



Moka Lee's portraits capture the likeness of social media strangers

The painter's intimate canvases explore the gap between who we are and who we pretend to be

Caption for full-bleed image: Moka Lee, Zoom Out (detail), 2022. Photo by Gu Han. © Moka Lee.

'A face alone can say so many things,' says Moka Lee. 'It indicates so much about a person, and I think understanding small nuances and being able to observe the tiniest flickers of emotion is quite fun and necessary.' The artist, who lives and works in Seoul, paints enigmatic portraits of young women that explore the gap between who we are and how we appear. For inspiration, she turns to what she calls 'the most convenient tool' when you're after an ever-expanding pool of images: social media.



Moka Lee in her studio. Photo by Inseo Hwang. Moka Lee in her studio. Photo by Inseo Hwang.

Lee often comes up with a narrative, then scrolls through various social-media channels. When she stumbles upon a post she likes, she contacts the account holder and buys the rights to paint an enlarged and adjusted version of the photograph. 'This process allows me to empathize with the subject,' she tells me. 'But there isn't any real personal interaction, which I think is representative of how we live today.' Lee believes that such emotional distance enables her to approach her subjects objectively and to reconfigure their characters with precision.



Left: I'm Not Like Me, 2020. Right: Dark Ray, 2021. Both artworks by Moka Lee. Photos by Oyeol Kwon. © Moka Lee.

With their quality and queasy lighting, the final portraits are surreal yet strangely beautiful. Bold outlines and murky shadows contribute to an atmosphere that teeters between innocent and eerie. In I'm Not Like Me (2020), a girl with dark eyes and crimson lips gazes up at the viewer from her bed, the strap of her pale-pink camisole slipping from her shoulder, the room dimly lit. In Dark Ray (2021), another girl stands on a beach in a swimsuit, the sky an azure, her hands shading her eyes – either from the sun, or from the viewer.

'Painting a face is difficult,' explains Lee. 'Even the most minuscule modification in detail can change the narrative completely.' In adapting her source images, the artist explores how physical features and aesthetic choices relate to identity. In her paintings, she also encourages viewers to really look at what – and who – appears before us. It's a different kind of looking than that which takes place online, and one that begs the question: is this a dream, or is this reality?

Published on January 20, 2023.