

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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Fay Ku in Domestic Brutes at Pelham Art Center

In Dialogue with Fay Ku



May 2020. The artist lives and shares a studio with her partner, who is a musician. She is usually on the other side of her worktable, or else he wouldn't have been able to sneak this photo of her.

For Taiwanese born artist, Fay Ku, the single, most formative event in life was immigrating to the United States. Ku says that if she had stayed in Taiwan, she would never have become an artist so she would have been a completely different person. It still surprises her how much this one event which she was too young to remember (though of course remembering all its aftershocks), shapes her work, often without her being consciously aware of the themes and issues at the time of making the work. Fay Ku shares some insights on her body of work in Domestic Brutes, the all women group show at the Pelham Art Center which engages the visitor with diverse approaches of what feminism means in American society today.

AS: How do you see your work in context of *Domestic Brutes* feminist perspective?

FK: As a figurative artist, and especially an artist who is a woman and person of color, I have no option to remain neutral. It's impossible to draw a universal face; age, sex, race all needs to be assigned to characters. When I first started out, my works were populated by young children—though, really, my characters weren't children any more than Bugs Bunny is a rabbit. I wanted to convey the experience of looking out into the world, a perspective similar to the "I" when dreaming, an "I" who is sexless, ageless, without history or specificity but somehow containing the essence of the person. I didn't realize I was drawing Asian faces until others pointed out to me that that was what they saw. I know I must sound naïve, but it was a surprise to me. It reminded of me when I was young, when we lived in communities where no one looked like us and I constantly asked, "Where are you from *really*." I understood from a very young age even then that my response would always be a political statement. I don't know why it took me so much longer to become politicized as an artist.

I should also mention that I grew up in a strict, patriarchal household. I really rebelled—my poor parents. I fought and kicked and screamed and demanded to engage fully with the world. And that's what my characters, do: they engage in the full spectrum of human activity and sometimes grapple with the consequences of their choices. They are constantly questioning their relationship to the world and demanding to find a place in it.

AS: Tell me about the work in this show – its genesis and process.

FK: *The Desert Is My Home* is the first of a series where I am thinking about what it means to have a context, where I question what it means to create an environment for my characters. For years, my characters existed in a vacuum, against the void of the

untouched paper. My parents and I were so isolated when I was growing up (this was before mainstream accessibility to the Internet), we carried our culture from Taiwan through stories, language and food. There was no real material or visual component to our reality. It made sense to have characters existing in a psychological realm, disconnected from physical world. That was fun to explore for a several years, but then I wanted to claim a space in this world, so where to put my characters has been something I've been grappling with increasingly.

“Desert Is My Home” is a line from *An Old Cracked Tune*, a poem by Stanley Kunitz that affects me deeply. Kunitz’s poem seems ancient, like something from the Old Testament (stories forged in the desert) and its end is a triumph, not an overcoming of but an embrace of isolation as identity:

*I dance, for the joy of surviving,
on the edge of the road.*



The Desert Is My Home, 2019, graphite and oil on translucent drafting film, 20 x 30 inches

AS: How does the work in this show relate to your other work?

FK: The *Desert Is My Home* and *Lush Life* I began at the same time and are the first two of a series. I was exploring what the context for my characters, how they relate to the world around them, and what kind of world to depict around them. During a residency last summer, I continued the themes I was exploring in *Desert* and *Lush Life* during a residency in Trélex, Switzerland, which resulted in several works, including *The Jungle Has Eyes* and *New Olympia*. I thought that being in nature would help inform the landscape I was beginning to locate my figures. It's funny because although I was surrounded in Trélex by gorgeous nature, I never went outside.

While there is often lush nature depicted in my work, it's never about the real observed nature. More often the inspiration comes from art history or some other mediation. For example, in another work that is not in this show but is in this series, the depicted nature was inspired by looking at the wild vegetation in the background or sidelines of the Grünewald Altarpiece. Or in the *Jungle Has Eyes*, the “eyes” of the darkness comes from a textile pattern. In my most recent works, including *Natural History*, the characters' relationship to “nature” have evolved: they are active agents, acting on their surroundings.

Natural History was inspired by a stereograph of Martha Maxwell, a pioneer taxidermist and naturalist. She was photographed in a diorama she had constructed (I believe she herself killed, stuffed, and mounted all the animals). I loved how it was a constructed nature, the paradox of killing to conserve, and that she was the first woman to do so. It added another layer to the insertion of “nature” into the work.



Natural History, 2020, graphite on translucent drafting film, 32 x 40 inches

AS: How do you hope viewers connect with your work in this show?

FK: Sometimes I love novels or short stories because they are fun and funny, or because they are so wild, or because the writing is beautiful, but rarest of all I'll gasp in wonder, "How did the writer know? How did she know I felt that way?" I'm happy as long as viewers are engaged with my work, but I have met a few people who saw themselves in my work, and those are the most special of all connections.

Domestic Brutes at the Pelham Art Center – Opening receptions: September 12th (in gallery with applicable rules); September 17th (virtual).

Artists: Tirtzah Bassel, Aisha Tandiwe Bell, Ashley Norwood Cooper, Maria de Los Angeles, Nancy Elsamanoudi, Fay Ku, Sharon Madanes, Lacey McKinney, Joiri Minaya, Rose Nestler, Simonette Quamina, Diana Schmertz, Alisa Sikelianos-Carter, Manju Shandler, Melissa Stern; Curated by Christina Massey and Ety Yaniv

Thanks to Audrey Putman for helping with the interview.

Etty Yaniv works on her art, art writing and curatorial projects in Brooklyn. She founded Art Spiel as a platform for highlighting the work of contemporary artists, including art reviews, studio visits, interviews with artists, curators, and gallerists. For more details contact by

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ARTIST PROFILE, IN DIALOGUE

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