

In the midst of life, we are in death, begins a Gregorian chant that likely originated in the 14th century. Sunhee Kim Jung's oil paintings, while not explicitly religious, embody this paradox. The artist fills her canvases with a riot of lush foliage and colorful flowers, but also with hints of human decline and loss. Look closely and sometimes you'll see that what appear to be stalks that support green leaves are actually whitened bones.

In Kim Jung's series, "Born Heroes," humans dominate the compositions, but are wreathed in plants. Babies in fetal positions -- and wearing superhero costumes -- are at the center of the 20-by-20-inch pictures, nestled in wombs surrounded by flowers, reeds, fronds, and berries in contrasting hues. Depicted with varying degrees of literalism, the images illustrate both human and vegetal fertility. They are also, in ways that are not immediately obvious, autobiographical.

Kim Jung grew up in South Korea, smitten with American superheroes. At 10, she reports, one of her favorite TV shows was "The Incredible Hulk." But "Born Heroes" reflects adult concerns as well. Twenty years ago, the mother of two had a hysterectomy. Seeing a post-operative X-ray of her abdomen gave her a sense of emptiness, and a psychic need for healing.

Ironically, one of things Kim Jung says her 10-year-old self had admired about comic-book heroes was their "supernatural powers to heal."

The silhouetted female torso in each of these pictures is her own, replenished and fulfilled by nurturing these symbolic offspring. The babies, in turn, will be born and "fix the world to be peaceful, to be beautiful," Kim Jung explains. In the sock-bang-pow fables of costumed heroes, the artist glimpses the possibility of an end to violence.

Kim Jung came to Washington D.C., near which she still lives, as a college student. Although the daughter of a noted calligrapher, she didn't originally intend to pursue art. But she found her way to the Corcoran School of Art, and later American University, where she studied painting. (Now she teaches at Anne Arundel Community College, not far from her home, where she has worked for 17 years.) She was introduced to the color paintings of two German-born American artists, the free-form Hans Hoffman and the strictly geometric Josef Albers.

Perhaps the most important of her Corcoran teachers was the late Tom Green, who painted hieroglyphic forms that were neither abstract nor fully representational. Kim Jung's style is much more realistic, but shares Green's proclivity for tidy outlined forms. Perhaps Kim Jung's hard-edged style owes as much to Green as to the commercial artists who invented the Hulk, Aquaman, and the Silver Surfer, who are among the comic-book infants almost ready to leave the womb in her paintings.

In a few of the "Born Heroes" pictures, Kim Jung experiments with thicker and rougher textures, adding sand to the pigment. (One of the paintings, of course, depicts a pre-natal version of the Sandman, the only villain included in the 21-painting series.) Such gambits are rare in her work, however. The painter's colors are usually bright and

unmuddled, and her forms precise and well-defined. She's not a photorealist, but her style has that genre's crispness.

Many of Kim Jung's flower paintings are as bright and lush as the work of such French post-impressionists as Henri Rousseau and Paul Gauguin, who depicted tropical locales both imagined and real. But among her pictures are some that feature such attributes as black backdrops, grayer colors, flatter forms, and vertical formats, all of which hint at East Asian scroll paintings.

One way the artist linked her work to Korean tradition, and specifically to her family heritage, was by painting over some of her mother's abandoned calligraphic works. These pictures, which adopted a more typically Asian style, became the "Nostalgia" series. Some of them have bright orange or red blooms in the foreground, but the backdrops are quieter, with mottled colors and ghostly Hangul lettering.

Roughly a decade ago, Kim Jung employed muted hues for another reason. The paintings in her "Camouflage" series combine foliage with vegetation-derived designs like those of combat uniforms. Inspired by American troops then at war in the Middle East, the pictures pay homages to a different sort of hero in an earth-toned palette that's keyed to military-issue clothing rather than comic-book tights and capes.

Unusual among the painter's canvases is "A Bearing Life," which gazes up at a fruit-bearing tropical tree. The skyward perspective is striking, and uncharacteristic. Usually, Kim Jung gazes straight into the heart of a thicket whose branches or tendrils clearly grow beyond the pictures's edges. Even the "Born Heroes," with their strong central focus, include flowers and vines that continue past the borders of the composition.

Thus the painter places the viewer amid her fecund locations, whether gardens, forests, or jungles. The greenery is just too abundant to be contained, and stretches far beyond what the eye can see. This immersive approach suggests cinematic or photographic closeups, or the way comics divide stories into panels.

But there's also a philosophical dimension to the technique. By forcing the spectator's viewpoint so far into the composition, the artist emphasizes the prodigious vitality of the scenes she immortalizes. In a world shadowed by death, Sunhee Kim Jung pushes us into the midst of life.

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