

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art **Reviews**

## Jiha Moon's Artistic Breakthrough

It is precisely Moon's openness to using any source that makes her work flamboyant, captivating, odd, funny, smart, uncanny, comically monstrous, and unsettling. And, most of all, over the top.



by John Yau  
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Jiha Moon, "Yellowwave (Stranger Yellow)" (2021), ink and acrylic on Hanji mounted on canvas, 60 x 120 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Derek Eller New York)

I first met Jiha Moon in 2000, when she was in the MFA program at the University of Iowa. Later, I learned that she was born in Daegu, South Korea, in 1973, and came to the United States in the late 1990s, after earning her BFA and MFA in Korea. At that point, she was working largely in painting and printmaking. In 2012, she was awarded a grant from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, which she used to sign up at a local clay studio in Atlanta, where she has lived for many years.

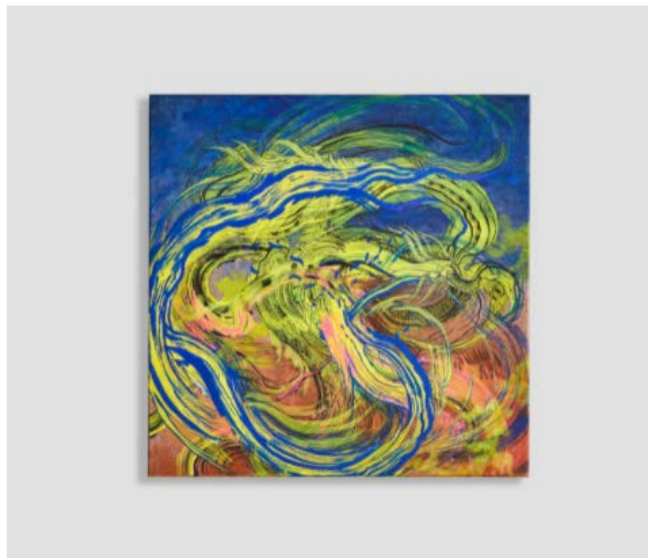
The reason I mention these facts about Moon's life is that in her current exhibition of paintings and ceramics, Jiha Moon: Stranger Yellow at Derek Eller Gallery (January 6 – February 5, 2022), she joins together images and symbols from the different cultures where she has lived, from her upbringing in a city known for its textiles (Daegu) to her many years as a resident of the only city to be set on fire during the Civil War, the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement, and the city where a man, targeting Asian women, shot six to death during another wave of anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021.



Installation view of Jiha Moon: *Stranger Yellow* at Derek Eller New York

In nearly every work, the color yellow — as stylized brushstroke, sinuous wave, or banana peel — plays a role. While some might see Moon's work as a hybrid of East and West, I agree with the great Antillean writer Edouard Glissant that "hybrid" conveys predictability. Glissant's term "creolization," which underscores the continuous flux and absorption of different cultures and locales, more accurately characterizes Moon's bricoleur approach to living in the Diaspora. That's because I always encounter something unpredictable in her art. And it is precisely her openness to using any source — from classic Asian symbols to kitsch fantasy to Pop art to mall culture to Korean and American folk art — that makes her work flamboyant, captivating, odd, funny, smart, uncanny, comically monstrous, and unsettling. And, most of all, over the top.

There were times at the exhibition when I did not know how I was supposed to feel while looking at one of Moon's works, which achieve a deliciously vertiginous state of ambivalence by bringing together a wide variety of diverse cultural sources. Moon has clearly pushed her work into fresh territory, and in her ceramics and paintings she is making that territory her own. Her art does not resemble anyone else's, and for that alone she should be getting far more attention than she has.



Jiha Moon, "Yellowwave (Blue)" (2021), ink and acrylic on Hanji mounted on canvas, 20 x 20 inches

The painting “Yellowwave (Stranger Yellow)” (2021) is a diptych done in ink and acrylic on Hanji, a traditional handmade Korean paper that dates back to the first century BCE, mounted on canvas. Moon’s materials remind viewers that her roots are not in Western painting, even as it has had an impact on her thinking and processes.

Using a palette dominated by yellow with touches of turquoise, blue, and brown, she depicts ribbon-like waves extending in from both sides toward the center. Overlapping as well as running parallel to each other, the layered waves partially cover four small rectangles, two in each panel. In one of the panels is the silhouette of a turtle, as if seen from above, while the others convey different levels of legibility.

The strength of “Yellowwave (Stranger Yellow)” lies in the ambiguity of the waves. Are they stylized brushstrokes, blond tresses, or animated gusts of wind blowing across a landscape where we can glimpse fences, a symbol of two birds kissing, and the silhouettes of fortune cookies and turtles? Moon has moved away from her earlier, more literal reference (Roy Lichtenstein’s graphic image of a brushstroke) by dislodging it from any one-to-one reading. Starting out as a quotation, the brushstroke has morphed into another resonant sign in her expanding vocabulary.

In the painting “Yellowwave (Blue)” (2021), using a palette of deep blues, faded reds, yellows, and blacks, Moon depicts a blue and yellow streaked wave-brushstroke winding (or unwinding) within the square format. The wave-brushstroke transforms into a creature that seems equal parts phoenix, dragon, snake, and squid. Her evocation of a state of continuous change has roots in Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings and the depictions of mythic dragons and phoenixes, which are mortal enemies, found throughout Asian art.



Jiha Moon, “Lucky Face” (2021), earthenware, underglaze, glaze, synthetic hair, 12.75 x 9.5 x 4.5 inches

This seems to me the breakthrough that Moon has made in her paintings: they are an amalgamation of Eastern and Western sources, which cannot be easily taken apart. The joining of the two has become seamless.

If the exhibition consisted only of the three paintings, it would still amount to a remarkable accomplishment that addresses the construction of an unpredictable identity by someone living in the Diaspora. The fact that it also contains more than 20 ceramic works elevates this show to another level. The simplest way to characterize her ceramics is to state that she has merged the vessel with a creature. Sometimes the creature has a head, torso, and feet. Other times it is just a head, signified by a large, garish mouth full of menacing teeth.

In her ceramics, Moon has synthesized face jugs, teapots, and incense burners. She glazes and paints the entire surface, both inside and outside, and attaches various objects, including ceramic fortune cookies, banana peels, pinkish round forms topped by red nipples, and synthetic hair. I think of her ceramics as household gods, mythic creatures, animal spirits, dolls, and idols, whose exact motivations remain elusive. Are they benign or sinister presences? Do they protect us? Or are they tricksters?



Jiha Moon, "Full Moon Face Jug" (2021), stoneware, earthenware, porcelain slip, underglaze, glaze, 17.5 x 13.5 x 8 inches

What connects this diverse body of work is Moon's penchant for painting images and/or patterns on the surface, as well as adding on different representational objects. The result is a complex figural presence, which resists any quick reading. One sign of her increasing deftness is her repeated use of ceramic fortune cookies, which retain their recognizable shape, but become different in each work, depending on how she paints their surface, and where they are placed. They can be eyes, ears, hats, or handles. Meanwhile, the images she depicts run the gamut, from Milagros to Asian pop culture, from cosmic signs to comic symbols. By layering and colliding images from different cultures and beliefs, and by adding unwieldy things to the surface, Moon underscores how difficult it is for an Asian woman to navigate American culture in order to make a space of one's own, to quote Virginia Woolf. Moon has made that space with this exhibition; it is a big space, which I am sure she will make even bigger.

Jiha Moon: *Stranger Yellow* continues at Derek Eller Gallery (300 Broome Street, Manhattan) through February 5.