

*Artists We Love to Collect*



**THE  
SIMPLE  
PLEASURES  
OF  
HEIN  
KOH**

Detail of *Hello Daddy, Hello Mom*, 2017

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# A trip into a Teletubbies, surrealist dreamscape doused in rainbows, metallic Lycra, and glitter.



Hein Koh in front of her work at Marvin Gardens gallery

It's a typical January afternoon in New York - the kind that leaves you wondering where the grey, monotonous office towers of Midtown end and the dreary, overcast sky begins. Rockefeller Center's time-honored Christmas Tree is long gone. The elaborate window dressings of Saks Fifth Avenue, across the street, wiped clear. The only remnants of any "holiday spirit" seem to be the web of burnt out lights waiting to be plucked from neighboring buildings and a half-dozen tourists wobbling around the complex's ice rink. I retreat from the wintry weather into the entrance of 45 Rockefeller Plaza where I'm greeted by Hein Koh and her newest installation - aptly named *Braving the Cold* (2019).

Koh's installation is the latest in the "Art in Focus" series displayed at Rockefeller Center in partnership with the Art Production Fund. The multidisciplinary program commissions contemporary artists to create works inspired by the landscape of New York City.

There's no easy way to describe what stepping into Koh's world feels like. It's more of a trip than anything else. A trip into a Teletubbies, surrealist dreamscape doused in rainbows, metallic Lycra, and glitter.

For the past few years now, the Brooklyn-based artist has engineered a menagerie of psychedelic soft sculptures. She's the ringleader behind a motley crew of oversized, googly-eyed cheeseburgers, ice cream cones, and lofty flowers that shed tears with their petals. This time around, Koh and her colorful creatures have invaded the landmark plaza, occupying several locations throughout the Gothic, four-block strip of limestone.

I enter the lobby and my attention is immediately drawn to three vitrines holding bundles of flowers, each with its own distinct evil eye and red carpet ready lashes - Koh's trademark.

It might have been hard to find the artist responsible, what with her modest, black puffer jacket (the standard uniform of New Yorkers this time of year). However, as soon as she spots me among the throng of mid-day lunch stragglers, she slips off the dark marble landing where she has been perched and introduces herself with a warm hello. It's the sort of welcoming energy that Koh's pieces emanate, just with fewer rhinestones and sequins.

Koh is almost out of breath, at first, when giving me an overview of *Braving the Cold*; but who could blame her? 2018 was a banner year for the artist. She had her first major debut in New York, was awarded a commission from the Bronx Children's Museum (set to open in 2020), and was - of course - invited to produce a public art exhibition for Rockefeller Center. This is her largest exhibition to date and it needed to be completed in a very short amount of time.

"The Art Production Fund asked me to do this show not too long ago. It was just at the beginning of November. It was a crazy deadline."

Koh decided to pull inspiration from her solo exhibition last May at the Marvin Gardens gallery, where she presented her flowers for the first time. She did not want to recycle or copy the sculptures. That would've been too easy.

“I wanted them to be a little different because, for me, it’s too boring to keep doing the same thing,” she explains.

Koh fashioned completely new sculptures and experimented with velvet and satin - fabrics she felt were appropriate for winter. She also went a step further by trying out flowers that she had not crafted before. “I thought, okay...I’ve done roses, but I will try out violets, and try out a lily, and I want to make them frozen, covered in snow, and icicles...because I thought, ‘that’s just too perfect for the holidays.’ You know?”

Koh tells me surrealism and pop art, in particular, have informed her most recent endeavors.

“I knew I wanted a very simple and iconic aesthetic (for the project). I want the work to be accessible, but I want it to make people think a bit too.”

After the birth of her twin daughters in 2015, the artist’s subject matter shifted into a more playful atmosphere. Koh often finds herself inspired by imagery like the designs on her kids’ clothing, their toys, and especially their books filled with children’s illustrations. “I’m basically making cartoon characters,” Koh laughs.

That attitude of happiness is at the core of the artist’s body of work.

I ask her more about her mindset and motivations

when she’s in her Greenpoint, NY studio creating sculptures like the ones in the vitrines.

“I’ve been thinking so much more about love and family, those values. So, I like to bring that into my work. I’ve become very sappy, very sappy, and sentimental, which is why - you know - I have flowers hugging, and a lot of my flowers are twins (an ode to her daughters). When I do trios (like the three roses she points toward) I think of it as me and my daughters. I think a lot about relationships.”

Of course, motherhood has its challenges but Koh is a master of multitasking. In 2015, she challenged the famed performance artist, Marina Abramović, who had made disparaging comments about the limits child raising place on female artistic success. The post of her breastfeeding both her daughters while simultaneously working away became a viral clap back.

I ask her about the role her daughters play in her art and if she plans to continue working with themes that they have kindled.

“I’m still so inspired by them. I think they influence me more and more.”

Koh guides me to the lower level of the building where one of her digital drawings stretches across the length of a 150-ft foot corridor. The illustration depicts the evolution of a flower dying in the winter



*Holy Trinity, 2017*





*Sad Daisy, 2018*



*Cheeseburger With An Eye and Tongue, 2018*

only to be resurrected in the spring - fitting, since *Braving the Cold* will run through April.

"I thought of it as poetry," she tells me as we walk from one end of the mural to the other. "I just love the idea of creating this narrative of this rose blooming, and dying. Thinking about the cycle of life."

We brave the cold ourselves stepping out into the exterior of the plaza. It feels like a "Where's Waldo" treasure hunt weaving in and out of parts of the complex where the artist's work is on display. Koh's flowers sprout up all over the place. The cheerful kaleidoscopes of color are a welcomed change of pace from their gloomy backdrop.

She had previously wished that there was more time to create a variety of illustrations but has ended up being happy with the way things have turned out.

"I think there's a lot of power in this repetition. The flower drawings become images that are ingrained in people's minds. They become icons and that's something I'm interested in. Especially in this setting, because people just kind of walk by here and I think that my message needs to just be very direct." Koh says.

"I also liked the idea of just putting rainbows everywhere," she adds with a smile.

Nearly every aspect of her art is light-hearted and fun, right down to the way she signs off her name in

Comic Sans, not for the sake of irony, but purely because she, "just likes the way it looks."

Koh's soft sculptures spark the kind of joy that would have Marie Kondo nodding in silent approval. She talks to me more about how her art is rooted in, "the simple pleasures of life." Pleasures that her daughters (and most people) enjoy daily. Her Marvin Gardens show, titled *Splendor In The Grass* (2018), is a perfect example of this sentiment. The artist invited patrons to a "picnic" of unearthly delights comprised of large-scale, anthropomorphic food sticking their tongues out, à la Miley Cyrus.

She has even shared, "her pleasures" with spaces like the Museum of Pizza - an irresistibly Instagramable site in Brooklyn dedicated solely to the even more irresistible snack. In fact, Koh had already constructed a pizza sculpture before she was brought on board by the curator.

The simple pleasures born from the artist's imagination are infectiously nostalgic. They have that type of kitsch nostalgia that makes an aspiring collector - like myself - want to round them up like Beanie Babies and adopt them into my life.

Her interests in consciousness and philosophy contribute to the psychological element beneath the surface of the pieces. Koh prefers keeping the meaning opaque and open to your own interpretation.

“My work is always changing, but, right now I just really like to make objects that make people really happy, at the basic level. Just bring people joy. That joy always has some deeper layer to it. Whether it’s a



Detail of *Cheeseburger With An Eye and Tongue*, 2018

little bit of subversion, or perversion, or melancholy...” Koh explains.

Throughout the guided tour she elaborates on how she started making sculptures in the first place. In the beginning, Koh worked with canvases. She’s a trained painter and they were the only materials that she had at the ready disposal. The painter turned sculptor created mediums using vinyl and spandex, pushing her sculptural envelope.

“I remember thinking this would look really good in gold spandex,” she says of one of her early sculptures. “I also just really like the quality of it. The stretchiness and especially stuffing it, it takes on different qualities. I’ve been on a spandex kick for a while...” That said, Koh plans on charting new territory in the near future.

“This is going to be a big departure, but I’ve actually been thinking a lot about metal casting. So, I might make a 180°. Or, you know, it might be an in addition to my soft sculptures...I’ve just been asking friends and doing some research.”

One thing is for certain: Koh will not be straying from sculpture anytime soon.

“There’s still so much to learn and I’m still so excited by it. But, I mean, if people asked me to do more digital murals, I’d be into that. I had fun!”

As our excursion through *Braving the Cold* comes to a close, I notice a handful of individuals paused in front of some of the drawings. We watch them remove their gloves, pull out their phones, and snap a few photos. I ask Koh what it feels like to see random strangers stop in the street to appreciate her installation. Moreover, how it feels to have her work on view at one of New York’s most iconic landmarks. “It’s amazing. It feels like I finally have a little piece of New York City, you know? That feels great.”



Detail of *Cheeseburger With An Eye and Tongue*, 2018

## 6 Untold Facts on Hein Koh

- She used to be the lead singer of a riotgrrrl band called “Speedy Vulva.”
- She earned a black belt in TaeKwonDo when she was 11. Also she knows how to use nunchucks.
- She obsessively listens to psychology and self-help books in her studio.
- Every night she takes a bath, writes in her journal, and reads a book to relax before bed.
- She suffers from chronic insomnia - and meditates, exercises, and occasionally goes to acupuncture to combat it.
- She is really good at twerking.