

This South Korean artist is turning strangers' Instagram posts into portraits

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(CNN) — For some people, Instagram's infinite scroll is an endless time waster. For celebrated young South Korean artist Moka Lee, it's the main source of inspiration for her portrait paintings, which have sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"I can observe countless people with just my phone without meeting them," Lee tells CNN. "I wait to find something unique in the pictures that I come across by chance through the algorithm," she adds.

This week, her portrait "Surface Tension 07," of a young woman she encountered on the social media app and painted from the photo she had posted, will be exhibited by the London gallery Carlos/Ishikawa at the Art Basel art fair in Switzerland. It shows a young woman wearing a baggy white t-shirt smiling widely, her bangs falling into her eyes.

Lee, 28, has used other sources to find images, including Google search and the work of American photographer Nan Goldin, but she says she finds it intriguing to watch how people present themselves in their highly curated Instagram posts.

"It may be a bit dark in some ways, but I think it is a very interesting method for me because I can observe so many people sharing themselves," she says. "People use the very few pictures that they have on Instagram to express themselves."

When she finds a photograph she likes, she sends the potential



An installation view of Moka Lee's work at the exhibition "Karma" (2023) at Frieze No.9 Cork Street, in London. Mirko Boffelli/Courtesy Jason Haam

subject a direct message (DM) to ask if she can buy the rights to the image.

Jason Haam, whose Seoul gallery represents Lee, says that Lee's relationship with her subjects reflects how human interaction has changed over time.

"Mona Lisa would have been painted with a person sitting in front of the artist all the time," he says, referring to Leonardo da Vinci's 16th-century masterpiece.

Lee "just DMs this person that she never met and says, 'Oh, I'd like to paint your portrait and I'll pay you a certain amount of money.' And they never see each other," he says.

The artist has already had enormous success with her work, appearing at major shows like Art Basel Hong Kong in 2023. "It



A photograph of Moka Lee's "Surface Tension 07" (2024), oil on cotton, 194 x 157.5 centimeters. The work will be shown at Art Basel 2025 by the gallery Carlos/Ishikawa. Courtesy the artist/Jason Haam

brought so much interest from around the globe," says Haam. After that, "it was really just immediate stardom," he adds.

In late 2024, her painting "I'm Not Like Me" — which depicts a red-lipstick-wearing, camisole-clad woman sitting on a bed — sold for more than \$200,000 at a Hong Kong auction.

That's a "record price for an artist in their 20s in this country (South Korea)," says Haam.



Moka Lee's "Live Inside Bubble 2" (2021), oil on cotton, 92 x 126 centimeters. Courtesy the artist/Jason Haam

Lee was also recognized in Artsy's Vanguard list for 2025, which highlights 10 promising contemporary artists.

She tells CNN that her requests to Instagram users used to get rejected a lot, but now that she's better known, it's easier to get people to agree to become the subjects of her work.

A recently completed painting, measuring 190 centimeters (about six feet) tall by 160 centimeters (about five feet) wide took her one month to complete, working for 10 hours a day, she says.

She uses oil paints, a traditionally Western medium — which she says was necessary to participate in overseas art markets — but with what she calls "Asian techniques." She points to watercolor



A photograph of South Korean artist Moka Lee. Courtesy the artist/Jason Haam

painting, in which layers of paint are stacked to create depth and texture, as a source of inspiration.

Her process gives her paintings a distinct aesthetic quality, says Haam, explaining that Lee dilutes her paint. “She paints very, very thinly, but it’s layered up so that you can actually see all these mysterious colors coming up,” he says. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

It’s an aesthetic that’s quickly gaining traction among buyers.

“My career is now expanding from South Korea to overseas markets,” says Lee, “But I’m someone who just looks at my phone in a small room in my studio in South Korea, so it doesn’t feel real at all.”