

## Atmospheric conditions Medicine, Meditation, Metaphor

By Kris Vagner

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"Talking about art is like trying to French kiss over the telephone," said artist Terry Allen.

But here goes.

Ask 10 people what art is supposed to do, what it's for, what it's all about, and you'll get more than 10 different answers.

Here's one way to look at it: You could say it's an artist's responsibility to train his or her perceptions to show us some part of life as it is, to see things closely, then give us a version of the world we can relate to. It can be comforting to find like-minded observers in the same rain-soaked, flood-threatened boat. Good examples: R. Crumb, Tom Waits.

Or you could say artists should take it upon themselves to do the opposite, to collect raw data about life and synthesize it into some self-contained sanctuary, a haven from the drudge, to give us, in other words, something beautiful. Good example: Mark Rothko.

Then there are those optimists who do neither, or, something in between.

The painter Hee Sook Kim cites her influences: childhood memories, herbal medicine, Asian philosophy, identity (that of a female, Korean-born former New Yorker, in particular), spiritualism (especially as it relates to nature), a reassessment of things after Sept. 11. Any of these has the potential, when translated to painting, to drag it to the ground and pin viewers under didactic weight.

But Kim's compact, pleasantly bleary paintings, now on display in the Main Gallery at Truckee Meadows Community College, nearly levitate.

In the exhibition *Medicine, Meditation, Metaphor*, she gives us something that's not quite fiction. It's a glimpse into the world of her mind that's somehow personal but not at all confessional. She doesn't make a clear statement about any of the above-listed themes, but neither is her artwork obtuse or secretive.

Specimens of medicinal herbs--embedded in waxy surfaces on a grid of 50 8-by-10-inch canvases--look like livelier, contemporary-art versions of traditional botanical drawings. Hazy pinks and oranges rendered in a meld of watercolor and acrylic paint, undefined splotches of baby blues and muted yellows (East Coast sunset colors, the Pennsylvania-based artist calls them) are the backgrounds.

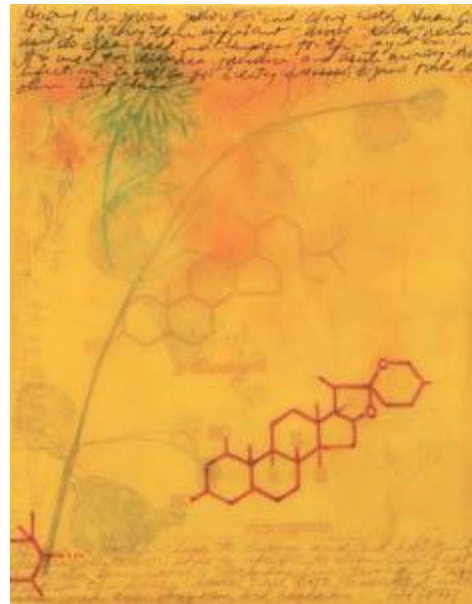
"Medicine" is a group of six small mixed-media paintings with the materials applied in separate layers. Neat lines of Korean type and snippets of English text, both from botany textbooks, are held floating by almost-clear acrylic polymer on top of chemical diagrams. Scribbles and sparse ink drawings of plants hover above the paintings' thick, translucent layers. There's the slightest wisp of tension between materials when polymer resists ink, which pools on the surface.

Kim has whittled her own language out of visual symbols and used it to make paintings that are comparable to haikus, concise and more atmospheric than narrative.

The paintings have a distinct, airy tone, and they allude to personal mysteries. There are no outright explanations or stories, but there are threads of Kim's history left here and there to grasp if you want and to follow where you will.

A look at Kim's paintings is far juicier than a discussion about them. *Medicine, Meditation, Metaphor* works in a way that's comparable to instrumental music. It has a distinct mood and aesthetic without needing to have a point or a message.

But then again, as either Laurie Anderson or Frank Zappa said (the quote is variously attributed, depending where you find it),



Hee Sook Kim uses translucent layers of writing, ink drawings, textbook illustrations of medicinal herbs, and transparent acrylic to convey a subtle, atmospheric sense of her history in "Medicine," a series of six paintings. PHOTO BY DAVID ROBERT

"Talking about music is like dancing about architecture."