

MIHEE NAHM

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*SOAKED*



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WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 18 - FEBRUARY 27, 2020

AUSTIN, TEXAS

## ELEGY TO EVERY DAY

Mihee Nahm's exhibition *Soaked* surrounds you in atmospheric paintings that demand close and slow inspection, their beauty and weight seeping into you. Nahm returned to South Korea, where she grew up, after receiving her graduate degree from The University of Texas at Austin. While there, she created realistically painted still lifes of sealed Ziploc bags pinned to walls and containing dead leaves from her grandmother's grave, flowers, or the remains of a Korean brand skin toner called "Essence."

Like a naturalist's collection, these memory specimens—organic materials locked inside throw away bags—are a way of trying to crystallize time. Observed and painted in a sealed room to control the light, they are shrines imbued with a general desire to hold things where they are, both the light shining on the subject and the consciousness of the artist. More modest than butterfly wings, the



*Puddle*, 2019, oil on canvas, 16" x 24"

detritus in each still life—inanimate matter, relics of her past, lifeless yet tender, seem to represent Nahm's longing for life to be fully contained and accessible to her.

Perhaps Nahm is trying to capture transience or impermanence and seal it forever—unmoving and pinned to the wall. Can we seal our memories? Can we capture longing? If these are Nahm's questions, the still life answers her—the nail holding the "Essence" slides down the wall, leaving a jagged scar. The "Essence" leaks out of the bag, forming bruised puddles. Nahm responds by lovingly painting the scar and the bruises.

Particularly the Ziploc bag of "Essence" calls to mind a naturalist's specimen jar, only the specimen feels missing. Nahm accidentally broke her bottle of "Essence" and caught what she could. Perhaps the thing Nahm is trying to pin to the wall is herself. That could be said of all of the works in this moody exhibition—lush paintings of soggy leaves, clipped grass on

rain soaked pavement, pebbles in pools of water.

Moving back to Texas two years ago, Nahm began painting landscapes, or, as she calls them "anonymous glimpses." Though she herself is not in view, she is deeply present in all of them. There is a decision to remove herself, but there is also a decision to observe and record exactly where she is. Nahm describes her longing for Texas while in Korea and her longing for Korea while in Texas. Her work serves as a psychic bridge or poultice for her unfulfilled longing.

Each landscape painting is a snapshot from her daily walks. Having left the controlled environment of her studio evident in her earlier still lifes, inspiration and feelings of nostalgia have come off the wall and seem to be everywhere. Sometimes she finds her subject by looking around while walking but most often looking down at her feet, as if, like in her pinned still lifes, she can hold herself where she is.



*Committing to Memory\_NMR*, 2014, oil on panel, 20 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 18 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"





*Committing to Memory\_Essence*, 2014, oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 17"

Cover Panel: *Begin Again*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"

Nahm expresses a fluidity, or as she puts it “an ability to drift to her inner space,” more readily in landscape. Her technique becomes a looser, layered building up of the paint, while continuing to maintain her gorgeous realism. The mood and the palette of this exhibition is generally somber and fairly neutral in tone, Nahm being very comfortable with melancholy. For her, melancholy inhabits both sadness and contentment, and there is an expansiveness in her choice of colors and mood. She pushes against all the possibilities of grey and brown, making them hers. And in her elegant attention to every rock, puddle, grass clipping, and dead leaf, there is joy and reverence that underlies the melancholy.

The experience of being in Nahm’s soggy world has a kinship with the tradition of Vanitas nature morte of the 17th century. Artists of Vanitas sought to comment on the ephemerality of life through allegorical objects. Though there are no skulls or extinguished candles in Nahm’s work, there is

a sense that the dead leaves in bags or the dead leaves on the ground are reminding us how fleeting life is and how we need to pay closer attention.

Pops of color start to emerge, pink crepe myrtle blossoms in *Puddle*, bright yellow leaves in *Soaked*, and the saffron orange of a giant tarp in *Begin Again*. This last painting is a larger one (40 x 48 inches)— a dark, predominantly black, scene at a plant store, the foreground inhabited by clumsy and forgotten plants. But the gloom is outweighed by an enormous and luminous tarp, in Christo orange. The tarp seeks to contain nature and in so doing, much like Christo’s work, offers us another way to engage with it. The Ziploc bags from the still lifes and the tarp seem to have similar functions in Nahm’s work. They contain and protect life where it is, but while the still lifes seem to enshrine her past, the luminosity of the tarp seems to herald a future, unknown yet promising.



*Earth Water*, 2019, acrylic on panel, 80” x 60”

The obsession with capturing imagery at our feet became popular with Instagram, yet Nahm is not on social media and seems flummoxed by the analogy. Nahm’s paintings and Instagram photographs of the ground at our feet both seem to rise out of the same desire to claim and honor one’s particular space in the world. But Nahm’s practice seems to invert this phenomenon. While documenting these moments on Instagram cumulatively and neurologically removes us from being present to our lives, Nahm’s decision to mark where she is and to do it in such a lush way, seems to take her deeper into the experience of her own reality. Instagram can take the real away from us, but Nahm is expanding and deepening what real can actually mean.

**Elizabeth Chapin** is an artist and writer based in Austin, Texas.



*Soaked*, 2019, oil on canvas, 16” x 24”



# MIHEE NAHM

## EDUCATION

- 2012 MFA, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX  
2008 BFA, Art Academy of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

## EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *The Architecture of Limitless Delusion*, Texas A&M Commerce University Gallery, Commerce, TX
- 2016 *Helm's Trust Exhibition*, City Hall, Cincinnati, OH  
*Helm's Trust Exhibition*, Graydon on Main, Cincinnati, OH
- 2015 *And They Papered The Room*, Liliana Bloch Gallery, Dallas, TX
- 2014 *EAFA 39th Annual Open Juried Exhibition*, EAFA Gallery, Seattle, WA  
*Summer School*, Liliana Bloch Gallery, Dallas, TX  
*Omnis*, Minan Gallery, Los Angeles, CA  
*The Schwa Show*, The Pitt County Arts Council, Greenville, NC  
*10th Annual Postcards from the Edge*, Visual Aids, New York, NY  
*Hope Project*, Body Art Center, Daejeon, South Korea
- 2013 *Collective Diary*, Space Mass, Seoul, South Korea  
*Small Works – Big Talent*, Las Laguna Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA  
*American Art Today: Figures*, The Bascom: A Center for the Visual Arts, Highlands, NC  
*Real People 2013*, Old Court House Arts Center, Woodstock, IL  
*6th Annual Juried Show Part II*, Sylvia White Gallery, Ventura, CA
- 2012 *MFA National Competition*, First Street Gallery, New York, NY  
*Mixed Feelings*, Visual Arts Center, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX  
*Medium Small at Big Medium*, Big Medium, Austin, TX  
*National Wet Paint Exhibition*, Zhou B. Art Center, Chicago, IL
- 2010 *A Look to the Future*, PAC Gallery, Cincinnati, OH  
*Influence and Development*, Art Museum of Greater Lafayette, Lafayette, IN  
*Young at Art: Works on Paper by Emerging and Established Artists*, Weston Bolling Gallery, Cincinnati, OH  
*Reconnection: A Reflection*, Convergys Gallery, Cincinnati, OH

## RESIDENCIES

- 2017 North Mountain Residency, Garrardstown, WV  
2014 Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, Nebraska City, NE  
Brush Creek Foundation for the Arts, Saratoga, WY  
2011 Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT

## AWARDS & SCHOLARSHIPS

- 2011 College of Fine Arts Student Excellence Award, The University of Texas at Austin  
Garwood Scholarship, The University of Texas at Austin Dean's Travel Grant & Batts Travel Grant, The University of Texas at Austin  
Demings Endowed Scholarship in Studio Art
- 2010 College of Fine Arts Student Excellence Award, The University of Texas at Austin  
Wells Endowed Presidential Scholarship, The University of Texas at Austin  
Frary Endowed Scholarship, The University of Texas at Austin
- 2009 Lucas Scholarship, The University of Texas at Austin  
Frary Endowed Scholarship, The University of Texas at Austin
- 2008 Wilder Travel Scholarship, Art Academy of Cincinnati  
Helms Trust Purchase Prize, Art Academy of Cincinnati
- 2007 Alumni Council Scholarship, Art Academy of Cincinnati  
Helms Trust Purchase Prize, Art Academy of Cincinnati  
Excellence Scholarship, Art Academy of Cincinnati



*Leaf Study\_Indiana 1 (detail)*, 2017, oil  
on canvas board, 16 3/4" x 20 3/4"



*Puddle*, 2019, oil on canvas, 16" x 24"

## WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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This project is supported in part by the Cultural Arts Division of the City of Austin Economic Development Department. Additional support is provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Women & Their Work is a visual and performing arts organization located in Austin that serves as a catalyst for new ideas in contemporary art. For over 40 years, Women & Their Work has brought groundbreaking art created by women to Austin with exhibitions, performances and education workshops. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented over 1,900 artists in 326 visual art exhibitions, 155 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 30 literary readings and spoken word performances, and 715 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, The New York Times, ArtForum, and on National Public

Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 850 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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*Andy Warhol*

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



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