

DEBBIE HAN: HERE AND NOW



By Alejandra Russi

Beauty has long since disappeared. It has slipped beneath the surface of the noise ... sunk as deep as Atlantis. The only thing left of it is the word, whose meaning loses clarity from year to year.

—Milan Kundera, “The Book of Laughter and Forgetting”

The work of Korean-American artist Debbie Han exudes a charisma and gravitas that are rare in contemporary art. Han has conjured up a realm populated by polysemous icons, beings that are lifelike yet otherworldly: isolated female figures (crossbreeds of flesh and rock existing in an elegiac virtual space, not unlike the inscrutable fourth dimension of a mirror), fallen archaic goddesses, part dignified decay, and part roguish buffoons. There’s a sense, in this space, of history compressed; things simultaneously ossified and in a nascent state where meaning has not yet congealed. Han’s practice focuses on combining antagonistic components of female imagery in a kind of sophisticated visual

oddness, from which originate a string of thematic dualisms that destabilize perception, whereas the whole strikes as something seamlessly expressed.



Walking Three Graces, 2007, lightjet print, 86.6 x 59 in.

Although formally trained as a painter, Han's mature body of work developed at the self-fashioned coordinates between sculpture and photography. The "Graces" series in black and white (perhaps the artist's most celebrated work) synthesizes the traditions of mimetic sculpture and portrait photography through cutting-edge digital tools. Here depicted is a wide spectrum of nude female figures whose heads have been replaced with those of existing Roman-Greek statues from classical antiquity—emblematic of the period in history when the fundamental Western ethos was established. Their snow-white complexions, contoured like polished marble, are set against a neutral background where they appear to be involved in genre scenes of sorts: walking, socializing, praying, masturbating, agonizing—though stripped of any context. These mysterious simulacra, as much as they're composed to feel larger than life, create an illusion of three-dimensionality, of us transitioning into the space of the images or the figures that occupy them into ours.

In technical terms, what we are looking at in the sizeable light jet prints of Han's "Graces" are the bodies of contemporary Asian women (and, in the more recent "Color Graces" series, women of different races) who the artist

photographs in exact poses and pairs with photos of the statue heads—which are carefully selected to fit flawlessly with each body in angle and expression. After scanning the negatives, starts a meticulous computer rendering process through which the artist removes every single hair and pore from the surface of the skin, pixel by pixel, and blurs details like nails, nipples, and genitalia to give each silhouette a sculptural quality. As described by Han, each figure acts as a visual “heterotopia,” a concept coined by Michel Foucault in the essay “Des espaces autres,” which refers to certain spaces capable of juxtaposing several settings that are incompatible; counter-sites with many layers of meaning where both the real and the utopic are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”



Agonizing Grace, 2011, lightjet print, 86.6 x 39.4 in



Masturbating Grace I, 2007, lightjet print, 86.6 x 39.4 in.

Han's "Graces" figures are, in this way, also a locus where past and present, West and East, tradition and innovation, the sacred and the profane, liberation and objectification, and the "ideal" and the actual meet in continuous tension, unfixing preconceptions on both sides. This effect, or what the artist calls a "sense of dissonance" (achieved by the goddess heads removed from the original framework of ritual solemnity and the shelter of art histories onto non-idealized, living human bodies) can also shift in function. In the newer "Color Graces" series, where Han incorporates

color through racial variations in skin tone, the statue heads equalize the differences between the figures to a certain extent, contributing to the overarching themes of human empathy and compassion. Because happiness, love, conflict, and grief—the collective experiences of humanity portrayed in this series—are all part of the emotional sphere of existence, the “Color Graces,” though they look less ghastly than their black and white counterparts, read as allegories; as group portraits of ideas, theatrically achieved.

The “Venus de Milo,” a marble statue representing the Roman-Greek goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and desire, was found in the Nineteenth Century in the Aegean island Melos and exhumed without her arms, with which she was, presumably, either reaching toward Cupid or holding an apple, in reference to the story of the judgment of Paris. This celebrated depiction of Venus, which is at the center of Han’s sculptural work, is both the mythical Aphrodite; the prototypical femme born from sea foam—whose iconography has fed perennial fantasies in visual art and literature—and a symbol of the earliest Western notions of beauty. Even though the spiral composition of the body and the drapery over the hips reflect the sculptural development of the late Hellenistic Period (when the statue was made), the regularity and serenity of the head identify with the Greek high classicism of four centuries back, when the conception of beauty as the harmony of constituent parts and their symmetrical correspondence first originated.



Terms of Beauty VII, 2010, cast bronze, 9 pieces, each: 23.6 x 9.8 x 11 in

In the series “Terms of Beauty,” Han integrates various racial and ethnic facial features (hooked noses, thick lips, and oblique eyes, sometimes including more than one trait in the same face, or exaggerating them to the point of caricature) into nine Venus heads cast in bronze. The corroded surface of these figures conveys the legitimacy of historical longevity, though it’s also conceivably the expression of a humanist view of the world where deities have lost their aura of magic and linger only as melancholic vestiges of their earthly representations, surrendered to the genetic determinism that underpins all human forms. Here, Venus serves as both a citation and a transgression of a model; by intervening its “perfect” proportions and making dissimilar multiples (or what could ironically be called deviations of the norm), Han makes these heads mock themselves, so to speak, and this implicit sense of parody exposes the concept of an ideal as a problematic socio-cultural construct. In the sculpture installation “Battle of Conception,” 32 heads of Venus (recreated through the ancient practice of Korean celadon, with its distinctive blue-gray hue and crackle glaze) are arranged in a chess game format; half of them with diverse racial features facing the other half, whose faces are obliterated. Beyond its portrayal of a survival of the fittest scenario, this staging seems to regard conception as a process akin to artistic creation—one that entails an aggressive elimination of options—or, in the same line of thought, to the formation of identity as related to pure invention, implicating the possibilities of deliberate modification or erasure.



The Eye of Perception No. 6, 2010, inkjet print, 35.4 x 35.3 in

The photographic series “The Eye of Perception,” which originated from a set of 10 reconstructed life-size Venus busts in porcelain, consists of images whose holographic quality (produced by layering several negatives out of register with one another and scanning them in a block) make the face of Venus waver between alternatives of the same feature—eyes, nose, and lips, get softer, stronger, thinner, thicker, never to coalesce into a single form. Edges throb and overflow, creating a sense of anxiety in the viewer, as there are many possible beings in one, relentlessly disintegrating and regenerating; literally shifting parameters and pointing to their contingency. “The Eye of Perception” reflects what all of Han’s sculptural work illuminates from different angles; the fact that physical traits are always symbolic, that they resonate with associations and have assigned values; that we see with the mind and therefore the head of Venus is merely a surface upon which many narratives, assumptions, and inherited or recycled ideas—often thought of as natural or common sense—are projected.



Battle of Conception, 2010, Korean celadon, wooden table, 32 pieces
each sculpture: 13 x 5.9 x 6.3 in; 2 tables, each 78.7 x 39.4 x 39.4 in

While the idea of a dominant standard seems to be portrayed in Han's work as a means for cultural imperialism—whether it's through racial or gender inequality, physical stereotypes perpetuated by the global media bubble, or the idea of a canon in art—there's also an embedded sense of choice in spite of it. We are conditioned by our bodies and can only relate to others through theirs, yet as contemporary society shatters into sub-cultures (perhaps best exemplified by the emancipation of gender from sexuality, male/female overlap, and concepts like “genderqueer” and non-binary), the beauty ideal moves further into the territory of myth, back with Venus and everything she epitomizes. Chaos—understood as asymmetry, exaggeration, and subversion—has, after all, always been an alternative, in art and life; even in the golden age of the Greeks, Apollo was meant to contain Dionysus's disarray, though not abolish it.



Season of Being I, 2014, lightjet print, 59 x 89.8 in



Season of Being IV, 2013, lightjet print, 59 x 82 in

As much as Han's oeuvre seems to be an island unto itself, it inspires interpretative paths that reach deeply into the heart of the present; it speaks tacitly of the post-modern tendency for pastiche and a more widespread awareness of the performative core of all being. Then, of course, is the distinct allure and technical prowess of the work and the intuitive thoroughness of the artist's vision. Han's output for the last ten years is the visual equivalent of a fugue in many voices, all of which counterpoint and expand a central motif, a display that suggests—strikingly and bravely-

that there is perhaps no crux of the matter, only enlightening possibilities.



Here and Now, 2013, lightjet print, 73.3 x 59 in.

Alejandra Russi is a freelance arts and culture journalist. Follow: [@RussiAleja](#)

[1] Judith Butler's term.