

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Desire*, an exhibition by Eunkang Koh, at the Western Nevada College Bristlecone Gallery from May 15 – September 14, 2023. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Josie Glassberg, who provided the following essay.

Who We Really Are

Creating art about late capitalism seems like a safe bet. Without a strong point of view and a clear sense of medium, it's only natural to reflect what we live inside of – a framework that shows up no matter what, making new commentary on consumer culture the easiest thing an artist can do and the hardest thing an artist can do well.

Eunkang Koh can do it very well. For almost twenty years, Koh has been redressing postmodern despair as overt desire, straddling deep paradigms and shimmering surfaces, appeal and disgust, the simultaneous need to empty and feed our egos.

In her latest body of work, titled *Desire*, Koh takes an oblique look at the human condition, using the world of animal and food imagery that she has drawn and sewn into existence over the years to repeat a few favorite assertions and make some new claims, too.

Hanging on the walls, Koh's print intaglio animals do their usual thing: looking vaguely, grotesquely human and posing as our food. Loosely based on animals from Korean mythology and Buddhist philosophy, the creatures also appear quite Jungian in their dreamlike, detached, and sometimes dismembered states.

Popsicle Full of Heads is one example that is exactly what it sounds like. In this black and white print, popsicle



Popsicle Full of Heads, intaglio, collagraph, chin collé, 2019.

sticks end in animal heads instead of lollipops. You stare at a rabbit-head and the rabbit-head stares back at you. Or a fish. Or a chicken. Or a human head. Perhaps each animal is a persona you wear or the shadows of the traits you won't claim, but still possess. Perhaps they are the Buddhist embodiment of hungry ghosts – beings that haunt their own lives, never whole, insatiable in their desires.

Another muted intaglio, titled *Gold Surprise* depicts the kind of shrink-wrapped items you might find in the meat or fish department of a grocery store, but



instead of ambiguous cuts of flesh there are distinct animal heads with all features intact and eyes open. A weasel, a camel, and a chicken seem to be farther gone and look away, but a brown fish in the center of the print stares back at you from underneath the confines of her plastic wrap. The eye contact is jarring, for sure, but the most surprising revelation is that eye contact is all you need to remind yourself of what eating animals actually entails. Or maybe the reminder is that it's you who is on ice, simultaneously dead and alive.



Gold Surprise, intaglio, collagraph, chin collé, 2020.

Not every piece deals with the downside of consumption. Instead of animals as food, Koh's most recent intaglios feature animals and food. Emus pose next to popsicles, lizards sun themselves on avocados, ducks hold limes, and various mammals, fishes, and birds hover around glasses of overstuffed Bloody Marys. Most of these prints are brightly hand-colored and semi-tesselated, clever and witty and with a burgeoning light-heartedness that edges on pleasure.



After Three Glasses of Bloody Mary, multiple-color intaglio, 2019.

This departure from unsettling animals is – according to Koh – a direct result of the artist's need to be present with pleasure during the pandemic lockdown, using her work as both a coping mechanism and source of personal celebration.

In one celebratory print, a flock of quail scurry across a blue background dotted with colorful, hard candy. As they run, the birds claim pieces for themselves, holding the striped balls tight with their human limbs, looking at the viewer with their human eyes as if to say, "What more could we want?" Coming from our animal-selves, this is the kind of pure pleasure that likes candy but does not yearn for it; wants to pick it up, but can never keep it for very long.

Further in the gallery, food takes center stage with Koh's display of seventy-five exquisite, inedible doughnuts. Affixed to the wall on neat aluminum pastry trays, the soft sculptures are accompanied by white plaster-cast hands, fingers, and a tongue, which appear to reach directly out of the wall towards the desserts. Though the bodiless parts never have a chance of touching or tasting, they are nonetheless a visual reminder that no one can ever have the doughnuts, upping their imagined value and steepening the curve for despair.





Doughnut Dreams, screen printing, sewing, relief, five aluminum trays, 2021.

From far away, the doughnuts can only be mistaken for the real thing if you are squinting, and even then, the bright colors and craft-store materials might give them away. Up close, they are clearly screen-printed and uninterested in appearing realistic. In one specimen, pom poms become sprinkles, sewn into place in the same uneven way that they might stick to chocolate. In another, a piece of white yarn is “drizzled” across the top of the pastry like piped frosting. My favorite doughnut, though, is plain glazed – a circle covered in fluffy white tulle, like a DIY wedding scunci.

Even with the prospect of a mouthful of tulle, the initial desire to eat a doughnut is very, very strong and the disappointment is very real when no actual doughnuts materialize. Koh is clever here, creating a piece that is only completed by the mimetic desire and eventual letdown of the beholder; a phenomenon that shares analogous experience with social media. You are looking at photos of food, yes – like the kind Koh painstakingly draws for Instagram – but more simply, you are just online, engaging in any number of dopamine feedback loops. Commenting, getting likes, getting trolled. All attention is good enough attention to keep the machine of desire going indefinitely...it doesn't quite matter if it's triggered by desserts or an algorithm.

This is all a pretty good trap if the aim is to notice compulsion because there is nothing better to eat than doughnuts and there is nothing better to post than a tray of fancy ones. This invitation – implicit in the imagery of Koh's doughnuts – gives the gallery a bit of a Selfie World vibe that aligns with the artist's affinity for objects that exist somewhere in between physical and online spaces.

The last artwork in the gallery – titled *Watching* – also lives between worlds. Made up of approximately fifteen hundred individual block-printed, hand-sewn eyes, Koh's soft sculpture installation creeps across the wall and piles onto the floor, watching you watch the doughnuts with the same human eyes that belong to Koh's intaglio animals. Or do the eyes belong to internet anons? Hungry ghosts? God? In these contexts, the gaze is not a neutral, naked eyeball, but



Watching, relief printing, sewing, installation, 2021.



a panopticon of animal, digital, and metaphysical witnesses that we imagine might help us, condemn us, or simply leave us alone.

Koh never tells us who the eyes belong to, but I like to think it is the quail, watching our depraved doughnut-based desires spiral out of control while they suck on hard candy, addicted – like us – to sugar and attention.

Josie Glassberg

Reno, Nevada

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Eunkang Koh

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