

25/06/23

Flash Art

• 331 SUMMER 2020, REVIEWS

25 June 2020, 9:00 am CET

Billy Childish “Wolves, Sunsets, and the Self” *Lehmann Maupin / Seoul* by Byunghee Lee



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Billy Childish “Wolves, Sunsets, and the Self”. Installation view at Lehmann Maupin, Seoul, 2020. Photography by OnArt Studio.
Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York / Hong Kong / Seoul.

Billy Childish, whose works were exhibited in Seoul Hyundai Gallery for the first time in 2012, has now mounted a solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Seoul. Unlike his previous exhibition, which offered portraits of Korean novelist Yi Kwang-su (1892-1950) and poet Yi Sang (1910-1937), his current exhibition, titled "Wolves, Sunsets, and the Self," presents paintings of landscapes, wolves, and flowers.

The overall theme of the exhibition is nature. His painting is, as Childish often says, "the painting the painting wants." He does not allow his works to be invested with his own desires or those of the spectator or collector. Instead, he seems to believe that art must be autonomous. Childish regards paintings of nature not as someone's belongings but rather as autonomous and independent beings. His whirly brushstrokes look like traces of nature's free and fluctuating performance. The colors rhythmically resonate on the brown linen canvas as if they are somehow in sync with the brisk charcoal drawing. The life of nature does a soft dance there.

A wolf comes out of a birch woods, looking straight ahead with her glittering eyes. Searching for food, she seems to be in early pregnancy, as the tiny nipples on her swollen belly indicate. Childish's painting of the wolf, along with those of a bison, moose, and elk, embodies a free spirit that has inhabited the Earth from time immemorial. He somehow retains potentialities of life that persist in what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life" confined to the cycle of life and death.

If his past encounter with Seoul was characterized as cross-cultural, Childish's present display of works leads us to think about cross-species symbiosis in the era of COVID-19. The present lockdown is causing intense feelings of restlessness and anxiety at a global scale. During a moment when the Korean art market is suffering due to the current crisis, Childish's endearing works with their vigorous brushstrokes offer spectators a breath of pure nature. Beyond the mortality of living beings, one cannot help to think about the significance of how these works illuminate a symbiotic mode of life through natural landscapes and beings. Although some of our systems have temporarily stopped due to the global lockdown, life's potential never ceases.