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Sijae Byun

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Surrounded by silks, stretchers, dozens upon dozens of squeezed paint tubes, brushes and other art-making materials, Korean-born artist Sijae Byun sits on a stool in her studio at the Arlington Arts Center and says with an exuberant smile, “I am very thankful.”

Less than two weeks ago at the third annual (e)merge art fair, Byun was awarded The Phillips Collection Emerging Artist Prize. The award is the first of its kind to be given by the nation’s oldest modern art museum, and supports Byun as an important new artist, whose work is thought to be original and of art historical significance.

“I think her paintings were the most impressive work that we saw at the fair,” said Klaus Ottmann, Director of the Center for the Study of Modern Art and Curator at Large at the Phillips Collection, “It was just a matter of which one we should buy.”

Ottmann, along with Phillips Collection director Dorothy Kosinski and senior curator of modern and contemporary art Vesela Sretenović, selected Byun’s *Wind #7 In Jungle* as the winning work and the piece that would be acquired for the museum’s permanent collection.

Wind #7 In Jungle is a large-scale artwork with content and context equal in monumentality to the towering 37.5 x 50.5 inch work, made in a highly complex practice of layering and painting silk. A dynamic and energetic ovular form asserts itself against a modulated pink background. A variety of textural surfaces and intricate patterns intertwine and support one another, creating a surrealist structure. A purple flower hangs quiet and closed, ready to bloom, provoking thoughts of nature. Environmental themes such as these are supported by vegetal imagery resembling lily pad leaves and green algae, and are underscored and considered critically juxtaposed the architectural forms, rendered in sharp manufactured lines scattered throughout the work and clustered heavily at the bottom right. Strands of dark hairs and veins appear to weave the elements together, and one cannot help but to consider whether the blood-pumping vessels give life to these traditionally oppositional forces, or if the human body constricts and strangles, further complicating the relationships between

natural landscape and mechanical construction.

“This particular work fits really nicely into [The Phillip’s] long tradition and conversation that goes on in our collection about color and painting, but at the same time, brings in something new, a different kind of dialogue in terms of material as silk and some non-western aesthetics that play in the work so it’s kind of expanding that tradition,” said Ottmann.

The Phillips Collection has a long history of supporting emerging artists. Duncan Phillips, the seminal art collector whose collection was the precursor to the 1921 museum and who played a key role in introducing America to the modernists, was widely responsible for launching the careers of such important figures as Arthur Dove, Georgia O’Keefe and John Marin. In keeping with the spirit of Duncan Phillips, Ottmann believes award and grant programs that both support emerging artists in the local DC-community and engage artists and viewers in a global dialogue, should occur regularly, given the appropriate funding.

When asked about having her work in the Phillips Collection, Byun said humbly, “I’m very happy, but I also, I want to work harder and be a greater artist. I really like [The Phillips Collection] and I want to be one of the great artist there.”

The acquisition of a painting is of particular significance for Byun, who was told by her undergraduate teachers that she should avoid painting and instead focus her artistic practice on installation. Following the advise of her teachers, Byun studied fabric design and primarily worked in installation and set design, until a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York noticed Byun’s aptitude for drawing and suggested she start painting.

Since those initial conversations in 2007, Byun has combined painting with such mediums as stop motion animation, installation and fabrics, to create nuanced and challenging artworks that share a masterful command of space.

When asked about how the prize will affect her artistic practice, Byun says it will help her maintain energy and encourage her to continually work harder. For Byun, she is most concerned with keeping her eyes and her mind strong, and always following her inner voice.

Sijae Byun’s solo exhibition, Vaginascope, is currently on display at Tallybeck Contemporary in New York until November 15, 2013, and her solo exhibition, Circulation-Respiration at the Korean Cultural Center in Washington, DC, opens November 1, 2013.

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Roxanne