



The Eye of the Painting

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**무제 #1**

2019, acrylic, watercolor, sumi ink, pen, graphite, glue on sketchbook, 28.5 × 43 cm, 11 × 17 inches

**Untitled #1**

2019, acrylic, watercolor, sumi ink, pen, graphite, glue on sketchbook, 28.5 × 43 cm, 11 × 17 inches

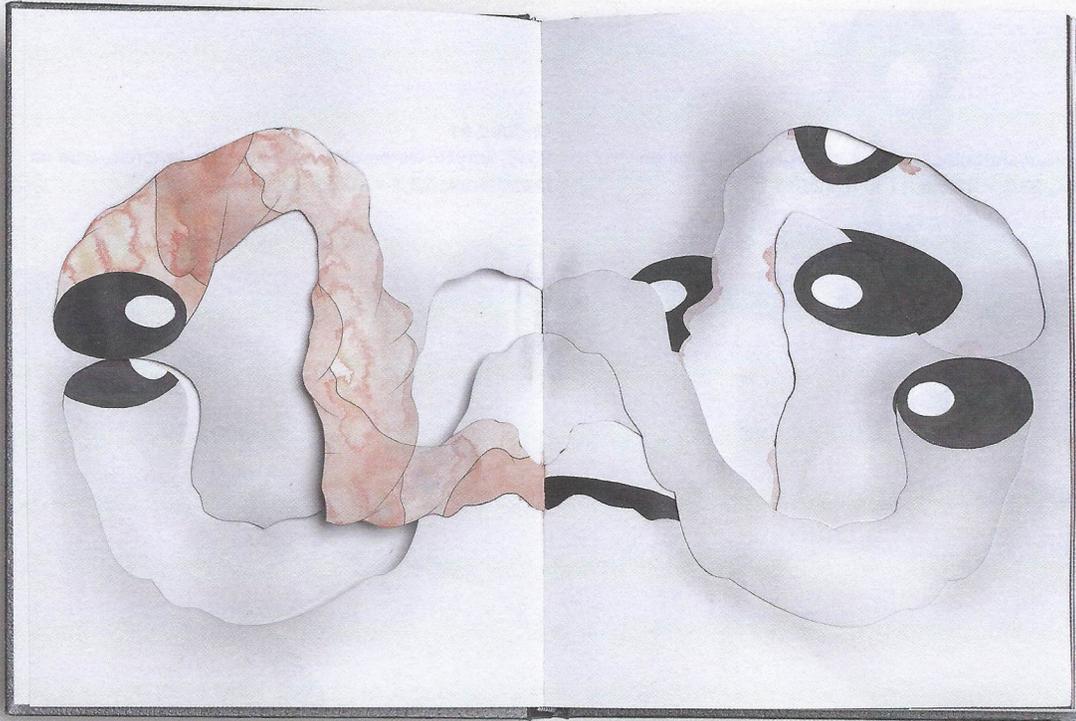


**무제 #2**

2020-2022, acrylic, graphite, felt tip pen, sumi ink and glue on sketchbook, 28.5 × 43 cm, 11 × 17 inches

**Untitled #2**

2020-2022, acrylic, graphite, felt tip pen, sumi ink and glue on sketchbook, 28.5 × 43 cm, 11 × 17 inches



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An Odyssey with  
Sang-ah Choi Through the  
Pages of a Sketchbook

Linda Tesner

Linda Tesner

Linda Tesner is an independent curator and writer living in Portland, Oregon. She has served as the interim director of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University and as the director and curator at the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College (1998-2019). She was formerly the assistant director of the Portland Art Museum and the director of the Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Washington. She received her B.A. in Art History from the University of Oregon and her M.A. in History of Art from Ohio State University. Her publications can be found at [lindatesner.com](http://lindatesner.com).

Indeed, Sang-ah Choi's immersive and continuous drawn serial *Untitled #2* (2020–22) is a sketchbook. In the sense that the images are intuitive and immediate, that they record a chronological and sequential time span in her studio practice—a sketchbook. But *Untitled #2* is also a thoughtfully conceived work of art that evolved organically, paired with the assiduous attention to formal considerations that one might expect in a major composition. It is, in a real sense, a time-based work, as the viewer is invited to experience each page and spread consecutively, one drawing flowing into and interacting with the next, backward and forward. Yes, *Untitled #2* may contain Choi's quotidian and subliminal thoughts and ideas paired with a looseness of style, but the effect of this work of art is, in fact, quite monumental.

*Untitled #2* is the second such volume created by Choi, each one containing a compilation of interrelated imagery. Choi says that the impetus for this long-format continuous drawing emerged from two sketches she made in 2019. She began these drawings as she approaches her sketchbooks, with no particular goal in mind. She simply drew and painted intuitively.

Choi notes that around the time she began these drawings, she was feeling particularly introspective. An encounter with Carl Jung's *The Red Book: Liber Novus*; a series of major geographic moves (first from Korea to the United States, and then between different regions within the US); and her own formal inquiries into the context and purpose of painting had led her to a mood of quiet curiosity. Her response was to look deeply inward and permit herself the time and space to aimlessly explore pigments and the page. The process of mark-making without a particular intention led to imagery, which then gave rise to more concrete thoughts about the imagery. And then Choi observed herself having thoughts about those thoughts. The sketchbook became a diaristic monologue with herself, part of an investigation into what, to Choi, is true about her own work.

In Choi's first long-format sketchbook, *Untitled #1* (2019–20), she used a book that she had already been working in, and her drawings progressed sequentially. For *Untitled #2*, Choi started in the middle of an empty book and then worked her way to the front and back from the center. Linear time, she says, had begun to feel unnatural to her. The drawings evolved through a balance of opposing forces, and if she began to feel like she "knew what she was doing," she notes, the drawings became too controlled. Only when she was able to maintain a certain remove or detachment from the work did the drawings take on their own autonomy—as if they had sprung from Choi's unconscious nearly unassisted. Ultimately, the drawings became about Choi's physical movements, her flow with the materials.

When she begins a drawing, Choi approaches the blank page with the intention of forming a relationship, or initiating a conversation, with it through what she calls “an unintentional gaze.” Her process starts with her desire to understand the nature of the paper—its surface, its edges—almost as if it were a fellow sentient being, worthy of exploration and discovery. But this conversation takes place in three dimensions, as Choi cuts and folds the paper, making sculpture out of the sketchbook’s pages. Choi shares that she loved pop-up books as a child, and she makes remarkable pop-up paper constructions and what she calls “folded paintings” in her studio. She likes that a pop-up pulls the viewer not only forward, but also inward, in a way that allows them to enter a painting. Her interaction with the pages of the sketchbook—their temporal flow, physicality, and immersive depth of field—helps her to navigate pictorial space and time.

Of course, Choi’s imagery is purely abstract, and if there is a narrative, it is only because the viewer constructs his or her own to parallel Choi’s experience of making. Choi does not tell a story, *per se*, but she does describe an odyssey as the viewer traverses from one spread to another.

Choi’s chosen palette is quite spare: white, black, shades of gray, and a fleshy pink that reminds one of the human body. Very occasionally there are greenish undertones to the flesh colors, like the remnants of a bruise. And there is one page near the center of the sketchbook, a singular instance, on which Choi has introduced grayed periwinkle-blue halos around elongated ellipses—a hue that, on the color wheel, sits opposite the pink that threads through the book, and a true anomaly. The whites and blacks are matte and flat, but the gray is typically soft and misty, and the pink components are rich with detail. These effects have to do with the mediums Choi uses, and how she uses them. For the grays she uses graphite, which she gently pounces and smudges onto the paper, creating shapes by employing stencils. The blush tones are made with watercolor and acrylic paint. These passages are literal records of the “life” of the watercolor as it lands on the paper and then dries in a concentrated ring of color that resembles the outline of a cell. The result of the roseate passages is a surface that looks like freckled splotches of human skin.

Skin is not the only reference to the human body in Choi’s work. Nearly all of her abstracted forms loosely reference human body parts: arms, hands, and fingers, but also intestines, fallopian tubes, the ridges and grooves of the brain’s surface, blood vessels and corpuscles, muscles and tendons. Painted black voids and cutout circles suggest the various apertures of the body. There is an inside-out quality to the imagery, as if a body has been disembodied and rearranged on the page. Black circles are scattered throughout the sketchbook, each one containing a smaller white circle. These shapes evoke googly eyes, inspired by Choi’s fascination with anime, but also mirror

the viewer's own gaze on the page. The relationship between the eyes creates tension and dialogue—between mind and body, the spiritual and the physical, the intangible and the tangible. The careful viewer will notice that sometimes the eyes/apertures appear to be completely cut out, separated from the paper, while at other times they seem to be barely and tentatively attached. This ambiguity, to Choi, speaks to the idea that no state is fixed, but rather constantly shifting and transforming.

Besides physical body parts, one discerns the suggestion of certain bodily functions and even thoughts in the images as well. Some passages conjure spittle, or the exhale of breath. Other spreads are entirely black or white—these feel like islands of calm and repose. But many pages contain dense, complicated, and even confusing compositions, visually metaphoric of jumbled thoughts, or brain fog, or the process of changing one's mind.

Much of the complexity found in the sketchbook's spreads has to do with how intently and extensively Choi manipulates the paper itself. The drawn shapes and colors are just the beginning, the foundation. Choi intrepidly cuts the paper—she might make a slit in the page, so that one sees a hint of the page underneath the page one is viewing. But more often she cuts idiosyncratic organic shapes out of the paper, so that the cutout can be viewed on one side of the spread or the other, the composition completely altered depending upon which side of the gutter the cutout lands.

It's a difficult challenge, to describe movement using a flat sheet of paper, but Choi accomplishes this on pages where she has made series of slits, closely spaced, so that the paper takes on a fanned, three-dimensional quality. As one gently moves the page from one side to the other, the paper ripples, flickers, and animates. In other instances, Choi takes paper that's been cut out of the sketchbook and weaves it back into slits to create basket-like textures; or she takes a cutout shape and loops it through another hole on the same page. Some passages of cutouts expose imagery from several pages before or henceforth; in others, the visual field of a spread is entirely transformed depending upon how the viewer holds the page. Even spreads that are completely black reveal nearly invisible lines, if the viewer looks carefully—the subtle effect of a white, hairlike edge of cut paper. Or, on a predominantly white spread, a cut may appear as a dark line, either narrowing or expanding depending upon how the page is held. The character and variety of Choi's cuts and cutouts remind one of variations in a painter's brushstrokes.

Another method Choi uses to manipulate the paper is folding. As she folds the paper, she makes a permanent line on the page, whether or not the fold is retained or reflattened. When a fold in a

page is activated, again, the composition changes. In other passages, remnants of the glue used to collage or adhere cutouts together become yet another set of intentional marks.

Of course, the best and perhaps only way to truly experience Choi's sketchbook is to spend time with it. This is an art experience that invites duration. This quality of the work led to the development of a video, *Untitled: My Present* (2022), based on the viewing of the sketchbook *Untitled #2*.<sup>1</sup> Unlike viewing an individual painting, it is impossible to inculcate the themes and emotive content of this work without witnessing the physical turning of the pages and watching the shapes relate and interact. This requires a slow pace. The many slits and cutouts throughout the sketchbook make the object quite frangible and even a bit brittle; this fragility has the natural effect of causing the viewer to moderate the turning of the pages. The composition literally changes—quite dramatically—with every movement made by the person handling the sketchbook. The necessarily deliberate cadence, and the innumerable ways in which Choi has created dimensionality on each page, have manifested a book that swells and pulses with a palpable sense of living energy.

What do Choi's images mean in the liminal space of a simple folio? *Untitled #2* is a visual riddle, a sojourn, a conversation, an entire universe housed within the binding of a single volume. Color, shapes, lines, edges, negative space—these all collide and evolve in Choi's evanescent passage through the pages of a sketchbook.

Notes 1.

This video, produced by curator Jee Young Maeng, gradually took shape over the course of the following exhibitions: *One at a Time* (WESS, Seoul, 2021); *My Present* (WESS, Seoul, 2022); and *Your Present* (Pace Gallery, Seoul, 2022).

Slit: 그림의 눈  
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