

Woo Kukwon: Once Upon Her Time

Curator: Dai Zhuoqun

2023.8.12 – 9.16

Tang Contemporary Art, Beijing 1st Space

Tang Contemporary Art is delighted to announce a solo exhibition by Korean artist Woo Kukwon, "Once Upon Her Time", curated by Dai Zhuoqun, to be held on August 12th to September 16th at Beijing 1st Space. As the second show after the first collaborative solo exhibition "Carnival" in 2022, this exhibition will feature more than 20 paintings which were recently created this year.

Woo Kukwon: Walking in Dreams

Dai Zhuoqun

Woo Kukwon inscribed the powerful phrase "All children except one grow up" at the bottom center of his 2022 artwork Goodbye Peter. It underscores the undeniable truth that children will have to grow up. Artists often find themselves wandering in the realm of dreams, lost in a world without exceptions. Woo Kukwon embarks on a captivating journey originating from fairy tales, navigating the realm between dreams and wakefulness, in which the two at times intermingle with one another.

Woo Kukwon possesses a remarkable ability to draw deep inspiration from specific themes and narratives, and skillfully transform them into his own distinct creations. Last year, for his solo exhibition Carnival at Tang Contemporary Art's Hong Kong space, the artist used biblical stories as the foundation for his creative exploration. Carnival presented over 20 captivating artworks that revolved around themes from Noah's Ark to the Epistle to the Ephesians. This already hinted at a systematic approach to his work, which has now been further affirmed in his current exhibition "Once Upon Her Time" in Beijing.

Fairy tales serve as Woo Kukwon's primal language of expression. His rich and almost layered brushstrokes bring a charming clumsiness to the childlike figures, which adds a sense of contradiction between painting and sculpture. One might even infer that, contextually, terms such as "painting" and "sculpture" feels too conventional: Woo's works are more like playful doodles with doll-like textures. The forms of the characters and animals resemble both the raw and primitive beings found in ancient rock paintings and the delightfully simple figures from low-resolution electronic games favored by children.

Regarding the interplay of imagery and narrative in his paintings, the artist appears to have established distinct and reliable structures and methods. Notably, the frequently present white puppy and yellow-haired boy—representing the artist—take on the role of bystanders. Additionally, each painting is enriched with a specific textual reference, with a thought-provoking sentence directly inscribed onto the canvas, creating a meaningful intertextual relationship with the depicted imagery and narrative.

Woo Kukwon skillfully crafts and weaves fairytale-like imagery, but he is not particularly keen on writing fairy tales. Instead, he bids farewell to the notion of eternal childhood, acknowledging that all children eventually do have to grow up to witness the absurdity of the real world and the complexity, cruelty hidden behind fairy tales. Through a childlike lens, Woo Kukwon crafts his symbolic fable-like universe, intensifying the captivating interplay between imagination and reality. Within this realm, life and death intertwine, joys and sorrows coexist, and the perpetual cycle of good and evil unfolds. Everyone ventures through dreamscapes, reveling in fantasies, yet also faces the unyielding embrace of reality.

In the exhibition "Once Upon Her Time", Woo Kukwon shifts his focus to the female characters from various literary masterpieces. He maintains the previous method of extracting and transforming figures, stories and scenes from these sources, then utilizes his own unique aesthetic approach to weave characters and narratives onto the canvas. The imagery are drawn from classics such as "The Wizard of Oz", "Hua Mulan", "Peter Pan", "Odyssey" and "Pygmalion". Each artwork is directly named after the female character from the story, and the text within each painting, as always, is sourced directly from the original literary work.

About Artist

Woo Kukwon, born 1976 in Seoul, South Korea, lives and works in Seoul, South Korea. At first glance, Woo Kukwon's canvas looks like a scene from a fairy tale. Colorfully painted child-like images and thick matiere is the most distinguishable features of his works. Anything that can create the texture as the artist intended, be it a brush, pencil, or finger, becomes a tool. However, if you look closely at the work, it is not perfectly light and cheerful. The liveliness felt in the first impression fades as one gazes at the details or the surrounding environment of the characters in the work, and the cynical sentences overlap, immersing the audience in thought. He leaves interpretation up to the audience, and as his nickname 'Korean Basquiat' suggests, he is now the most wanted artist by collectors following his every exhibition.

The artist likes to have adorable children and animals appear on the canvas, and excludes a clear point of view or explanation for the work. Friendly and fairy tale-like images help the audience easily access the works regardless of age. Therefore, the moment the audience sees the work, they fall into the charm of the canvas and enter the game of asking questions about the work and searching for answers themselves. His wit of putting sentences such as "I hate mornings" or "The more I know about people the more I like my dog," is probably the reason that makes people stay in front of his works for a long time, by bringing bitter but sincere laughter in their faces. The bright balance felt in the finished image and the chaos that comes from the serious text that contrasts with it make people look back on the works over and over again.

The imaginary world of Woo Kukwon is free and unconstrained. Colors that are not common in reality feel familiar, and the appearance of a girl and an animal sleeping together naturally harmonizes in the canvas. As he has once said, "My work starts from frank emotions such as happiness, joy, jolliness, anger, hate, jealousy, envy, weakness, frustration, etc. Almost like a child who spends half a day happily just by wiggling histoes."

His works are included in collections by major institutions such as National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea; Kolon Group; Ilshin Cultural Foundation, and LVMH Foundation.

About Curator

Dai Zhuoqun is an independent curator and art critic. He currently lives and works in Beijing. In 2007, he founded Contemporary Art magazine, where he served as chief editor and art director. He was also the executive director of White Box Museum of Art. In 2009, he launched and jointly curated the "Warm Winter" protest project in Beijing, one of the most important art events in recent years. He has since planned exhibitions and lectures with numerous art institutions, art academies, and museums. He has also published articles in international art magazines and other publications.

He has curated exhibitions such as "The Awakening of Things" (White Box Museum of Art, Beijing, 2011); "Superfluous Things" (Hive Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2013); "Civilization" (White Box Museum of Art, Beijing, 2013; OCAT, Xi'an, 2014; Hubei Institute of Fine Arts Museum, Wuhan, 2015); "DISSENSUS AGITATION — The Painting To Language" (Today Art Museum, Beijing, 2016), "Brushwork and True Feeling" (Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, 2018); "Approach Spirits" (N3 Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2018); "New Expression of Beijing" (N3 Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2018); "Free Prism Video Wave" (Boxes Art Museum, Foshan, 2019), etc.