

# TOPO- GRAPHY OF FLUX

REBECCA ROSE

In the paintings of Eemyun Kang the inherent instability of the subject is a constant concern. Central to Kang's work is the ontological question of "becoming" – the point at which an idea, creative process or painting crystallizes and takes on a new form. This state of perpetual evolution – or metamorphosis – is a second vital focus in Kang's work. Her paintings capture this dynamic process using subjects such as eating, sleeping, splitting and doubling and most of the artist's themes center on these everyday organic processes. Shifting between abstract and figurative registers, the artist's vocabulary includes a dizzying range of biomorphic forms including mushrooms and plants as well as animals. These denizens of the forest are never quite what they seem however, with fungi blown up to the size of poisonous clouds, and piles of skulls resembling extravagant bouquets of dead flowers.

The artist's fascination with hybridity stems, in part, from her own dislocation. Born and raised in Korea, she has made her home in the vastly different cultural milieu of London for the better part of the last decade. Despite her extended residency, however, Kang continues to feel like an alien and accepts this displacement as a defining characteristic. Adjustment has become a cornerstone of her reality, a state of mind that has led to her rejection of the Aristotelian concept that change is illusory. Instead, the artist has adopted a more radical process based philosophy in her work. Her self-perception as an outsider is also expressed through her titles such as that of two recent paintings *Happy Transformation* and *Sleepy Plant* both of which are chosen specifically to sound like awkward translations. This is not a defense mechanism but an example of Kang's sophisticated use of humor to help frame her experience as an outsider. Kang asserts her individuality by reclaiming her foreignness and deliberately subverting the role of language in her work. This complex relationship between language and cultural identity is highlighted by the fact that both paintings were selected for display at the Korean Cultural Centre in London, as part of an exhibition entitled *Crossfields*.

The idea of hybridity is most often explored within its cross-cultural context, yet Kang's paintings push beyond geographical boundaries and contend with notions of dual process – for example, eating as a means of swallowing as well as digestion. This interest in how materials are converted from one thing to another plays a central role in the works included in her exhibition at Tina Kim Gallery. Dual-process actions that occur when the body experiences a shift in energies, such as sleeping or eating, offer the artist an opportunity to resolve questions of metamorphosis and dualism. *Sleep Talk*, 2009, is another example of how Kang uses her paintings to link two separate activities through a shared event.



*The Metamorphosis*, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 94 x 177 inches

Similarly metaphorical themes made an earlier appearance in Kang's series of horse paintings such as *Horse Among the Horses* that fuses Freud's 1909 case study of "Little Hans" (a boy who developed a phobia of horses and Freud's first ever recorded case of psychoanalysis, specifically infantile sexuality) and Kang's own sense of dislocation. The composition of *Horse Among the Horses* is inspired by a cave painting in the ancient city of Dunhuang — a famous junction where Silk Road traders would meet coming from East and West. The final painting in this series, *Back of the Horse*, features an equine body with a semi-human head, representing the subject's anthropomorphism as well as the artist's transmogrification. Shape-shifting is a common theme in mythology and folklore, treated here with Kang's idiosyncratic curiosity.

Following the interpretation of Gilles Deleuze, the case of 'Little Hans' can also open the door to a variety of potential 'becomings'. He argues that the symbol of the horse may not represent the father figure as Freud suggests since they are associated with packs. Kang's work can be seen in light of this quandary and poses the questions: How does metamorphosis operate in the collective? How does it alter one's position in relation to the pack?

The concept of grouping is a prominent element of Kang's work, whether in a direct representation as seen in the horse paintings or the organic reproduction of mushrooms in her *Fungal Land* series, completed in 2006. Fungi are both nutritious and potentially lethal – an ambiguity that resonates with the artist's interest in the cycle of creation and destruction.

The *Fungal Land* cycle was a major achievement for such a young artist: a large-scale project that juxtaposed eight vast canvases where bold sweeps of color depicted the amorphous and unpredictable growth of fungi. There are keen psychedelic elements to this immense 'landscape' painting in which Kang wanted to express the idea of a creation without end: 'I wanted to make edges of the canvas that are no longer edges of the painting, so the viewer can travel from one picture to the next. *Fungal Land* could be seen as a place viewed in different seasons, at different times of day, or from different points of view. The brush strokes turn into mushrooms, water, air, or remain simply as brush strokes themselves in the picture.' It is in these paintings we first see the presence of rhythm that has come to define much of Kang's work. An important

influence on the artist has been Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky's book *Sculpting in Time*, where he argues, "The dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm expressing the course of time within the frame." (*Andrey Tarkovsky, Sculpting In Time*, [1986], pg 113)

Another key symbol for ontological becoming is of course the chrysalis, or pupa, a motif that has appeared in the artist's more recent paintings. In this respect there is a compelling link to the allegorical story *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. Not only does Kafka's extended – and often ambiguous – sentence structure have parallels with the artist's vast panel arrangements, but there is also a strong relationship to his use of metaphor. Kafka's 1915 novella centers on salesman Gregor Samsa who wakes one morning to find himself transformed into an insect. This profound transformation resonates with the concept of anthropomorphism that has come to play such an important role in Kang's paintings.

Kang's monumental work *Metamorphosis*, 2006, shows an interpretation – reading right to left – of the Korean myth *Tan'Gun*. Kang's canvas becomes an unbroken landscape where myth is transformed into visual narrative, a familiar concept in Western art that remains uncommon in Korean culture. As such the artist offers an original perspective on the themes of transformation. The Korean myth tells the story of a tiger and a bear living in a cave together, praying to become human. Upon hearing their prayers, Hwan-ung (God of all and ruler of Heaven) called them to him, ordering them to follow a strict diet and remain out of the sunlight for 100 days. After a brief period the tiger admitted defeat and left the cave. However, the bear remained and after 21 days was transformed into a woman. The bear-woman understood how indebted she was to him and dedicated herself to his powers. Her existence proved to be a lonely one and without a companion she began to yearn for a child. Stirred by her prayers, Hwan-ung took the bear-woman as his bride and together they produced a son, Tan'Gun. The son grew up to be a shrewd leader of men and remarkable warrior, and in 2333 BC established the Choson Kingdom.

This compelling story of mystical transmutation comes to life through Kang's subtle negotiation of what it means to be hybrid. Bold brushwork and a compelling manipulation of space within the canvas bring to life a traditional Korean myth with a powerful yet enigmatic energy. *Metamorphosis* was shown at the *Premium Exhibition* in the Sackler Wing at the Royal Academy of Art, where Kang was the recipient of the Gold medal upon her graduation as well as the prestigious Dunoyer de Segonzac award.

The darker side of folklore and mythology also finds fertile ground in Kang's paintings, in addition to Korean legend the artist looks to European fairy tales for inspiration. One such source is the cult children's film, *The Singing Ringing Tree*, produced in East Germany in 1957 and then turned into a television series by the BBC. A story in the style of the Brothers Grimm and directed by Francesco Stefani, *The Singing Ringing Tree* remains as frightening now as it was when first broadcast. The awkward sets and stiff English language voiceover contribute to a sense of eerie possibility – the same sensation that one collects from Kang's canvases.

In 2007 Kang began to experiment with what she refers to as 'scroll paintings', a format that allowed her to present paintings along with unfolding text. Her poem *Fungal Land* functions as an extension of the painting series of the same name. It has a mesostic structure, which is an offshoot of the more traditional acrostic poem. This form challenges the reader to detect a relationship between form and function that offers a new experience of the written word. This configuration also correlates with the self-referential qualities of myths and legends that she references.



*The Mushroom Book, 2006*  
Ink on paper, 10 x 79 inches

According to Kang much of this work is indebted to the American composer and poet John Cage (1912–1992), who also happened to be an amateur mycologist. His passion for studying fungi may be coincidence – or perhaps there is a deeper communication with Kang’s art. His controversial compositions rupture musical conventions and dispatch with traditional time and key signatures. Beyond music, Cage produced several highly experimental poems that offered an increasingly visual dimension to text-based verse.

Similarly, Kang looks to modern Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, whose work mines both cultural history and myth for modern relevance, and in particular his poem *Ithaca*, published in 1911. The narrator tells the protagonist that the journey is of greater importance than the destination. In so doing he draws comparison with Odysseus, whose objective was to reach Ithaca after many years of rootless excursions. Cavafy emphasizes the importance of experiencing the journey with the senses as well as the mind, and advises the traveler to recognize this opportunity: “Keep Ithaca always in your mind / Arriving there is what you are destined for / But do not hurry the journey at all”.

The concept of the eternal voyage resonates with Kang’s own trajectory from Asia to Europe: the initial sense of dislocation now reconciled into an arc of experience that the artist accepts as a singular and valued constant in her life. Kang’s reality, or ‘continuous landscape’ is mirrored in her extended panel compositions. With several of these paintings we see how the individual sections multiply and variegate, with certain works giving the impression that they could continue ad infinitum and that the work would remain perpetually unfinished. It is perhaps this interminable creative process that reflects the philosophy of ‘becoming’ that informs such a large proportion of Kang’s work. Her paintings synthesize the idea of something happening spontaneously and simultaneously. This fusion of the unpredictable with the coincidental has continued to be a rich vein of inspiration for the artist and it is the vectors of this flux that give energy to her canvas.

A recent shift in Kang’s creative development is her newly adopted bright palette. Pre-2009 her canvases would often exude a physical melancholy through sinister monochromes and intrepid brushwork. Bright flashes of color were occasionally present but would be contained within focused areas and bring a very specific vigor to the canvas. Since then the artist has started to use more vibrant pigments in her work that generate intense new energy. This shift into a higher register promises a new direction while simultaneously harking back to her interest in the almost supernaturally fecund palette of creation. Hidden below the folds of fungus and in the rotting petals of flowers hides a saturated spectrum that defies belief. It is this slippery place of chromatic gestation that has always imbued Kang’s canvas with a shocking intimacy — a charge that holds infinite potential for future work.