

The Artsy Vanguard 2025: Moka Lee

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Portrait of Moka Lee in her studio, 2024. Photo by Tim Franco for Artsy.

Moka Lee's image of youth is shaped by mobile screens and social media. Born at around the start of Gen Z in Korea, she differs from those born in the early 2010s (Gen Alpha), who grew up with smartphones. Lee first experienced the pre-mobile internet landscape before encountering mobile culture in her teens. The artist's exploration of human stories through smartphone screens has led her to gain new attention throughout 2024. This year alone, Lee participated in Frieze Seoul with Jason Haam, as well as Art Basel and Frieze London with Carlos/Ishikawa, which will present her first solo show in the U.K. next January.

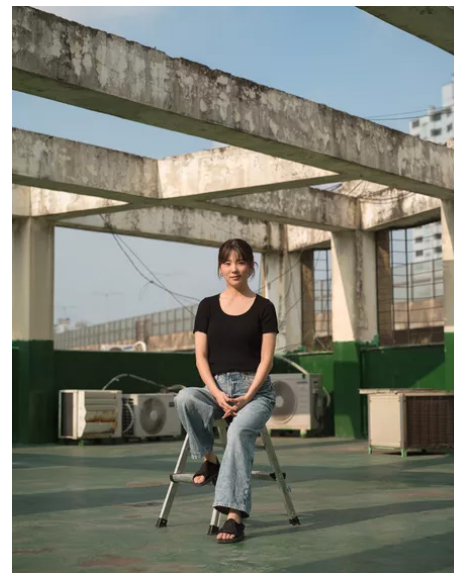
"Instagram is a medium where you can observe people up close. The intentional elements in the photos people post are intriguing," she said in an interview with Artsy. "Though it differs entirely from real-life speech, the intuitive props—like the composition, background, pose, and expression—are crafted to 'show off' something."

The young couple in *Ego Function Error* (2022) exemplifies this dynamic. Unlike the carefully preserved film photos of couples standing side by side in front of monuments in earlier generations' albums, the young woman's face

takes center stage. Casually dressed yet thoughtfully styled, she embodies effortless cool with her outfit and makeup.

The man in the foreground, holding the phone in selfie mode with his arm extended, has his face half out of frame, subtly revealing that he serves merely as a prop to complete his female companion's self-image. Lee's interpretation of this image is encapsulated in the title: "It captures moments when the ego undergoes significant shifts, such as the feelings of possession or fulfillment from emotional ownership that a young adult might experience."

This is not merely a generational self-portrait reflecting the artist herself. Lee takes a more deliberate approach to reference images in this series, which depicts carefully staged celebratory moments from various life stages. Cakes with candles, bouquets, a husband affectionately holding a child, and a smiling wife all evoke moments when one's self is intentionally exposed to public or unfamiliar gazes. Lee modifies these found images to fit her own understanding "by adjusting the colors to the desired emotional level, removing unnecessary props that could lead to misinterpretations, or cropping to emphasize focus."



Portrait of Moka Lee, 2024. Photo by Tim Franco for Artsy.

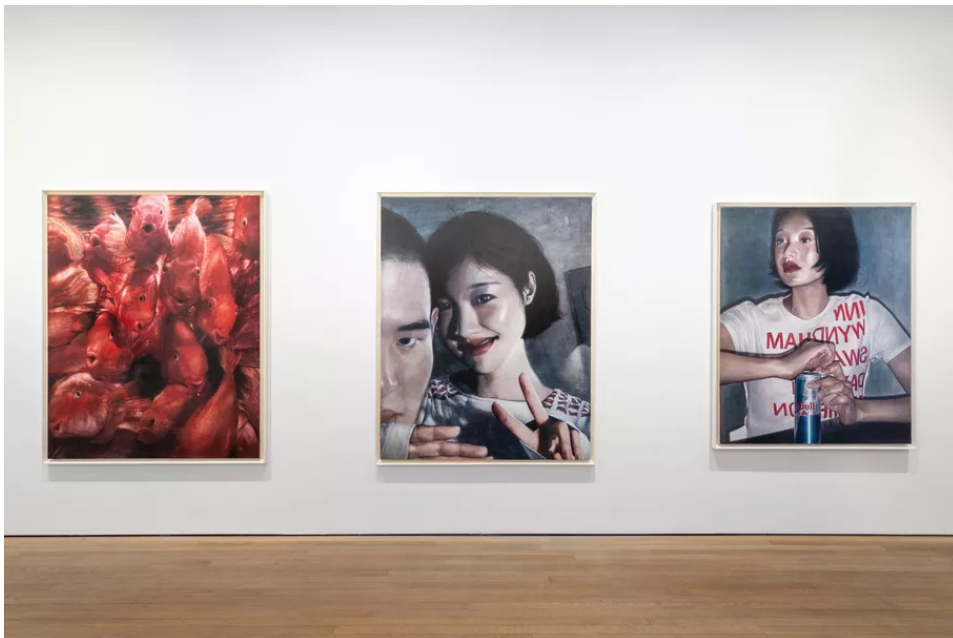


Moka Lee, *Ego Function Error*, 2022

MOKA LEE

What makes Lee's retro-photo-style paintings noteworthy is her consistent experimentation with materials and techniques with a focus on painting as a medium. Like the layered emotions in her works, her techniques are not immediately discernible: What might appear as watercolor on paper is, in fact, oil paint on cotton. Lee traces her fixation on the dry texture of paper back to her early years as an aspiring artist in high school. She recalls being captivated by the even, thin surfaces of paper-based works made for the countless drawing exercises required for admission into art college.

Today, to smooth the painting's surface, she selects fine cotton canvas and applies gesso with a spatula, pressing down hard to spread it in a thin layer. "A layer forms as it dries, resembling the surface created when pulp dries into paper," she explained. "So when oil paint is applied, the gesso is so thin that the paint absorbs, and the canvas's even surface allows the paint's light density to show through." Even when working full-time, completing a piece takes Lee nearly a month.

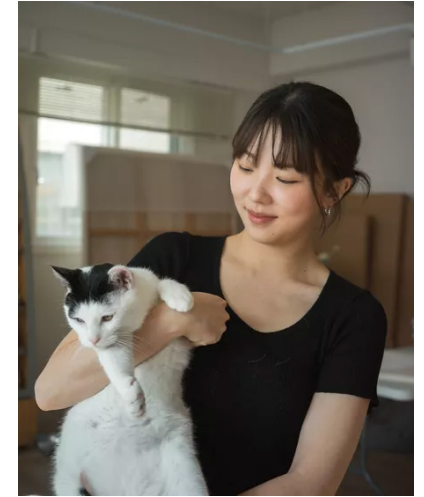


Moka Lee, installation view in "Karma" at Frieze No.9 Cork Street, 2023. © Moka Lee. Photo by Mirko Boffelli. Courtesy of Jason Haam.

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA



Moka Lee, *Illusion Cake 04*, 2023



Portrait of Moka Lee, 2024. Photo by Tim Franco for Artsy.

A glimpse of this meticulous process can be seen in the color palette of *Illusion Cake 04* (2023). The bright white areas, reminiscent of light reflecting off a camera flash, contrast with deep, dark hues that have a shell-like iridescence, "just like the blank spaces in Eastern painting, or how in drawing, you leave the brightest areas blank," she noted. "To achieve the effect of translucency and layering, I stack the colors thinly, letting each layer dry fully before adding the next," she said. As a result, the cool base tones she favors, like turquoise blue or purple, demonstrate her initial emotional distance from her subjects, but her extensive layering of thin washes in yellows, reds, and other warm hues hints at growing intimacy over time.

Lee's painting is continuously evolving, most recently through engagement with other artists' work. In the March 2024 group exhibition "Masterful Attention Seekers" at the Busan Museum of Contemporary Art, Lee presented *Surface Tension 06 (After Nan Goldin: The Ballad of Sexual Dependency)* (2024), which pays homage to American photographer Nan Goldin's *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (1984). In this work, Lee emphasizes the contrast in the bruised white face, frizzy black hair, and the silky, patterned navy curtain in the background. Her subject choice also reflects a foundational interest in an art historical lineage that extends beyond contemporary Korean society.



Moka Lee, *Zoom Out 2: The Ideal City*, 2024

Lee likes to have her completed paintings accompany her in the studio while working. “Until I add the final color, it’s far from complete, so looking at the finished work brings back memories of the process, making me feel like I’m finding my way,” she said. She has recently moved into a studio with a high ceiling in Cheongnyangni, an old neighborhood in Seoul filled with office buildings and factories, where the lights from clothing factories operating through the night glimmer beyond her window.

With a shy but firm smile, she said, “Each painting is still new and painful every time, but I am eager to carry this concern and pain for a while longer.” Just like the lights from the factories that never go out, Lee’s work is always on.

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature highlighting the most promising artists working today. The seventh edition of The Artsy Vanguard features 10 exceptional talents poised to become the next great leaders of contemporary art.