



JIWON CHOI

# Jiwon Choi

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PROFILES

If there is one way for Jiwon Choi to overcome trauma and transcend our human shortcomings in these troubled times, it is through painting and encouraging empathy through what she chooses to depict and how. She aims to establish empathy through painting by focusing on materiality and exploring the sense of melancholia, a powerful emotion that often paradoxically inspires us with the courage to face reality as it is.



JIWON CHOI

“True values entail  
suffering.  
That’s the way  
we think.  
All in all, we tend to  
view melancholia  
as more true.  
We prefer music and art  
to contain a touch  
of melancholia.  
So melancholia in itself  
is a value.”

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Lars Von Trier on Melancholia

“In Jiwon Choi’s paintings, the soft materiality of oil on canvas gives way to a gripping feeling of uncanny discomfort. The artist explores how peaceful-looking scenes can sometimes conceal the turbulent emotions that underlie our daily lives.”

In artist Jiwon Choi’s studio, a detailed study of an upside-down wine glass hangs by the window. The walls on either side of the window are lined with large canvases that almost look like apertures themselves because of the blinds and curtains painted in as a backdrop. A small table marks the separation of the section of the shared studio occupied by the artist. Sitting at this table feels like taking a seat at the theater, looking at the stage, which is the artist’s studio, with the expectation of a spectacle, enjoying a certain feeling of intimacy and privilege of looking at a work in progress on an easel with its back to the window, only half-finished and fully exposed to the visitor’s eye. The artist takes her place on the opposite side of the table with the sunlight flooding in from the window as a backlight, in the middle of her stage and studio surrounded by paintings of blinds and curtains and ceramic dolls. When asked if the theatricality is intentional, she simply smiles and tells us, “A lot of people do make that connection. I think it’s because of the curtains and perhaps also the fact that I am often inspired by movies.” Then there is the question of light. The particular way in which light falls upon an object fascinates Choi: her paintings are composed of layers of objects which she refers to as “stickers,” each seemingly illuminated by a



distinct source of light. This playful technique conveys the artist’s mastery of oil painting, her medium of choice. “I always try to cast light from a different angle on each element composing a painting. They are brought together on one canvas, but it’s as if they are in different places at the same time. This always fascinates people with a keen eye who comment on it. I like playing with light to add an element of surprise in a subtle way.”

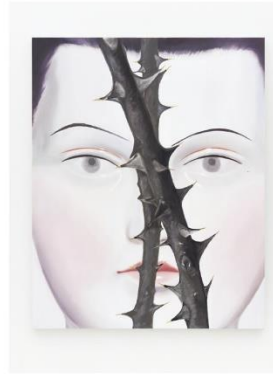
The studio visit continues with a guided tour of her portfolio, going over her works in chronological order. Much of her work draws from personal recollections and reflections on daily life. The majority of her paintings depict porcelain dolls, creating paintings that feel like still lifes, landscapes, and portraits of women all at once. The impeccable smoothness of these porcelain surfaces tempts our sensory responses and as if the sheer materiality of her work wasn’t enough to enthrall, her surreal compositions further provoke our curiosity. As Choi explains that she was drawn to porcelain dolls because of their charm and elegance, her eyes fill with nostalgia for an age that preceded her. What was once a symbol of luxury and class has become an object of fascination charged with symbolism amassed over the years, an icon of femininity sometimes arguably synonymous with frailty, a personified embodiment of opulence, and a totem that couldn’t be rushed into existence.

In Choi’s paintings, the soft materiality of oil on canvas gives way to a gripping feeling of uncanny discomfort. The artist explores how peaceful-looking scenes can sometimes conceal the turbulent emotions that underlie our daily lives. On some days, we feel fine; on others, we are suddenly overcome by the frightening truth that we are nothing more than a speck of dust in the vast universe. This feeling of being helplessly fragile often intensifies when watching the news or learning of a misfortune that has befallen someone we know. One such moment of anxiety erupts in the form of a fiery background in *Where are we headed* (우리는 어디로 향하는가), one of Choi’s earliest pieces of work. The fire destroys and consumes everything in its path. It’s an abruptly violent force of nature seemingly caused by human activity. Eight figures stand in front of the flames, well-groomed and dressed in formal attire, they gaze vaguely into the distance, lost, eclipsed, empty. In contrast with the disastrous scene unfolding behind them, their frigid posture suggests a voluntary detachment. They don’t seem to feel a thing. Have they become numb to pain? Looking into the cloudy eyes of the porcelain dolls, we catch a glimpse of artist Choi’s own fears and anxieties as a woman living in modern-day Korea, where mainstream media often highlights various cases of sex crimes and misogynist practices. “I felt like it was an act of violence directed toward myself. It could have happened to anyone, me, and people close to me.” Around this time, one of her close friends also had a “disturbing experience of violent nature” that





*Room in Red*, 2021,  
oil and acrylic on canvas, 181.1 x 181.1 cm. Courtesy of Jiwon Choi and ThisWeekendRoom.



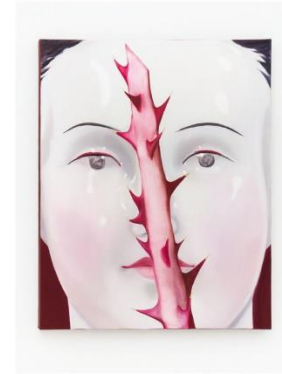
*Fig of Thorns 1*, 2021, oil on canvas, 90.9 x 72.7 cm.  
Courtesy of Jiwon Choi and ThisWeekendRoom.



*Fig of Thorns 2*, 2021, oil on canvas, 90.9 x 72.7 cm.  
Courtesy of Jiwon Choi and ThisWeekendRoom.



*Fig of Thorns 3*, 2021, oil on canvas, 90.9 x 72.7 cm.  
Courtesy of Jiwon Choi and ThisWeekendRoom.



*Fig of Thorns 4*, 2021, oil on canvas, 90.9 x 72.7 cm.  
Courtesy of Jiwon Choi and ThisWeekendRoom.



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PROFILES

“Her paintings heal the sense of defenselessness we feel in front of disasters, lived by us, by others, by close friends, or by strangers. Beauty, then, emerges from terror as a thaumaturgic practice.”

enhanced this feeling of imminent danger underlying our daily lives.

In another one of the paintings hanging in Choi's studio, two dolls stand in front of heavily patterned navy blue curtains. These curtains transform the canvas into a stage and transport the viewer to the front row of a theater—you can almost see the lights starting to dim and hear the hushed ruffles and occasional coughs of an expectant audience. You are invited to be a physical part of the scene, to hold your breath in anticipation as if, at any moment, one of the dolls will turn its head and burst out in soliloquy or blink to let a single teardrop run down its cheek. While the dolls are imminently inanimate, there remains an underlying sense of tension induced by the beautifully rendered shadows and by each of the dolls' intent gaze into the void beyond the frame. The scene feels like something out of a Virginia Woolf novel, a moment of crisis and danger expressed by the curiously calm voice of a quiet, seemingly undisturbed female character.

Today, violence is everywhere, highly visible, on social media, in movies, on television, and all around us. We are made aware of imminent danger, but the neutral expressions of the porcelain dolls subdue the palpitating fear and cataclysmic explosions that animate the background. The numbness of Choi's characters is a reaction to a wider and more profound process of anesthetization. Numb to the mimesis, the painter creates as a cathartic practice. Her paintings heal the sense of defenselessness we feel in front of disasters, lived by us, by others, by close friends, or by strangers. Beauty, then, emerges from terror as a thaumaturgic (healing) practice. Our mortality-induced existential crises no longer call for panic or shock but inspire a sense of awe.

The painter and the viewer are haunted by a question: “can we feel again, without being afraid to feel? Is it not better to hide our true feelings and cover them up under the reassuring familiarity of patterns taken from common and affordable brands? Is it not easier to let go of our worries and just stare back into the empty gaze of the porcelain dolls that replaces our trivial and earthly preoccupations with something bigger and paradoxically less burdening?”

Birds spread their wings as if to take flight in Choi's paintings, connecting us to a higher dimension, where poetry is possible in the midst of trauma. The use of contour - mildly fluorescent colors oozing out from around the birds and the dolls - further emphasizes the immiscibility of the layers, each part of a different time, “stickers” compressed onto the canvas in an effort to capture a fleeting flurry of emotions. Although Choi doesn't want to specify what exactly she means for us to feel through each painting, she welcomes the public's imagination in interpreting her work: “I always leave the interpretation to the public. People see my work and sometimes make the most surprising connections or come up with witty ideas that, in turn, inspire me to work on something new. Even if something you

felt wasn't intentional on my part, you are most welcome to explore that feeling when looking at my work.” She is also “grateful for the times when viewers express a sense of relief and comfort upon seeing the calm and poised expressions on the dolls' faces” because, if her paintings depict scenes of violent or worrying mood and nature, she ultimately aims to “heal and transcend” these, and “painting is a way to express these worries and learn that a lot of people feel the same way about things happening around us, which is reassuring in a way.”

In art, one must always wonder: does a work of tragedy have a positive or negative effect on those who engage with it? Plato condemned art for being mimetic and dangerous because it creates illusions. Aristotle recognized that violence onstage could be part of a cathartic experience. Jiwon Choi fully acknowledges the therapeutic qualities of the act of painting and actively delves into controversial subjects such as various forms of violence to ultimately transcend their effects. She is “rather fond of the beautifully uncanny aesthetic as seen in *Melancholia*,” an apocalyptic drama art film written and directed by Lars von Trier that she “highly recommends everyone to watch.” Somehow, her painted scenes reconnect with that almost perfect and staged movie curation, which, if looked at closely, embodies the unsettling inquietude of the human experience.

