

“Evergreen” at Art Mora (Ridgefield Park, New Jersey)

“Evergreen,” a strong show occurring at gallerist Sunny Shin’s large space in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey, consists of work by three Asian women artists: Jae Hi Ahn (from Korea), Xin Song (from Mainland China), and Tai Hwa Goh (from Korea). All three women were born and raised in Asia, but they have studied in America and now live and work here in New York or its environs. Staying permanently in the States and participating in the New York art world is not an easy task; recently, the attention paid to the Asian art community has been small, except for the very few artstars from the East who attract most of the interest. But, even then, we hear of well-known artists from Asia returning home, in part because they have not been fully recognized in the West. This is slightly odd, in the sense that the work made by Asians regularly fits very well into the current language established by leading American artists and other artists in the West. For whatever reasons, it has been hard for Asian artists to find opportunities to show here. Shin, who has been running Art Mora for a number of years, is giving these three talented, mid-career artists a chance to display their work at a time when it is not easy to find Asian art available to see.

Ahn’s “Flora” (2022) hung from the ceiling in front of the gallery, consists of thin stems with leaves and red flowers, the latter often occurring in clusters. The group of stems, embellished by flowers, is clearly made with artificial materials, but the forms themselves are highly realistic, close to natural form. Placed together, in close proximity, the arrangement comes close to feeling like a forest hanging from the top of the space. Ahn brings into question interesting ideas about realism and artificial form; clearly the materials look synthetic, despite the fact that the experience of this small environment feels far from counterfeit. Of course, no matter how realistic, all art imitating nature remains at a remove from nature, and we accept the distance between the actual thing and its imaginative copy from the start. In Ahn’s case, we see the deliberate use of artificial materials as a way of introducing contemporary time into a representation that could easily be seen as stemming from a long-established lyric realism in Korean art. Ahn’s creation of a small forest of flowers not only captures us with its deliberate

beauty, it also reveals the extent to which we are surrounded by synthetic materials. Yet here, the beauty of the installation, not the artificial aspect of its materials, wins out because of Ahn's skill and imagination. Ahn has also included four framed watercolor drawings of plants. Simple, accurate in detail, and lyrically attractive, the drawings demonstrate the artist's long-standing interest in natural beauty, best represented by a faithful realism.

China-born artist Xin Song created the large quilt "In Search of Lost Time" (2021) with fabrics collected both by herself and by her mother. Some of the material dates back a full century. The quilt consists of scores of panels, each one a foot square. Because they are highly patterned, the experience of the quilt is both abstract and decorative. Imageries shift sharply from one panel to the next, creating wonderful contrasts in shape, color, and feeling. At the same time, Xin Song's use of textiles inherited from her family and, in some cases, created generations ago, ties her art to an ongoing understanding of the warmth of family relations. But the composite of cloth square is not merely a genealogical demonstration, it is also the refashioning of materials traditionally tied to women's work, so that art takes precedent over our understanding of it as gender-based activity. This enables Xin Song to revise the textiles into statements of considerable interest, at a good distance from the cloths' original use. The individual components are impersonal, manmade statements that nonetheless retain their aura of decoration; as I noted, they also tie art making to Chinese female traditions of embroidery and ornamental work. Although Xin Song has been living in America for many years, her art's allegiance is with China, her first home and the continuing home of her family. In this large wall hanging, art is not only a means of communicating to an audience, it is also the way the artist maintains ties with the past.

Korea-born artist Goh has two compelling wall installations (made this year), one of lozenge-shaped forms held at a distance from the wall by steel supports, the other composed of two clumps of yellow lozenges, also placed several inches off the wall by visible metal supports. Her forms are simple in outline, but they are created by multiple open folds of paper, so that the surface of her art regularly demonstrates pleats that complicate her

art with their combination of closed and open spaces. While the spaces of these surfaces are small, they combine in greater numbers to fashion the overall form of the sculpture. The lozenge is multiplied to create the wall environment. These works are organic in both individual form and overall gestalt; their abstraction is linked more to art's own idiom than to the external world. Goh's art stems from a long tradition of sculptural abstraction, originated in the West but now available to artists from all over the world. New York has a long tradition of very good abstract sculpture, and Goh's efforts fit in well with the history of the medium. The metal pipes supporting the sculptures introduce a very contemporary awareness, both physically and thematically, of Goh's process.

Interestingly, none of the three women's art can be easily connected with their original cultures. Perhaps Xin Song's quilts reflect Chinese design, given the specificity of their embroidery, but then quilt-making using local textiles occurs worldwide. But there really is no debate to be had about the influence of Korea or China on these artists. Instead, as happens so often now, the impulse is essentially individualistic in nature, being free of transparent influence. In Ahn's case, the intention is to reproduce nature very closely, so as to create a space of wanted beauty. The environment is interestingly real and artificial at once. In Xin Song's work, the variousness and beauty of (Chinese) textiles exist both separately and a whole, resulting in a complex wall work striking for the esthetic differences in the cloth panels. Thus, the many squares develop a composite rich in visual interest while asserting the artist's personal past. Goh's abstract wall works exist within the ongoing practice of nonobjective form, beginning with modernist art. Her vision, not so much Asian as international, can be easily tied to present art made in New York. All three women make new work that aligns them closely to practices engaged in worldwide, rather than reflecting in particular an Asian past. Thus, their image-making belongs to the general character of contemporary art, whose geographical and cultural presence is essentially neutral.

Jonathan Goodman, 2022 July