



Ken Gun Min. *13 Missing Ladies*, 2023. Oil, Korean pigment, silk embroidery thread, beads, crystals, 80 x 64 in

Ken Gun Min

Sweet Discipline from Koreatown

November 11 – December 20

Opening Reception, Saturday, November 11, 6-8pm

Shulamit Nazarian is pleased to present *Sweet Discipline from Koreatown*, an exhibition of new works by Ken Gun Min. In the artist's newest paintings, lush, floral landscapes and sensitively rendered, imaginative portraits are adorned with beads and embroidery. Born in Seoul, South Korea, Min has led a global existence, moving from Zurich and Berlin to San Francisco before eventually settling in Los Angeles's Koreatown. This cosmopolitan personal history informs the social and political narratives of Min's work, which explores emotion, otherness, and an intimate connection to place.

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After training and building his initial painting practice in traditional European methods of oil painting, Min transitioned to painting with Korean pigments and priming his canvas or linen surfaces with a specially prepared glue used in Japanese bookbinding. These materials produce the multi-textured, richly layered colors of Min's dreamy internal landscapes. Mixed with a custom-made viscous medium, the saturated colors of the Korean pigments absorb into Min's linen and canvas to delicate, aqueous effect, similar to the aesthetic of watercolors on rice paper.

After the initial elements of Min's compositions are painted, he hand-embroiders the surface with flowers, patterned swirls, and other decorative elements in a sea of tiny, shimmering stitches that evoke the texture of woven tapestries. Even as he's moved away from European-style oil painting, certain elements of Western art history influence Min's imagery, such as the dramatic skies of eighteenth-century Romantic painter William Blake and the hyper-muscular anatomy of Renaissance figures. These sources combine fluidly with Min's interest in traditional Asian landscape painting and East Asian textiles and weavings.

Min's unique, labor-intensive process not only produces stunningly ornate surfaces but pays homage to historically feminized crafts, which are often devalued relative to the "high art" of Europe. In addition to exploring the gendered association of crafts, Min's movement towards the materials and techniques of East Asian art history suits the subversive narrative content of his work, which centers queer men of color. As curator John Chaich wrote in his book *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community*, thread "parallels the potential for connectivity" and suggests the fragile intimacy that intertwines individuals and binds the queer community together.

This year marks the decade anniversary of Min's move to Los Angeles, and the sprawling city's strange histories and eclectic quality have become essential aspects of the artist's visual storytelling. *Sweet Discipline from Koreatown* is Min's third exhibition exploring Los Angeles, after his 2022 *Silverlake Dog Park*, and his 2023 Chicago Expo presentation *Westlake*. The men depicted in Min's portraits, such as *Sweet Discipline from Koreatown*, *Daddy Lives in Hollywood Hills*, or *Boy from Virgil Village*, are not based on specific people, but are fantasy figures that represent a diverse array of Asian masculinity rarely depicted in popular culture or representations of L.A. They contemplate the viewer with seductive power, challenging the heteronormative, colonial gaze that would minimize or emasculate them. By populating the various neighborhoods of L.A. with these elegant, imagined men, Min remakes the urban landscape as a kind of queer utopia according to his own standards of beauty and masculinity.

While the figures depicted in Min's paintings are imagined characters, the titles of Min's works refer to true histories tied to specific events and neighborhoods within the city. For example, the piece *Thirteen Missing Ladies* refers to the spate of disappearing transwomen in the Westlake neighborhood near MacArthur Park. The past several years have seen a rise in violence targeting trans and queer people around MacArthur Park; Min observed an atmosphere of fear and mystery in his conversations with people in the neighborhood on the topic. The titular "thirteen ladies" are symbolized as a variety of unique botanical forms—mushrooms, fruit, and flowers that grow amidst a landscape which is both beautiful and threatening. Beyond the few documented attacks on trans people, many of the most marginalized in the community, such as queer undocumented immigrants, disappear without comment in the local news. In *You May Disappear Here*, a flamboyant peacock stands poised on an Edenic cascade of waterfalls that threatens to sweep it away, as phoenix-like flames rise from the creature's back. These works depict a particular kind of contrast that is endemic to the Los Angeles landscape, a meeting of utopia and dystopia, of openness to difference and dangerous opposition to its display. Min

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represents these complexities and contradictions allegorically, with layers of dense natural elements, a sense of space that feels both epic and confining, and explosive, embroidered bursts of color and texture.

The paintings in this exhibition exemplify Min's intersectional engagement with the nuances of queer experience as an Asian man and his deeply personal approach to often unexplored social spaces and histories. Yet even as he mines his own feelings and experiences, Min pulls a wide range of references and associations into the work to consider the ways that power, race, and sexuality play into both local and global geopolitics. Certain works reference the history of conflict between Asia and Europe, the dynamic history of relations between different minority groups in urban conflicts, and the intersection of sexual and racial prejudice. By exploring stories that span contemporary reality and earlier historical moments, the paintings expand outward from Min's personal journey through Los Angeles to address the sublime encounter of splendor and darkness in the human experience.

Ken Gun Min (b. 1976, Seoul, South Korea; Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) studied western painting and art history and theory at Hongik University in Seoul, Korea and received his MFA from the Academy of Art, University of San Francisco. Solo exhibitions include *Silverlake Dog Park*, Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles; *Wounded Man*, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, K contemporary, Denver, CO; and *Becoming Palm Tree*, Gae Po Project Space, Seoul, Korea. Group exhibitions that featured Min's work include *Strings of Desire*, Craft Contemporary Museum, Los Angeles, CA; *i know you are, but what am i? (De)Framing Identity and the Body*, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City, UT; *Sparkle in, Fade out*, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, CA; *People of the Otherworld: Ken Kiff in Dialogue*, curated by Kathy Battista, Albertz Benda, New York, NY; *Who is Your Master?* curated by Wolf Hill, 1969 Gallery, New York, NY; *Bozomag: Bozo Family Hoedown*, M+B gallery, Los Angeles, CA; and *36 Paintings*, Harper's, East Hampton, NY. He was a Hopper Prize finalist and received awards from Direktorenhaus, Berlin, DE and the Kellogg Foundation, New York, NY. Min's work has been featured in *Artnet*, *Artsy*, *Hyperallergic*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Wallpaper** and *Frieze*.