

Eunjung Hwang Interview

Conducted via e-mail by Corinna Ripps Schaming, curator January 2011

CRS:

Could you tell me about the title of your show, *Three Thousand Revisits*?

EH:

I like my titles to be somewhat ambiguous. In this instance, I'm thinking about all my ghost- and spirit-like like figures that seem to come out again and again in my work, like an endless form of reincarnation or *déjà vu*. There's a certain implied mysticism in the title—I think a lot about the Buddhist eternal life circle. It's poetic and comforting to think about how when you die, your soul briefly revisits all the places you've been before you go to another level of space.

CRS:

Where do your ideas come from? You seem like such a mild-mannered person, but the activities of your hybrid characters are truly perverse.

EH:

I have a fascination with all kinds of supernatural things: ghosts, superstitious beliefs. Sometimes I have vivid dreams that I think reveal fleeting, hidden truths about the human condition. I like to tap into these. I also love comic books and B movies and get ideas from them. The perverse elements are part of the fun for me.

CRS:

There's an element of playful yet disturbing menace in your films. What role does violence play in your films?

EH:

On a very basic level, I think of it as a kind of spice. It can add a visually compelling element to something ordinary or familiar. For instance, when I draw a generic smiley face it looks boring and predictable, but when I add a drippy blood line, suddenly it becomes a funny character. And I like that.

CRS:

Who are some of your favorite artists?

EH:

Francisco Goya, Hieronymus Bosch, Henry Darger.

CRS:

Does all your work begin with a hand sketch?

EH:

Yes. I'm always doodling. It's something I've done since childhood, starting at around four years old. My characters and images come out of this process in an automatic kind of way.

CRS:

When did you start exploring digital animation? Could you talk about your animations and new media works in relation to your earlier paintings and drawings?

EH:

I didn't start out at art college. Getting into art school was different in Korea. For example, you needed to be able to draw the figure super-realistically. It was a painful test that required costly training. I didn't want to go through with it, so I took art classes outside my major. I made character-based images, and I began to think about making the characters move and adding sound effects. I met an instructor with a very old Mac and he showed me how to make simple flipbook-style animations. Shortly after that I transferred to art college, where I majored in painting, increased my picture-making skills, and made my first animation.

CRS:

At what point do you develop the sound in your animations?

EH:

I always add the sound after I finish the visuals and the animation. For me, putting in the sound is the fun part.

The only digital sound program that I know is Pro Tools. I collect specific sounds—animal sounds, footsteps, et cetera—from the sound-effects library and then lay them in the right spot. I mix and match the sound footages and sound effects I've collected along the timeline of the animation. I keep playing with the sound until I hit on chaotic and weird sounds that I like. I also try to create my own strange sounds using my voice or other people's voices, or by modifying music or existing sounds.

CRS:

When did you come to New York City? How has your work changed since your arrival?

EH:

I came in 2000 to study at the School of Visual of Arts [SVA] in New York City. I hadn't used the computer that much in Korea, so I did mostly paintings. I majored in computer arts at SVA. Since then, I've done more digital work.

Part II

CRS:

In your narratives you eschew a legible storyline in favor of something more primordial or instinctive, in which you acknowledge all the terrors of life without denying its pleasure. I thought it might be interesting to echo your non-linear approach in the next stage of our interview.

When I think about your work, the following words, phrases, and ideas come to mind. I've presented them in no particular order. Please feel free to pick and choose and to respond in any manner that feels comfortable for you. Here goes:

- Escape**
- Magic**
- Ghostly apparitions**
- Fantastic possibilities of animation**
- Drawings that move through time**
- Displacement**
- Laughter and suffering**

- Fantasy/Hell/Afterlife
- Surreal dreams
- Innocence
- Fleeting realities
- Human folly

EH:

Your list, it's like a poem. I like it a lot...

Escape:

The inspiration for some of my works comes from childhood memories—childhood BEFORE I started school. After school started, the reality wasn't always fun. I remember distinct moments and thoughts from my earliest childhood. I can remember sleeping with my parents as a baby, and in the dark I saw a teapot and a thin white snake coming out of the pot. It felt scary/sad/warm at the same time. We lived in a small two-story house with a garden, a humble and peaceful home. We had many small rooms and attics.

As the youngest child, I spent many hours alone while my brothers and sisters were at school. My mom was a housewife, so she was always home doing chores: cleaning, sewing, cooking. She didn't give me too much attention, which was nice...sometimes she'd give me fruits and snacks, but other than that, she didn't bother me much. I didn't have toys, but I knew how to kill time well, playing in the garden, exploring small rooms, or sometimes running around outside the house over and over again. I would imagine being overtaken by some evil forces or disasters outside, but I always felt that I could "escape" to my peaceful shelter. When I got back inside, I always felt cozy/sheltered/protected. I thought of it as being inside the layers of cabbages. I could escape from dizzying worlds of ghosts and goblins and go back to my boringly peaceful shelter, where all I heard was the clock ticking or my mom peeling an apple. These fantastic notions and the feelings they evoked remind me of the movie *Fanny and Alexander* by Ingmar Bergman, which I love.

Ghostly apparitions:

I love ghosts. I don't like the Japanese Ringu-style ghosts because they're too scary and vengeful. I like the kind of ghost that comes and goes and is a little scary, but is more on the sad side. I think I have run into ghostly apparitions a few times. And I used to hear a lot of weird noises in my ear right before I fell asleep that I suspect came from them. These experiences happened more when I was younger.

Sometimes I think that if I trained myself, developed my psychic sense more, I could become a professional fortuneteller, but I'm too secular for that. The sense has dulled. My contact with ghosts is in my work.

Fantastic possibilities of animation:

Making my characters move and putting sounds to them is a whole other way of working for me. It's so different from making paintings and drawings. Sometimes making only one thing by hand seems so precious and vulnerable. Animation feels light and liberating by comparison.

Displacement:

I enjoy not being in a familiar place. When I first came to New York City from Korea, it felt disorienting to be surrounded by people who didn't speak my mother tongue. I think this state can actually make you sharper and more aware.

Laughter and suffering:

I see no clear or absolute line between laughter and suffering. There's an aspect of both in each, a kind of ongoing circulation between extremes that I try to reflect in my work. "Gladness becomes weeping"—I like this phrase. It comes from the book *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Amos Tutuola, which recounts the adventures of an African boy who strays into the world of the dead, where he is lost for twenty-four years.

Fantasy/Hell/Afterlife:

I think about death and reincarnation a lot and try to express something about it in my work. Death is really the only concept that interests me. I really like Buddhism even if I am not a practicing Buddhist, and the great visual icons and ideas about death in Buddhism fascinate me too. A friend of mine from South America once scanned my palm and showed it to a psychic. The psychic said I have a lot of fine lines, which means I've lived many lives already. I like the idea that I could be an old soul.

Surreal dreams:

It's fair to say that I'm a "dream junkie." I used to dream a lot more when I had a better psychic sense. I still dream a lot because I sleep a lot, and I love sleeping. Some dreams are so vivid that I have to channel that weirdness, flesh it out in my work, and somehow find some fleeting truth in it all.

Human folly:

I think a lot about disaster and the tragedy of life, how one small folly can lead to an unbearable result. I try to find ways to lighten things up through my work by inventing my own solutions to life's follies and misfortunes.