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NEWS

In Their Own Words

Brooklyn-based artist Su-en Wong on the elation and sting that can accompany reading a critics review of your own work. Wong currently has two pieces at the Brooklyn Museum's Open House: Working in Brooklyn, on view until August 15.

In the sea of inaccessible and arduous contemporary art writing, it's revealing to think that a peer, not a "professional" critic, has provided me with the clearest and sharpest analysis of my work. Harvard University art history major Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer's lucid and accurate writing on my paintings and drawings addresses their obvious as well as hidden concerns, and has inspired me to investigate themes I haven't yet developed. In her prelude to a lecture I was giving that evening for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' journal *The Advocate*, Sarah read an excerpt from her writing:

Su-en Wong's images are separation perfected. She deals with multiples, repetition, and homogeneity, and in this way, copes with intensely personal yet common crises of self-knowledge, identity formation, variability, and continuity. In defining herself in the plural, she draws on her fascination with the liminality of maturation from childhood to adulthood, negotiating between alternating impulses of self-obsession and self-alienation with the resulting visual effect of melancholy, mystery, disillusionment, humiliation, and fear. Looking at her paintings, you can hear the echo of Samuel Beckett's voice whispering 'I have the silly impression we are looking at me.'

When I read reviews of my work I'm often disappointed, and, very occasionally, feel a bit like a misunderstood teenager. I've been exceptionally fortunate (only one review to pout over), but often find art writing laden with layers of academic verbosity and angled from fashion and the media-driven politics of the moment. Inevitably, the media dictates how criticism is formed. While critics, like artists, aren't immune to trends, I often feel that commentary on my work is a decoy for commentary on trends, rather than an assessment of my work's relevancy to those trends. My paintings and drawings come from a deeply personal place and are often a culmination of challenging self-inspection and hyper self-criticism, so I realize the difficulty for anyone (myself included) to perform a razor-sharp diagnosis of my intentions. My work renders a very private and deeply personal paradise, a haven in which to explore the conflicting contexts of power and vulnerability, fear and desire, assimilation and individuality, drive and repression, fantasy and reality, predators and prey, public versus private persona, and good and evil. These dualities are always shifting, flexing, and fluxing, perhaps eluding criticism in their malleability.



Su-en Wong
Baby-blue Painting with Girl as Covergirl (detail) (1999)
Acrylic and pencil on linen
Collection of Alva and Dr. Stefan Stux,
New York



Su-en Wong
Mellow Yellow/American Cheese (2001)
Colored pencil on painted paper
Courtesy the artist

The delicate role of the critic is to engage in a complex discourse with the artist he or she is writing on under the polish of a methodology. When let loose, private opinions, often colored by individual experience and background, subject the critic to criticism. Furthermore, in this post-post-modern world of art making, where the boundaries of art have expanded far beyond the plastic, and where we get ourselves in trouble just trying to define what contemporary art even is, the art critic's road must be a hairy, nebulous, and treacherous one. How to comment "accurately" or "fairly" about that which eludes definition or containment?

A critic can serve as bellwether, editor, educator, back-scratcher, ego-crusher, fan, cynic, censor, friend, or foe—all in equal measure. What euphoria, what misery! Perhaps it is every artist's fantasy to relegate the opinions of all but their own to obsolescence. While it's unavoidable that artists depend upon critic's favorable word in this market-driven world of artmaking, I ultimately try to remind myself that the most important criticism is generated within the confines of my own studio.