

# Jiha Moon

in Conversation with  
**SARAH CHERRY**







Courtesy of the Stanley Museum of Art  
Photo by Adrian Carmenate



Jiha Moon's gestural paintings, mixed media, ceramic sculpture, and installations explore fluid identities and global circulation of peoples and cultures. Her work layers cultural elements such as emoticons and text, fashion, and Pop references blending humor and irony into global collages. Moon, a gifted versatile painter, printmaker, and ceramicist, works in a variety of media, from ink and acrylic on Hanji (Korean mulberry paper) to porcelain sculpture accented with synthetic hair and ornamentation. Her sculptures combine found objects, fibers, and atypical color-infused glazes and offer up their own mythological magnitude and presence, as if animated beyond their vessel-like scale.



*Yellow Dust (Still Life with Haetae)*, 2023  
Ink and acrylic on Hanji mounted on canvas, 48 x 48 inches  
Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery



With past and upcoming exhibitions at Laney Contemporary, representation at art fairs, placement in notable collections, and numerous group and institutional solo shows, Moon is an indefatigable creative force. She recently sat down with Sarah Cherry, Laney Contemporary's Assistant Director, to discuss origins, ideas, and exciting things to come.

**Sarah Cherry:** Jiha, you have been busy! Your work ethic has been something Susan [Susan Laney, Founder, Laney Contemporary] and I have always admired.

**Jiha Moon:** Thank you! I feel useful and alive. I like to stay active because it makes me feel that my art community is a busy and fun place to be.

**SC:** In the last year you started a position as professor of art at Florida State University (FSU). In 2023, you were awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. What an honor! Recently you completed an artist-in-residence at the Arkansas Museum of Fine Art AND a mural at the Stanley Museum for the University of Iowa (UI).

**JM:** Yes, it has been quite a busy year, and I am thankful to have tackled everything you mentioned. Through the Guggenheim Fellowship, I was able to re-establish my studio in Tallahassee, which was quite challenging with the move to a new state. Geographically, Tallahassee is closer to Savannah than Atlanta! The FSU Art Department has been amazingly supportive of my practice as well. Then, the Iowa mural project at Stanley Museum just opened up my possibilities! Me and my team (my husband and son plus students from FSU and UI) finished this project in 10 days. I have learned so much.

**SC:** You are co-curating an exhibition with Veronica Kessenich this fall at Laney Contemporary, and you have an upcoming solo with Derek Eller in New York. And we are thrilled to announce that we will be exhibiting your work at Untitled Art alongside James Benjamin Franklin during Art Basel / Miami Art Week in December.

On top of all these academic and artistic honors, you received your United States citizenship back in January. How incredible to have you officially be a part of the American voice.

**JM:** Thank you! The whole process was very emotional. I had been thinking about becoming a U.S. citizen, but I had to think it through which is why it took so long. I am excited that I can vote this year!

**SC:** Let's go back in time a bit. You have lived in the United States for 25 years. Was it difficult for you to leave the familiarity of South Korea? Was studying in

America something you had dreamed about?

**JM:** I wanted to pursue my second MFA in America after earning my first one at Ewha Womans University. Initially, I planned to return to Korea but things changed. Plans are just plans, and sometimes they shift. When considering my study abroad options I had to choose between the U.S. and Europe. The freedom and ideas behind abstract painting and modernism in America greatly appealed to me, and made the decision easy.

**SC:** Was there fear in facing an unfamiliar Western world and the stereotypical "starving artist" lifestyle, or did you leave South Korea with a sense of determination and confidence that you would find the "American Dream?"

**JM:** The idea of the "starving artist" is pervasive and frightening because it leads to misconceptions about what artists do. I think it's as damaging as the myth of the "genius artist" that art history has created, which some people believe religiously. I didn't pursue the "American Dream" because I didn't understand or believe in it. Instead, I wanted to experience new cultures, engage in new conversations, and make new friends. I wanted to escape my old situation, relocate, and see if I could create new images, which excited me the most. Of course, I was confident because I knew nothing. 😊

**SC:** The United States is a melting pot of cultures. It is my experience that many people are pulled into your work because they see both the familiar and unfamiliar, the exotic and the mundane. What is foreign is subjective and your work confronts this concept head on.

At what point in the timeline after moving to the United States did you discover your definitive visual voice? Was it during college at the University of Iowa that you first combined iconography and symbols from the past and present, East and West? Or did you start exploring these concepts during your studies in Korea?

**JM:** I was a figurative painter for a long time in Korea. I made lots of bad paintings during my three years in Iowa. I tried this and that, exploring ideas to visualize and it was definitely a transitional period. I combined photo-realism and surrealism to create family portraits in a technicolor style for a while. Then I explored the idea of landscapes referencing kudzu, road signs, animals, and weather patterns to create emotions and narratives. Just lots of experimenting with images and colors. The real paintings got started after I left grad school, when I didn't have a studio. That's where I discovered my true materials: water



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based media and Hanji paper.

**SC:** Your visual vocabulary includes dynamic mark-making and unconventional explorations of color and materials. Your signature “yellowwave” is a perfect example of incorporating lucid shades of yellow and undulating linework. Yellow is so powerful, so essential to the story you are trying to tell. Can you explain to our audience the significance of the color yellow within your body of work?

**JM:** Yellow is the color of gold, yet it can also be used as a derogatory term to describe Asian people in this country. It’s also the color of The Simpsons and the smiley face emoji. I love the duality of this color, as it reflects what I want to express in my work. My Yellowwave series aims to uplift and celebrate the Asian and Asian American communities in the States and beyond.

**SC:** What role does humor play within your ceramics and two-dimensional work?

**JM:** I say this often: No one wants to be lectured about serious issues. Like my teenage son, he already knows when I start nagging. Humor can be a

powerful tool to engage people and spark conversation about important topics. Combining it with my visual language (colors, forms, textures, choice of materials) can create an impactful way to communicate those messages.

For example, I began painting a peach to symbolize goodness from Eastern traditions and mythology. Then it evolved to include an angry bird image when my son was a toddler, eventually coming to represent motherhood. These evolutions are important, but I tend to approach them with a light and playful tone.

**SC:** The theme for this year’s *Untitled Art* presentation is “East meets West.” I couldn’t think of a more perfect person to participate in this conversation. Susan and I are really looking forward to presenting your work alongside James Benjamin Franklin, a first generation Filipino American.

As we mentioned earlier, you have lived in the United States for 25 years now. Can you tell me a bit about your Asian identity then versus now... What changes have you seen regarding your interpretations of that identity?

**JM:** I am very excited to participate in *Untitled* with you all! I don’t typically think about my identity when I work. I just dive in and work. Of course, when I think about the first time I arrived here in the U.S., I feel I have come a long way. One’s identity is not something fixed, or that we are just born with. We are learning that it is constantly shifting, changing, in flux. And it can be very subtle.

**SC:** Can you tell us what we can expect to see with this particular body of work for Miami? Any new approaches and imagery we can look forward to seeing?

**JM:** Yes, along with my ceramic sculptures, I am working on hybrid paintings that I am combining with ceramic components. I use acrylic on Hanji (Korean mulberry paper) mounted panels and incorporate them with three-dimensional ceramic parts. I am working on paintings and ceramics side by side and working on each stage carefully. It is a meticulous yet intuitive process.

**SC:** You recently told Susan and I that you still feel uncomfortable in certain situations. Uncomfortable being a Korean, uncomfortable being an American, a mother, an artist.

◀ *Yellowwave Banana*, 2023. Earthenware, underglaze, glaze, 12.75 x 10.5 x 10.5 inches

▶ *Night Eyes*, 2020. Earthenware, underglaze, glaze, 10.5 x 7 x 5.5 inches





From my perspective, it seemed like you were speaking to the stress of existing in all these worlds and maintaining multiple identities. Do you sometimes create to cope? Does creating assist or hinder you in navigating your emotions?

**JM:** All the different roles in my life are important foundations for my art. I'm not uncomfortable with the challenges. I just wish I had more time, or another version of myself to work faster. However, as I get older, I recognize the importance of pausing, breathing, and taking care of myself so I can continue this work for longer. I love what I do and find immense joy in it. I also understand that it's okay not to have everything exactly as I desire. Working with imperfection is an essential part of the process.

As for coping skills, I play with my two poodles, Miso and Pickle. I love them so much, and they love me back unconditionally! I walk with them twice a day. I walk and walk. It became my meditative routine.

**SC:** The "emotion" exhibition taking place this fall at Laney Contemporary is a group show of seven female artists that you are participating in and co-curating with Veronica Kessenich. Can you tell us about the concepts and considerations for this exhibition?

**JM:** Yes! I am very excited about co-curating *emotion* with Veronica. She has been championing my work and the work of other women artists. When she was Director at Atlanta Contemporary Art Center she helped me curate an online exhibition, *Out Loud* where we showcased some of the amazing Korean, and Korean American Artists fundraising to support the Asian community in Atlanta. From there we started talking about *emotion*.

What are the most important considerations when looking at art? For me, emotion is a crucial and positive aspect of experiencing art. However, the word "emotion" often carries a negative connotation in our everyday lives. Phrases like "you are too emotional" or "women are too emotional" suggest that having emotions is a flaw.

Why is that? Emotion is often associated with being uneducated, out of control, attributed to women or children, and generally viewed as something negative. This societal bias diminishes the value of emotion, despite its essential role in human experience and artistic expression.

At the inception of this group exhibition, I began noticing that artists I love are using emotion in a pronounced way. Artists in this show employ crude and expressive brush strokes, aggressive color choices, and unconventional materials to convey strong emo-



tions in their narratives. None of them are shy about their approaches. They boldly embrace their emotional expression.

Each of the artists reveal their vulnerability as an essential feature of their storytelling, reminding us that artists are integral members of society, not distant observers. They are not only creators but also mothers, teachers, persons of color, and immigrants. Artists talk about their motherhood, their vulnerable selves as powerful beings, childhood memories, womanhood, and life and death through their work, in loud and quiet ways.

**SC:** Who are the participating artists? Can you talk about why you chose them to engage in this visual conversation?

**JM:** As I seek out support systems in the art community, I find myself drawn to artists who share similar traits and interests, and whose work is amazing. Many of them happen to be female artists, although this





Like, 2015. Ink and acrylic,  
nail decals on Hanji, 58 x 42 inches











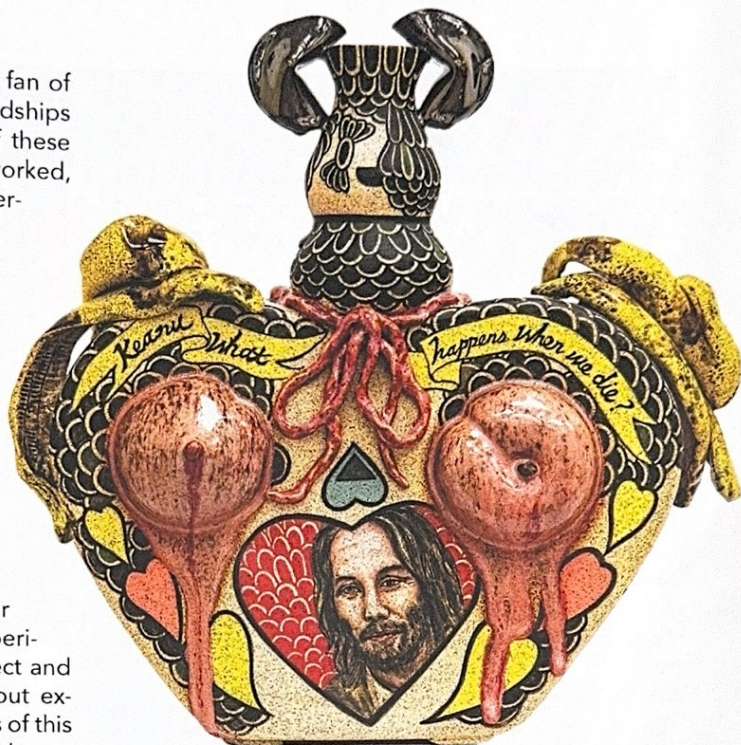
wasn't intentional. I'm an artist, but I'm also a fan of other artists. I love them and want to build friendships where we can communicate openly. Many of these artists are from places where I've lived and worked, like Atlanta and New York, but most of our interactions happen through social media, email, or phone. I know these artists are incredible, not just in their work but in how they power through their struggles, just like everyone else.

The participating artists are Tori Tinsley, Dawn Black, Judy Rushin-Knopf, Mie Yim, Victoria Dugger, Raheleh Filsoofi, and myself. From paintings to works on paper and textile sculptures, there are commonalities and diversities among the artists' works. I hope viewers engage with these pieces, listening to their inner voices and reflecting on their own experiences. Artists are "out loud" sometimes - direct and funny, but also subtle. They are not shy about expressing their emotion, which is the main focus of this show. Several works deal with taboos imposed by society. Artists are also just people. If you take a second to think about that, it will open your mind to see more.

**SC:** One of the works you created for the emotion exhibition includes a quote by Keanu Reeves. Who doesn't love Keanu?! I see his beautiful face incorporated on several new ceramics on your Instagram (@moonjiha) as well. Why has he been making an appearance in your work as of late?

**JM:** Keanu Reeves is the most recent addition to my image vocabulary. I was watching his interview with Stephen Colbert, where Colbert asked him, "Keanu, what happens when we die?" Keanu's response, "I know the people who love us will miss us," hit me like a brick. Having lost my dad a few years ago, I often think about life and death. This moment resonated deeply with me, and I wanted to bring that emotion to the core of my work. Can I create sincere art that explores life and death without being too literal? This question led me to start painting Keanu and incorporating some of his quotes. He has now become one of my visual icons - alongside peaches, bananas, blue willow, and others.

**SC:** For nearly two decades, peaches and bananas have been peppered throughout your work. I think



the audience would love to learn about the significance of each fruit and why you incorporate them within your work?

**JM:** The banana peel has become one of my iconic symbols over time. Initially, I used it to reference the derogatory terms applied to second- or third-generation Asian Americans. I often incorporate it in a subversive manner, mixed with humor, to address this issue. While working on my sculptures and paintings, I frequently leave banana peels around my studio and observe their process of decay. This process makes me reflect on life, death, and womanhood.

Society often glorifies youth as an ideal form of beauty, promoting anti-aging products that make us feel less valuable as we age. Watching banana peels decay and return to nature, I find a meaningful beauty in natural decay. I started this series to juxtapose these themes with Keanu Reeves' favorite saying, highlighting our brief time on earth.

The peach began as a spiritual icon in my work, representing my South Korean heritage. It is a protective symbol and is believed to chase evil spirits from your loved ones. After moving to Atlanta and living there for over 20 years, the peach began to symbolize my Southern life. When I became a mother, the peach became synonymous with motherhood. I love how my peaches look like body parts such as breasts or a baby's butt. How can one fruit be so versatile?

◀ Work in progress, detail. Photo courtesy of the artist and Jason Masters for Little Rock Soirée

▶ What Happens When We Die?, 2024. Earthenware, glaze, underglaze, 15.75 x 16.5 x 5 inches. Courtesy of Derek Eller Gallery



**SC:** *When traveling in New Mexico last summer I came across an abundance of milagros (religious charms) and immediately thought of your work. They reinforce your belief that images hold power. I love the way you integrate them within your work, whether through painting and drawing or physically applying them to a sculpture or painting.*

*Were milagros something you stumbled upon while traveling? Have you always enjoyed incorporating found and precious objects within your work? And was collecting small trinkets something you did as a child?*

**JM:** I've always been interested in folk belief systems around the world and how they intersect with major religions like Catholicism and Buddhism. My family in Korea is Catholic, and I find folk art fascinating because it often reflects how people blend their belief systems in quirky and unexpected ways. You can see religious aspects combined with local folk beliefs, which gives me a lot to think about regarding humanity. Milagros, for example, are visual evidence of this blending. I personalize these shapes and infuse them with my own stories, incorporating elements like my son's face, praying hands, emojis, and more.

**SC:** *I have an obsession with mythology. I incorporate mythological creatures often within my personal work because I find their origins and abilities fascinating, and their designs dynamic and iconic. I illustrate these creatures to give them life; to keep the story alive.*

*When I began working at Laney Contemporary I was immediately drawn to your imagery and stylization. Within your work viewers can discover dragons (symbols of protection, wisdom, and power), Bonghwangs (Phoenix-like creatures that symbolize immortality), and Haetae (unicorn/lion-like creatures that protect against fire and represent justice), among many*



*Haetae (pink light), 2023. Ink and acrylic on Hanji mounted on canvas, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery*

*others. You also create mythical hybrids.*

*What fuels your fascination with mythological creatures? When did this appreciation begin, and why do they continue to make appearances in your work? Are there any new creatures making appearances?*

**JM:** Yes, I love them too – they're like my own superheroes in a fantasy world. The world around us can seem helpless, but my studio is a powerful place where I create my own narratives. Lately, I've been exploring a lot of East Asian mythological creatures based on real animals. It's fascinating how the Asian Zodiac combines mythical beings like dragons with familiar animals like dogs and rabbits, each embodying positive, empowering traits.

I wrote my Guggenheim Fellowship proposal based on a manifesto centered around Haetae, creating paintings and ceramic sculptures in 2023, and I'm still experimenting with this concept. Instead of relying solely on traditional references, I've started looking into my personal life for inspiration. I'm observing my pets – two miniature poodles named Miso and Pickle – and incorporating their features and expressions into my work. I enjoy combining something powerful with something ridiculous, much like how I often blend a tiger pattern with a rotten banana skin – juxtaposing strength with vulnerability. ♦

*Laney Contemporary is deeply committed to engaging diverse artistic communities in the South through thoughtful curatorial endeavors that include both regional and international artists. "emotion" is on view at Laney Contemporary through November 2, 2024. And for those of you headed to Miami for the fairs this December, please stop by Untitled Art, booth A17 to say hello.*

