

Giant Robot



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38
INTERNAL
YOUTH



SEONNA HONG

BIGFOOT IN ASIA, NATURAL GRAFFITI, KILLER POTATOES
LUNCHBOX STORIES, FRUIT CHAN, PLEASURE VICTIMIZERS
PUSHER MAN, ULTRA MEGA OKINAWA

SEONNA HONG

Uneasy Art



Above: *Adrift*, 8" x 8", Col vinyl on wood

Opposite: *Contemplation*, 7.5" x 10.5", Col vinyl on wood

Above a desk in Seonna Hong's home studio is a shelf filled with collectible toys. Barely peeking above them is an Emmy. In 2004, the artist and animator won television's highest honor for her background paintings on the hit cartoon, *My Life as a Teenage Robot*. While she works around a tight schedule to fulfill the responsibilities of her day job, Seonna dedicates a large portion of

her remaining time to her personal paintings. Capturing the innocence of children and placing them in precarious situations, her work effectively captures the viewer's eye and imagination. We caught up with the artist, along with her husband (and fellow artist), Tim Biskup, and their daughter, Tigerlily, at their mid-century modern home in La Cañada, just north of downtown Los Angeles.



GR: Your personal stuff is totally dominated by Tim's stuff!

SH: Tim's a collector, but I'm not, really. Tim tries to get me to collect. It's so sweet; he'll bring home treasures for me.

GR: You paint backgrounds. What does that mean?

SH: You know how in the background of *Scooby Doo* there's that rock that always repeats? I get a layout from an artist and then paint it out. The characters do whatever they do on top of it.

GR: Was this position a goal?

SH: It's a job. I loved cartoons growing up, but I thought it was a North Pole thing—like it just happened somewhere, magically. When I met Tim, I was teaching art to kids, and he was in animation. I was thinking it was so great. You get to paint for a living! So I went to his job, and thought, "Oh, I want to do this." I helped on a job, then I met the director, who is the director that I work for now.

GR: Did you ever want to animate your own characters?

SH: That wasn't a goal. I just wanted to make a living as an artist after college. Just something art-related. Hearing from teachers and relatives about how hard it is to make a living, I was like, "I'll just be happy if I'm doing something related to squeezing out paint." I love to teach, but I need to actually be making art. Working in animation has had such a huge influence on my personal stuff. It shows in my paintings.

GR: If you have a job description, what is it?

SH: I guess I'm a painter—whether it's production painting or painting my personal stuff. It's definitely two sides of my brain. Production is a col-

Top: *Beginning*, 16" x 20", Oil on canvas

Bottom: *Solace Assemble*, 10" x 10", Cell vinyl on wood



Above: *Music*, 12" x 16", Oil on canvas

Opposite: *Unnie*, 8" x 8", Cell vinyl on wood

laborative effort; you're working with many people. I'm not always making a complete painting because it can't have everything in it. You have to save something for the characters. I feel like I get to work out a lot of my ideas in animation painting. It's sort of like musicians who have their own band and are also studio musicians. They practice their technique, but their own stuff is separate. I get to practice my technique all the time, and I don't have to put myself in it. It's not emotional.

GR: I notice your Emmy is almost hidden. Is there one side of painting that's more important?

SH: I don't know. If you do work that's personal and intensive, sometimes you need to get up and do something like the laundry. Not that you're not thinking about it, but you need to take a break. I like to switch gears like that. I like the balance. I don't know if I could put one in front of the other. On some days, I'm more comfortable in my animation job.

GR: How much time do you have for your personal work?

SH: Weekends! My animation workday often goes into the night. And on weekends, I still only have half the time. Because Tim and I don't have childcare, we split up the day. So when Tim is working, I get Lily. And when I'm working, Tim has Lily.

GR: There's not much time left.

SH: Definitely not. If there were more time in the day, Tim and I could go watch a movie or not maximize each hour. I'd love to do something useless. I want more time for uselessness! But I feel like the balance is there. It's just the right amount. I know for Tim, he has to paint all the time. Me, I still get that satisfaction, but it's in a different avenue. I love working with other people.

GR: When you won the Emmy, did you go onstage and were you on TV?

SH: Yes! It's horrifying and so surreal. When you watch the Oscars and the Emmys and see people get flustered, you think, "What a ding-dong. Don't they know where to go?" I saw Matthew Perry and William Shatner, and I was totally lost.

GR: You went to Long Beach State, which seems like an atypical art school. Did it prepare you for your career?

SH: I love and appreciate what I got there. Part of it was, I had to put myself through school. It was what I could afford. When I turned to my parents, they were like, "If you want to be a doctor or a lawyer, we know how to help you, but if you want to be an art major..." They were supportive, but they were sort of like, "You're on your own." I had a romantic vision of an art school like *Fame*, with people dancing on tables, but what I ended up getting was a lot like a trade school. The illustration department was really technique-oriented. So my first classes were like, "Here's how you use the mediums and material," and the design classes

were very trade and technique-based. So I left knowing a lot about the basics. I didn't get the whole *Fame* thing, but I got an affordable and practical education.

GR: Were you the kid who was always drawing?

SH: Yes, totally. I started because I hated public speaking. Immediately, I found out if I drew the map in a group project, I could just hold it up, hide behind it, and not do any talking. I



Savannah slips through the streets while everyone sleeps.





The Gesture, 9" x 7", Gel vinyl on wood



Spring, 21" x 30", Gel vinyl on wood

I had a romantic vision of art school like *Fame*, with people dancing on tables, but what I ended up getting was a lot like a trade school.

carried that all through high school. In my last semester of high school, a guy who never talked to me found out that I could draw things photorealistically. He said, "I'll pay you a hundred bucks if you draw this picture of Glenn Danzig." I was like, "Cool!" My Sizzler's high school job wasn't cutting it, so I took a lot of commissions and was accepted by a different crowd.

GR: Is there a theme in your works? Does it change?

SH: Definitely. I think my earlier stuff was influenced by children's books. I was more interested in painting a certain aesthetic. But as it got more personal, I got more into the moods, emotions, and processes that I was going through.

GR: For example, how is "Railroads" autobiographical?

SH: "Railroads" was life after Lily was born. Animation up until that time was sporadic: on nine months, off six months. It just started rolling in, and I started to get more shows and whatnot. It was an oncoming train—I could get squashed or jump on, have fun, and jump off. It's like that moment of new experiences that is sort of scary.

"Animus" was about dealing with things or people who are confusing—where there's no right or wrong answer—and trying to figure out what hurts your feelings and how you deal with it. Nothing really has that happy ending that you see in movies.

GR: Do you think about this stuff a lot?

SH: Too much. I obsess over it. The balance of having a kid is so important. With that comes a lot of stress. I want to do things healthily, right, consciously, thoughtfully. To have fun, do things, and find balance is really hard. A lot of times, she's crying all night. That's when parenthood is really hard. You'll wake up after very little sleep, she'll say something cute and funny, and it all rights itself. That's sort of a micro example of everything.

GR: Who's the character in your paintings?

SH: It started off as me, but it's a little bit of Lily. What I love about kids in general, I see in Lily. She is really honest and will say what she wants

to do, or who she wants to play with, or not talk to. I love that about her. When it was me, it was that quality. Now I see it in her, so I'm mashing it together. (This is before junior high ruins her.)

GR: Your paintings are somewhat mysterious and not obviously happy. What moments are you catching in them?

SH: I think the characters are a little unsure and overwhelmed. New scary things can also be a little exciting. So it's a mix of them having fun and being sad or scared.

GR: Are they evil?

SH: Yes, they can be devious for sure.

GR: Why are they always female?

SH: Dresses are fun to paint.

GR: Do you think your style will change?

SH: Actually, my next show is portraits. It's only 10 or 15 weekends from now.

GR: You're disciplined. Most people would start preparing for an October show in September.

SH: I got a lot of discipline from animation. If I hadn't, I don't think I could fit in as much. I always feel bad when I can't put a piece in a show, even if I'm asked three months in advance and it's only one painting, because my weekend is already planned. It's all marked down on a calendar. It's who has Lily and when. I have it broken down by time.

GR: There's a look to your work. It's a rustic color style, and I can't tell when it's from. Maybe the '40s?

SH: It's the '30s! No, I'm doing that on purpose. I try to convey a sense of nostalgia. My friend Alex said, "Wouldn't it be disappointing if you had a time machine, went back to the 1880s, and everything was brightly colored?" Because in your mind you think of everything as being a burnt-out brown color. I'd want my brown shades. I also really like old comics that are yellowed. When I see mint copies that have never seen oxygen, they're not real to me.