

Tang Contemporary Art presents  
Woo Kukwon Solo Exhibition – Carnival



Woo Kukwon, *Yellow Brick Road*, Oil on canvas, 181.8 x 227.3 cm, 2022

**Artist:** Woo Kukwon

**Curator:** Park Soojeun

**Exhibition Dates:** May 5 – June 11, 2022

**Location:** 10/F, H Queen's, 80 Queen's Road Central, Central, Hong Kong

**Media Preview:** Thursday, May 5, 3 – 6 pm

**Opening Reception:** Thursday, May 5, 6 – 8 pm

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Tang Contemporary Art, Hong Kong presents the solo exhibition of Woo Kukwon, a promising artist from Korea. The artist has worked on paintings and installations focusing on the growth of human self-consciousness from his debut exhibition “The Rainbow Connection” (2009) to “I’m your father” (2021), his last exhibition where he re-examined his father’s works from the son’s point of view. In the current exhibition at Tang Contemporary Art, Woo explores his autobiographical growth and self-transformation through paintings depicting ancient Carnival ceremonies with iconic characters from fairytales and mythologies.

The exhibition begins at the Garden of Eden with humans portrayed in their purest state. Before mankind tasted the forbidden fruit (of good and evil), they were as innocent as babies sleeping in their cradle. However, it is a rite of passage for a person to break away from innocence and face the rough and rugged paths of life in order to grow and build their own world. Such turning points have been presented in countless stories in various forms. Here, the artist adopts the Flood myth depicted in the Old Testament to develop a theme that moves through the entire exhibition.

In the exhibition hall, a painting depicting the saved animals on Noah’s ark, drinking and dancing merrily hangs in juxtaposition to a painting with a giant crocodile in the water. In “Peter Pan,” the crocodile that swallowed Captain Hook’s watch is a creature that allures the audience back to a world where time does not exist, giving us an opportunity to reflect on how we are destined towards death from the moment we are born. By juxtaposing these two paintings, Woo portrays the chaotic festival period as a time when freedom and precariousness mix together. Through the festival, humans participate in the circle of life which inevitably pulls death closer, and are in turn able to set themselves free from the fear of death. The artist unravels this ritual’s symbolic meaning through the depiction of Peter Pan (an eternal boy)’s funeral. The sacrificial suggestion depicted in the work fiercely unveils the symbolism that an individual self is newly vivified by a symbolic death to end of his former self. Additionally, Woo uses the phrase ‘All children, except none, grow up,’ an altered version of the opening line of the original novel in order to connect the starting point with the end to complete the entire process as a ritualistic time of circulation.

The impasto technique often utilized by Woo Kukwon adds three-dimensional effects and liveliness to the paintings. With the impasto technique, the artist makes good use of the material properties to reconstruct objects that he perceives, making it possible to emphasize the subjective interpretation. Woo achieves this *matière* effect by first applying a layer of paint to the canvas and then scraping it off or by applying thick layers of paint on top of each other. It is not difficult to see that the visual language has changed

with time. In his earlier works, his brushstrokes on the canvas were erased and smudged, and for a while, after that, he worked with rough and ruptured matière, eventually settling to his recent works, with more stable contour lines and firm sculptural forms. One might explain this change by the artist's gradual inner growth and development which helps understand his body of work in its entirety.

A blue-faced woman with epicene beauty has appeared in his work through all of his exhibitions as a figure that represents the artist's anima, revealing the artist's innermost feelings. In this exhibition, she appears both as a glamorous and confident protagonist of the carnival, as an ordinary observer. The conflicting symbols of anima in his work seem to reflect Woo's internal conflict between the Apollonian view of the world and his wish for the Dionysian liberation. His work is like a mirror that reflects the subconscious of this age so that the viewer may be absorbed into the work and deliberate the depths of their inner self.

From ancient times, the carnival has provided the opportunity for one to reconstruct one's inner order through its divine power. Although today its religious role has faded, most people still long to discover meaning in their lives. Furthermore, art continues to exist as the last resort to restore the existential meaning and to question the meaning of being. Woo walks side by side with us on the path towards the carnival that is expressed as the "Yellow Brick Road." His previous work with the same title portrayed characters facing the audience from the starting line, but this time the audience is gazing at the characters' journey from behind. This change in focus shifting from the front to the rear seems to imply the transition of the artist's viewpoint from inward to outward. This exhibition will give audiences the opportunity to extend their viewpoint and to recognize the significance of the growth of human self-consciousness through community participation by the metaphors appearing in the artist's work.

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## ABOUT ARTIST

Woo Kukwon (b.1976, Korea) focuses on the gap between reality and fantasy, working mainly with oil paints as well as drawings on paper and installations. Woo was exposed to the heavy subject of life and death at a far too early age, pushing him to hide away from reality and into the fantasy-filled story world. After growing up, he discovered the cruelty hidden behind seemingly beautiful fairy tales, making him re-interpret the world from a new perspective driving him to investigate philosophy and religion. In the same vein, the Three "B" (Beautiful, Baby, Best) always coexist with the death motif in his works. The equivocal co-existence of reality and fantasy called upon the artist to seek truth in fairy tales, humour in philosophy and freedom in the bible.

Woo's early works mainly consisted of roughly scratched paintings, expressing the raw dangers of a wandering ego. His more recent works evolved into a more stable form expressed through the build-up of thick layers of paint into a rich material. Woo Kukwon's work combines cruel fairy tale scenes and roughly scribbled famous words with his natural gift of colour, creating a unique genre that mixes Pop Art and Figurative Art.

Woo is a promising artist who was selected as one of the 20 artists for the 32nd JoongAng Fine Arts Prize, which is one of Korea's most important awards. He has held numerous solo exhibitions since 2009. His art piece has been collected at Culture Convenience Club, a Japanese company that operates Tsutaya, a nationwide bookstore in Japan. Furthermore, his paintings have been collected at various museums in Korea, such as the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul National University Museum of Art, etc.

## ABOUT TANG CONTEMPORARY ART

Tang Contemporary Art was established in 1997 in Bangkok, later establishing galleries in Beijing, Hong Kong, and most recently in South Korea. The gallery is fully committed to producing critical projects and exhibitions to promote Chinese contemporary art regionally and worldwide, and encourage a dynamic exchange between Chinese artists and those abroad. Acting as one of the most progressive and critically driven exhibition spaces in China, the gallery strives to initiate dialogue between artists, curators, collectors, and institutions working both locally and internationally. A roster of groundbreaking exhibitions has earned them international recognition, establishing their status as a pioneer of the contemporary art scene in Asia.

Tang Contemporary Art represents leading figures in Chinese art including Ai Weiwei, Yue Minjun, Huang Yongping, Yin Zhaoyang, Shen Yuan, Wang Du, Liu Xiaodong, Yang Jiechang, Xia Xiaowan, Sun Yuan & Peng Yu, Yan Lei, Wang Yin, Wang Yuping, Yangjiang Group, Guo Wei, Zheng Guogu, Lin Yilin, He An, Zhao Zhao and Zhu Jinshi.

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