

# *Right Here, Right Now*

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Death and all its sublime mysteries have always been an unavoidable matter in my life. I was born and raised in a Buddhist temple in Paju, South Korea, which included a nursing home, columbarium, and memorial park in the Gubuk mountains of our “backyard.” This sanctuary of “all-inclusive services to death” was first built by my grandmother in the 1950s; my father became a monk when he was in middle school. The sanctuary was the final destination of many souls and people who were abandoned by their family members. After having witnessed countless final travels of my relatives and others, I question what is truly important in my life, and remain curious about the metaphysical time-space where life and death coexist. This has also made me think about my very existence and where I belong, motivating factors in my work.

In my work I explore the relational stance of life and death and how it manifests in space primarily in two ways. One involves expressing through images, and the other through raw materials. In my paintings, I depict places where I have experienced rituals, such as *Jesa*<sup>1</sup>;



objects related to memorial ceremonies, such as *jegi*<sup>2</sup>, candles, incense, incense holders, and funeral portraits; and objects of daily necessities. To convey my story, I use specific materials, such as resin, mirrors, and oil-based mediums that reflect the viewer. In addition to the subject matter and the physical materials, I attempt to

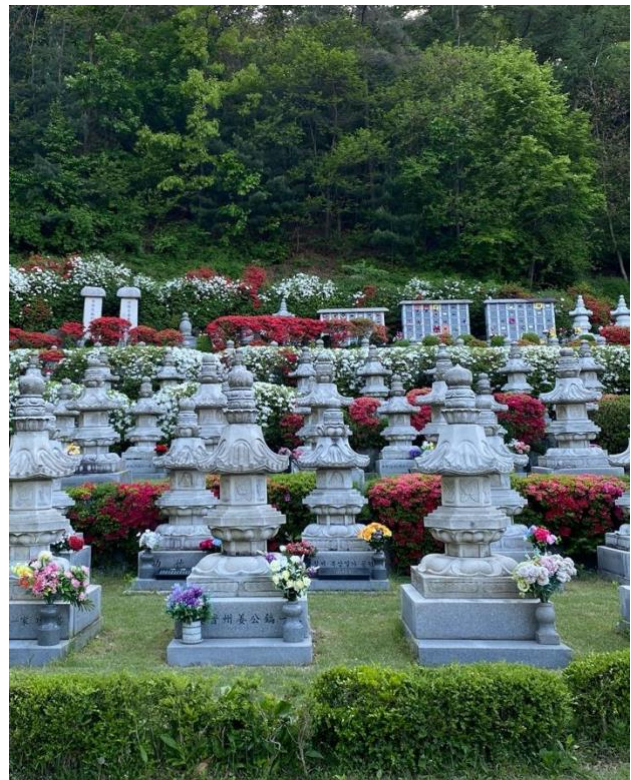
<sup>1</sup> *Jesa* is a ceremony commonly practiced in Korea. *Jesa* functions as a memorial to the ancestors of the participants. *Jesa* is usually held on the anniversary of the ancestor’s death. The majority of Catholics, Buddhists and some nonbelievers practice ancestral rites, although Protestants do not.

<sup>2</sup> Implements used at a memorial rite in general. Vessels.

embody the idea of a commemorative place whose significance lies in the coexistence there of life and death.

### **Definition**

The memorial place refers to the site where the living and the dead are connected in space. A memorial place can refer to a cemetery—a “Chumo (cherished)” park—with the added (add footnote that the meaning has been changed) meaning of being a place of rest for those who mourn and a comfort for those who visit (Dong-Yeon Kang, 2019). Such spaces can be classified as memorializing innocent victims, heroes who sacrifice natural disasters. They might include public facilities to honor the souls of patriotic martyrs, such as a national cemetery or patriotic monument; or act as a comfort to the souls victimized by an unexpected catastrophe, like 9/11. However, for comfort, we might think more of an individual park or cemetery where our ancestors or neighbors have been laid to rest.



Bongan Tower (pagoda) cemetery



Life and death co-exist in the place where I grew up, unlike other cemetery parks in South Korea. When I was in K2, my father built a memorial center and park in front of the house. From the room I shared with elderly homeless people, I could see the Bongantop (Pagoda), where pagodas with an urn are placed on a terraced steep slope on a hillside. This front yard was my playground, while for visitors, it was (and is) a place to take a walk and rest. During the weekends, I was busy running between the sanctuary and kitchen, helping to prepare for the ancestor rites. More than 20 kinds of food were prepared early in the morning for each rite. The food had to be

arranged in a specific place along with a memorial tablet with the portraits of the deceased. The ritual begins with the bereaved families kneeling in front of the food table and offering incense to invoke the spirits of the ancestors. Next, the eldest person pours rice wine into a cup. There are three pauses during the pouring, after which the cup is placed on the table. The purpose of this ritual is to lure the ancestors, using the pleasant smell of incense. Then, everyone, in order of age, bows to thank and respect their ancestors. The ritual of offering food to ancestors is an expression of gratitude. Also, a spoon should be placed in the rice and then in the soup, in order. A pair of chopsticks is placed in a vegetable pancake. (This is a ritual that I depict in my painting *Afterparty for Unkwon Center*, 2021). After those ancestral rites are performed, leftovers are carried to the table in front of the sermon hall, where cats wait to eat them. Therefore, my space was had multiple meanings: as a resting place for restless souls, as my home and playground, and as a home for the homeless, where visitors take a rest. There, I could also compare their death with my life, observing their pre-death and after-death existences vicariously.



*Afterparty for Unkwon Center*, 2021, oil and fluorescent powder on canvas, 74 x 80 inches



*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, oil on linen, each canvas 48 x 60inches

### *Yesterday*—Past

These three canvases represent the past, present, and future of my life: in a work titled *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. Yesterday is divided into four different sections. In it, I overlapped the images of a playground and memorial park, referring to my experience as a child growing up in this place, as mentioned above. It combines the image of death—Bongantop, where urns are placed—and life—a playground where I was delighted. I painted bright green grass in front of the enshrining tower, since it was my playground. However, entering elementary school, and as I began to build my identity, I began to feel my home belonged to others, not to me. So, I decided to move my playground to the front of the school. I played with my friends there until sunset. One by one, my friends returned home, and only after that I returned home.

### *Today*—present

The middle canvas, *Today*, is described in four different parts. Around the end of winter, everybody in the temple became very busy as we prepared for the Buddha's Birthday in May. First, we needed to replace 1000 year-old lotus-lanterns, which was strenuous work. Unlike most of the temples, which buy pre-made plastic lotus lanterns, we make each lotus lantern out of paper by hand. This is expressed in *Today*. First, we cover the wire frames with white *Changhoji* to make

shapes and surfaces (left lower part of *Today*). This base can be used either as a lantern for the dead or for the living. After finishing the base in white, we attach paper lotus petals. White lotus petals are for the dead, and pink petals are for the living. Working at this for a couple of months, all ten of our fingers become pink. Since my mother believes that we must make the lanterns by hand to honor a prayer's wishes, all of us attach the petals one by one upon the base. It is the most labor-intensive task, and it ends at the beginning of May. In the painting, I depicted the white-base lanterns because the present has not been decided.

In the left middle of *Today*, I painted an image of my mother making a lantern, because whenever I think about her it is always with this memory of her sitting and making lanterns. Peter Doig once said about oil painting, "*a painting needs to go its way, while its incidental qualities develop toward significance* (Richard, 2017)." Inspired by Peter Doig, I painted her figure using burnt umber, and poured Gamsol on top to make her figure formless. I also waited for a chemical reaction between Gamsol, galkyd, linseed oil, and oil paint, to create cracks on the surface of the painting and thereby reveal its natural form. At the bottom, in order to emphasize the importance of the lanterns, I mixed wax with oil paint and painted it thickly on them. A mineral spring is painted on the bottom right in a blue color; between the lantern and mineral spring, a friend scoops up the water with a red cup. A white lantern rests on a green chair in the center, symbolizing a restless soul taking a rest. The green color of the chair represents comfort and the spring season symbolizes the beginning and the present.

In the left upper corner, I included the shrine of the mountain god. Here a candle sheds light in the darkness. Still, in the painting, the candlelight is not directly painted. It just mops the dark colors around it so that the undertone of orange and yellow colors can come out; the burnt sienna and burnt umber contrast so that the light can be seen more clearly. I intentionally made

the surroundings darker because I wish to convey the sense that I have experienced my life through the deaths of others. The candle, whose light just glimmers in the darkness, represents myself. In the right top corner, I painted the One-Pillar Gate. In the Buddhist cosmos represented by a temple structure, One-Pillar Gate is located in a space between the secular world (outside of the gate) and the world of truth (inside of the gate). The door is open wide, symbolizing the potential of the present moment.

*Tomorrow—future*

Unlike *Yesterday* and *Today*, *Tomorrow* is a unified composition. I intentionally changed the composition from I used in *Yesterday* and *Today* to express an undetermined future. On the left side of the *Tomorrow* is a continuation from *Today*, which leans toward the future. The different shapes of Pagodas that take up the major portion of the painting portray the actual four actual pagodas at my home, and they are related to my grandmother. The tallest orangish tower on the far-right side is the stone tower my grandmother built by stacking small stones one by one; I wanted it to look gold by painting its top with sunset colors. The history of our temple and grandmother's life story is written on the long indigo monument. The gray pagoda with the roof contains my grandmother's urn. Next to the gray pagoda, the more diminutive gray pagoda contains my grandfather's urn.

At the top, a glossy blue color painted in rectangular shapes depicts the name tags of the living and the dead hanging under the lotus lanterns. The sky in the rectangle serves as a mirror or window reflecting the world of the opposite side. Particularly, the form on the left side are a continuation of the room from *Yesterday* and *Today*. Deceased people appear in silhouettes, and I created them with a glossy effect. Each shape and color appears and disappears, depending on the audience's perspective, to indicate that the future is uncertain.



At the bottom of the panel is a bouquet of chrysanthemums used for funerals, along with the deceased's shoes and miscellaneous possessions. In the foreground, dry reeds hover to show the Fall season. In Buddhist practice, life and death are not different, and time and space are temporary place-holders in an ever-changing causal network. The future is the consummation of the past and the present. *Tomorrow* is not different from *Yesterday* and *Today*. However, it is not determined yet. In that sense, the future is different but not different, and therefore is non-dualistic. I wanted to demonstrate this non-dualistic aspect of the future by setting my grandparents' pagodas in the middle of the future. My grandparents and parents are the roots of my future.

In the past, I was able to fully feel myself and live my present. While people think that the present is the current time, in it time is passing by—is already past. The existence of my identity has faded out and overlapped with the life of my mother and my grandparents, which I expressed in the present and future. In that sense, the distinction between the past, present and



future does not exist. If someone forces me to express it, then I cannot but paint the past, present and future in this way.



*Here and Now*, 2020, oil on linen, 31.5 x 40 inches

*Here and Now*

The composition in *Here and Now* invites the viewer to see the painting as if they were standing in front of an actual temple. The temple, located in my family's complex, is called *Yong-gung* (the underwater palace of the Dragon King), and it is built of marble. Above the gray roof, spring sunlight peeks through the tree foliage sprawling from left to right. Through a slightly reflective, rectangular-shaped glass door, various images are superimposed: candles, trees, cars, chairs, mountains, flowers, etc. A candy pack, the Dragon King's portrait within the frame, a teacup, the sky, and a reflection of myself taking a selfie are layered within the same surface. I can see these objects, my reflection, and the landscape behind of me all on the surface of the glass door. With

the question - what comes first and what comes after? - I wanted to spare some time for a realization of where I lived at the moment. Lois Dodd asked the same question in her work. She painted reflections in windows. Shortly after she began painting windows, she began to be interested in reflections because of their tendency to capture the effects of time and change. They presented many formal possibilities:

I am painting this window, and the glass was there and behind that was the curtain. So, it was like painting the whole thing in reverse. Then, as I was standing there, I could see the barn's reflection, and then a cloud drifting over, so that everything was just perfect. With all these little things, the change could be made. There is still a chance that anything can move, although it would look static. So, I like that, too. I enjoy being out there and something occurs in this very quiet way. Nothing is static, at all. Anything keeps moving and changing, even while you're working (Hirsch, 2017, p47).

## 천도재 Cheondojae<sup>3</sup>

In 2021, I returned to my home in Korea, due to the pandemic. While sleeping in my late grandmother's room, in the middle of the night, I woke up with a chill. Something felt very off. I could not move my body, not even my fingers. The only thing I could control was my eyes. I opened them slightly and saw a woman wearing a skirt circling the futon where I was sleeping. I immediately closed my eyes again. As I tried to move my body, I heard people rustling around me. They said, "She is awake."

This continued until the sunlight shattered my room and dispelled the darkness. I moved to another room to avoid it, but it repeated every night wherever I slept. It kept chasing me. Weirdly enough, I was not scared, because I did not feel that it was trying to harm me. However, it did make me tired. I told my parents about it, and they decided to call in a monk who could perform a special ritual ceremony called Chondojae. They carefully chose the day and told me to prepare various things. I was skeptical, though. The ceremony was much longer than I expected. The monk wrote different things about me on a piece of paper and made a bundle of things including the paper, my clothes, talismans, etc. Then he positioned one large and one small table next to each other. There were plates full of food on the large ritual table while the small table had only empty plates. I prostrated repeatedly for seven hours. Then, the monk turned off all the lights of the temple and explained to me that he would cover me with a dharma robe and throw red beans on the back. He said "When I take off the dharma robe, you will go home and never look back." As soon as I heard it, I got frightened. His last instruction, "Don't ever look back," made me irritated even more. The red beans he threw at my back strangely hurt. Yelling at me, "NOW! Go home! DON'T

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<sup>3</sup> Consolation ceremony for the spirit of the dead: A transforming celebration to help the spirit of the deceased attain a higher spiritual realm or rebirth in the Land of Bliss by the grace of Buddha. The most common celebration of this type is Sasipgujae, the forty-nine days of memorial celebration for the spirit of the deceased.

LOOK BACK!," he took off the dharma robe that covered my body. I rushed to my car and drove to my sister's home, not my parents'.

On the same night, after the ritual, I called my dad and asked why I had to do it. He told me that I had another older sister who died young, when I was seven. My dad believed that she came to me because she was afraid of being forgotten. He said that she might have come to let me know that she was there. I felt terribly sorry that I had completely forgotten about her. The saddest thing for the dead is that people will forget them as if they never existed. Since she died when I was too young to remember her, I did forget that she was with me. It made me wonder what the true meaning of life and death is, and what the meaning of the space is where the living and the dead coexist.



*From Everlasting to Everlasting*, 2020, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 inches

### *From Everlasting to Everlasting*

Sacred religious ceremonies, including the rituals I have mentioned, begin with the burning of incense. Burning incense is a way of inviting gods and ancestors to visit. Incense burns its body to purify the space. It is believed that aroma of the incense will purify and thereby open the space to Buddhas to come. In other words, incense serves as a medium bridging between Sahā World<sup>4</sup> and Pure Land of the Buddhas.<sup>5</sup> The act of burning incense and praying with a desperate heart can be an effective means of approaching the Buddhas.

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<sup>4</sup> Saha: The mundane world, or the sea of suffering, which, contrary to the Pure Land in the West, must be endured.

<sup>5</sup> The utmost bliss: The Pure Land of Utmost Bliss of Amitabha Buddha lying in the West beyond innumerable Buddha-lands. Cf. (Hwajang Segye) The Blissful Land of Vairochana Buddha, and the Blissful Land of the Buddha of Infinite Life.

In the painting, at the bottom right of the work, there is a turquoise-blue incense holder sitting on a burnt sienna-colored table. The incense holders next to the table are reflections of the incense holders limitlessly repeating the same object. It implies the unending repetition of life and death—the cyclic existence of birth, death, and rebirth in Buddhism. The reflectiveness of the mirrors refers to both the real and virtual worlds and acts as a metaphor of the door to the eternity. Gray smoke rises in the background at the right side; the incense embers in orange evoke both life and the flow of the time as it is burning, turning it into ashes and smoke.

Next to the mirror in the painting is a portrait of the deceased one. It is barely visible; his faintly visible mustache is reflected in the mirror which is painted with galkyd and liquin to make the surface glossy. I intended to invite the viewers to be part of the painting. On the right, a wooden nameplate of the deceased is sketched out lightly. A wooden chair where the wooden nameplate is placed appears in the right corner of the painting, as it does in my parents' temple. I painted the landscape dominantly with phthalo and ultramarine blue to contrast the existence of a spot of light of the burning incense. Near the left-end corner, the image becomes hazier while the spirit-tablet and its shelf become sketchier, as if they are going to leave only a trace. I did not draw the smoke on the reflections of the incense, in order to distinguish the real from the virtual.



*Flight deck*, oil and fluorescent powder on canvas, 2021, 36 x 36 inches, under the LED light/ UV light

### *Flight deck*

The most exciting moment while working as a flight attendant is watching the changing of time in the sky. Although I see the sunrise and sunset whenever I am on the plane, the scenery is always different, always touching. Particularly it is so when the sunset gently descends upon the plane window like a gentle thief stealing my heart. The sunset is beautiful because it cannot be owned but only seen. My friend asked, “Where did you take this photo?” I have begun to think that, although we imagine that the sun rises and sets, actually, it is the earth and I that revolve around the sun. It depends on the perspective.

The scene I saw in the flight deck gave me a moment of decisive new recognition. *Flight Deck*, 36 x 36 inches, is painted with oil and fluorescence powder on the canvas. It is an interior view of the cockpit of an airplane where I work. Near the pilot’s seat is a yoke with clipped blank notes, control panels, and monitors. The windows are divided by a frame bar diagonally slanted.



The cockpit's low ceiling is in dark, reddish-brown colors; it takes up about a quarter of the canvas. Such an allocation makes one feel enclosed, as if one is there. There is light from the buttons on the control panels and screen monitors. The scenery outside is dimly visible. The clipped paper on the yoke, which supposedly contains all the necessary information for the flight, is left blank. And the arrows on the control panel indicate the current location, which is a fluorescent pink color, reminding me where I am presently.

Beyond the window, the Persian blue and indigo sky spreads out. Slightly above the center of the painting, a cloud forms a horizontal line across the frame. The cloud also enters into the cockpit as though the boundary between the inside and outside is unclear. A streak of red emanates from the purple floating over the clouds, as if the sun is setting. On the left side of the cockpit, it still seems to be night. A trace of paint flows down in the monitor on the right side. I also use white, orange, yellow and blue paints mixed with fluorescent powder which is invisible under the general lighting. The paint marks are scattered and shine brightly like stars under UV light. Generally, while, on earth, we cannot see the stars during the day, only at night. However, because the day and night coexist from the cockpit view, I can see the stars even during the day. The stars are twinkling everywhere, day and night. The borderlines between day and night, light and darkness, life and death, and here and there, are obscure.

The airplane keeps moving; time and space are never the same. I used fluorescent powder with UV effect to express the space I felt where everything exists but does not exist in the same time-space. The information in the dashboard orientates me as to where I am and where I should go. This scene reminds me that life and death are not different. The idea of birth and death is a conceptual distinction, just like sunrise and sunset. It teaches me the most important principle of Buddhism—*pratītyasamutpāda*, or dependent arising. All phenomena arise dependent upon other

phenomena. Like the Buddha Śākyamuni says, “This being, that exists; through the arising of this that arises. This not being, that does not exist. Because this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist(Aramaki, 1991).” Life is meaningful only depending upon death. The sunset is sunset only because there is sunrise. The past, present, and future exist only because they depend on each other.



*Inner peace*, 2021, oil and fluorescent powder on canvas, 36x 36 inches

### *Inner Peace*

This painting arose out of an experience I had while working in my airplane. Suddenly, when I was looking at the sky, I felt that I was immersed in the space beyond any boundaries of inside and outside, here and there, past, future, and present. Stars hugged me in the darkness, and I felt a deeply cozy, calm, and warm sensation. Despite being alone at that moment, I felt complete. My father told me that all of us are travelers on the planet earth, to take a tour called life. Through this painting, I tried to present a moment of inner peace.

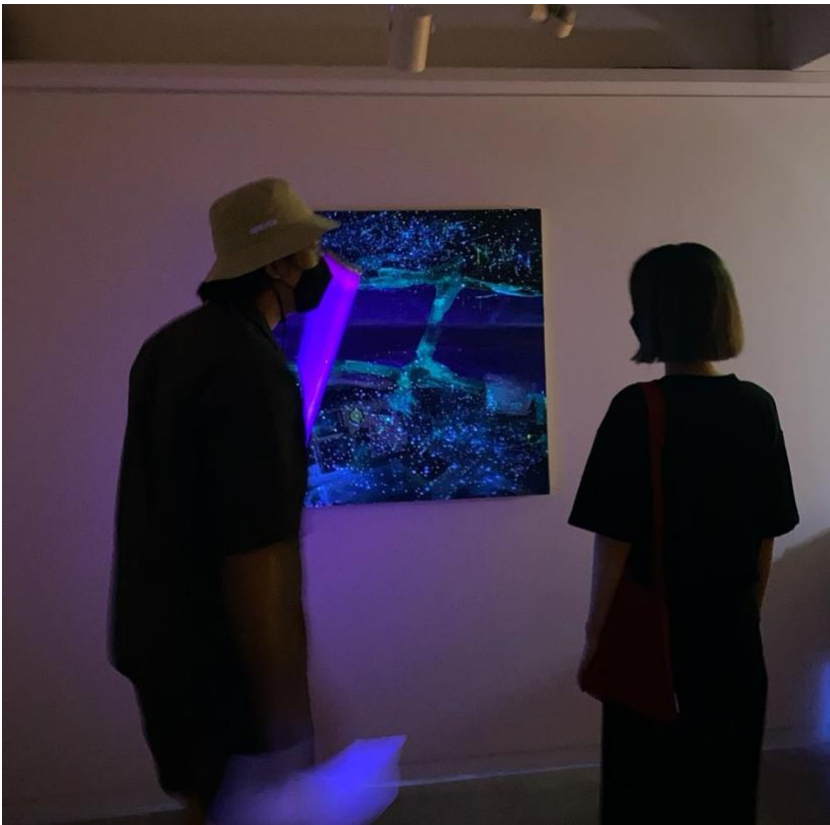
I believed that my experience of *inner peace* is close to the Buddhist teaching of emptiness. The open window painted with burnt sienna-colored open window extends from the right to the middle of a square canvas. Mostly expressed in indigo, cobalt blue, and ultramarine blue, the painting conjures outer space and the universe, which symbolize emptiness. Two-hand mudrās are floating in the air with a gesture of finger-folding. In the hand on the left, the thumb and ring finger are touching while the other three fingers are straight up and the Buddhist rosary (yeomjoo) is hanging from the wrist. The other hand is holding a glowing pale yellow star with the thumb and ring finger. The Buddha's hand gestures, called mudrās, express symbolic meanings. The mudrā I used in my work is called "the lower class in the lower category of rebirth." The concept of "Lower Class Lower Rebirth" represents the peaceful realm of evildoers who repented their evil actions and thereby were reborn in the lowest realm of the Pure Land of Amitayus Buddha. Those hands, painted purple and black, are glowing in space.

Shooting stars streak across the painting from right to left. When I see shooting stars flying across the night sky, I feel their death and make wishes at the same time. The meteor shines in an instant, but Koreans make a wish when they see the shooting stars. In the middle, two street lights are shining on the road. In the foreground is a transparent shelf; a teacup is drawn in pink and a vibrant yellow chrysanthemum blooms in a sky-blue flowerpot. In the bottom left-hand corner, part of a gray teakettle appears. And at the left end, the kettle's sprout, a little far from the teacup, indicates that tea has already been served. In Buddhism, emptiness refers to the idea that nothing has a permanently fixed nature. It is also said that emptiness means all phenomena in the world stay alive through everlasting causal interactions with others. In that sense, despite the common misunderstanding of emptiness as nihilism, it is the symbol of possibilities. According to the theory of emptiness, all our existence is not determined, but open to new possibilities, and since emptiness

also means interconnectivity wherever we are, we are not alone (The Buddhist professor Jongbok Yi, in a personal conversation I had with him on Apr 23, 2022). This is the *Inner Peace* that I experienced and intended to present in this work.

I wanted my painting to be more friendly to my friends and family who did not study art. I considered ways of encouraging viewers to interact more directly with my painting to stimulate their curiosity; however, I could not find a definite solution. To find out the best way to communicate with viewers, I used the fluorescent powder in my paintings to conduct an intriguing experiment. I took photos of these paintings in both regular and UV blacklight and posted them on Instagram. The experiment was to see how many people, when visiting the show, would turn off the regular light in the exhibition hall and observe the paintings with UV flashlights placed next to it. Those who visited the exhibition after seeing my Instagram posts turned off the regular light, held the flashlight, and observed the paintings; those who did not read the Instagram posts simply glanced at them or quickly passed them by. Some viewers used the flashlights, while others manipulated a movable UV light that was suspended in front of the paintings. Some people moved the light fixture horizontally across the paintings, like scanning and X-rays, as if they were searching for their way through the stars and universe. As light moves across the paintings, both images and viewers' perspectives changed. Fixed images became responsive to visitors moving their bodies and moving lights. The audience spent much more time watching the paintings under UV blacklight than under the regular light. I believe the use of fluorescent powder improved communication with the audience, triggering them to understand that their casual experience

cannot fully convey numerous aspects of a phenomenon and that the meanings of a phenomenon are not determined but constantly changing, depending on the surroundings, time, and space.





*Welcome*, 2021, RGB LED screen and acrylic box, 14 x 14 inches

I wanted to create more accessible works. I also made a series of called *officeview* that fell somewhere between painting and object, by pouring resin on top of the painting. Recently, I invented an emoji thermometer box to measure the gallery visitor's temperature. This work starts by sensing the moment a person stands in front of the work. A moving graphic dot matrix display with a "welcome" sign appears then asks the person to measure their temperature. I designed seven different emoticons for each temperature. For example, if the person's temperature is lower than

97°F, a blue cold-looking emoji pops up. If the person's temperature is higher than 97°F, it shows an emoticon with sweating and frowning look asking "Are you okay?" This dot matrix display, placed in a black acrylic box, reflects who is being measured, like a mirror reflecting the face of a person measuring their own temperature. By inviting the viewers directly or indirectly observing the work, my intention is to remind the viewer that they exist at the present moment, here and now. This theme, penetrating all my works, can be summarized by Buddha's following words:

What is past is left behind.

The future is as yet unreached.

Whatever quality is present

you clearly see right there, right there.

Not taken in, unshaken,

that's how you develop the heart(Bhikkhu, 2013).

I have lived close to death and far from death, and to me, the distinction between life and death is often empty and meaningless. I could die at any moment, and everything I have been through could disappear at any moment. Instead of asking the unanswerable question of what is the most important matter in my life, I decided to put my effort into things at present moment. My personal attempt is to focus on matters that I want to do right now. I create art, prove my existence by them, and connect my universe with the world. I hope that one day my universe can inspire viewers to contemplate the meaning of their lives in their own ways and to live their lives from their newly gained perspectives.

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