

Seung Yul Oh

b.1981

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Seung Yul Oh's paintings make me laugh. His paintings are so deliberately big, cartoony-stupid and brightly coloured that you want to join in the joke and giggle or guffaw along with them. Have you ever seen someone laugh in an art gallery? Should art galleries be exclusively places for quiet contemplation, or should there be room for humour?

Oh's paintings can be read as parodies of 'serious' Modernist Abstract painting. But his humour is based on irreverence rather than ridicule. He still loves painting after all. At the height of its cultural influence, during the second half of the 20th century, extravagant claims were made about the philosophical and spiritual content of abstract painting. Oh's work is very much about subverting that kind of pretension. He uses wacky, playful materials like polyfilla and popcorn; he 'mis-uses' techniques like dripping and spilling; and he elevates the humble act of doodling.

Do you doodle on your pencil case or when you are on the telephone? A doodle is an aimless, random drawing made when your attention is otherwise occupied. Imagine blowing those drawings up in size and expanding on them with colour and texture to make a painting. The Surrealists of the early 20th century were very interested in doodling as a way of tapping into the subconscious mind to see what forms might emerge. For Oh it is more like a game, but obviously he is still interested in what forms emerge. Unlike the Surrealists, though, he knows that he is excavating the brain-fill of contemporary pop culture, mass media and art history.

In this painting, heavily textured, quasi-abstract Expressionist drips and blobs are tweaked and nudged with graphic touches of black pen or brushpoint toward cute, cartoon form. But only far enough to suggest possible images. The way the forms sit on the neutral-toned, raw canvas here suggests an illusion of space. This could be a cartoon planet populated by bird-blobs. Something about the way they are arranged – perching – suggests musical notation.

There is an affinity in his work with the 'cuteness' aesthetic which pervades toys, animation, fashion and technology in East Asian Pop culture. Pop cuteness is found in the contemporary

art of the region (notably in the work of Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, two Japanese artists with international careers). The tendency is also obvious in art of younger East Asian artists asserting their identities in Europe, the United States and Australasia. The fusion of Western Modernism, traditional East Asian art forms (Chinese calligraphy and Japanese printmaking for example), cutting-edge technological advances on the Pacific rim, and exchanges between the Pop cultures of East and West, have resulted in a distinctive and influential Pop dialect mainly associated with Japan and South Korea.

Andrew Paul Wood

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