

# HESSE FLATOW

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## ART MAZE Mag

### ANNIVERSARY ISSUE 25

ARTMAZEMAG × 23 NOVEMBER 2021

## In pursuit of the truth of existence: In conversation with Sung Hwa Kim

How to locate oneself within an artistic tradition, to find an authentic artistic voice, to make honest work—these are some of the big questions Sung Hwa Kim is grappling with in his art. "I've always been concerned with meaning and trying to understand our being and existence," the South Korean born, New York based artist says. Cycling has become an unlikely but important way for the artist to contemplate and process these existential concerns. Traversing the city by bike late at night, this mundane activity gained a new resonance for Sung during the lockdown. Gliding fluidly between built and natural environments and seeing the world in a blur of motion punctuated by fleeting frozen details: the feeling of being in perpetual transience at once located him within the broader historic moment and yielded a singular new perspective that resonates through his current work.

Nocturne is an ongoing body of work that Sung began during the pandemic. The subjects of these contemplative night-time paintings—flowers, weeds, butterflies, bare branches, the moon—are symbols of impermanence, reminders of our mortality and the ephemeral nature of existence. But bleak these paintings are not. Rather, Sung finds a tender beauty in this transience: in the quiet poetry of the compositions and the soft light that breaks through the darkness. Tonal and resonant, the paintings are traces of fleeting scenes, mementos of time and place. In the making-permanent, none of the original magic is lost. The surface of Sung's paintings seem to glow as if brushed with phosphorescence. And like a moth to a flame, they draw the viewer in to share in the evanescent moment.

Sung received his BFA from the Art Institute of Boston and his MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2012. He has participated in numerous national group exhibitions over the past decade. His Nocturne body of work was shown at M+B in Los Angeles earlier this year.

interview by Layla Leiman



Featured image:

Sung Hwa Kim  
*It's alright. We've all been born for the first time on this planet*  
acrylic and flashe on canvas  
24 x 18 inches

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*AMM: Hi Sung! To start us off, can you share a few milestones—good or bad—that have shaped you as an artist over the years?*

SHK: Hi Layla! Thanks for having me. I would say moving to New York City was a huge milestone for me. I've been here for about eight years now and I still love everything about the city. It wasn't easy at first, I took a break from producing art for about a year and just absorbed the new environment. The energy, passion, and love that I felt from people and the city truly inspired me. I felt that people came and stayed here for a reason.

This city offers you everything you desire if you are willing to grind and hustle. Also being here always kept me in check, you are surrounded by all these talented bright minds from all over the world who make wonderful works. It helped me to stay aware of where I was as an artist and kept me motivated. What can I say, even to this day whenever I see the NYC skyline, I hear Jay-Z and Alicia Keys' "Empire State of Mind" and my heart starts to pound hahaha.

*AMM: As an artist, developing one's unique artistic voice is a daunting and ever-evolving process. Can you tell us a little about what this process has been like for you, and any mentors that might have played a hand guiding you along the way?*

SHK: Yeah, trying to find my artistic voice is an ongoing process for me. There was a time when I focused on it too much, and hesitated to create anything. This was right after graduate school. I guess I drank too much of what I call "Grad school Kool-aid". I had to get that shit out of my system and search for my own meanings. But now I'm at a point where I'm more comfortable with who and where I am. I'm not too concerned about whether the work looks good or not. I'm more interested in the honesty of the work. When you accept your vulnerabilities and let them be what they are, things find their own ways. This state of mind naturally showed up in the work.

Joan Waltemath, who's been my mentor since 2010, played a huge part in how I think and who I am today. She changed my perception, not only of art, but of life too. She taught me what it means to be an artist, and how to maintain a healthy work-life balance and helped me realize that art is only one part of life.

*AMM: Over the years the style of your work has changed considerably. Can you tell us about the different phases of your artistic output, and, despite the apparent differences, trace any underlying threads that link them all together?*

SHK: With my installation work, I was focusing more on the process of making art than the results. I would set up a situational proposition by placing both ready-mades and found objects together without intentionally

*"We can always learn something from the past. As an artist, I am very aware of my place in a long lineage of people trying to make sense of their experiences using physical forms and materials. I've always been drawn to works with an emotional resonance. For example, looking at someone like van Gogh, I see the freedom of expression in modern art for the first time. This might have been caused by the invention of the camera or of tube oil paints, but nonetheless, starting with van Gogh artists were no longer beholden to painting the likeness of a landscape. They could go outside with their materials and paint what they truly saw and felt. When I look at the artists from this time period (Monet, Bonnard, van Gogh, Vuillard... too many) I really feel that I am experiencing their perception of the world and that's profoundly Romantic. And in a way, I think what we need as a society now is a little bit of Romanticism and time to heal."*

- Sung Hwa Kim

considering aesthetics. With my abstract works, I was questioning my perception of reality, trying to define the truth of actual being. I would create multiple layers of dimensions and let the subconscious wonder.

Looking back now I can see that what I've been trying to do over and over, throughout the years, is capture individual moments, my physical and emotional experience of them, and preserve them in paint or otherwise. Whether the work was abstract, installation, or landscape, they were all the result of this pursuit of the truth of existence.

*AMM: Let's chat about your visual language, which currently seems to borrow from various art history movements such as symbolism and Romanticism. In what ways do you resonate with the ideals and ideas of these aesthetic movements? How do you interpret this in your own work?*

SHK: We can always learn something from the past. As an artist, I am very aware of my place in a long lineage of people trying to make sense of their experiences using physical forms and materials. I've always been drawn to works with an emotional resonance. For example, looking at someone like van Gogh, I see the freedom of expression in modern art for the first time. This might have been caused by the invention of the camera or of tube oil paints, but nonetheless, starting with van Gogh artists were no longer beholden to painting the likeness of a landscape. They could go outside with their materials and paint what they truly saw and felt. When I look at the artists from this time period (Monet, Bonnard, van Gogh, Vuillard... too many) I really feel that I am experiencing their perception of the world and that's profoundly Romantic. And in a way, I think what we need as a society now is a little bit of Romanticism and time to heal. How I enact this in my own work is by not just mimicking the look or style of a particularly Romantic artist but by trying to understand their approach to painting and reason. I still believe that art has the power, the capacity, to narrow the at times vast expanse between one person and another, and function as a catalyst for connection, understanding, and empathy.

*AMM: You share a lot of reference images on Instagram. Evidently art history is a great source of inspiration for you. Where else do you look for inspiration and references for your art?*

SHK: Besides art history, I look for inspirations from poetry. How poetry transpires is similar to how I want my paintings to unfold. Just like the words in a poem, the images that I invoke in a painting serve as a shared language, a set of symbols, for the viewer to recognize and engage with. I am interested in the space between the painting and the viewer, the space where the viewer's experience and understanding of the art changes the art itself. The moment someone recognizes the painting as something more than just an object, and then

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internalizes it, and sees her/himself reflected back in some way, the act of looking because of the creative process.

*AMM: What is your process of researching and working? Do you start with an idea and plan and make preparatory sketches, or do you just begin and trust that the process will guide you somewhere interesting? Do you work from head or heart, or maybe a combination of both?*

SHK: I would say both. It usually starts with certain scenes or moments I've experienced while I go around the city. I don't like to force things but rather listen to my instinct and intuition, if a particular moment sticks out or stays with me throughout the day then I try to pay attention to that. It's essential to my practice to be actively attentive and open and receptive to the world around me. Sometimes I will record the moment with video or sometimes with sound so I don't forget the feeling it invoked or the air of the space. Certain paintings I sketch first just to see the composition but there are other paintings I just dive right in to. I'm always trying to strike a balance between knowing and not knowing, this requires a bit of faith and trust in the process, and a relinquishing of control. The beauty of painting is that sometimes during the process of making it, the work itself reveals something to you, something you never expected to see. I love these moments because they always surprise you.

*AMM: If we stepped inside your studio today, what would we see? What are some of the physical and sensory things that are important for you to surround yourself with?*

SHK: I have this wooden Virgin Mary statue that was given to me 12-13 years ago. For some reason this statue has followed me everywhere. The funny thing is, I'm not even religious, yet I still have this and it's been in every studio space I've had. Now I put it by the window with all the plants I have and every time I look at that corner it gives me comfort. It's not really about what that statue symbolizes, but what it's come to mean for me.

*AMM: What are you busy working on right now? What's working, and what's posing a challenge?*

SHK: Actually, at this very moment, I'm trying to figure out what the next painting will be. I always have somewhat of a difficult time deciding what I want to paint. I have to feel something internally in order to start the painting and sometimes it takes a while for anything to arise. There are many days where I just stare at the blank canvas and wait for it. I truly believe the work itself has a life of its own, its own desires and concerns. I realize it's not something I can dictate or take control of, so I learn to live with it. If I force it and paint something that I don't feel strongly about then the viewer won't feel anything either. Trying to be in tune with my sentient being and constantly questioning the honesty of my work has been the most challenging part of the process.

*"The "Nocturne" series is related to my feelings about and experience of the pandemic. Like most artists, at the beginning of the pandemic, I couldn't make anything because there was so much uncertainty about the future. Also, there was a shameful feeling for me when it came to being in the studio while all over the world people were suffering. Art and art making sort of lost its meaning. I needed hope. I think we all did. During this time, I went on long late-night bike rides across the city to escape from both my thoughts and worries, and one night I was struck by the way the moonlight shone through the cover of darkness. This somehow comforted me and I understood it to mean that this wasn't the end. That's when this new body of work appeared in my studio. It's something that happened in my studio without any intention. It was the only thing that brought me peace and comfort. I wanted to make something that showed my empathy towards that which we'd lost and captured a sense of hope of our collective fear and worry."*

- Sung Hwa Kim

*AMM: Your work seems to engage with broad philosophical and existential themes. In what ways is your art an expression of your own experiences and interior landscape?*

SHK: I've always loved the image that was sent from Voyager 1 as it was leaving our solar system in February 1990. It reminds me how small we are in the universe. It's hard to find or even get a grip on where and what we are with the world rapidly changing around us. I've always been concerned with meaning and trying to understand our being and existence. No matter what type of work I'm making, these questions show up in some form. I realize the importance of the experiential aspect of art to my work. The subjects I choose to paint such as flowers, weeds, butterflies, the moon, all contain reminders of our mortality, the ephemeral nature of our existence. It helps me to be humble. Everything is temporary, nothing is permanent.

*AMM: For you, what does being an artist mean?*

SHK: For me, art has always been linked with history, because of the role it plays in our culture. For example, the intention and motivation behind certain works of art and journalism are similar, in that they are both attempting to record the conditions of certain events. Journalism, however, is primarily concerned with the facts, and art, the truth. With art, each of us has the freedom to contribute a different perspective of a situation. The way each individual experiences becomes passages and provides a diverse perspective for the viewer. So being an artist is just playing another role that's part of humanity.

*AMM: We're curious to know about the thinking and geneses of the nocturnal body of work you began in 2020. Was this in any way inspired by experiences or feelings related to the pandemic? What is this body of work about?*

SHK: The "Nocturne" series is related to my feelings about and experience of the pandemic. Like most artists, at the beginning of the pandemic, I couldn't make anything because there was so much uncertainty about the future. Also, there was a shameful feeling for me when it came to being in the studio while all over the world people were suffering. Art and art making sort of lost its meaning. I needed hope. I think we all did. During this time, I went on long late-night bike rides across the city to escape from both my thoughts and worries, and one night I was struck by the way the moonlight shone through the cover of darkness. This somehow comforted me and I understood it to mean that this wasn't the end. That's when this new body of work appeared in my studio. It's something that happened in my studio without any intention. It was the only thing that brought me peace and comfort. I wanted to make something that showed my empathy towards that which we'd lost and captured a sense of hope capable of easing some of our collective fear and worry.

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**AMM:** *Nature is a recurring motif in your work. Can you tell us more about your interest in the natural world and what this represents in your art?*

SHK: In my work, nature symbolizes a moment of pause. I've been living in the metropolis area for most of my life and when you are surrounded by constant movement, sometimes it feels like there is no place to escape, to space to stop and catch your breath. Nature became that breathing space for me. I was also drawn to the familiarity and accessibility that scenes depicting trees, the moon, flowers, possessed. Nature also represents the cycle of life and death.

**AMM:** *What ideas or themes are you currently exploring in your work?*

SHK: Lately, I've been exploring the concept of solitude, creating scenes that highlight single, often unexpected or hidden, sources of light. I'm hoping to propose different ways of looking, slower, closer, outward, and above all, introspectively. With the world changing rapidly around us, I want to examine our surroundings while contemplating a newfound, heightened awareness of self, being, and co-existence with the environment.

**AMM:** *What is your approach to colour? Please tell us about creating mood and atmosphere in your work.*

SHK: My approach to color is more like trying to capture the shifts of light within each subject. For example, when we think of an apple, we think that it contains the color red, but actually what we're seeing is the color red being reflected from the object while other colors are being absorbed. If I were painting the night sky, it wouldn't be just black or dark blue. When you stare at it for a while, you start to see hints of purple, red, yellow, green, etc. The shifts of light slowly unfold for the viewer to get a sense of the air and feelings of the space. I try to create the atmosphere of a painting by capturing those subtle shifts of light, paying equal attention to what's being reflected and absorbed.

**AMM:** *Nocturne: One day I'll become a star in the night sky and protect you forever and Sometimes I pass by it, and again I wait. Today, I miss you on a street with blooming flowers ... Please tell us more about the wonderfully poetic titles of your artworks!*

SHK: The titles are an essential part of my work. They carry almost an equal amount of value as the images that I paint. I normally think about the titles while I make the paintings. I think of them as an entrance, a portal into the work, that sets up the tone for the viewer and guides them through the piece.

**AMM:** *Do you have any daily rituals or routines that feed you creatively?*

SHK: I'm not sure if it's a ritual but a lot of

times when my mind gets all cloudy and clogged up, I hop on my bike and go for a ride. It helps me to not get caught up with my thoughts and it is a great way to open myself up to a moment that might inspire me to paint something.

**AMM:** *When you're not in studio, where are we likely to find you?*

SHK: Well, before the pandemic, I was easily found at the corner bar next to my studio, haha, but now if I'm not at my studio, I'm probably on my bike.

**AMM:** *What are you watching, listening to, reading right now?*

SHK: I recently watched "Dreams" by Akira Kurosawa. It's an eight-vignette film that was inspired by Kurosawa's dreams and the cinematography just blew me away. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. I've been listening to this Korean band called Jaurim. The lead singer's voice and their lyrics hit the spot. I just finished the book "I do not bid farewell" by Han Kang. It's about the civilian massacre that happened on Jeju Island Korea on April 3rd, 1948. It really hit me hard on many levels.

**AMM:** *Do you have any projects or exhibitions coming up? What's next for you?*

SHK: I'll be in a group show sometime in the spring in London. Hopefully, you guys can see my work in person! Also, I'm getting ready for a solo show in June in New York.



Sung Hwa Kim  
*Nocturne: The night returned to its sleep and silence*  
acrylic and gouache on canvas  
24 x 18 inches

Featured image (p.21):

Sung Hwa Kim  
*We are not that different, you and I*  
acrylic and flashe on canvas  
60 x 48 inches