wander. Fi's work provides in the way of her place of origin's cultural tradition. In other words, three millenniums of art project their impact on an imaginary able to absorb her own roots to transcend through the compromise with her daily routine.

It is said that one of the peculiarities of Han's country's art is to reflect and embrace human emotions. Consequently, this practise implies an open compromise with feelings, with the human factor, with History.

When Lee first arrived in BilbaoArte she did it with an unfinished work. A beautiful and complex project around folding screens, a common practise that speaks about Korean artists' quality and which has a beautiful and unique moment in IX, XIII and XIV centuries, when the Goryeo dynasty conformed its culture's identifying traits.

At first sight it reminded of a shield, as folding screens were a protection against the wind. Later, those would serve as a blocking screen to hide what should not be seen, what belonged to privacy, establishing the boundaries between what is shown and what is hidden. Finally, it became an object of pure visual delight, an ornament of desire.

In her case, Fi's shield was accomplished happily. She worked with loving care and patience on it until she revealed in each piece of her structure a fragment of human nature, a fragment of an organism, a gift of the human forms.

As west air vanquished her resistance to live in a distant land, Fi Jae began to elaborate an ambitious proposal with the patience of a goldsmith and nourished by each brush-stroke.

Fi felt and loved every corner of Biscay, every Street of Bilbao and each story of a country so different to hers that, even though, she found it highly accessible for her and her plastic universe.

Leaning almost to the immobility against the floor, surrounded by crayons that, in their order and disposition, composed a beautiful abstract piece of work, Fi turned her eyes to her hometown Seoul to look over its recent history. She pictured what she expected when she would come back. She drew the crossroads of a country that lives even the mildest circumstances with intensity.

Fi Jae Lee has such a strong and solid statement that she is able to translate it into many different types of work. From paintings to sculptures, she stands out for her use of colour and techniques. Lee describes her way of working as a way of letting the impressions of the images she sees and the experiences she lives go off her skin. She senses those ephemeral marks on her as clothes that slowly merge with her body and she revolt against it. She captures those feelings in unique pieces, making her feel shapeless and free, finding a way of keeping her beautiful memories and deep thoughts at the same time.

While she was in BilbaoArte we were lucky to watch her develop powerful and brave paintings throughout the three months long exchange programme, completing works such as *“The Mandala Project for the Million Hands Holding Candles”*, inspired by the political events that just happened in her hometown. In this painting, the lit candles held by the struggling inhabitants of South Korea would heat up Park Geun-Hye ex-president’s floor, making her leave the building. Fi Jae pictures an angel-like character waiting for Park to come out and judge her. When Lee came to Bilbao the new president was just elected and she still felt restless about the situation, which led her to the realisation of this piece.

This painting has many of the key elements to recognise Lee’s work. On one hand, we have the materials she uses; the refined gold powder, inspired by Buddhist painting, combined with ink to make the contours, and the watercolours, inspired by the colourfulness of nature to fill the shapes. On the other hand, we have the bird beak that both characters have on their faces. Birds represent everything that is imprisoned in this world for Fi Jae, and are often present in her paintings; she also represents doors, boxes or cages to depict this imprisonment.

During her residency she also worked on some clay figures based on common objects (like yogurt or toothpaste containers). This brings us to how she looks at the world. The container and the content: the prison and the object, the prison itself as an object and the object that imprisons. For Fi Jae Lee every piece of art she makes has many other pieces within, and every single fragment has completeness as a whole when looked at each part separately. She compares it to her body, feeling it as a mass that contains -and somehow imprisons- emotions and experiences. This parallelism she creates and embraces makes her art part of herself.

Her awareness of the body and consciousness of how daily events affect her, it is explained in how she senses her own self through others, and somehow she replies with her art to this recognition. She then rebels against the imprisonment of being defined and represents what once bounded her into a canvas. This creates a paradox as a defined line of creation can be identified from her work.

Confronted with works that demanded long and complex dedication, Fi Jae Lee mixed the discipline of a big artwork with the lightness of the brief sculpture. She made it possible for her strange creatures to coexist with the political chronicle, creatures that would possibly fascinate Buñuel, that Dalí would have made his, or even that Gaudí would admit with pleasure in his particular fantastic fauna, collected in the Sagrada Familia, hegemonic and free in Güell Park.

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