

# Jiha Moon Rooted

Jan. 21 - Feb. 14, 2020

**Feb. 5: Artist Lecture, 6 p.m., AD120**  
**Feb. 6: Reception/Gallery Talk, Noon-1 p.m.**



## Gallery Guide

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## **Artist Statement**

Moon gestural paintings, mixed media, ceramic sculpture and installation explore fluid identities and the global movement of people and their cultures. She says “I am a cartographer of cultures and an icon maker in my lucid worlds.” She is taking cues from wide ranges of history of Eastern and Western art, colors and designs from popular culture, Korean temple paintings and folk art, internet emoticons and icons, fruit stickers and labels of products from all over the place. She often teases and changes these lexicons so that they are hard to identify, yet stay in a familiar zone.

## **Artist Bio**

**Jiha Moon** (b. 1973) is from DaeGu, Korea and lives and works in Atlanta, GA. She received her MFA from the University of Iowa, Iowa City. Her works have been acquired by Asia Society, New York, NY, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, The Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC, Smithsonian Institute, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, Weatherspoon Museum of Art, Greensboro, NC and The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA.

She has had solo exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, GA, Taubman Museum, Roanoke, VA, the Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC, The Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville, TN and Rhodes College, Clough-Hanson Gallery, Memphis, TN and James Gallery of CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY.

She has been included in group shows at Kemper Museum, Kansas City, MI, the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA, the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA, Asia Society, New York, NY, The Drawing Center, New York, NY, White Columns, New York, NY, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA, and the Weatherspoon Museum of Art, Greensboro, NC.

he is recipient of prestigious Joan Mitchell foundation’s painter and sculptor’s award for 2011. Her mid-career survey exhibition, “Double Welcome: Most everyone’s mad here” organized by Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art and Taubman Museum has toured more than 10 museum venues around the country until 2018.

*JIHA MOON: ROOTED*

THE NEW GALLERY AT AUSTIN PEAY STATE UNIVERSITY

JANUARY 21-FEBRUARY 14, 2020

CURATOR: MICHAEL DICKINS

As a student who came of age in the so-called “identity politics generation,” the process of becoming political was (for me) a collaboration between the classroom and the streets as I navigated with my cohort a shared territory between protest marches, reading groups, and embodied practices of friendship and ally-making.<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality was our watchword as we did the hard work of de-tangling the thickly mired layers of our various privileges and oppressions and held space for others as they came to terms with their own. Despite what others have violently written off as “snowflake behavior,” the impact of identity politics on contemporary culture cannot be denied, nor can the dissolution of historically inherited separations between personal and collective political action. The wake of identity politics is visible and vast: drag culture has made it to the mainstream, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have unleashed an awareness of and accountability for naturalized discriminatory injustices; discussions of cultural appropriation loom large in the world of professionalized sports. Rare is the artform that does not engage with a struggle, and common is the artist who is criticized from abstaining. Once a slogan of second-wave feminists, it seems now that the personal can never not be political as the visibility and social connection for groups historically displaced by the cruel march of Western, white, heterosexual, male-presenting cultural imperialism continues to rise above board. Identity politics has indeed taken root.

But as the rhetoric and ethics of identity politics accommodates itself to the values and language of institutional, everyday life, what consequences unfold as the antagonistic origins of this movement inches closer to accessibility? What is gained and lost when political struggles domesticate themselves to the operations of daily life? Moreover, what kinds of formulaic propositions emerge once identity politics becomes attached to a process of definition as opposed to a process of accumulating complexity? What is lost or covered over in the process of representing and “rooting” identity linguistically as well as visually? These questions seem to manifest in exciting and complicated ways in the work of artist Jiha Moon and take powerful shape in the current constellation of works presented in *Rooted* at The New Gallery. Aware of the complicated climate of identity politics at the personal and cultural level, Moon’s work deconstructs the dependence of visuality and perception on orienting and synthesizing identity. By intermixing genres and materials—from acrylic to earthenware, Hanji paper to synthetic hair—Moon manages to confuse and scramble appearances and assumptions alike.

In this way, Moon’s conscious antagonism of the paradoxes and fallacies inherent in the representation of identity reverberates with a range of contemporary aesthetic practices

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Jiha Moon for her patient responses to my questions and generous collegiality throughout this process, and to curator Michael Dickins for the opportunity to write and think through this incredible work at this urgent political time and to take risks in my writing and conception of this essay. His extension of grace and kindness is a lovely thing.

without appropriating or diametrically opposing them—hers is a politics of the dialectics of identity and an encounter with the mis-nomations that follow from identity done badly. Moon is not alone in asking these kinds of difficult questions: the conceptual work of artists like Jimmy Durham, David Hammons, and Mary Kelly whose critique of the various visual and performative assumptions of identity marked themselves as first-generation responses to identity politics and the work of artists like Adrian Piper, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Kori Newkirk whose oeuvres bypass the mere representation of identity altogether in order to ask questions of the matrix of signification are Moon's historical and ideological compatriots. It is between and within these discourses that *Rooted* takes shape—how does the politics of visibility engage the politics of identity today? What is the consequence of emphasizing the visual in the construction of narratives of identity?

While there are clear conceptual relationships between all of Moon's series of work, her ceramic-based vessels and wall-hangings seem to resonate the most overtly with the politics of visibility and identity. This perhaps has to do with Moon's mobilization of conditions of portraiture in these two bodies of work; fragments of facial features (mouths, teeth, eyes, ears, hair, and apertures that subtly signify the orifices of the head) lead viewers to find, organize, and identify with the image and subsequently, extend personhood to the inanimate object. Works such as *LOL* (2015)—a bulbous darkly painted vessel formally akin to those found in ancient Mesopotamian, Persian, Greco-Roman, and Chinese cultures is sliced open at the base by a crescent shaped gaping mouth and covered with softly rounded balls painted with Korean characters and anime-like faces—force the viewer to think through, if not outright LOL, at the assemblage of these traditions and forms and to detach themselves from a need for singular “origins.” For Moon, it is the admixture and tensions following the rise of contemporary politics of multiculturalism that stand as the most exciting spaces to build an aesthetic practice from, and the realization that visual signals are powerful in their ability to provoke and upend expectations of how objects (and perhaps people) are expected to present to the world. Mobilizing forms and styles often labeled in Western museums as “traditional,” “ancient,” or “pre-modern” point to Moon's powerful critique of the politics of categorization and subsequent primitivization of practices deemed non-Western, or in this day-and-age, “global”—what is meant in the leveraging of identification and ordering? Who gets to construct that label? What kinds of value judgments lie in the wake of using “traditional forms”? What kind of viewer is universalized in the beholding of objects in museum and gallery settings? Who is doing the laughing in Moon's *LOL*, and what tone does that laughter take?

These questions take a more playful but no less powerful form in Moon's wall hangings—a “tradition” that manifests in a constellation of visual practices from indigenous cultures of Meso-America and European medieval tapestry work, to the commemorative Victorian embroidery practices and Haitian Voodoo wall totems. Art-historically rich, Moon's wall hangings engage all and none of these culturally relevant narratives, edging their visual bets in the midst of them without ever settling or binding to them directly. *White Tiger* (2014) and *Double Ginger* (2014) are excellent examples of Moon's amagmatic praxis: fragments of ceramic work are twisted into knotted entanglements, often set in place with braided vines and swishy streams of synthetic hair, plastic beads and children's hair barrettes nestle themselves

within nests of twisted wire and worn shreds of leather, ragged shoelaces, and Hanji beads made from traditional Korean paper processes. Reveling in their handmade qualities as crafted objects, Moon's acute ability to allow "form to follow function" indicates a deep engagement with the ideological idioms of high modernism and the demands of formalism as well—entangled concepts reveal themselves as entangled materiality, their associations interwoven into very objects themselves. The titles name these objects in curious ways, describing colors and tones that can be seen or gathered from the assortment of "stuff" and point to the politicized nature of color when leveraged onto bodies and groups ("ginger" is expressed as a derogatory word for redheads, especially in the United Kingdom, and yet is an indispensable foundation of many Asian cuisines and one of the first international luxury goods, while "white tigers" feature prominently in the mythological histories of both Chinese and Korean cultures alike but has recently been inflicted as a racial slur towards players of color on university football teams). Again, Moon's willful confusion of visual culture and cultural origins are spread and scrambled in these works, which leaves much of the burden of identification on the viewer. What happens when the consequences of naming and unpacking origins and identity is left for the viewer to parse through? What kinds of connections and mistakes are possible, and what do they reveal about the impulse to name and identify using our eyes (and imparted assumptions) only? What do these objects tell us about what they are, and how can appearances impart and confuse our knowledge of an "other"? What do we know about an object, and how much more are we willing to learn or un-learn in the process of looking?

These debates appear in current discourses on the philosophy of race, which now highlight the contingent and historical nature of "race" as a category of identity and that despite a complex history of biological essentialism in the presentation of racial typologies, what remains clear is the ways in which racial formations have always been organized and hierarchized according to social contingencies and political views of the moment.<sup>2</sup> This has been made clear in the violent constructions of race as biological in the United States' "one-drop rule"—an idea that Adrien Piper reminds us remains persistent in contemporary readings of racial identity and that the contingency of race, especially at the borders of its categories, points to the social constructed nature of the impulse to classify and contain identity in the first place.<sup>3</sup> It seems that in an identity politics of now, what is more urgent is the recognition of one's relationship to the name and classification itself and the powerful forces that determine who and what gets a name and how. Pressing into a future of Identity Politics 2.0, Moon's work potently reminds us that a name—an identity—is a constellation of intervening discourses and contingencies that are not always obvious or truthful, but confusion, ideological, and up for reconstruction always.

--Dr. Jordan Amirkhani, January 2020

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Omi and Howard Winant's book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, New York: Routledge, 1986/1994 for more information about histories of racial categorization and the politics of classification.

<sup>3</sup> See Adrian Piper's essay "Passing for Black, Passing for White," in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996; and Noel Ignatiev's book *How the Irish Became White*, New York: Routledge Press, 1995 for more on the social constructed nature of race.

**Jiha Moon: Rooted**  
**Image List**

1. *Blue Yolo Yellow Onion*, 2016 - Ink and Acrylic, Tie-dye cotton fabric, gold leaf on Hanji
2. *Yellow Dust*, 2012 - Ink & Acrylic, Spray paint on Hanji
3. *The Story I did not know about*, 2014 - Ink and acrylic on Hanji
4. *Forever Couplehood (Watcher)*, 2017 - Vintage screen print, Ink and acrylic on Hanji
5. *Kudzu Yolo*, 2017 - Ink and Acrylic, Hanji on Mylar
6. *Kudzu Floating*, 2017 - Ink and Acrylic, Hanji on Mylar
7. *Kudzu Cartography of Sakura*, 2017 - Ink and Acrylic, nail decals, Hanji on Mylar
8. *Genie 2019 Genie (Yellow)*, 2019 - Lithograph and screen print, nail decals (Flying Horse Edition published)
9. *Lucky Monster, Keep Calm and Carry On*, 2019 - Lithograph and screen print (Landfall press published)
10. *Chung*, 2017 - Earthenware, underglaze, glaze, wire, synthetic hair, Shredded jean
11. *Maya*, 2015 - Earthenware, underglaze, glaze, synthetic braid hair, pony beads, wire
12. *Hello Monkey*, 2013 - Ceramic, Hand- Knotted Synthetic Hair, Found Objects, Pony Beads and Wire
13. *Lahr*, 2014 - Ceramic, Hand-Knotted Synthetic Hair, Found Objects, Plastic Beads and Wire
14. *Hosoon*, 2013 - Ceramic, Hand-Knotted Synthetic Hair, Pony Beads, Shells, Thread and Wire
15. *White Tiger*, 2014 - Ceramic, Hand-Knotted Synthetic Hair, Found Objects, Beads, Plastic Hair Barrettes and Wire
16. *Double Ginger*, 2014 - Ceramic, Hand-Knotted Synthetic Hair, Found Objects, Hanji-Beads, Shoe-laces, Leather and Wire
17. *Owl Lady*, 2014 - Ceramic, Hand- Knotted Synthetic Hair, Plastic Beads, Found Objects, Shoe-laces and Wire
18. *Gloria*, 2013 - Ceramic, Hand-Knotted Synthetic Hair, Acrylic Paint, Found Object.
19. *LOL*, 2015 - Earthenware, underglaze, glaze
20. *Blue Frog*, 2017 - Earthenware, glaze, synthetic hair, found object,
21. *Yolo*, 2015 - Porcelain, underglaze, glaze, Synthetic hair
22. *Pierrot*, 2019 - Porcelain, underglaze, glaze, synthetic hair, Hanji beads, found object
23. *Peach Vase*, 2013 - Earthenware, glaze
24. *Hello Katie*, 2015 - Ceramic, synthetic hair, wire, Hanji beads, found object.