

Things Hidden Since the Beginning of the World

by Liviu Tanasoica

I carefully lifted the creature from the desk. I held it in my hands as if it were a baby. Its limbs were stubby. It had no fingers or toes. It had a black glistening button-like eye on the forehead. Actually, I am not sure if it was an eye or a mouth. Maybe it could be both. It wriggled to get away from me. I recollect the scene of holding this creature many times. I miss the creature. I want to see it and touch it again.

Thus begins a recollection of a dream Minyoung Choi once had, which led to the creation of the fleshy stars she affectionately calls "Slightly Frightened Creatures" (SFCs). Playful, yet subtly menacing given their formless, featureless structure, it's impossible to figure out where they come from in *Living Room*, or by which laws of evolution they multiply, yet they invade this typical household space and throw it into surreality with ease.

Perhaps that's the best description one can give to Choi: an unashamed, metamodern Surrealist. She intends her paintings to be "extensions of the state of dreaming", tapping into the same respected trope once described by André Breton as the "superior reality of certain forces of previously neglected associations" - the omnipotent power of Dreams. If ever the curators of that recent blockbuster show at Tate Modern needed more evidence of the matter, Choi is the perfect demonstration that Surrealism was never a stylistic current purely confined to historical Modernity. It became a breathing life force that permeated into contemporaneity, allowing Choi to charge representation with a primal power harking back to our ancient, collective unconscious. We've perhaps forgotten this, but once upon a time we invested images with supernatural powers, ontologically linked to the things they represented. Since then, we have built innumerable rituals on top of these images, increasingly complex, yet evermore removed from the original associations which stood at the basis of the image, evermore removed from their original sacrality.

Choi can perform an archeology of this stratum because her art is the result of a vast personal mythology which transcends borders and cultures. Growing up at the turn of the millennium in multiple distinct spaces - Korea, California, Japan - and maturing as an artist in the UK, she has assimilated influences as diverse as concepts from Buddhist philosophy, Shintoist ideas from the cartoons of Hayao Miyazaki, Confucianism, Western religious oil painting, the works of Giorgio de Chirico and Renée Magritte (have you noticed the mirror in *Living Room*?), or Sumukhwa (commonly known as ink wash painting), to name just a few. Her imaginarium thus taps into a personal unconscious where she has sedimented precious symbols as memories acquired from different places. Her mind is now a collection of symbols personal, yet universal, eerily familiar. In *Blue Cat*, her oversized central character acquires totemic qualities as she presides over another familiar space, in a time which seems outside of time itself, encouraging her minions to interact with the SFCs that play mindlessly on

her domain. After painting much of them captive in tanks in previous works, Choi has released her two characters from *Sleeping Fish* into the ocean. Again, she suspends the subject matter in *illo tempore*: the central, oversized fish appearing to us as an ancient creature, forever sleeping at the bottom of an ocean floor. Much like the cat, the way Choi has depicted the animal endows the pictorial space with an eerie, dignified presence which makes the creature the unmistakable god of its aquatic domain. Meanwhile, in *Moon Ritual*, the artist constructs a space through which a sacred experience permeates, where mysterious cloaked figures seem to perform an incantation on giant snowballs that mirror the fullness of the moon. Again, her roots offer a clue as to the peculiar gesturality of the group performing the ritual: their meticulousness recalls the attention to detail implied in aspects of Korean day-to-day life like table setting, where profound respect towards the rules of dining and its participants echoes Confucianist ethics. The painting is thus sacred, but without invoking any particular sacralty.

This breadth of influence, the fact that her pictorial consciousness has matured in such different places, allows Choi to reverse engineer that layer which psychoanalysts believe deposits symbols of our transcultural past. Irrespective of our backgrounds, it's easy to resonate with and be captivated by her works. The palette of colours she uses accentuates a certain feeling of familiarity, giving her work a digital quality we have certainly become accustomed to. This is no coincidence, as the artist grew up surrounded by screens, just when the personal computer became the most powerful driving force in our pop culture. Burning filaments in diodes are her sources of light, and that light is rendered back onto the canvas as bright paint. Her works are perfectly portable to pixels, much more so than a lot of contemporary painting, and can be easily consumed on Instagram on screens with infinite contrast ratios, by people who have momentarily forgotten materiality and have chosen to live parts of their lives saturated with commodified digital images. She admits herself that her paintings are "accidentally photogenic", much to the artist's contrary desire for them to be experienced in the flesh. This is a consequence of the light sources she chooses in her paintings, and the unusual choice of colour and texture meant to accentuate the surreality of her characters.

When experienced in person though, the sheer material size and quality of Minyoung Choi's works dwarf any digital experience of the same. In their presence, the viewer is compelled to snap out of Instagram and back into the gallery, where they are reminded that there are things hidden since the beginning of the world, sacred things *still* ineffable, from a time when humans and animals coexisted in ecological balance, when the animal was respected, dignified, and revered as a god, things only paintings like hers now have the power to render back onto us as feelings. And perhaps if one looks closely enough, the archetype within will resurface those ancient feelings of empathy, awe, and mystique, so dearly yearned for in an age of arrogant secularism and anthropocentrism.