

ART GALLERIES

REVIEW

Leeah Joo's storytelling works

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Tribune art critic

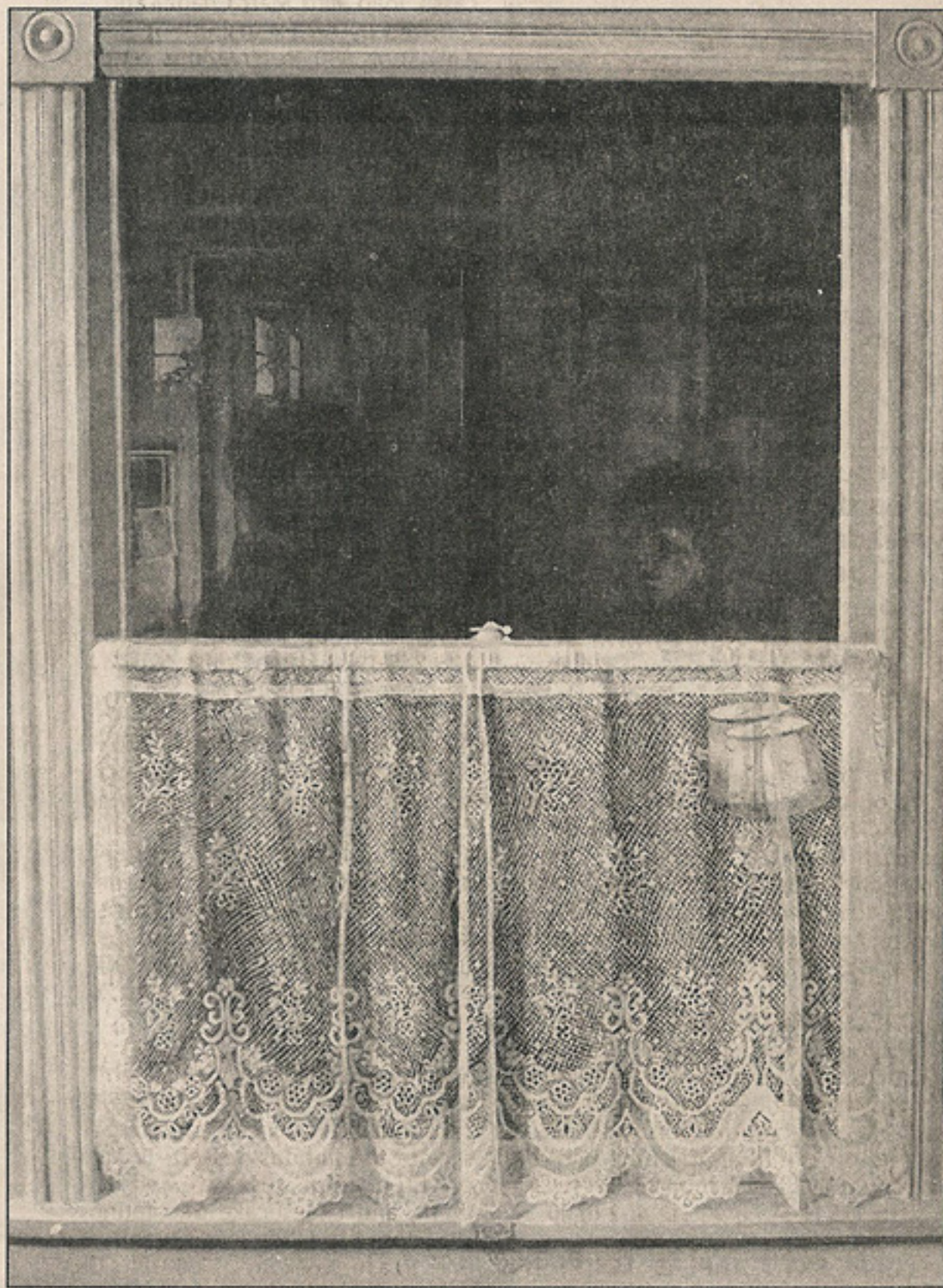
The conservatism that now is seen in even so-called cutting-edge painting is much in evidence in the figurative work of Leeah Joo, at the Andrew Bae Gallery.

Joo, 34, is a realist who tells stories in her paintings. Not so long ago neither young realists nor storytellers had a chance to be taken seriously by the contemporary art community. But chiefly thanks to John Currin, who attended the Yale School of Art as did Joo, prejudices began to drop away, and today the technique that long was scorned as mere craft is enthusiastically accepted, as is a tendency toward open-ended narrative.

Unlike Currin and another Yale alumna, Lisa Yuskavage, Joo seems to be a dyed-in-the-wool realist interested in creating narratives out of direct observation rather than distorting fantasy or sexual politics. This, along with an absence of any tendency that can be passed off as "conceptual," may ultimately keep her from being discussed in the highest contemporary art circles, but they are known for a short attention span and any spotlight coming from them moves on rapidly.

Joo, however, has a theme that shows the possibility of lasting provocation: She paints windows—her own and those of others, from inside and out. So the viewer continually is cast in the role of voyeur, piecing together clues of domestic dramas. Only once, in "Fireworks on 4th of July," do the clues become overtly titillating. Mostly, we observe in reflections and dimly perceived interiors the unsensational signs of daily life that the artist has heightened ever so slightly.

The major exceptions are Korean-style windows with elaborate latticework and translucent paper or glass. Here only



"Truly Medium," by Leeah Joo, demonstrates great complexity.

silhouettes of figures are visible, and Joo uses them to communicate more mysterious encounters growing out of non-Western folktales or traditions. The most prominent one appears in "The Fortuneteller," in which the movement of a suspended needle foretells the gender of a child to an expectant mother.

Pregnant women, mothers and children appear in several paintings, glimpsed through or reflected in Western-style, double-hung windows. Often the likenesses are of the artist and her infant child, but that is al-

most irrelevant, as the figures are more forms to be manipulated than archetypes or universal symbols.

In "Before B, After B," for example, one painting in the diptych presents two pregnant women in a bedroom that has an apparent easel. The other painting shows a mother and child multiplied in reflection as they regard a nocturnal street scene. The two together imply a passage of time and change of role for the woman. But the most commanding aspect of the painting is the complexity of what Joo records on the glass,

mirrored from both inside and outside, but given to us simultaneously as overlapping reflections we have to untangle.

Sometimes viewers are inside, looking out from one building and across, into another window. But just as often, we're hovering outside, peering in while catching reflections of scenes that are in our space, theoretically behind us. This kind of play recalls the work of certain Photo Realist painters from decades ago, but the vision now is more warmly painted and made to appear more human by Joo's domestic storytelling.

At 300 W. Superior St., through April 9. 312-335-8601.

Diane Simpson

For more than 30 years, Diane Simpson has been one of the most individual sculptors working in the Chicago area. She has drawn upon such diverse sources as American farm architecture and Japanese armor, bringing together the influences in works of diverse and unusual materials that convey both flatness and three-dimensionality.

Simpson's new sculptures at the I Space Gallery are accompanied by working drawings that are engrossing in their own right. However, the purpose of the juxtaposition is to indicate the development of 10 freestanding and wall-mounted pieces that are at once pure and seductive, allusive and fantastic.

Each piece is part of an "Apron" series that refers in shape or detail to the protective article of apparel. But Simpson's combination of materials—metal, fabric, plastic mesh, paint, linoleum—also recalls something of American design in the '30s and '40s, if not earlier, giving a richness that is held in check by an almost puritan rigor. This work is inimitable.

At 230 W. Superior St., through April 2. 312-587-9976.

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