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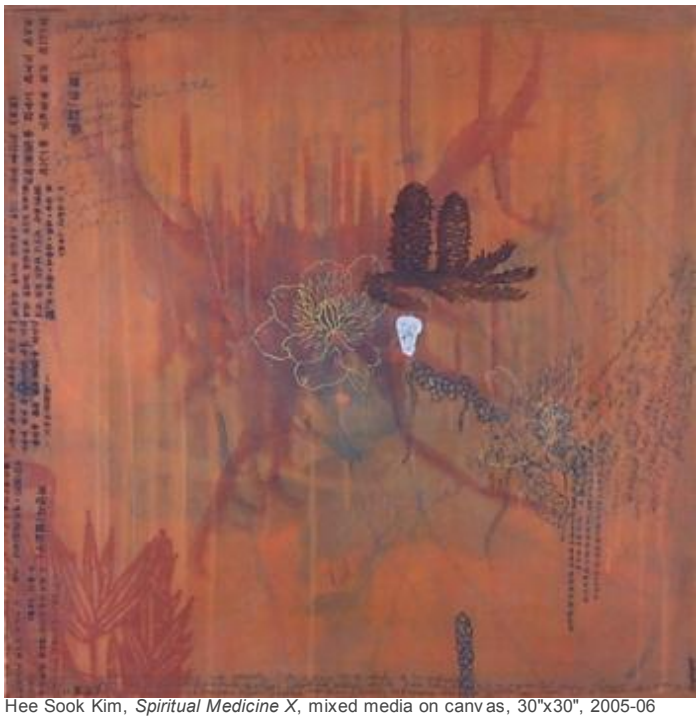
Hee Sook Kim, *Spiritual Medicine X*, mixed media on canvas, 30"x30", 2005-06

Philadelphia Introductions: Hee Sook Kim

by
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Hee Sook Kim's current work is part of a conscious turn to a practice of healing following September 11, 2001. Born and raised in Korea where she studied printmaking and painting, Kim moved to New York City in 1989 to do further graduate work in printmaking. She remained in New York, teaching at numerous schools and working as a master printer at The Printmaking Workshop, where Robert Blackburn became a mentor. Following September 11 her family was unable to leave their apartment for a week and, as she described it, "it took six months to clean the air of death out of our neighborhood." The next year she accepted a job at Haverford College and moved to Pennsylvania.

The development of Kim's work reflects traditions of Korean art as well as reactions to the extremely different social, linguistic, and artistic situation she found in New York. She acknowledges an awkwardness with the language and feelings of foreignness while understanding that American culture is inherently a culture of immigrants. Her situation is both alien and central to the American condition. The Korean art world she left, reflecting the larger culture, had been very male-dominated. In the late 90s Kim reacted to the freedom of women in the West with constructed pieces of overtly-feminist content. She combined materials associated with gender and sexuality including lipstick, condoms, women's gloves and panties. *Iron Woman* consisted of shoulder-length white lace gloves, filled with dried flowers; they were hung against a red background and attached to the frame with large nails. *Head Size* was a wall-piece of four circular saw-blades, labeled A, B, C, D; protruding from each was a condom filled with ever more dried beans, so that D hung longer than C, which hung longer than B... The works were serious and ironic, humorous and unsettling; they acknowledged precedents in Surrealism, Pop Art, and the political use of clothing and domestic objects by women such as Mimi Smith, Pat Oleszko, and Martha Rosler.

The clearest connection between the feminist constructions and Kim's post 9/11 work is a concern for transparency and layering. All of her art involves one thing seen through another; the current paintings are palimpsests whose multiple layers evoke the evolution of knowledge through time as well as growth and decay in the cycle of nature. In seeking a source of healing Kim turned to memories of her grandmother's garden, which led her to the medicinal uses of plants. While she had previously incorporated organic imagery, since 2003 (when she had a residency in Taos) Kim has concentrated her subject matter on medicinal herbs. Kim has studied the use of botanical remedies throughout history and across cultures. She sees this as an extension of her earlier interest in spirituality.

Kim collects specimens of herbs wherever she travels; they become models for some work; in others she makes impressions from the specimens and in still others she incorporates the actual plant material. She combines these with botanical illustrations and anatomical charts from herbals as well as their multi-lingual texts. Bits of writing become graphic elements, sometimes inverted, sometimes in mirror image, and text from an herbal is occasionally transcribed along the edge of a painting. Kim considers the multi-cultural sources of the plants and herbals as part of a project of tolerance and mutual respect; all cultures have learned to use available plants for cures, and all have something to teach.

The works incorporate multiple layers of technique as well as multiple layers of imagery and writing. Kim's paintings resemble encaustic but their slightly-milky surfaces are actually a polymer-based medium. She experimented with encaustic but found it too

fragile, and the polymer medium gave her a similar effect of translucency and a similar surface. The polymer medium also allows her to work in water-based paints, a preference which derives from her Korean training. When Kim paints on canvas, images for one or two of the layers are usually transferred via silkscreen. Her prints are usually combinations of methods (lithography, silkscreen, intaglio). One large series ("Spiritual Medicine," 2006) combined painting and collage on paper, glued to panels; it also incorporated plant materials, screen-printed images and handwriting. Recognizable imagery and text are juxtaposed with abstract forms, some of which look as though they were done with a resist method, like batik. In fact much of Kim's work has visual analogies with textiles, which often make use of layered patterns. The complexity of the technique as well as the incorporation of printmaking ideas and methods into paintings reminds me of the similarly-inventive technique of Paul Klee.

Kim has a natural graphic sensibility which is particularly clear when she exhibits works in series, as she does with some of the smaller-scale pieces. She prefers to hang the panels of "Spiritual Medicine" in a grid of fifty, which she considers a single work even though panels have been sold separately. Much of her work stays within a single chromatic range, or plays with two color groups among the equally soft roses, hydrangea blues, honeyed yellows, and fern greens which Kim favors. They might naturally be identified as the "yellow painting" or the "blue one." I think the most effective paintings employ the narrowest range; they achieve a density and richness that derive from the complexity and depth of multiple layers rather than chromatic contrasts across the surface. These subtle, monochrome works divulge their imagery slowly. They repay the time spent.

Most of the paintings are a square format; I mentioned that within Western painting square formats are unusual and always a conscious compositional challenge for the artist. Kim said that Korean art traditionally puts great emphasis on the edges of a painting, with the implication that the motif extends beyond their limits. She also associates the bifold symmetry of the square canvas with the circle of the universe. Kim's serial, multi-layered work acknowledges the universality of man's ongoing study of plants and the medicinal substances they yield. It is also an homage to nature and the endless source of succor it offers.

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