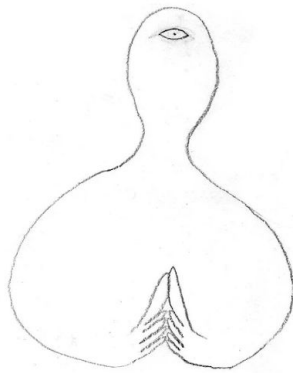




Terence Koh: Diary at Andrew Edlin Gallery



a bald homeless womyn with a third eye on her forehead was screaming wisdom top of her lungs for all too listen and when  walked pass she stop clasp her hand toogather smiled and bow at me  smile bac k walk pass and she immediaty begins screaning again

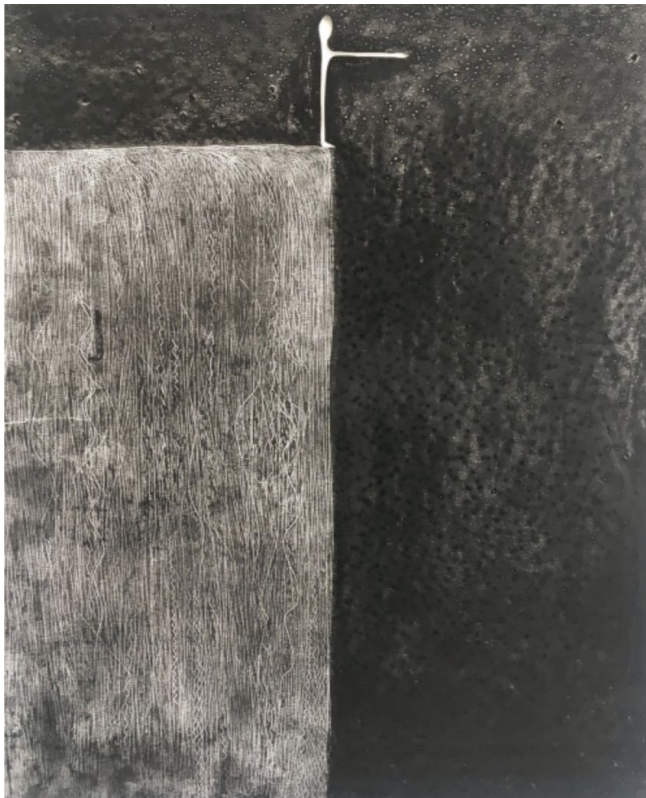


Terence Koh, is a Chinese - Canadian artist, born in Beijing (1977) and currently living and working in Northern California. Koh studied at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver and The University of Waterloo, Ontario.

The drawings are notable for their eccentrically allegorical vision. Small, made with mixed media such as charcoal and graphite, these drawings read the evidence of our isolated condition in black and white and shades of gray (only rarely does Koh use color). Often the imagery revolves around a single figure, who may be surrounded by a pattern or looking off the edge of a cliff. The metaphysical conceit implied by these offbeat drawings is not one necessarily of psychological ease or comfort. Instead, the works combine to offer a point of view that is partially alienated, being oriented toward a primal, archetypal understanding of life. As an attitude, this is interesting since Koh is Chinese--one might think that his art would be oriented toward his background, perhaps toward nature. But that would be a mistake, as Koh has studied and lived in the West for some time. He is, like many deracinated artists, a student of the international moment, in which individual idiosyncrasy rather than cultural legacies serve as an organizing principle.

Why is this so? Clearly, we are living in a time of worldwide immigration, as well as in a time of extreme cultural eclecticism. Moreover, New York City, where Koh has lived and makes use of, has been known to

attract gifted foreign-born artists for more than a few decades. Consciously, often antagonistically rejecting the historical hierarchies of the canon, the artworld tends to prefer the personal and the popular. Koh's work fits this niche well. It has been true since the Seventies that pluralism is the term most accurately describing the output of artists everywhere, perhaps especially in New York City, where immigration is the rule rather than the exception. Thus, in these visionary works of art, we might say two things: first, the tonal limiting--the lack of color--in the drawings is a way of focusing our attention on the mythic content involved; and second, the content itself is directed toward a conscious awareness of what looks like helplessness in the face of overwhelming circumstances. Assigning so pessimistic a reading to Koh's work may be slightly overinterpreting, however. There is a totemic energy, linked to life itself, in the drawings, which convey a surprising resilience despite a generally dark design.

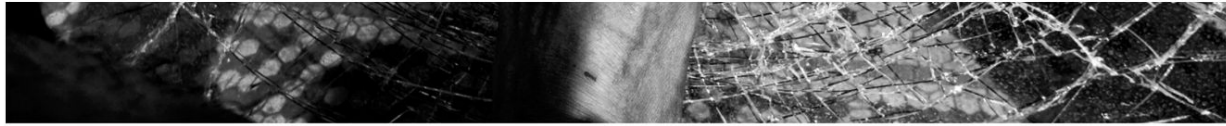


In a 2020 drawing--all the drawings are untitled and date to this year--Koh places a white stick figure, its arms extended, that stands on top of a gray cliff lined with vertical striations and small differences in tonalities of shade. Surrounding the figure, and to the right of the rock, night dominates. Is the figure supplicating the unknown? It would seem so. The drawing is so simple as to remind us of a cave painting, by someone dead long ago, from an ancient culture, yet it is entirely believable--as a statement of vulnerability in an indifferent, if not hostile, contemporary world. This is the implication not only of this particular work but also of Koh's art in general: we exist as best we can, proceeding in the midst of a hostile environment. In a second drawing, we see a stick figure drawn sideways, surrounded by a couple of circles. The figure is encompassed completely by a horizontal linear pattern, seemingly of lines that then turn out to have filled spheres for heads. What first looks allegorical may well be biological: Is this an ovary with a homunculus inside,

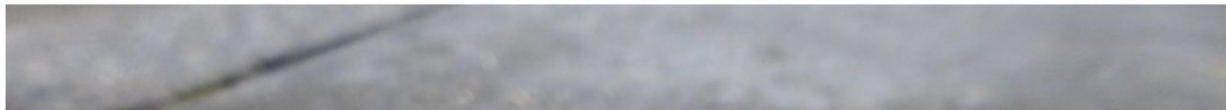
surrounded by sperm? Close inspection could argue in favor of the reading. Here Koh's point of view may be as close to truth as to allegory.

Other drawings attempt the same outlook. In a further drawing, a white figure, faceless, is set against a variegated, black background, nearly a vortex in the upper left. The legless trunk and armless hands seem to be rising from a white core at the bottom of the artwork, as if issuing from light into darkness. As I have noted, this happens on a regular basis in Koh's work--so much so, we can wonder whether the theme is slightly repetitive. Yet the artist's presentation is varied enough, and original enough, to overcome this suggestion. We remain curious where his sources come from--they might well simulate indigenous, tribal imaginations. In a highly allegorical work, a white figure stands in a small boat resting on a patterned sea. Behind is a forest consisting of thin, leafless trees, while up in the right corner a quarter portion of the sun is seen, its rays shooting forth. One can hardly think of a more effective way to describe life: indeed, the head is two-faced, with the left face looking down and the right face looking up. I don't think the image is meant to suggest duplicity so much as it is intended to portray two ways of looking at the world.

In the final work to be mentioned, Koh introduces his audience to an entirely death-ridden image: a large tree lacking foliage, from whose extended branches hang more than a few dead figures, suspended by rope around their necks. The tree is supported by some sort of counterweight dug into a half circle of soil; in the upper right, a bright disk, a moon, shines out of a corner of darkness. We assume the dead have taken their lives. The drawing really sets out an unreconciled image of hopelessness; the horror of the artwork is as much a part of Koh's psyche as are his figures of light. Taken as the artist is with his visual dialectics, he presents the biophilic and the death oriented as dichotomies that nonetheless belong to a larger vision, in which both coincide. At the same time, it is likely that Koh, by setting up his themes as polar opposites, may be suggesting that the preference of one perspective over the other is a choice, not without consequences.



👁 wonder what my role in all this is?
neutral? protestor? activist? cop sympathizer?
black lifes matter? all lifes matter? story teller?
healer? artist? perennial philosopher?
this moment all 👁 know too doo is too take
off my socks and shoos and touch my bare skin
against the cold fragile sharpness of yesterday's rage.



In addition to his drawings, Koh is publishing an online visual and written diary through the gallery's website. Almost all the materials have to do with the social difficulties all of America is experiencing in the face of racially motivated murder. Koh himself seems slightly bemused by his own position in the midst of the fracas, but his handwritten thoughts, concerning his responsibility as an Asian person in the protests, are heartfelt. His pictures of the shuttered shops, broken glass, and bloodstains show us that America's violence against black people is not a case of isolated actions but a consistent aggression that persists despite the often-placid surface of daily life. Koh, as an artist, has chosen to address the violence in a seemingly naive manner. Yet he includes an image of drops of blood on the pavement: a stark, incontrovertible statement of the less than attractive truth underlying our culture--namely, that we are given to prejudicial enmities that have no truth or reality to them, being based on skin color alone.

Jonathan Goodman, New York, June 5, 2020