

Tone Check:

**The Skins of Contemporary Korean Painting
Exhibition Essay**

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In Korea, pale, flawless skin has historically been associated with beauty, wealth, and social status. This ideal originally served to distinguish the noble class from agrarian society, where laborers' prolonged exposure to the sunlight led to darker skin. This aesthetic preference has endured over time, profoundly shaping contemporary beauty standards and societal perceptions. However, the fixation on perfect skin has also faced criticism for marginalizing individuals who do not conform, particularly those with darker skin, tattoos, or piercings. Such deviations from the norm are often perceived as acts of non-conformity, leading to social exclusion. This concern has sparked critical discussions on inclusivity and representation, exposing the societal pressures embedded within these ideals. In this context, skin transcends its biological function, becoming a symbol of Korea's evolving identity, where conservative traditions intersect with modern diversity.

Tone Check: The Skins of Contemporary Korean Painting examines the material and metaphorical relationship between skin and the painted surface. Both act as permeable boundaries, where internal meanings and external realities converge: skin carries personal histories that emerge through exposure to the world, while the painted canvas transforms into a layered space where materiality and narrative entwine. The nine Korean artists featured in this exhibition use painting to explore tensions between the body and the societal pressures surrounding it. Their works reveal the friction between individual expression and societal norms, illustrating how the canvas, like skin, becomes a complex surface where histories and identities unfold. These pieces investigate the boundary between internal and external experiences, personal and collective struggles, uncovering the nuanced complexities inscribed on both skin and painting.

The analogy of skin as a map of memory and identity is central to many works in the exhibition. Skin bears marks that chronicle the passage of time, shaping both personal and cultural identity. **Jazoo Yang's** Skin of Everything series, for instance, incorporates materials such as soil and debris from demolished sites in Korea to create textured surfaces—skins of the city. By integrating fragments from a rapidly changing urban landscape into her paintings, Yang poignantly captures the collective memory within the cityscape, tracing the impact of these transformations on individual lives.

Similarly, **Ahyun Jeon's** work portrays the skin as a site of memory. Her realistic depictions of hands and legs, marked by bruises and scars, become maps of internal conflict and emotional turmoil. The defensive gestures and postures of these body parts—subtle and almost abstract in their forms—intensify these emotions while simultaneously concealing them. In this tension, where defense mechanisms blur into quasi-abstracted body parts and wounds, Jeon reveals a fragile boundary where self-protection intertwines with self-inflicted distress.

Yissho Oh's painting reimagines skin as a memory-laden surface, marked by both deliberate and instinctual gestures. Using silicone to mimic the texture of human skin, Oh engraves its surface with a tattoo machine, responding to his body's spontaneous movements. The resulting marks—etched impressions left by both artist and instrument—become fragmented traces, each one a moment of embodied memory. As he interprets these marks into raw forms, Oh draws attention to skin as an archive of the unconscious, where memory and impulse intersect.

Claire Chey's *Guijeop* series expands on this theme, merging human bodies with ghostly figures to explore the intersections of trauma and desire. Through her investigation of spectrophilia—intimate encounters with spirits—Chey blurs the boundaries between yearning and fear, rendering the body as a charged landscape haunted by unresolved histories. In this fusion of the erotic and the supernatural, skin emerges as a liminal space, holding the tension between what is past and what remains palpably present.

Beyond identity, another recurring theme in the exhibition is the metaphor of skin as a collaged surface—fragmented and reassembled—to capture how identity and experience accumulate over time, forming a fractured yet cohesive reality. **Jenny Jisun Kim**'s work explores the instability of language and identity through layered paintings in which text and symbols fragment into narratives in constant flux. Her technique of sanding and layering suggests cycles of creation and erasure, reflecting how identity is shaped by what is alternately revealed and concealed. The dynamic interplay between clarity and obscurity illuminates societal expectations etched onto personal histories, mirroring the complexities of identity in a perpetually shifting reality.

Kai Oh also approaches the idea of collage through her fusion of digital imagery and material structures, blending digital prints on silk with bold acrylic overlays. Her compositions, with their juxtaposition of smooth and textured surfaces, evoke the experience of a world filtered through digital devices, where even our perception of the body is mediated by screens. Drawing from natural phenomena such as weather patterns and plant life, Oh's work reflects a quest for self-exploration within this cyclical, hybrid environment, as identity navigates both physical and digital realms.

Judy Chung's work extends the theme of fragmentation and reassembly by examining the fragility of reality and narrative. Her collaged compositions—woven from elements of subcultures, mythology, and personal experience—explore the shifting boundaries of storytelling through the interplay of digital manipulation and traditional brushwork. Each piece holds layered meanings that destabilize as they are revealed, blurring the line between truth and fiction. Chung's work transforms storytelling into a fluid process of meaning-making, where fragmented realities are both concealed and revealed.

Similarly, **Youngmin Park**'s work examines the delicate boundary between reality and belief. Drawing inspiration from Thomas the Apostle—whose struggle to believe without seeing echoes through history—Park explores how skin serves as a threshold between inner conviction and outer reality. Through repeated imagery, her work subtly shifts meanings, inviting viewers to look beyond surface appearances and question the layered depths beneath visual mirroring.

Finally, **Jean Oh**'s sewn paintings depict identity as a mosaic of fragmented memories and experiences. Through meticulous stitching and layering, she merges fabrics and canvases from past works, creating textured surfaces that evoke the layered quality of skin as it heals over time. By stitching together moments of tension and imperfection, Oh unveils both the fragility and resilience of identity, echoing life's constant interplay between expectations and the unpredictability of change.

Together, the exhibition demonstrates how skin, as both a physical and metaphorical boundary, reflects Korea's evolving societal identity. The nine artists use the painted surface to mirror the complexities of identity and experience. Through varied approaches, they challenge traditional ideals of the body and cultural expectations surrounding identity, offering layered perspectives on the personal and collective narratives inscribed upon the skin. In contemporary Korea, where cultural heritage intersects with rapid change, skin becomes a potent site for renewed understandings of self and society, expressing both personal history and collective transformation.