

Myths of Our Time

Heemin Chung, Sun Woo, Zadie Xa

6 January—25 February 2023

Thaddaeus Ropac
Seoul Fort Hill
2F, 122-1, Dokseodang-ro, Yongsan-gu, Seoul



Zadie Xa, *Homecoming*, 2022. Oil on canvas, machine-stitched linen. 240 x 260 cm (94.49 x 102.36 in).
Photo: artifacts.

Thaddaeus Ropac Seoul presents *Myths of Our Time*, a group exhibition of new work by three artists for whom Korea's artistic, cultural and social landscape serves as a vital source of inspiration: **Heemin Chung** (South Korea, b.1987), **Sun Woo** (South Korea, b.1994) and **Zadie Xa** (Canada, b.1983).

While the work of each artist illustrates their own unique perspective and distinct approach to artmaking, the title of the show highlights their shared engagement with mythological traditions of storytelling. Through sculpture, textile and painting created especially for the exhibition, narratives drawn from diverse cultural contexts are reimagined through a contemporary lens to address urgent issues relating to technological developments, identity and notions of self.

Employing a visual language of poetic abstraction, **Heemin Chung** presents three large-scale paintings and a group of floor-standing sculptures that take inspiration from the fate of Echo, a nymph in Roman mythology. Sentenced to repeat the words of others, Echo serves as a metaphor for the limits of language, particularly in the digital circulation of information. Chung employs modelling software to 'sketch out a canvas' before it is materialised, drawing digital objects that are then dissected into thin cross-sections or planes. These planes are then realised as membrane-like sheets using a transparent gel medium. Draped, tucked and pinched onto canvases, before being coloured in pastel hues, the devised material creates echoed forms of the original modelled object, reconfiguring the genre of the still life.

As more aspects of our lives move online, I believe the way we perceive and relate to objects is evolving. I'm interested in deriving different meanings from the original, questioning things I've taken for granted, and using traditional materials to do so. — Heemin Chung

Positioning her practice as an extension of orthodox painting techniques, Chung claims the tradition for herself: 'Given its long history, I believe painting is an easy medium to detect changes in the way we see and perceive. This is why the medium is appealing.' Her sculptures are conceived as an extension of this experimental painting practice, their biomorphic lines, modelled using the same digital software, evoking Echo's final bodily transformation from bone into stone.

Chung pursues the state of becoming an object beyond an image and with a thickness that, itself, becomes an act and a world, rather than a mediated plane [...] The physical thickness of Chung's painting is related to the thickness of the layer of meaning that interprets it.

— Wonseok Koh, chief curator at Seoul Museum of Art

The relationship between technology and artmaking practices also informs the work of **Sun Woo**, who presents three painted canvases in *Myths of Our Time*. She turns to the past, referencing the history of prosthetics and medieval armour to consider the potential of technology to extend the body beyond its physical bounds. Fragmented bodies and hybrid corporeal forms entwined with machines, objects and landscapes populate her canvases, evoking mythological states of metamorphosis.



Heemin Chung, *Distant Calling*, 2022
Acrylic, oil, inkjet transferred gel medium on canvas.
223 x 190 cm (87.8 x 74.8 in). Photo: artifacts.



Sun Woo, *In the Cage*, 2022. Acrylic and charcoal on canvas.
220 x 166 cm (86.61 x 65.35 in). Photo: artifacts.

Reaching beyond the human, these “enhanced” bodies,’ she says, ‘are stranded as living debris – fragmented and vulnerable.’

I reflect on this strange convergence of the organic and mechanic, thinking about what it means to be a body in society where technologies enable us to filter realities while simultaneously magnifying our frailties and sometimes, even our sense of impotence.

— Sun Woo

Sun Woo gathers images from varied sources to inform her paintings, creating amalgamated digital images using Photoshop that she refers to as ‘sketches’. These are scaled up employing airbrushing and traditional painting techniques to produce surfaces that juxtapose a ‘computer-like texture’ with more overtly painterly sections. Such fusing of the corporeal with the digital is extended to her conceptualisation of the process of artistic creation itself. ‘I imagine digital images as disconnected “bodies” inhabiting the virtual environment,’ she says, ‘bringing them out of the screen and adding weight to them through physical labour.’

As an individual who absorbs and consumes changes in the contemporary reality, Sun Woo is at once an artist who performs the long-held role of painting, as well as an anonymous user who continuously repeats the act of appropriation, replication, and mutation.

— Nah Garam, curator at KT&G Sangsang Madang Chuncheon

Technique and theme are also integrally entwined in **Zadie Xa**'s expansive practice as an installation artist. For *Myths of Our Time*, she places three paintings back-to-back with three textile works (including her signature robes mounted to quilted panels), creating three-dimensional pieces within the gallery space. Marking the first time Xa has shown new work in Korea, the installation demonstrates the centrality of her Korean-Canadian background to her ongoing exploration of diasporic identities.

Self-portraits, including the large-scale painted work *Homecoming* (2022), are set in patchwork frames created using the Korean quilting technique *bojagi*. Adapting traditional craft techniques, Xa sheds light on the anonymous Korean artists and artisans who, as she explains, 'become erased or invisible in the process of their works being made visible', situating her practice within a historical lineage of production.

The emphasis Xa places on modalities of artmaking that have otherwise been made invisible [...] are ways of excavating and reformatting ancient technologies with new subject matters. Her use of storytelling is really a political gesture.

— Tarini Malik, curator of *Zadie Xa: House Gods, Animal Guides and Five Ways 2 Forgiveness* at Whitechapel Gallery, London (2022)

Korean mythology and folklore serve as central sources of inspiration for Xa. Autobiographical motifs are fused

with the symbolism of these storytelling traditions to establish her own cross-cultural and deeply personal mythology: her dog is imagined as a *haetae*, a creature who passes moral judgement, while shells native to Jeju Island in South Korea recur as a symbol for ideas of the home, understood as past vessels for the bodies of other creatures. Although Xa does not typically represent herself within her art, the self-portraits featured in *Myths of Our Time* are conceived as symbols of her artistic 'homecoming'. Wearing a costume created for her concurrent solo exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, she establishes a line of continuity between these new works and her existing oeuvre through a mode of self-referentiality.

I use mythology as the skeleton or backbone for a larger project to create points of linking myself to other artists and particularly, I suppose, to a timeline in history... It's a way for me to think about what's happening contemporaneously to me, in my time.
— Zadie Xa

The first group exhibition solely dedicated to work by artists from Korea and its diaspora to be presented at Thaddaeus Ropac, *Myths of Our Time* celebrates the global reach of the dynamic contemporary art scene in Seoul. Placed together, the work of **Heemin Chung**, **Sun Woo** and **Zadie Xa** reveals their shared interests in mythological traditions and technical innovation, forging overlapping connections between their distinctive practices.

About the artists

Heemin Chung (b.1987) investigates the material potential of digital images as she translates them into the mediums of painting and sculpture. Her work interrogates the role of technology in society and how it has shaped contemporary approaches to art. She reimagines art historical genres, including the landscape and still life, through poetic visual metaphor, engaging with experimental techniques to explore the function of texture and volume in her work. Born in South Korea, Heemin Chung lives and works in Seoul.

Sun Woo (b.1994) fuses digital tools with analogue painting techniques to explore themes of consumption, identity and the body. She gathers diverse images to create digital collages (or 'sketches') using Photoshop, which she transfers onto canvas to create uncanny, layered compositions. Her work investigates the impact of technology on the human experience, as she visualises convergences between the organic, machinal

and extended body that raise questions about the body's boundaries, redefining the value of our physical presence in today's society. Born in South Korea and raised in Canada, Sun Woo now lives and works in Seoul.

Zadie Xa (b.1983) draws upon her own background to inform an ongoing engagement with hybrid and diasporic identities, global histories, and folklore, as well as spiritual and religious rituals. She creates installations that incorporate painting, sculpture, textile, sound and performance. Xa's art seeks to elevate narratives that have been erased and repressed by the West and occupying powers. For her, art is a means to analyse socio-political conditions and cultural behaviours through a lens of masquerade, play, costuming and storytelling. Born in Vancouver, Canada, Zadie Xa now lives and works in London.

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