

Moon Sung-sic seeks essence of painting

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Moon Sung-sic stands in front of his work "Just Life," currently displayed at Kukje Gallery in Seoul.

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

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Moon Sung-sic, also stylized as Sungsic Moon, is an artist who is never complacent. At "Beautiful. Strange. Dirty," a solo exhibition held at the Kukje Gallery in downtown Seoul, Moon unravels the complexity of the world seen through his eyes in a unique style combining Eastern and Western drawing traditions.

Moon is the youngest Korean artist to take part in the Korean Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale when he was in graduate school. Such early success could have been a poisoned chalice, but he continued to explore his artistic world.

"I started my professional career as an artist as early as sophomore year in university. I've been drawing what I wanted to draw, but it took a while for me to sort out my thoughts," Moon said at an interview with The Korea Times earlier this month.

"I was lucky (to exhibit at the Venice Biennale), but there were many things I had to endure. I became an

artist without much in store, but I had to create something continuously."

Moon said his fundamental subject matter did not change, but how he expresses it has evolved through deliberation.

"When people asked me what my object of painting is, my answer was specific in the past such as gardens or the lives of Korean people. Now, I introduce myself as an artist who draws everything. It hasn't been long since I've been confident about the answer."

This is his first solo exhibition in four years and he moved to southern port city of Busan two years ago when he felt stuck.

"My early drawings featured raw, descriptive lines. However, when I shifted that style to oil painting, it became painful and sadistic for me. So I concluded that I should find a physically affordable and more suitable method for me if I want to retain art as my job," he said.

The most notable pieces on show at this exhibition are the "Just Life" series, featuring glamorous roses

in Korean traditional folk painting style.

However, when examined closely, there are butterflies, spiders and cobwebs, giving a glimpse of the complicated war of survival.

"Humans are drawn to flowers for their beauty. I also fell for roses and grew them in my garden for years. I think I am human and the love for flowers is inherent in me too. That's where these flower paintings began," Moon explained.

"As I observed the flowers, I realized that it was just part of this complicated world. In fact, flowers are basically plants' genitalia and they attract butterflies and bees to their genitalia for pollination, while butterflies and bees go to the genitalia to eat. Spiders create webs on twigs to catch preys. It is just a scene of life, each living one's own."

"The world is where each organism pursues one's own desire. A scenery is a slice of such desires and I captured a moment and painted through my perspective."

However, the paintings are not

exact scenes from reality.

"I don't take photograph of every rose or memorize everything, but collects pieces of memories and experiences of roses," he said.

The 39-year-old artist also developed a new technique.

He applies white gesso on black canvas, makes scratches on the half-dried primer with sharp tools to create a textured drawing and colors with gouache.

"It originated from a desire to leave a trace of my living body in my work, as if I'm wallowing in the mud. I added thickness on the canvas to give the characteristics of a relief sculpture and breathe my energy into it," Moon said.

Meanwhile, his pencil drawings on oil paint portray a lighter approach toward art.

"When I work on a large canvas, I feel a lot of pressure. Painting is labor and it links to pain, which causes me pain. So I wanted to make a playground for me, where I am not distressed and can enjoy art," he said.

The exhibit runs through the end of December.