



Yoonhee Ryoony Suh's "Hiding in My Brain Cortex"

No pictures exhibited in New Jersey this year were as lonely as our crowd scenes. Maybe it was residue of the pandemic. Maybe it was our Garden State reticence and our suspicion of outsiders. Maybe it was a coincidence. But paintings of people together were, very often, paintings of people far apart — separated from each other, separated from the viewer, and separated from our understanding of their emotional states.

A hovering sense of isolation blanketed the beach scenes painted by John Meehan III in “[NJ & Me: Imperfect Together](#)” at [Drawing Rooms](#), with members of families crammed together under the hot sun, each one engaged in a ferociously inward experience. Kirkland Bray pulled the point of view back further, capturing multitudes partially submerged in cave pools and seaside shallows, with nobody touching, nobody interacting, each bobbing head a gentle interruption in a vast plain of water and earth. [Keith Garcia's acrylic-painted human figures](#) at Deep Space were even tinier and more distant, afloat in moats and adrift in parking lots, waiting for the beginning of a concert that never seemed to start.

There are individuals, too, in **Yoonhee Ryoony Suh's** “Memory Gap,” but it might take you a few moments of staring at her frames to pick them out. The show, which will hang in Gallery #250 on the second floor of **MANA Contemporary** (888 Newark Ave.) until February 17, features quite a few likenesses of humans. But Suh's paintings and pressings on Korean Hanji paper are very large — some more than five feet wide — and her people are very small.



Yoonhee Ryoony Suh's "Every Moment II"

They're further miniaturized by great washes of pigment and pattern that suggest the impersonal grandeur of the natural world. The smallness of Suh's subjects amplifies the potent force of their surroundings. The artist's people are impermanent, transient, sometimes translucent; a flicker of pale flame against a bog sky. Her landscapes feel dynamic, electric like a storm, too dignified to be threatening, but a scary nonetheless.

“Memory Gap” is presented by [Monira Foundation](#) with the utmost respect for the artist. They’ve allowed plenty of room between these paintings to allow each one to tell its story. Those tales, which whisper of the irretrievability of things lost amidst the oceanic vastness of time, are often complicated. Playful as her arrangements of little people can be, they’re desperately summoned — clung to, by a fretting recollector who is worried about how much has already slipped into oblivion.

Monira also shows a short documentary about the artist's process, which doubles as an explanation for the uncanny effects she's able to generate. Suh stains her canvases naturally, pressing leaves, branches, fronds and weeds into her artworks until a tangled impression is captured. She'll douse her flora-covered sheets of paper with herb dyes, and she'll leave them that way for days. These techniques impart a fermented quality to Suh's pieces. You can almost hear the tick of the clock as you're looking at them. She's using geology and biology to say something about the effects of time on human memory, and the constant presence of decay. Hers is art that suggests the austerity — and absence — of the fossil record.

Whether by happenstance or design, she's summoned some confounding illusions. "People Hiding in My Brain Cortex," for instance, looks from a distance (and even on closer inspection) like a slab of marble. The grey smears and gentle curves resemble the striations of cut stone. Decomposing vegetable matter does what a paintbrush could never do. In the middle of the piece, tiny people appear to be enjoying a beach vacation. One figure basks in a bikini; another casts an afternoon shadow. Others, half swallowed by the rock, walk away from the action, or slip into the stone as if pulled by an undertow.

Neighboring pieces are less sessile, and murmur of the jungle instead. “Every Moment II” surrounds a small Buddha with a thicket of long pink and brown print marks. This could be a depiction of a great fallen tree, surrounded by tufts of grass, under a glowering tropical sky, or a clearing in an overgrown glade. The symbol of human culture — and human faith — is dwarfed by an indifferent forest. The Buddha seems almost apologetic, ceding ground to a more powerful force than he. A different kind of holy bond is present in “That’s Life I,” an image of a man walking a dog across a grey-gold expanse with the character of oxidized metal. Only a misty, watery reflection serves to orient the pair in space. They’re in the middle of nowhere, and it’s unclear where they’re going, but they’re absolutely in motion, striding toward their non-destination, lost somewhere amidst the immensity of shadow.

Suh's miniature people are rendered with great sensitivity to posture and detail; her precision work with a paintbrush is, in its way, just as impressive as the leaf-crunching brutality of her stains and washes. These are people she cares about, and whose position in time and space she's trying to fix, even as the scenes squirm away from her. Pointedly, she never shows us a face. Their backs are turned on us, just as their backs are turned on her. They're going someplace far away — too far for the artist to call them home.

Support our work

As an independent publication, we rely on contributions from readers like you to fund our journalism.

ONE-TIME

MONTHLY

\$2.99

\$5.99

\$9.99

Other

CONTRIBUTE NOW

Thanks for your contribution!

TAGGED: [Jersey City Visual Arts](#)



TRIS MCCALL

Tris McCall has written about art, architecture, performance, politics, and public culture for many publications, including the Newark Star-Ledger, the Bergen Record, Jersey Beat, the Jersey City Reporter,... [More by Tris McCall](#)

CONTACT US

First Name *

Last Name *

Email *

Message *

SUBMIT

ADS/INFO

For information on advertising opportunities, please contact -
info@jcitytimes.com

For information on writing opportunities, please contact - info@jcitytimes.com

ABOUT US

[About Us](#)
[Contact Us](#)

