

Art **Reviews**

## Long Live Life's Little Moments

Sally J. Han's paintings are at once cryptic and straightforward, inaccessible and yet meticulously laid out.

by [John Yau](#), Oct 26, 2022



Sally J. Han, "At Lupe's" (2022), acrylic on paper mounted on wood panel 48 x 36 inches (all photos by Jason Mandella; all images courtesy the artist and Fortnight Institute, NYC)

The group show *Wonder Women* at Jeffrey Deitch (May 7–June 25, 2022), curated by Kathy Huang and featuring (as the gallery press release announced) “30 Asian American and diasporic women and non-binary artists,” was important for many reasons. It was the first exhibition in New York that I know of to foreground Asian-American women artists working, for the most part, in painting. If the show included 30, there are probably more, which should make it difficult to ignore their presence.

While a handful of Asian-American women artists have been included in the Whitney Biennial since 2012, none have been painters under the age of 40. If you are getting your news about contemporary art from museum exhibitions, you might think there is no such thing as an Asian-American woman painter, as they are rarer than a Bigfoot sighting in Central Park. Or is the phenomenon so recent that the art world’s institutions still cannot wrap their heads around it?

One of the pleasures of *Wonder Women* was discovering an artist and immediately wanting to see more work by that artist. One piece that stuck in my mind was “Slumber” (2022) by Sally J. Han. Done in acrylic on paper mounted on a large panel, the painting is an aerial view of a young woman in a violet t-shirt and ashy gray jeans sitting on a wide windowsill in a modern apartment, framed by huge plants. Beside her is the novel *The Woman in the Dunes* by Kōbō Abe. The woman seems to have fallen asleep while sitting up. Her right palm, which rests on her thigh, is open; her left-hand forefinger looks almost as if it’s pointing to something inside the right palm. The gesture is enigmatic, as is her pose and surrounding environment, which Han has scrupulously detailed.



Sally J. Han, “After Bonnard” (2022), acrylic on paper mounted on wood panel, 24 x 18 inches

Published in 1962 and adapted as a film by Hiroshi Teshigahara two years later, *The Woman in the Dunes* is Abe's best-known book. The writer, who admired Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky, is considered a master of absurdist fiction. That Han's painting was in tune with the strangeness of Abe interested me immensely, and led me to see the exhibition *Sally J. Han: Lost and Found* at Fortnight Institute (October 13–November 13, 2022).

The exhibition's 12 paintings range in size from 12 by 9 to 48 by 60 inches; all are acrylic on paper mounted on panel. I can think of three other Asian woman artists (Jiha Moon, Tammy Nguyen, and Chie Fueki) who work in acrylic and other mediums on paper mounted on wood. While Euro-American painting has had an impact on these artists, their combinations of materials, emphasis on graphic precision, and use of paper as a support indicate that their roots are not in European oil painting, and that an exhibition of Asian women working this way is urgently needed, as it would underscore a material tendency that has been ignored in North America and Europe.

Han, who was born in China in 1993 and raised in South Korea, belongs to a group of Korean immigrants known as "Joseonjok." That, and her move to the United States when she was 17, form part of the image pool from which she draws inspiration. The solitary woman in "Slumber," whose face we do not see, exists in a domain that is both related to and separate from ours. This is one of the themes Abe explores in *The Woman in the Dunes* and a later novel, *The Face of Another* (1964), about a scientist who wears a mask after being disfigured, in order to be accepted by others, including his wife.



Installation view of *Sally J. Han: Lost and Found* at Fortnight Institute

A similar sense of isolation permeates Han's paintings. The faces of the seemingly introverted women in the works are never fully visible. Their only companions are a parrot or two and an orange tabby cat. As the same young Asian woman with a neatly trimmed bob haircut appears in many of the paintings, I began thinking of them as a visual journal of her life. In "At Lupe's" (2022), she wears black and sits alone at a table filled with plates of Mexican food, facing us but not looking straight ahead. She holds a tortilla chip with guacamole in her right hand; a large, salt-rimmed glass filled with orange liquor is by her left elbow. Behind her, on the wall, is the bottom of a reproduction of "Viva la Vida, Watermelons" (1954), Frida Kahlo's last painting (done shortly after her leg was amputated). What we see is Kahlo's inscription on the watermelon's wet, red flesh: "Viva la Vida" (long live life).

The combination of details, such as the crimson-colored fingernails (one of which is chipped), precisely applied lipstick, and cellphone encased in a green OtterBox, juxtaposed with Kahlo's painting, resists any reductive reading. The way a halved watermelon in the Kahlo painting rises above the figure's head, a like stained red halo, moves the painting into a place at once cryptic and straightforward, inaccessible and yet meticulously laid out.

In "Lost and Found" (2022), the reflection of a woman's face in profile occupies a small part of a large oval mirror, whose top and right side are cropped by the painting's edges. Instead of looking into the mirror to apply her lipstick, she looks into a white compact. A large, clear glass vase filled with water and thick green stalks partially obscures the mirror; beside the vase are a parrot, two Tootsie Rolls, and Abe's novel *The Face of Another* (1964). While the title is in English, the author's name is in Japanese, partially covered by the parrot's tail feathers.



Sally J. Han, "Tsingtao" (2022), acrylic on paper mounted on wood panel, 24 x 20 inches

As straightforward, stylishly cool, and precisely detailed as Han's paintings are, they are not all about surface and therefore not part of the tradition that painters such as Alex Katz and David Hockney started and Jonas Wood continues. There is so much to unpack in Han's work. The fact that she never directs the viewer on how to read them adds to their power. Are the Tootsie Rolls simply two pieces of candy lying on a book by a Japanese writer of absurdist horror stories? Or is Han alluding to the objectification of women ("tootsie") or derogatory slang for Asian men's penises? How does the woman applying lipstick connect with the disfigured man in the novel? What effect is caused by the dislocation of seeing the woman's reflection in a mirror while she looks in another, much smaller mirror?

In "First Snow in East Village" (2021), an Asian woman in a hanbok, a traditional Korean robe worn by women and men, is taking a walk on a snowy day, with two parakeets perched on her hand. Large, crystalline snowflakes fall to the ground. The woman is on the painting's far left side, framed between two trees. In front of her is a row of bare bushes; beyond the trees is a chain link fence, and past that, colored tenement buildings of different sizes. The tension between freedom (walking alone) and seclusion (she is framed on all sides) is a recurring theme in Han's work. The painting offers no sense of where the woman is coming from or where she is going, which seems a perfect metaphor for the world Han inhabits.

Sally J. Han: *Lost and Found continues at Fortnight Institute (21 East 3rd Street, East Village, Manhattan) through November 13. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*