

# Women of East meet West in spiritual multilayered artwork

## GALLERY GLANCE

By Margaret Hawkins

The Andrew Bae Gallery, which opened last September on the corner where the old Tech Lighting store used to be in River North, is devoted exclusively to contemporary Asian art. The show currently up through January, "**Six Korean Women**," narrows Bae's focus further, representing the work of six mid-career Korean women, all educated in Asia and all with connections to the States. The show expresses the complex relationship between East and West, and it is interesting to note how each artist negotiates this great divide.

Color is notably absent. While a few artists use it sparingly in accent notes, none works with a full-bodied palette and this minimalism is in keeping with our notion of Asian aesthetics. Another commonality among the six artists is a concern with spiritual issues as expressed in the artists' statements, all of which are posted. This is not to say that Western artists are not aware of spiritual matters, too, but there is less mental cogitation on aesthetics, art history and postmodernism here than in the average show of American art.

Taoism, Tato (the Tao of tea), calligraphy and the processing of a mother's death are some of the themes referenced, and while most of the work tends to be non-narrative, it retains a satisfying sense of content in addition to a mastery of form and technique.

The most arresting work in the show may be that of **Young June Lew**. Her big, rough impasto paintings of disembodied dresses and combs give it a feminist spin and set it apart as imagery that addresses contemporary Asian women's experiences. The work is monochromatic with brown and ash-colored dresses hanging in space, empty of any visible figures yet occupied with spirit and a kind of vitality.

Lew says she began to paint dresses, first cut out of paper and then stained brown with coffee and glued onto canvas, when she took charge of disposing her recently deceased mother's clothes. The complicated emotions aroused by this job, no doubt heightened by the scent still lingering in the fabrics, inspired this work, which is about memory and how life extends beyond the physical body. One can only imagine how the handling of these intimate garments led to paintings in which dresses and coats seem to float like a diaphanous yet surprisingly sturdy army of ghosts.

The artist is wrestling with memory here, and the power of the dead over the living and the realization of how the past lives on in material as well as in ephemeral forms.

In her big, larger-than-life paintings of combs, Lew also takes on feminist issues as they relate to traditional roles of women in Korea. She explains that young girls were given their mothers' hand-carved wooden combs as children, and when they began to use them to groom and beautify themselves, they became women. It was then also that they assumed women's duties of service. As she puts it, "This is the comb's moment, when femininity begins." Later she says, "Over time, a comb takes a woman to loneliness and also to tranquility."

Lew's paintings are about women's relationships to their own bodies, to their mothers and to the conflicting impulses of vanity, service and self-love.

**Kwang Jean Park's** big woodblock prints, on the other hand, are abstract, suggesting forces of physics and metaphysics rather than anything in the realm of human emotion.

Studies in opposites, her work explores the Taoist concept of yin and yang, the ongoing dynamic tension that keeps the world in balance. Dark and light, motion and stasis, male and female, inside and outside, heaven and earth: these are her themes. Park sums up these dualities in sweeping curves and deep, inky black arcs in a pure abstraction that reminds us that Asian brush painters discovered the power of nonrepresentational mark-



"Chair (Journey 01-16)," mixed media on canvas by Young June Lew, is representative of the artist's impasto paintings of brown, monochromatic disembodied dresses exploring life beyond the physical body.

making centuries before abstract expressionism.

**Soon Shil Baik** also contemplates Taoism in her work, which condenses the natural world into dense patterns. Inspired by the meditative ritual of tea drinking and her visits to tea fields, these small paintings present abstracted views of leafy shapes and lotus-like forms that encapsulate the elegance of plant life and suggest voluptuous landscapes with a few dots and brush strokes.

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Glass artist **Dale Chihuly** has said he wants his work to appear to have come from nature, so that if someone found it in the forest they might think it belonged there.

This is more than a bit of a stretch for the wildly baroque creations of the famed sculptor, which appear more likely to have blown in from outer space than to have grown on planet Earth.

And for just that reason, his installation at the Garfield Park Conservatory is simply magical.

Chihuly created this series of organic sculptures to be integrated into the conservatory's plantings, so that his work—fantasies of plant life in glass—appears to be growing, floating and otherwise co-existing among the other life forms there. Illuminated with dramatic stage lighting and tucked among the extensive gardens, the work glows with mystery and joy.

The conservatory is a fabulous place, anyway, and well worth a trip on its own. Designed in 1907 by Jens Jensen, who is known as the father of Prairie-style landscape architecture, it is a vast and towering glass structure full of fragrant trees, ferns, palms, banana plants, cactus, moss and all nature of exotic flora.

Into this paradise Chihuly has introduced his glass sculpture, which references both the glass conservatory structure and its botanical contents. Placed high up in trees, or hidden among dense growth, the fragile blossoms look startlingly like nature turned up a notch and at the same time like spun sugar confections.

Possibly the most wonderful of all are Chihuly's colored glass Nijima balls—as big as beach balls—mysteriously floating in the central pond as fish and turtles swim around below, amicably bumping them as if they are friendly aliens who dropped in for a visit. This is the ultimate sweet-smelling urban escape, offering both nature and fantasy in the heart of the city and only a half-block from the Lake Street L stop. Plan to be there after dark for maximum dramatic effect.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.

### Six Korean Women Artists

■ Andrew Bae Gallery, 300 W. Superior  
 ■ Through Jan. 31  
 ■ (312) 335-8601

### Chihuly in the Park: A Garden of Glass

■ Garfield Park Conservatory, 300 N. Central Park  
 ■ Through May 19  
 ■ (312) 746-5100