

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Kira Nam Greene
- Interviewer: Paul Laster
- May 2018 / Kira Nam Greene's studio, Brooklyn, New York
- Recorded and transcribed by Jeong-A Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2017-2018)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Paul Laster (PL): How do you describe your work?

Kira Nam Greene (KNG): I would describe my work as a combination of realist painting and abstraction with the use of patterns and decorations. My subject matter has changed, especially since last year with the election of Donald Trump, as I subsequently struggled with the political environment and what's happening to society and culture in general. I was painting still lifes of food surrounded by abstract patterns until early 2017. Since then I have changed direction to produce figurative work - like the portraiture you see here in the studio now.

PL: How long had you been making still lifes?

KNG: Probably since about 2005 or 2006, so that's three or four years out of graduate school. In school, I was making purely figurative work focused on dealing with the female body and the male gaze that related to being an Asian-American or Korean-American in a mostly white society. After graduation, I was searching for new ways of thinking about the same ideas and expressing them in a different way. I was also attempting to complicate the pictorial space, rather than making straightforward figurative work, which I started to feel was academic. I started combining abstract elements into my work.

PL: What role do you think your early life played in your choice of subject matter, particularly food?

KNG: Looking back, I think there are two or three different strands that came together and led me to choose food as my main subject matter. One is the fact that it is [a subject that is] accessible to anyone. I'm a Korean living in New York, and even though New York is a very cosmopolitan city, I miss Korean food. I started thinking about how it is fundamental to the immigrant experience. One of the key things people miss isn't fancy food, but street food and the kind of food you can't regularly buy at restaurants. The second was thinking of food as a metaphor for the body - Jesus Christ as the body in the sacraments or the tendency to equate a woman's body to fruits or vegetables, which has been a tradition in both the East and the West. Since I had been dealing with the subject of sexuality and the female body in my previous work, I felt it was a metaphorical and more layered approach to thinking about the female body than its direct representation, which has a long history. Third, on a personal level, I enjoy cooking and eating, as you know. I wanted to incorporate my daily personal interests into my practice, too. I think the artist needs to think about that, not only the culture and socio-politics but also his/her personal interests. That's how it started.

PL: How did your education influence what you do and how you do it?

KNG: I didn't start as an artist. I was an academic. I came to the United States originally



to do my Ph.D. in political economy. I got my Ph.D. and worked as a management consultant for a few years. Then I had an accident in 1999 and various life circumstances changed, which led to my making art. I always wanted to be an artist, but I couldn't - maybe because I did too well in school. If you're academically successful, it is hard to break out of a mold in Korea. One of the biggest experiences was moving to America and having the freedom of being able to choose and have a second career. In Korea, that is so much harder. There is always a prescribed 'success'. In terms of education and experience, I have a different kind of attitude to art because I have an academic background.

Research is a strong backdrop for whatever I do, especially my choice of abstract patterns. I do a lot of research on their origins and where they come from, which leads me to different areas of interest. For example, historical textile patterns and histories of trade and cultural exchange between countries. It makes me think about how globalism works, possibly because of my background. Globalism didn't start in the twenty-first century or the twentieth century but the 16/17th-century trade between Portugal and Asia. Even with the portrait work, my subjects are my friends in the art world or people in different creative fields. While I take their photos, I do research and ask them about their background, and what they're interested in, which eventually becomes part of the painting.

PL: Have you gone through a period of self-discovery or a time when you struggled and came out a better artist?

KNG: I think that's always true for every artist. There is a transition for the next level of work or the next body of work to develop. The change from the purely academic figurative work I was doing to the still life of food surrounded by abstract patterns came from a big struggle. I was straight out of school, trying to figure out how to be an artist without being in school, so there was a big transition. Last year after Trump became the president I struggled because it almost felt like I had PTSD, having grown up in Korea under military regimes. The rhetoric bandied about gave me flashbacks of the authoritarian regimes. I felt I had to do something, but I couldn't figure out the best way. I didn't feel I could accomplish a lot by going out into the streets and throwing stones like when I was twenty. I started questioning the value of the kind of work that I made, what it means to be part of an artist community, and what it means to be a political person. There were things I needed to do but I was unsure. Then the Women's March in January last year made me think of the solidarity of women, what our roles are, and how women are taking charge of opposing these political changes. That's when I started thinking of doing the series of women's portraits.

I call the series 'Tribal Council' because it is almost like a tribal council of women who are leading the charge in terms of political resistance, making sure things are not going the way of the authoritarian countries, and preserving the ideals of democracy.



PL: When you started painting food and flowers, did you look at the history of food in both Eastern and Western art?

KNG: In the beginning I didn't really look at other things. I have of course looked at things in the past that probably influence me subconsciously. I didn't look for anything specifically. I wanted to start by relying on my own instinct and my desires. Thinking about this led me to construct something. I need to make at least three or four pieces before I start to do research.

PL: You need to find your voice within it before you start bringing in other influences.

KNG: Exactly. From the beginning, I started surrounding food and still life with culturally inspired patterns. My thinking process at the time was that it was kind of like a self-portrait. I'm thinking about food becoming the body, so I'm eating Western food and painting Western food, but I'm Korean so I'm going to bring in Korean elements, but I live in New York, so I'm going to bring in something contemporary. That's how the combination started. After doing three or four paintings like that, I started thinking about where the patterns come from, and how I can combine things in a more interesting way. That's when I started looking at Dutch still life paintings, especially from the seventeenth century, and Korean *sa-gun-ja* painting [Ed. note: 사군자, a reference to the four plants of the plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo that symbolize the perfect character of a scholar]. They are scholarly paintings of fruits and vegetables and flowers. I found out about the Pattern and Decoration movement once I started to do more research on abstract patterns.

PL: Your food and flowers have become more realistic, while the patterns have become more complex and defined, more mixed and collaged and layered.

KNG: That's the direction I am going. There is the idea part of what I want to say - the identity or the sensuality of the body, the politics of being an immigrant, the politics of being a woman - then there is how those ideas get realized in my paintings. There is always the thinking about art history and what traditions I want to follow, what art is going on right now, or Pop Art or pop culture that influences how the work is made. The end towards which I strive and struggle is combining the realism which I am very interested in—which I think is like a political act now, as it is stupendously labor-intensive work against mechanical production in this visually saturated fleeting world where I am able to sit and spend time on what is also personally satisfying work and what has been going on in the last few hundred years of art history. That's a strong concern for me too because I don't merely want to paint like the academic painters. The complexity of realism, space, how the space is laid out, acknowledgment of the flatness and of other kinds of art that are going on, combining more and more of those elements into a cohesive painting is the ultimate goal.

PL: You have to get to a place that hasn't been journeyed so much before. You could have easily painted one still life or figure and added one or two patterns around it, but you have loaded and layered the background with decorative elements. Is it to add these levels of complexity in an analog way? You could have easily printed the patterns onto your canvas and then painted your figures in. There are a million shortcuts you could have taken. I appreciate what you said about the practice though, the idea of losing one's self in the making, the meditative process of trying to do something and to do it as well as you can. Your work has evolved in its level of realism from 2005, I can see refinement but also increased complexity. Some artists choose to simplify as they evolve, but for you, it seems you keep challenging yourself to do more and more.

KNG: In studio practice, there is always tension about that. My work is labor-intensive, so my paintings do take a couple of months to make. I enjoy it, but there is an element of burden as well. How do you balance that? As you say the complexity can be pushed to an extreme where it poses a problem, so I try to push it to its maximum level but still see where it can land. This piece [*Self Portrait with Ermine*, 2018] is in that transitional area. I pushed the complexity to its max, almost to its breaking point, so I am pulling away a little bit.

PL: You've included some collage elements. In a sense, you've found a way to make shortcuts, but it's still analog, by hand.

KNG: The analog process is important to me unless I am making a print. It is part of my thinking process about visual culture and what is happening in the world. Even though there is a printed element, it is a Xerox transfer and I use a hands-on process. I don't paint using tape. They are all done by hand.

PL: It presents a new challenge, which leads me to the branded products in your paintings of the last four or five years. What made you decide to add specific brands to your still lifes?

KNG: The brands came when I was at my residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska. Omaha was the headquarters of ConAgra. There is an artificial lake and a big campus for ConAgra. They make Reddi Whip and Chef Boyardee products. They have banners with their products around the lake. Omaha is also a very politically and economically segregated city. There is a big street that divides the north and south - the south is where the wealthy white people live and the north is where the poor African-Americans live. I started thinking about these economic and political divides in terms of food consumption. The brand-name products became an interesting point of entry because the processed foods were avoided by the wealthier people -

PL: - even though they make their profit from it.

KNG: They would prefer to eat organic food. From another point of view, these processed foods gave women freedom from the kitchen in the Fifties and became a tool of Women's Liberation. Now it's become another oppressive force on poor communities, but it also elicits a sense of nostalgia. People like Ding Dongs because of their childhood.

PL: Did you have to eat all of these foods to completely understand them?

KNG: I did eat some of it! Not all of it. Spam is really popular in Korea, because of its interesting history with the US military. Part of the U.S. military presence in Korea right after the Korean War gave the only proteins and meat products that were available - these heavily processed foods that came out of the army. Spam became the basis of Korean protein. When I made the Spam painting [*Spam, Spam, Egg, Spam, Rice and Spam*, 2016] I made Spam kimchi fried rice which is a staple in Korea. I was surprised it was good but at the same time, I hadn't remembered how greasy it was. I couldn't eat very much of it.

Before I make a painting, whether it is a still life or portrait, I begin with a photograph. With the Chef Boyardee painting [*Nebraska Suite No. 6: Hail to the Chef*, 2015], when I was taking photos, I had a bowl of spaghetti and a can upside down. I left the food there for a while, and when it congealed it was so disgusting. I couldn't believe how anyone could eat that.

PL: I think when they first started out they were convenience foods; they weren't as processed as now. Maybe they had a preservative and some salt or something. And as time went on they increased their shelf life by adding more chemicals.

KNG: As part of my research, I found out about the history of Chef Boyardee. The name sounds French, but the founder is an Italian immigrant who had a very successful restaurant in Cincinnati or Columbus in Ohio. The restaurant's sauce was so popular the customers would bring a jar to take some home.

PL: Which led the way for them to start bottling the sauce and canning the prepared pasta?

KNG: Yes. World War II started and they needed to feed the army in Europe on a massive scale. That's when they received government sponsorship. He had already started a local business of selling spaghetti sauce in a jar in the local community. That became the spaghetti factory during World War II because of the need to feed the army. These are the kinds of interesting things I discover through research.

PL: Do you see your incorporation of brands as having a dialogue with Pop Art? Expanding it in some way?

KNG: Yes. I was going to say, the other thing that interested me about the brand-name products were the packaging and advertisements.

PL: Are you dealing with feminist issues when focusing on food and domestic items, as well as with the textiles?

KNG: There are two aspects in terms of food where feminism comes in. My interest in the female body and how it is gazed upon and used for the visual pleasure of male audiences. This leads me to see food as a substitute for the female body. That scopophilia was the original exploration for working with food. Then when I started working on brand-name products, I started thinking about advertising, especially sexist advertising. Think about the Carl's Jr. burger ads that caused a lot of outrage - bikini-clad women eating juicy hamburgers. This also goes back to your question about the influence of Pop Art. If you look back to the history of advertisements for brand-name products, there are a lot of great Pop Art elements - after all they are the inspiration for Andy Warhol's art - but they are also very, very sexist. I incorporate some of those elements into my painting, especially in the Spam painting, which has all these post-coital, morning-after moments - "Would you like egg and Spam for breakfast?" - that have these sexist messages carved in stone propagating that propaganda. There are all these women cooking and cleaning. I incorporate those images to mock this cultural dominance and sexism.

I think feminism's influence also comes into my abstract patterns. The Pattern and Decoration movement was a feminist movement. It affects the choice of materials that I use, too. Right now, I'm doing a lot of oil painting, but my early food paintings were watercolor-based and were made with colored pencils, the types of mediums that are considered 'lesser' and associated with crafts rather than fine arts. In the European traditions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and even until very recently, women were not allowed to belong to a painters' guild. Even if they were part of one, they weren't always allowed to use oil paints and were confined mostly to watercolor. A lot of the scientific, and botanical paintings which were done by women were done in watercolor and less valued. So there was an intentional use of watercolor and colored pencils at the beginning of my practice.

PL: If you look at the old images of painters painting in their studios, mixing their pigments, and so on, they were usually men. It's interesting that with patterns and fabric designs, like batik, I believe they were made mostly by women. I know even now a lot of women who work for designers like Ralph Lauren doing textile designs. It's interesting how even the jobs — not just the use of the product, but the jobs relating to the product — are gendered that way; but that's a matter of training, as well.

KNG: Also in the economy, what kinds of jobs are available for women.

PL: And what you move towards in terms of your studies.

KNG: When I am doing pattern work, I often feel the historical connection with women working in the crafts field, especially textile workers. A lot of the textiles are designed by European designers who once supplied the European courts and royalty. These textiles were designed in Europe but sent to China and India to be embroidered by women. These women would do the embroidery work and exist in the margins of the textile design. They would also make their own designs. The work would come back to Europe, and the European designers, who were mostly men, would see those new elements and incorporate them back into their own designs. This is originally how the ideas were exchanged at the beginning of globalism. I think about that a lot when I am doing pattern work and I feel the connections.

PL: That reminds me of Yinka Shonibare's work. Shonibare uses what's called Dutch wax fabric. It was actually made in Indonesia. The Dutch made it to sell to the Indonesians, but the Indonesians didn't want it because they made their own batik. So they ended up selling it to people in Africa, and it then became a symbol of African identity.

KNG: Patterns are seemingly very decorative, which comes with its own pejorative meaning, like how Adolf Loos saw the decorative as the antithesis of rationality. Seemingly innocent decorative things can have such political, loaded meanings. I am very careful when I think about these patterns. Shonibare can use Dutch wax fabric in an anti-colonial way because it's personal. But I wouldn't use that specific pattern because I don't have the tradition and I don't have a point of view to add to it. Unless, like in the portrait series, my subject specifically asked me to incorporate it.

PL: It's like when Keith Haring first started making work relating to street art, people called him a "subcultural appropriator." He was taking on someone else's scene. He was from Pennsylvania; it wasn't his scene, per se. But he made it his own by moving to New York and hanging out in the city.

We were talking about the Pattern and Decoration movement. I see a relationship in your work, particularly with the women who fall under that aesthetic umbrella, such as Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, and Valerie Jaudon. Are these artists an influence? Do you look at them for inspiration or for tricks of the trade?

KNG: I look at them as inspiration for ideas but I don't specifically look at their work for inspiration. Even though our thinking and values are similar in elevating pattern and decoration as fine art, the inversion of the high versus low in fine art, and an

anti-colonialist viewpoint are very different. Probably the most visually influential artist is Joyce Kozloff in terms of the layering and juxtaposition of elements.

PL: They were also of their time. They were fighting the battle of the first wave of feminism in the face of what came before.

KNG: Exactly. It's interesting how the Pattern and Decoration movement is such an important element of my work but how I came about it is exactly how the artists in the Seventies came about developing their own work, without me realizing they existed first. I didn't know their movement existed, which also says something about the neglect of feminist art in art history. I started making these works and I arrived at the point almost exactly the same way they did. So times have changed, but times have also not changed. People started pointing out the similarities afterward. That's how I thought I should look them up. My work is related to the Pattern and Decoration movement but is also different.

PL: Some of those artists are getting a revisionist moment — Miriam Schapiro is having a show now at the Museum of Arts and Design. It shows these artists still have a contemporary influence. Are there other painters you admire? When you go to a show do you look closely to see how the work is made?

KNG: That's almost all of them. One of the things I like doing is seeing shows. I try to steal at least one idea from every show I see.

PL: I could see David Salle being an influence without there being any direct link to what you're doing. His handling of paint, as well as content, is so fascinating.

KNG: Also Sanford Biggers — how he works with the pattern and collage elements. I think the latest biggest influence and the work that I look at the most is Kerry James Marshall. When he had a show at the Met, I went to see it three times. I spent a very long time there each time.

PL: He looks a lot at Old Masters, which is interesting because you wouldn't necessarily see that in his work.

KNG: I do actually see it. I also go to the Met for inspiration. I look at the Ingres paintings and also Caravaggio is a huge influence on me in terms of space and how you view the people.

PL: Especially now since you're painting the figure — it seems like this work comes right out of Manet. [Pointing to *Barbara at Café Folies-Bergère*, 2018].

KNG: For this series, because the women I am painting are in the art world, I asked

them to choose their favorite paintings or the paintings they want to be in. Each subject chose their painting. Barbara Probst, who is a photographer, does work that deals with 'looking' and she chose Manet's work *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882. It's interesting she chose this painting because there is the Jeff Wall photograph of this same Manet, *Picture for Women*, 1979.

PL: Jeff Wall has appropriated so many different aspects of modernist painting in his work, creating modern-day allegories with it.

KNG: I tried to incorporate the same idea - why she chose that work. I tried to reflect on her profession, that's why there is also a camera here. There's a mirror but the mirror is obscured with thicker paint. I felt the other elements of her life should be the reflection of her, rather than a direct reflection of her in the mirror.

PL: You told me how the motivation for this series was Trump's election. But what motivated you to make these biographical portraits? What motivated you to ask the subject to choose their situation and frame them within these scenes?

KNG: I think that idea evolved from the self-portrait I made. This was the first work in the series [*Self-Portrait with an Ermine*, 2018]. I did the self-portrait first because I wanted to figure out how to make a figure painting and what it would mean, or whether I could even do it. By making this one painting, I figured out a lot. One of the things I wanted to do was something like Kerry James Marshall. You know his interest in Old Master paintings and how he incorporated them in such a subtle way into the contemporary dialogue. I love art history and looking at figure painting more than anything. I wanted to see how I can incorporate that into the art that I am making without being like the academic painters who were just copying.

PL: You probably like Alice Neel, even though her backgrounds are mostly flat, or your Maryland Institute College of Art colleague Amy Sherald. Her backgrounds are completely flat, as well. They have completely different handling, but they are precious in the way they catch the nature of a person and they do it in a way that deals with the language of painting.

KNG: Exactly. My way into that was thinking about the composition and mimicking the way the Old Master paintings treat portraiture. That's not unlike Kehinde Wiley's thinking process, especially since I decided to paint only women. I wanted to do women in an elevated portraiture way.

PL: In the beginning Wiley only did men. It was only at a certain point that he decided to involve women in his work; but he was after a particular stereotype of the black male and how they were perceived by culture. He was elevating them by putting them into the Old Master's circumstances.

KNG: I didn't want to do it exactly like Wiley, especially because his work has a lot of decorative elements. But I was thinking in a similar vein. *Self Portrait with Ermine* was inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine*, 1489-90. I always bring a little bit of humor into my paintings so instead of an ermine - who has an ermine these days? - I held a pillow but had the exact same pose. The background of the Old Master paintings is usually ambiguous and vague, and I was looking for the modern equivalent, so there's a space but not a space.

PL: I love the way you painted yourself because you're very objectified. Everything is encompassing her. It's like modern culture. We live in an image world, we are bombarded with images. You can't escape it. When you open your phone, even if you want to just look at your email, you're going to be hit with some images. If you want to look at the news, you're going to have to get advertisements.

KNG: I think there's also the issue of space and flatness and three-dimensionality. It becomes very important because of what you've just said, we look at three-dimensional things on a flat screen. It flattens things out. Everything is flat. Flatness is very important, but the space within it is also very important. My work has always been this collapsing and resurrecting, and going back and forth between those two ideas.

PL: Even in your process of taking the photograph of your subject, which is a very straightforward photograph, you still have to bring them to life in the painting with all the additions you create, with all the elaboration. You have to give them form to take away their flatness from the photograph, and you then also have to encompass them in a space to give them some aspect of dimensionality.

KNG: I didn't notice this when I was doing still life, because I was just trying to make the object I'm painting as realistic as possible, but as I was painting portraiture and specifically, the face, I had to deal with the idea of idealizing the figure. It is a really interesting concept. The subjects I am painting are my friends. I really do want to make them look good and nice, so there is this inevitable idealization happening in my work. I think about court painters and idealization. That's one of the interesting things that come into my work.

PL: Do you see them as related to your still lifes? I do. I think it's important to keep that relationship, don't you?

KNG: Definitely. The idea is this continuation of exploring femaleness. There are as many different ways that you can consider femaleness, feminism, sexuality, and all those things. That's an important and ongoing subject that I'm interested in. Especially in this painting [*Grab It By the Papaya*, 2018], if you think about female sexuality and being looked at and the portraiture of women, the traditional portraiture I mean, there is

a definite connection between them.

PL: Usually, if artists make a dramatic change in their work — you're making a subject matter change — they might decide to take the color out completely, like if you're an abstract painter you might decide to work in all black and white; and they often start over with color again. But it's interesting when I see your work, besides the fact that you're only painting women, it isn't like that. How do you see this aspect of your work developing? Where do you see it going?

KNG: I just started, so I'm not really sure where it is going. My goal is to do at least thirty to forty portraits of women. A big room of thirty women. It would be a powerful statement. In the beginning, I was going to focus on female painter friends, but then it expanded to women in the creative field. The painting is slow, but I've been taking photos. I've expanded it to include gender-fluid people. So the notion of women has expanded into that. I'm doing a couple of artists who are younger, female-identifying but anatomically male. From there, I think about how it is evolving and has interactive features: the interviewing, research, and so on becoming an interesting part of the practice. The anthropological aspect is becoming very important. Because it is a very slow process. I started doing watercolors of the subjects. There's a parallel process.

The painting itself is evolving. In 2016, I didn't make any still life paintings or figure paintings. I was trying to make abstract paintings. I haven't shown them to anyone.

PL: Maybe that's something you'll come back to, with all the information and knowledge you've gained through this process. Or it might be that you were thinking to make a stronger break at that time and decided it wasn't the right moment?

KNG: I was questioning whether I should do straightforward still life or make abstract paintings. Investing so much time in figure painting seems a little bit more interesting than still life, even though when I was doing still life, I felt like I was making a feminist gesture because still life paintings are passé and unfashionable and I was bringing them back into contemporary dialogue. Figure painting has always been in contemporary dialogue.

PL: Like Alex Katz and David Hockney.

KNG: Yes, so I feel I am more in the contemporary art conversation by doing figure painting, so that is more interesting for me. I feel my studio practice became more interesting even just by changing the subject matter. In trying to do just abstract painting for one year, what I learned is that I need realism in terms of my studio practice. I think the way I paint is not because of ideas, but rather because of my interest in doing certain things. I start multiple paintings so I can work on different elements of the paintings. I can do realism one day, and pattern another day, so that there is variation in

my studio experience and I don't get bogged down in one thing.

PL: It's like cooking. I might say, "Today, I'll make three different things, but I'll cut all of the vegetables up at one time."

KNG: That keeps it interesting in the studio and it's slow painting, so it's a way to keep me engaged. I think the watercolors especially take only about two days to do, so about eight hours.

PL: It gives you a sense of accomplishment because that's what motivates you to do more.

KNG: Yes. I also like the immediacy. I see the results. I have to be a bit sparer and not go overboard on loading all the elements. It's the perfect antidote for what I do in these paintings. It's something I'm really pleased to have found out.