

First published in *Sang-ah Choi: moremoremore*, published in 2006 to document the exhibit of the previous year at University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois.

## Moremoremore and more so

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Voltaire's farcical mentor, Dr. Pangloss, reminds ever innocent Candide over and over again, "This is the best of all possible worlds." Throughout the great 17th century novel's catalogue of brutalities, travails, and betrayal, Pangloss holds to this conviction, but for *Candide's* readers he is the greatest of fools, his name an ironic synopsis of his world view. For Pangloss no squalor was so complete, no deception so cruel, that it couldn't be redeemed in the thrall of the philosopher's self-delusion. Standing amid the sparkling panels and shimmering holograms of Sang-ah Choi's art one ought to be reminded of Pangloss, or, at least, of the use to which Voltaire put his philosopher/fool; to be seen seeing vistas of cruelty, deceit, and squalor as instead beautifully tautological interplays of illusion and rationale.

Sang-ah paints, draws, and (crucially) cuts out images that reference her dual-cultural experience as a Korean who has come to live in America. She applies this imagery to heavily gessoed and varnished wood panels that simulate decorative ceramic tiles or else to sheets of paper that are often also cut so as to make freestanding "pop-up"-style armatures. Her repertoire includes a variety of Korean (or more generically Asian) references, including bamboo stalks, vaguely oriental mountains, ceremonial swords, Taoist symbols, and erotically attenuated girls with big eyes, adapted from contemporary Japanese *anime*. These are juxtaposed with a panoply of American (or at least generic "First World") consumer items and *kitsch* symbols, among which are power tools, golf clubs, laptops, video game controllers, and magnums of Champagne, accompanied by such marginally spiritual icons as Santa Clauses, Easter Bunnies, and Jack o' Lanterns. This assortment is offered to viewers in densely layered compositions that often include subtle spatial distortions and other visual and material artifices.

The look of a shopper's paradise suffuses Sang-ah's pictures, but her visual inundations of luxury items also have a sinister aspect. There is an oddly mechanical quality to Sang-ah's draftsmanship. She renders her images in largely uninflected ballpoint pen or marker, creating the illusion that she has simply copied her chosen items from advertisements. Once drawn, they are carefully cut out and pasted onto her pictorial fields. The care with which the cutouts are situated isn't designed to disguise these transferences however, but to imbue them with a phantasmagorical quality, a "not-quite-thereness" appropriate to the artist's critical purposes.

Sang-ah interrogates our desires, offering us glittery scenes replete with symbols of status and sentimentalism as a way of challenging our greed and obliviousness. At one place or another in these pictures we note an apparently abstract *motif*; painted spills or drips that appear to seep from between the panels' striated backgrounds or swirling side trims. These stylized oozings can be understood as a kind of sugary adhesive binding layers of painted illusion together. The scope of this vision is nothing if not Voltairean. Sang-ah crafts scenes of the cruellest luxury, the most

annihilating indulgence, in which amalgamations of voluptuousness and grotesquery lurk in the shadows of her candied world.

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