

# *Soft Spot*

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## games

I sometimes think of my work as a tableau vivant or puzzle game. Individual interpretations arise from the desire to configure meaning from signifiers that may at first feel disjointed. I begin by analyzing what I've collected, compulsively: ephemera I've saved from the bloat of information and images in our 24-hour news-cycle reality. I wonder, what if I subvert the purpose of one image or another? How can I create new contexts by combining and recombining various elements? These are questions I apply not only to the time based-media in which I work, but also to my paintings. A canvas is an empty stage or a viewfinder on or through which I orchestrate an atmosphere – be it mischief, confusion or paranoia. The props are references from my archive – photography, screenshots, memes and snippets of daily life. Together, they create a mise-en-scene of seemingly arbitrary material. How is an image read? Does it whisper or yell? What language does it speak?



*Some Pointers*, 2021, oil on canvas, 22"x17" // *Baba Yaga*, 2019, oil on wood, 48" x 36"

In many of my paintings there are references to imagery related to learning from early childhood. I believe this is because that period constituted an especially steep learning curve for me. My first language was Korean, which honestly feels strange for me to admit because English has come so much more naturally to me for most of my life. This is due to the fact that I think in English while Korean feels more difficult to retain with each passing year. It requires effort to hang on to the language, even though my parents have never learned to speak English and I am an only child. My Korean vocabulary, reading and writing are stunted at an elementary level which makes it hard to express anything slightly complex or nuanced in Korean. When I switch between the languages it's more than a linguistic shift, it's psychological. The Korean speaking me doesn't have the full toolbox. That sense of an inability to completely express myself lingers in my work. Recently, I've been thinking about code-switching as it relates to my choice of medium. Parallel to my bifurcated language skills, working with time-based media and painting allows for an exploration of temporality through two distinct dialects. These practices work in tandem: how can I make a painterly video, or can I edit a painting?

I have distinct memories as a child opening up a picture book and desperately wanting to understand how to read the whole story. I thought I could decipher the text at the bottom by looking hard enough at the picture. The images were at once alluring and taunting – I was this close to figuring it all out. That quality of problem solving is something that I chase in my work. I use imagery to imply narrative but I also deprive the work of a key or legend. For me, the buildup to a resolution is always more exciting than the actual moment of mastery. This anticipation is like the American Dream: it's all about the chase. The chase of success. The chase of opportunity. The chase of a better life.

Is the juice worth the squeeze?

Our family moved a total of eight times, each new location being within about an hour's drive at the most from the last (one time we moved two houses down on the same street). This restlessness was the manifestation of my parents' ambitions to become successful immigrants and the up-and-down financial reality of most American livelihoods. Some of my earliest fond memories are of being a 7-Eleven baby in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. This was my daycare. My parents would keep an eye on me as I built forts out of plastic milk crates in the back near the refrigerated drinks. I was happy to entertain myself for hours with these props in my imaginary world. After a few years, my parents purchased a Korean restaurant in New Jersey. We moved again. While both of them share a genuine love for food, this was not something they had deliberately planned to pursue. Like their decision to come to the U.S., they took a chance.

Maybe it's not a surprise that they both like gambling. Playing Go-Stop, a Korean card game involving a small sum of money, is often when I see them at their most animated. It's highly entertaining to watch. They talk trash, they yell, they gloat when the other person loses. It's their way of showing affection. I can hardly ever recall my parents displaying affection for each other in a typically American sense; they don't kiss, hug, or hold hands.

Go Stop, also known as Godori, is a complicated game; I myself don't know how to fully play it even though I've been around it my entire life. Generally, it is an adult game (though the bright red cards and graphic images say otherwise). In any case, I was fine to stay out of it. I just liked to examine the imagery of the cards that portrayed the different months and seasons. There are several groupings of cards that go together – 광 gwang (bright), yul 열끗 (animals), 띠 tti (ribbons), and 피 pi (junk). Like my experience with picture books, when I watched my family play I could see the underlying logic of the game, but I didn't understand the point system or

how to play tactically. Images from these cards appear throughout my paintings. To me, they're at once familiar and mysterious.



*Waiting for Godori*, 2020 oil on wood, 48"x36"



$\pi$  (pi), 2020, acrylic and oil on wood, 8" x 10"// *Goseutop*, 2018, oil on canvas, 5" x 7" each

## myths

There were a lot of changes in my life after moving to New Jersey. I went to a predominantly Asian Montessori then repeated kindergarten at a Catholic school, since my birthday fell within the ambiguous cut-off range. We moved when I was entering the fourth grade so that I could attend a better school. My parents sacrificed a lot for me to go there, as my education was their first priority. I was one of an incredibly small minority of non-white students. Having previously lived in a town with a heavy Korean population, I quickly became aware of how alien I felt in this new environment. I didn't have the words at the time, but I was suddenly self-aware in a way that I hadn't experienced before.

We had to bring our own lunches and there were many times that first year when I was embarrassed by mine. It stung when the person next to me gasped at the sight and smell of the dark brown pickled vegetables in front me. I found myself jealous of their bland peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and accompanying hand-written notes from their mothers, "Josh, have a great day! Love, Mom." In *Minari* (2020), a movie about a Korean American family that moves to Arkansas in pursuit of the American Dream, the young grandson says in Korean, "Grandma, you don't seem like a real grandma." When the grandmother asks him what a real grandma is, he explains, "They bake cookies. They don't swear. They don't wear men's underwear." I resonated with the boy's confusion about the discrepancy between the American norms he was taught and his lived experience. In a way typical of Asian mothers, my mom showed me her love by wordlessly placing cut fruit next to me while I did my homework. It was much later in life that I grasped the weight of gestures like this for what they really were. Howardena Pindell speaks to the accepted forms of validation in her video *Free, White and 21* (1980), in which the artist,

portraying a white woman of power, says, “If the symbols are not used in a way – that we use them, then we won’t acknowledge them. In fact, you don’t exist until we validate you.”

In the summers visiting Seoul or Busan, I usually slept on the floor with my cousins at my grandmother’s house. Our family sat on the floor and ate our meals on a low table. The bathroom had no barriers between the toilet and the shower. Instead, there was a drain in the middle of the floor. I cherish these memories, but I also had to censor them because I was moving between two cultures and one set of experiences didn’t fit the other.



*Soft Spot* (still), 2021

The GW bridge against the background of the Palisades is a significant sight to me and has previously appeared in my work. It’s the image that comes to mind when I think of the word home. For me, it’s a metaphor for the American Dream. Our first move across the GW bridge from Brooklyn signaled a safer, more suburban life for my family; they didn’t have to worry so much about being robbed at work or having their car hijacked (both of which had happened several times). At the same time that I was assimilating to my new school, my parents were studying to pass their citizenship test. I helped to quiz them as we studied American history together. During my mom’s interview, she was asked who the first president was, and she answered, “George Washington Bridge.”

In high school, we moved to an apartment in Fort Lee that was right next to the Palisades Interstate Park. I would go there a lot to hang out with friends on the cliffs overlooking the GW

bridge. The rock I sat on is part of a massive 200-million-year-old geological cliff formation. It was also the indigenous territory of the Lenape, who were displaced by expanding European colonies during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. I think about how this giant rock is experienced today as an everyday state park. Between its stratifications are the stains of colonization and persisting cultural myths like American exceptionalism. These myths were sold like lottery tickets to people like my parents who put this country on a pedestal.

Roland Barthes defines myth as follows:

...[M]yth is a system of communication, that it is a message...it is a mode of signification, a form... It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech.

He goes on to warn of the myth as “language-robbery.” By this, he means that “nothing can be safe from myth, myth can develop its second-order schema from any meaning and...start from the very lack of meaning.” If the pervasiveness of myth can be associated with a type of speech, I aspire for my work to communicate in broken English. Barthes writes, “Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a lexis.”<sup>1</sup> In paintings, I garble signifiers, superimpose images, and resist linear narrative. With video, I layer fragmented audio and mix personal and found footage.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957), 107-108.





*Soft Spot* (installation), 2021



*Soft Spot* (still), 2021



Forrest Bess, *Landscape with Sun*, 1948, oil on canvas, 14" x 16 1/8"

Ideas relating to cultural myth are ongoing in my work. In *Soft Spot*, the American flag is being waved in two shots taken from the Chinese New Year celebration in New York City. In post-production I falsify a slow, arbitrary camera zoom into the flag. The audio combines melody from the intro of an astrological podcast mixed in with the soft sound of vaping. My intent is to emulate a kind of hypnosis. The flag is seductively dangled as bait in slow motion. I want to draw the viewer in, to get lost in the color, light and composition. My palpably futile attempt to disassociate the flag from the historical atrocities it represents is an effort to imitate the way myths are peddled. Cigarettes, lottery tickets, casinos, Times Square, freedom, individualism, celebrity and youth-oriented culture – all these are sold via visual stimuli: images in exciting, bright colors or with high contrast. The American flag is a moment of pause in *Soft Spot*, a video jam packed with stimuli. While the video is primarily pieced together from personal video and audio I recorded on my phone, it also incorporates found material: a gorilla encountering a self-reflection mirror test, paintballs colliding in slow motion, the New Year countdown, distorted audio of the intro music of the documentary television series, *How It's Made*, a robotic dancing dog, lightning, and a murmuration of birds. The clips are densely layered and expire quickly – they mimic my own distracted and crowded mind.

## holes and gloss



Agnes Pelton, *Light Center*, 1947-48, oil on canvas, 36"x25"

A sense of collapsed time, the gap between historical reality and my contemporary experience—the feeling I have in Palisades Interstate Park—has been exacerbated by the speed of media. I was often home alone growing up so I had a lot of freedom to watch TV and go on the computer. The internet was a rush at this time. The door-creak sound that indicated somebody had logged into AOL instant messenger had an effect similar to that of the dopamine hit that people get from “likes” on social media today. The pixelated, poor resolution images on the screen were completely fresh then.

My generation was the guinea pig for technological integration in schools. I learned to type at an early age, and by the time I was in elementary school I was completely absorbed by digital culture: playing *The Sims*, choosing just the right font for my away message, browsing through various forums, and torrenting music. Sometimes instead of downloading a song, you would be duped with a mp3 file of someone impersonating Bill Clinton, “My fellow Americans, I would once again like to say that I did not have sexual relations with that woman. I did, however, go to ifreeclub.com where they offer hundreds of free products...” This spam audio lives on as a niche meme, a small piece of memory shared by a subset of millennials.



*Heartburn*, 2020, oil on wood, 48"x40" // *Stand In*, 2020, oil on wood, 48"x40"

I am overwhelmed by the extraordinary amount of digital detritus on the internet, but it is also an invaluable source for my art. The time I've spent on the internet, more than 20 years' worth now, has deep-rooted consequences for the way my brain functions. Retaining information is no longer necessary when you can bookmark, screenshot or download. It's all at your fingertips, provoking the question of quantity versus quality.

Hito Steyerl speaks to the bastardization of the "original image" in her essay, "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009). She writes:

The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy. It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools. By drifting away from the vaults of cinema, it is propelled onto new and ephemeral screens stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators.

The circulation of poor images thus creates “visual bonds,” as Dziga Vertov once called them... In a sense, his dream has come true, if mostly under the rule of a global information capitalism whose audiences are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement, and anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

I am drawn to the affect communicated in both the sexy, high-res image and the grainy, but humble, low-res image. One speaks to production value and capital while the other, dragged and beaten through mass circulation, achieves the credibility of truth. The small airbrush paintings I have made since the start of the pandemic this year have been an exploration of these poor, inconsequential images: scientific illustrations, clip art, memes, graphic designs, and vectors. I have also been incorporating materials around my home, such as rice and teff grain, as a way of pixelating the painted surface. I believe there is a correlation between Barthes’ definition of myth and Steyerl’s analysis of the poor image. The two concepts identify a phenomenon in which meaning or intent is obscured in order to persist and spread to a wider audience. The flag can be seen as an emblem of Barthes’ myth but also of Steyerl’s poor image, in which its constant spread and recontextualization liberates it from its original symbolism. I also reflected on Barthes’ notion of myth as “language-robbery” when titling the series of airbrush paintings after a singular Korean consonant as a way to suggest the broken lexis of those images. Without accompanying vowels to form a full word, the individual paintings are incapable of speaking coherently.

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<sup>2</sup> Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *E-flux journal*, #10 (2009): 8.



*Weight of the Air*, 2021, Richard and Dolly Maass Gallery, Purchase College

I also want to interrogate the aspirational, glossy, poreless imagery emitted by the world of advertising. In considering what it is that the forces of capitalism are trying to distract us from, I have been thinking about the binaries we are presented with: young/old, feminine/masculine, white/black, Eastern/Western. The oval or hole shape appears in several of my paintings as a way to address the complexities of identity that are either erased or resolved in advertising. On one hand, holes are empty or lacking, but on the other hand, they invite projection. You could step behind the hole and wear it as a mask, or you could exit through it. In one painting the oval hole functions as the blank space of an early aughts sticker machine photo. I use this form as a way to emphasize the available compulsory effects for altering the appearance of those who participate in the sticker machine. Its filters featured options such as virtual stamps, decorative borders, glowing pens, overall brightening, making the eyes bigger or sparkling, adding a redder color on the lips, and blurring out any skin blemishes. I can't help but see the darker implications of escapism, or at least a forced upon standard of beauty, embedded in these filter aesthetics.



*Purikura*, 2020, acrylic on linen, 10"x8" // *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic and oil on wood, 11"x14" // *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic and oil on wood, 14"x11"



*Face Masks*, 2020, acrylic and oil on wood, 12"x12" // *Flies Over Gibraltar*, 2019, mixed media on wood, 11"x14" // *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic and seaweed on wood, 10"x14"

Artifice is sometimes regarded negatively. No one likes to be tricked. But I hope to open possibilities of a deeper read of my work by exaggerating artifice. If I abstract or subvert an advertisement enough, will our awareness of its falseness come clear? Will I see the light? In both my video and paintings, I depict flashes of light or a glowing effect to question if there's an area of overlap between artifice and spirituality. Motifs of holes, a glow, or light evoke Hal Foster's writing that the literal definition of "utopia" is a "no place" that functions as a "possible portal between an unfinished past and a reopened future."<sup>3</sup> The idea of a "no place" appears as a popular movie trope, when a character is surrounded by complete whiteness to indicate they've

<sup>3</sup> Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, Vol. 110 (2004): 15.

crossed the threshold into afterlife, as well as in product photography which utilizes the white cyclorama as a background. In both examples, the empty white non-space produces an effect of destabilization – there is no context for any specific time or place. I can no longer divorce the image of an engulfing whiteness or blinding light from these connections to death and capital.



Still from *Bruce Almighty* (2003) // Portable cyclorama for product photography

In his work *Specters of Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida described a concept he called “hauntology,” which can be understood simply as a broken sense of time. “The time is out of joint,” wrote Derrida, quoting *Hamlet*. In his 2012 essay “What is Hauntology,” Mark Fisher expands on Derrida’s idea of temporal disjunction in contemporary technology:

*Specters of Marx* was also a series of speculations about the media (or post-media) technologies that capital had installed on its now global territory – hauntology was by no means something rarefied; it was proper to the time of the techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity,” “simulacra,” and “synthetic images.” But this discussion of the “tele-” shows that hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time...Events that are spatially distant become available to audience instantaneously. Neither Baudrillard nor Derrida would live to see the full effects – no doubt I should say the full effects so far – of the “tele-technology” that has most radically contracted space and time, the Internet, and it is significant that the discourse of hauntology should have been attached to popular culture at the moment when cyberspace enjoyed dominion over the reception, distribution and consumption of culture...

Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time...<sup>4</sup>

As the internet amplifies repetition and mutation at a rapid pace, it also exacerbates our collective ability to forget. The digital realm, free from the limits of physicality, encourages the

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Fisher, “What Is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1 (2012): 19.



infinite: overlapping and parallel realities exist simultaneously. With physical mediums like painting or even film, there is some sense of material limitation. Materiality plays a large part in the creative process. With digital media, material scarcity is practically absent (assuming one has a functioning recording device and computer). However, there are other constraints to work with or against, such as time and attention. The infinite amount of available content—this year coupled with the Zoom fatigue that many of us experienced during the pandemic—makes me all too aware of how draining the glowing screen can be. I approach the hauntological sense of broken time in both my paintings and time-based media through wholly different structures. Yet, in spite of their differences, both allow me to examine the plasticity of memory and our collectively fleeting attention spans. My focus is not on coherence or linear storytelling. Instead, I aim to express a brokenness – of time and language. The virtual world gives us puzzles with endless solutions, stages with ever-shifting props. The Godori cards shuffle and regroup.

Another Autointerview 2021 (inspired by Lucas Samaras)

*Do you like games?*

Who's playing with me? I like games when other people want to play. I don't like it when I feel like I'm enjoying it more than others.

*Are you competitive?*

I can be. I'm most competitive against myself or one other person. I get overwhelmed when it's a large group and start to wonder if I can get away with slipping out unnoticed.

*Do you like rules?*

I like to know who's making the rules and what they are. I welcome it when I feel like I'm going to drown in infinite possibility.

*Who are you?*

When I think about it, I don't really feel like a Christine. The letter S is my middle name on my birth certificate. My family calls me 세종 (Sejong). My grandmother chose this name after the king who established Korean writing. I'll be 30 soon. Then I'll be 40, and then 80.

*Where are you from?*

America. Sometimes people ask me this looking for a different answer.

*Who are you and where are you from?*

I imagine my answer will change over time.

*How are you living?*

Semi-consciously. I wish I had more self-control. I distract myself too much.

*What did you do?*

I sat in front of screens, went to the grocery store to go somewhere, walked around the block, slept poorly or too much, scrolled, killed a plant, watched a lot of bad TV and some good movies, missed my friends, picked up poop, wished I could be somewhere new, started a lot of things I didn't finish, listened to podcasts, painted, tried to meditate, laughed, failed, complained, edited, cried, wore the same pants for days, made new friends, took pictures, drifted off, washed dishes, burned incense, showered, bruised myself, cut my bangs unevenly, avoided opening up the front facing camera on my phone, sanitized, waited, aged, gathered dust, piled clothes, held my breath.

*Can you disappear?*

No, but you can take a break.

*Is there permanence?*

If there is, it's hard to achieve.

*What's your proof?*  
The things I make.

*What do you want?*  
I want to keep having a reason to come back to making.

*How can you get it?*  
By showing up and doing, especially when I doubt myself.

*Are you prepared?*  
I try to be, but sometimes it's best not to pretend to know what to expect.

*Are you organized?*  
It doesn't come naturally. Physical things are more satisfying to organize. I wonder how many hard drives I'll accumulate in my life, and if I'll ever really go through them.

*How are you?*  
Today I'm about a 6.

*Are you hopeful?*  
It's foolish to be too hopeful but isn't sustainable to be hopeless. One should try to have a healthy amount of hope.

*Why are you making art?*  
For consistency and change.

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