

Seung Yul Oh

b.1981

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When he was still at art school, Seung Yul Oh intrigued the audience at a one-night-only exhibition when he deep-fried all his paintings! Since then, he has made sculptures and paintings whose forms bring to mind the digestive tract and bodily functions; he has titled an exhibition *CHEW CHEW Tongue*; and made a sculptural installation that brought the building's 'intestines' (the air ducting, wiring and other bits that are usually hidden in the wall and ceiling cavities) into the viewing space.

His paintings, like *Mong Mong*, have soupy, cooked-up surfaces that spend a lot of time flat on the studio floor. The paint looks like it has been poured from a mixing bowl, or squeezed from sauce bottles with different nozzles – sometimes a fine drizzly line, sometimes a squirt. Layer upon thick layer the paint has pooled, drying slowly to form a pocked and wrinkled skin. With a very fine brush or pen, Oh delineates some of the particularly suggestive, cartoony shapes with a graphic line. Just what the image suggests, depends on your imagination; *Mong Mong* reminds me of something menacing Captain Kirk and crew might have seen moments before beaming up.

Oh was born in Korea but trained to be an artist in New Zealand, where he now lives. His work combines elements of East Asian Pop culture with ironic references to the history of Western modern art, especially to Abstract Expressionism and Jackson Pollock. He likes the 'cuteness' aesthetic in Japanese and Korean contemporary animation, toys and fashion.¹ He doodles a lot.

Oh's work looks very 'now', so you might be surprised to learn of an historical episode that prefigured his artful play. In 1951, several Jackson Pollock paintings toured Japan. They were accompanied by Hans Namuth photographs of Pollock 'dancing' as he poured paint onto big unstretched canvases on the floor. The photographs in particular inspired a young group of artists – calling themselves Gutai – to emphasise this performance aspect of Pollock's revolutionary approach.

Pollock's abandonment of the brush to apply paint to canvas was pushed further by the Gutai artists who variously used their feet; an electric toy car; a watering can held 10 feet above the canvas; and even a rifle to shoot jars of paint placed on the canvas. Chance and theatre pervaded these actions. The 'paintings' themselves were not particularly valued, being seen more as props for performances or multimedia installations.

In his installation for *Prospect 2007* at Wellington's City Gallery, Oh seemed to offer a poetic homage to the Gutai artists when he wrapped blue polythene plastic around three large columns in the gallery, creating a translucent wall. In 1956, in an outdoor exhibition held in a pine forest, the Gutai group had hung between the trees long sheets of coloured plastic that filtered the sunlight. 50 years later, Oh's blue-swathed columns in City Gallery looked very much like ghostly tree trunks. Homage or coincidence, these are the kind of moments that make art history fascinating.

Gerald Barnett

¹ Yoshitomo Nara and Takashi Murakami are two very influential contemporary Japanese artists mining East Asian popular culture and the 'cuteness' aesthetic.

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp

www.govettbrewster.com

www.starkwhite.co.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

For Historical Gutai:
www.gutai.com (select 'version francais'/select Galeries/select Expos)

For Yoshitomo Nara:
www.marianneboeskygallery.com

Web search:

Gutai

Takashi Murakami

Yoshitomo Nara

Jackson Pollock

