



Looking at the World Through the Eyes of MeeNa Park

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Through a playful approach to painting and drawing, Korean artist MeeNa Park nurtures a deep investigation into visual systems that bind our world through colour, symbols and language.

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IMAGES: Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Stickers of hearts, flowers and Doraemon are plastered over the honey-loving Winnie the Pooh. Elmo and his colourful friends are decorated with drawings of squares, rectangles and scribbles of Korean characters. Upon first glance one may mistake it for a child's colouring book. Memories of your own childhood may even flood in with warmth. This is both the curious allure and delightful surprise in the multifaceted work of MeeNa Park.



MeeNa Park, 12 Colors Drawing III, 2015, colored pencils on coloring page, 33 x 25.5 cm each (12, 1 set); 12 Colors Drawing IV, 2015, colored pencils on coloring page, 33 x 25.5 cm each (12, 1 set).

Image courtesy of Kukje Gallery.

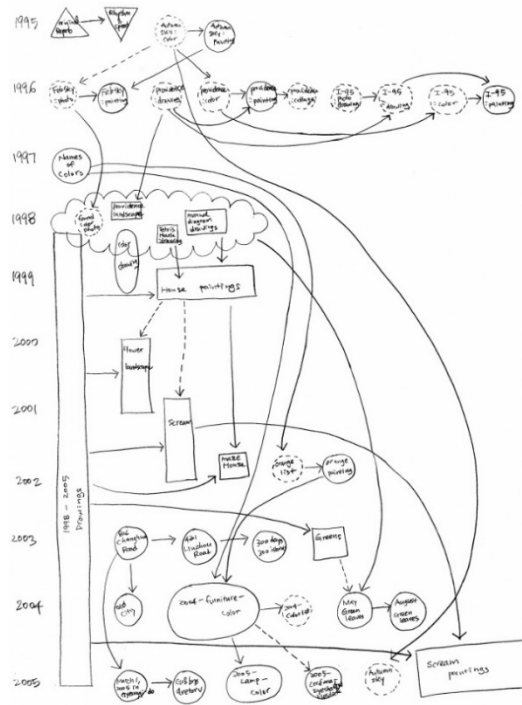
Born to a middle-class family, Park remembers with fondness a childhood growing up in the 1970s and 80s, in an apartment in metropolitan Seoul at a time of economic reform and rapid industrialization. While both parents were away at work, Park occupied her hours with colouring books, eating spam and watching cartoons such as Sesame Street and Superman. Such was the norm of her formative years.

During her years at Rhode Island School of Design studying painting, Park became embroiled in the identity politics of minorities that was all the hype of 1990s America. Her Korean heritage—or more broadly, Asian—became a frustrating focus; that is until a pivotal incident where she covered the classroom walls with thousands of ink circles on squares of hanji paper overnight. The bold statement earned her the respect of professors and peers alike. She went on to graduate school at Hunter College and it was in this time that she began her obsession with using colouring books, sparking an intuitive drawing practice which complements her painting practice.

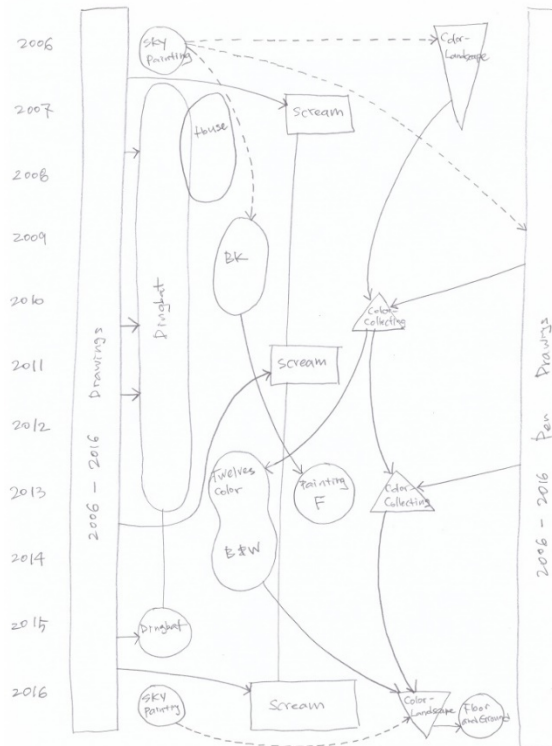


Artist portrait of MeeNa Park. Image courtesy of Sejin Park and Kukje Gallery.

“I felt like I wanted to restart thinking about art and in order for me to do that, I needed to go back to basics,” said Park. While painting is a long, drawn-out process that requires planning and patience, taking pen, crayons and stickers to a colouring book is, on the contrary, fast, instinctual and liberating. The colouring book, as a pedagogical tool for young children, also presented Park with a return to the most primitive form of a visual system that taught us shapes, alphabets, numbers and simple analytical concepts as young children. Between 1999 and 2012, Park produced more than 800 colouring book drawings. It has since become an on-going process to this day like an old habit, she said.



Artist portrait of MeeNa Park. Image courtesy of Sejin Park and Kukje Gallery.



A diagram drawn by MeeNa Park, describing the lines of relations within her body of work in 2016. Image courtesy of Kukje Gallery.

Tracing her “Autumn Sky” paintings from 1995 where she sought to collect the colours of the sky through painting the sky at a prescribed time and location everyday for 30 days, we come to “February Sky” (1995–96). Photographing the sky for 30 days, Park then selected a single, representative colour for each day and created a swatch painting. This swatch painting and this act of collecting shades of a colour return in 2002, culminating in Orange Painting (2002–03). Park recalls receiving a peculiar phone call one day with a vague and puzzling request for an orange painting. At the time, Park had one painting that fit this broad description, only to be turned down because its orientation was incorrect—portrait instead of landscape—and the shades of orange were not what the caller wanted. The call left her thinking about ideas of individual interpretations of colour and orientation. The baffling request sparked Park to seek out tubes of acrylic painting in as many shades of orange as she could find and create a striped, horizontal painting mocked up with a generic IKEA sofa underneath. It was Park’s imaginative answer to the call.

This quest to “collect colours” is another indispensable part of Park’s artistic process that feeds through all of her work. “I’m interested in so called public colour and trying to make a landscape out of it,” she explains. “Think of it this way, for example, if you’re walking from here to Seoul station, it takes about maybe 30 minutes. If you experience 30 minutes of visual stimulation and then translate that onto a flat surface, what kind of image will you get? That’s the very basic thought process that I go through,” says Park.



(left) MeeNa Park, Titanium Scream, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 80 cm; (right) Green Scream, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180 cm. Installation view at Over the Influence, Hong Kong. Image courtesy of Kukje Gallery.



MeeNa Park, Overlapped Scream, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Installation view at Audio Visual Pavilion, Seoul. Image courtesy of Kukje Gallery.

In all of these works, Park develops her own interpretation of visual structures and iconography. Colours are encrypted in a playful manner while the rules of how we use of symbols and icons are bent and re-invented. Whether it's her "Dingbat" paintings, her "Scream" paintings or her "BK" series in which she painstakingly overlaps circles of primary colours until a deceptively black painting emerges, the process of rendering the real world through a visual system can be seen.

For Park, who continues to push the boundaries of how language, colour and image coexist, the dichotomy of neat, ordered categorisation and the chaos of her intuitive urges gives her a never dulling spark to exhaust the possibilities of painting.

Denise Tsui is the Managing Editor for CoBo Social. A Hong Kong-born Aussie with an addiction to coffee, her research interests are primarily in the study of exhibition models and curatorial practices and art from the Southeast Asia Region. Previously she was an editor for ArtAsiaPacific and curator for a private collection of Australian and New Zealand art. A condensed version of her postgraduate curatorial thesis on contemporary Indonesian art was published in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies in 2015.