



Dong Yeoun Lee, *Sounds Like Spring is Coming*, 2014, hand ground color on silk, 23.8" x 28.6"

## **Transforming Contemporary Beauty** **Dong Yeoun Lee at Gallery d'Arte in Chelsea, New York**

**by Thalia Vrachopoulos**

It is fitting that as a Korean woman curator Suechung Koh at Gallery d'Arte in Chelsea chose to exhibit Dong Yeoun Lee's work, for the artist depicts updated versions of the Korean female. Indeed, even today, it is not easy for females in that society to conform to its Confucian tenets that demand compliance to a strict pecking order of power. In fact, through her show *Dong Yeoun Lee: Redefining Contemporary Beauty*, Koh demonstrates her dissidence almost as much as Lee's images. Lee's females are riotous in their joy while listening to music or using the telephone and consequently, it is left for us to assume that their mode of behavior is not only

acceptable but the norm for today's Korean females.

At a quick glance, and based upon the scroll formats, brush on silk media and hand ground colors Don-Yeoun Lee's paintings look traditional. But, at closer inspection details such as earphones, android telephones, virtual reality devices and other contemporary consumer products become evident as accessories worn or held by Lee's sitters, thus altering the reading of her images.

Lee's women seem anachronistic because they wear traditional costume until one understands that even today, and although somewhat modernized, in Korea women dress in Hanbok

for special occasions like weddings. Historically, a Hanbok's color and material varied according to class, sex and age and usually the more sumptuous the dress, the higher the class meant to wear it. In the Yi dynasty when Confucianism was at its height, strict emphasis was placed on etiquette and dress codes based on Chinese Ming Dynasty precepts brought to Korea during King Taejong's reign in 1403. Hanbok consist of a long Chima (skirt), and a short Juhgori (jacket) held closed at the right by ribbons called Goreum. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Juhgori became so short so as to allow the skirt band to show thus being considered vulgar by the conservative upper classes. Lee's Hanboks combine such details as very short Juhgori, unacceptable in the past, and brightly colored armpit inserts usually reserved

for upper classes. Lee's *Sounds Like Spring is Coming*, 2014 is a small painting on silk, whose beautiful sitter wears a green Juhgori with a scarlet Chima that signal her newly wedded state. The blossoming cherry branch stretching from the upper right corner as if to hug the beauty, is painted by the artist from behind the silk in order to afford some depth and to further soften its powdery hand ground color.

Gisaeng or professional entertainer genre painting by Yangban class literati proliferated in the Joseon dynasty period. Painters like Shi San or Hye-won depicted the great beauties of Korea as did Sin Yun-bok in *The Beauty*, or Kim Duk-sin's *Women out Walking*. But while these masters were using the notion of portraiture to demonstrate their skill or to depict the beauty of Korean women, Lee uses the format to examine the notion of female as metaphor for the 'other.'

While seemingly free and updated, Lee's beautiful women are dressed in traditional costumes and consequently are still somewhat bound to their Confucian past. It is in the last scroll that we see the contemporary icon who differs from her sisters coloristically but also in pose, for she is moving. She does not sit or stand passively, and her Hanbok lacks any color, thus her class is not predetermined by sumptuary laws. Her round face is made up, and her hair is clipped short while she gesticulates to the music coming from her cell phone to her earphones. Apropos of the modern female, the painting is entitled *Redefining Contemporary Beauty*, 2014.

Lee's beauties are self-portraits that examine the reflection of the artist's inner being and feelings of a Kierkegaardian existential incompleteness. So, in this sense Lee goes back to her history to bring it up to date by focusing on the individual's experience. She acknowledges the uneasy partnership between mind and body while focusing on sensory perception in order to negotiate the existential divide. Her creative instinct is an act of self-assertion as much as it is an act of defiance and freedom.



Dong Yeoun Lee,  
*Redefining  
Contemporary  
Beauty*, 2014, hand  
ground color on Korean  
Paper, 63.7" x 25.6"