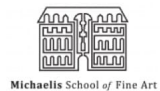


When a Smile is Not a Smile...  
by Wooju Lee  
Self published by Wooju Lee  
Cape Town, South Africa, 2020  
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Artwork: Wooju Lee  
Graphic concept and design: Wooju Lee  
Printing: Orms Direct, Cape Town



Michaelis School of Fine Art  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Cape Town  
  
Supervisors  
Associate Professor Fritha Langerman

**when a smile is not a smile...**

wooju lee

## Artist statement

Wooju Lee  
Artist Statement 2021  
LXXWOO002

### ***When a Smile is Not a Smile...***

Surrealist art appeals to me because of its emphasis on creative freedom. Freedom itself happens to be the underlying theme in my artwork, the freedom to just be myself while too often having to experience discrimination related to my Asian identity. As a contemporary surrealist artist, I am able to use both physical and digital tools to highlight the discrimination and isolation I have experienced. Like most surrealist artists, I use dream-like imagery, though not based on actual dreams and not by releasing the unbridled imagination of the subconscious. I use simple graphics and everyday imagery. Then, like symbolist painters, my art is a synthesis of form and of feeling, of both reality and my own subjectivity. Beginning by making collages and then painting with oil on canvas, I often connect the human figure, representing myself, with the space where I experienced this discrimination and isolation. As a motif, I use a smiling emoji, or else yellow colour elsewhere in the art, to represent stereotypical Asian skin colour. The smiling emoji is, in fact, a kind of poker face, hiding my real emotions which are not those typically associated with a smile. When finding myself as the object of scorn, I smile not because I am happy, but because it is my only available 'weapon' for diffusing a tense situation. In some of my art, I appear half-naked, stripped of dignity by the unfriendly glances or insulting comments. The intense yearning to escape abuse or to find rest is always clear in my artwork, whether it be my human figure running on water, trying to ascend a stairway to the sky or lying on the floor as a shadow. A chess board also becomes a stage, where two different sides of myself are engaged in a lengthy struggle as to how to deal with the abusers. Also, dressed in black, I mourn my situation in a lonely desert where yellow rain is falling. Even in my only sculpture, the cry for freedom and rest is clear. All of my artworks represent not merely a psychological mood, but a bigger picture that considers relationships and the kinds of situations that everyone should be able to understand. My art aims to speak to the imagination and to the heart and to increase understanding of the complexity of social identity. Sometimes a smile is, in fact, something one learns to do when other responses are futile, something that masks the true feelings of helplessness and sadness.



# yelow

It has been ten years since I left South Korea and moved to South Africa, where I soon realized that there are large cultural differences between the two countries. It was these differences that often led to my being in a state of mental confusion. I describe this state of mental confusion as a “dual emotional state”, one of the greatest challenges that I have experienced as an Asian living in South Africa.

Yue Minjun said: “Laughter can be about anything.” (Katherine, 2010:1). Yue also describes laughter as “a moment when our mind refuses to reason.” He explains that sometimes when a certain thing puzzles us, the mind just does not wish to struggle or else we possibly do not know how to think. We simply wish to forget it (Katherine, 2010:2). Yue depicts laughing people who in appearance are happy, but who have clearly been manipulated by someone or something. The central theme of forced laughter in Yue Minjun's work reminds me of myself living in South Africa. For me, living as an Asian in South Africa has never been easy. Asian skin colour is different and also the eyes, and the difference in my appearance has too often been the subject of laughter on the streets of South Africa. In such situations, I felt embarrassed and felt that I had no choice but to respond with a smile. I never smiled or laughed because I liked it; I smiled or laughed because I felt I had to. I now understand that there can be many emotions involved in laughter. I believe that when laughter is too exaggerated, it can in fact express negative feelings of sadness, anger or dissatisfaction.

There is a traditional Korean game called 'The Mask Dance'. The shape of the mask used in this traditional dance is often used to express feelings related to laughter. The essence of 'The Mask Dance' is in fact sadness, and often related to complaints about, and ridicule of, the privileged social class. Like this dance, the human "smile" can imply dual emotions, so "laughing may not be laughing."

As a result of my own experience in South Africa, and being inspired by the laughter used in the work of Yue Minjun, I decided to use the “Smile” emoji face as the subject matter in my final work. I believe that a smiling emoji face can, in fact, be a kind of poker face, hiding the real emotion.

I used oil paint on canvas and painted in a surrealistic way. I began by making several collages with pictures randomly put together, telling my story of what and how I felt about the discrimination and isolation I have experienced. In each of the collages, I mostly used either a smile emoji or yellow colour elsewhere in the art to represent stereotypical Asian skin colour. I also focused on the connection between the human figure and the space where I felt the isolation and discrimination.

I hope that this graduation work will resonate with the audience and show them that "laughter" or a "smile" can in fact express various emotions. My goal is ultimately to remind the audience that people from different cultures should respect one another's feelings. Dong Kingman was one of the most popular Asian American artists in the mid-twentieth century, whose work everyone described as half East and half West. They wrote that he was "in between". Using the words in Dong Kingman's response, I hope that the audience viewing my work will understand that "I just want to be myself." (Chang & Gordon, 2009:10). I am just grateful that there is, nowadays, more understanding of the complexity of social identity, that identities can be multiple, hybrid, contextual, transnational or even unstable (Chang & Gordon, 2009:11).

For many creative Asian Americans, the visual arts are an important means of expression that do not require fluency in English (Chang & Gordon, 2009:12). As with them, my hope is that the message in my work will be effectively conveyed to the audience.







# smile

My art praxis developed over the years at Michaelis, where I learned to use various materials in my work to communicate ideas. By my studying art theory, I gained understanding of Sociology, Psychology and Art Philosophy. I also gained an understanding of South Africa's history and diverse cultural backgrounds and how this is expressed conceptually through artwork. In my final year at Michaelis, the focus was on refining my skills as an artist. Surrealist art appeals to me because its emphasis is on creative freedom. As a contemporary surrealist artist, I use both physical and digital tools to make my work more consciously challenging.

In the city, the streets are normally where I experienced discrimination, so I chose to do "The Street Fighter". Since I am not that fluent in English and since I am peaceful by nature, my only weapon to diffuse the situation is a smile. I appear half naked as the unfriendly glances or insulting comments have stripped me of dignity.



Wooju Lee, *The Street Fighter*, 2021, oil on canvas, 122 x 154 cm, Cape Town



Wooju Lee, *Yellow Rain*, 2021, oil on canvas, 102 x 127 cm, Cape Town

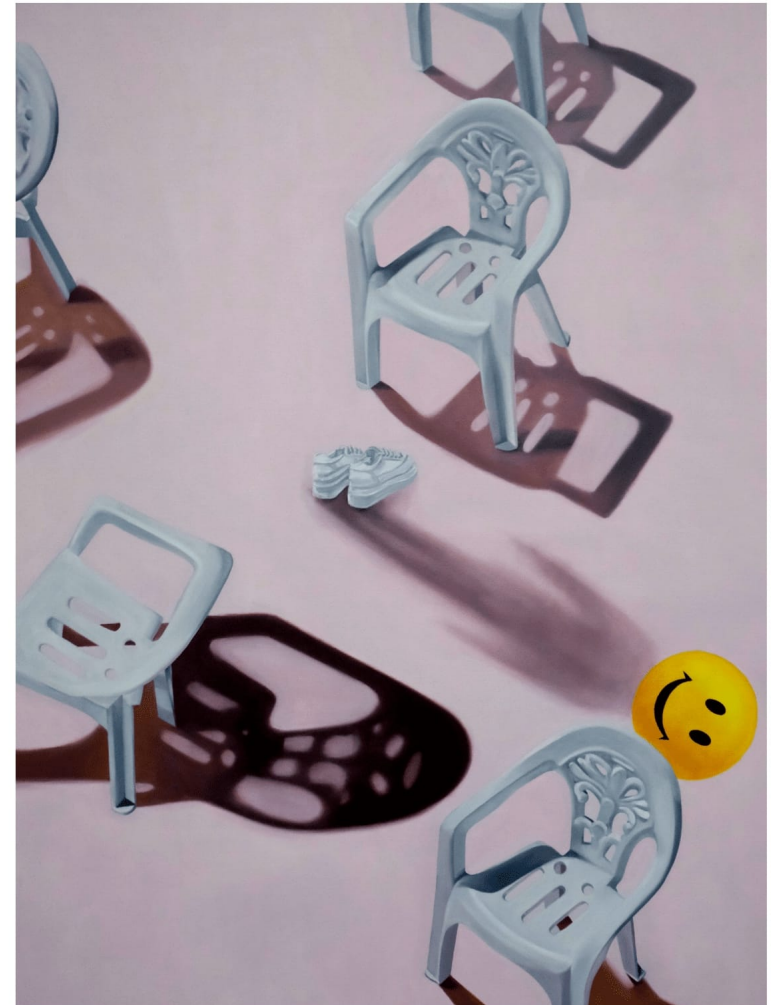
The stereotyping of Asians is expressed by the yellow paint which is being forced out. The umbrella represents my attempts to protect myself from discrimination, yet I find myself in a place of isolation. The black dress represents my mourning of this situation. The separation of the painting into two distinct parts represents the world in general and also my private world.



The hand pulling the rope represents those that are determined to put me back into their definition of who I am, while I am trying to walk away from them and their labels. My forced emoji smile is an attempt to lessen their aggression. The sky represents the freedom I yearn for, the freedom to just be myself. The large hand represents the many people who I am unaware of, those who are not against me and are supporting my ascent to freedom. It is usually only a few of such people that I am ever aware of, represented by the small hand pulling me upwards.



So often I just wish to rest from the ongoing onslaught on my right to just be myself. This is represented by the many chairs. Sometimes I am so tired of being a target that I wish I weren't here. The figure's body is therefore depicted as merely a shadow. Also in the minds of those who discriminate, I weigh less than a shadow in worth. The shoes are not shadows as I may need to walk away from abuse at short notice. The forced smile still on my face also represents a state of constant readiness, to 'defend' myself.



Wooju Lee, *Shadow Rest*, 2021, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm, Cape Town





Both figures are of myself, the part of me wishing to retaliate against abuse and the other part of myself that seeks a peaceful solution. The path to peace, however, will require a forced smile to hopefully pacify my aggressors. The chess board represents this lengthy struggle within me, where one wrong move could result in defeat. It also represents a stage, which is my life. The red curtain represents my heart that I am opening to the viewer. The drawn open curtains give the viewer only a glimpse of what I am experiencing.







The fear I sometimes experience when facing discrimination is represented by the same half-drowned figure hanging out of two industrial washing machines. I am half naked, preparing to attempt to wash away the cause of my fear. Only the eyes and mouths of the emoji's are yellow. This represents my forced smile as well as the ever-present unpleasant glances and comments. The yellow streaks of water represent a loss in the quality of life, water being a source of life. The staring human eye in the red basket is challenging the viewers to examine their own beliefs or actions, since we are all deserve to be treated as humans. The human eye, together with the many ears, also represents the unfriendly stares that accompany the nasty comments, which are almost always overheard.

Wooju Lee, *The Birthing of a Forced Smile*, 2021, oil on canvas, Cape Town



Giving birth is a painful process and my forced smile, represented by a smile emoji, came about as a result of much anguish. The school building represents where I first encountered racism and where most of my ten years in South Africa were spent. The line of students, who are facing the school, represent my abusers. They do not question the wrongness of what is happening daily at their school. They appear identical in school uniform but also because they are 'cut from the same cloth'. I am running on water towards an exit sign, which shows the desperation I felt to escape what I was experiencing. Running on water represents the miracle I needed if I wanted to truly escape. I am represented by a lone figure as I often felt completely alone in my suffering, though others may have felt the same. My face is the 'smiling' emoji, my defense mechanism that became force of habit.

Similarly to the way Yue Minjun views his work, my work is also describing the world from my own frame of mind (Karen, n.d:31). Yue understands that to laugh, or to smile like my emoji, is something one learns to do when other responses are futile (Karen, n.d:27). As in Yue's paintings that illustrate a situation rather than a psychological mood only, my painting can be viewed in the context of a bigger picture that considers relationships and the kind of situations we all should be able to understand. I was inspired by the constant smoothness of the surface of Yue's paintings to achieve this bigger picture (Karen, n.d:31). Yue explains to Karen Smith that each series of his work is like "mapping out a storyboard of crucial scenes" from the plot of a play, the plots involving Yue dealing with society around him (Karen, n.d:31).



My sculpture consists of wood and chains. My 'smiling' face is a helium balloon that is weighted down. The chains represent the bondage in which discrimination has placed me. The chains surround me, representing the great difficulty that would be involved in trying to escape the widespread discrimination. The balloon face is filled with helium, representing the desire to ascend to freedom. The wood in the structure and the three chairs that surround it represent the earth. We are all citizens of the same world. The one chair represents South Korea, one represents South Africa and the unattractive, broken chair represents the effects of racism. This broken chair is weathered, representing ongoing abuse. Chairs also represent rest, but the broken chair is incapable of offering the rest I desire.





# hi

Yue Minjun's art and my own fall under the basic definition of contemporary art.

Our art can also be considered symbolism. For symbolist painters, art should reflect an idea or emotion instead of the realistic description of the natural world ("Symbolism: Late nineteenth ...", n.d.). Symbolism is a synthesis of form and of feeling, of both reality and also an artist's inner subjectivity (Nicole, 2007). Yue's recurring motif of forced laughter highlights the idea that laughter can mask true emotions. The smile emoji in my work functions in the same way. All the artists associated with symbolism express a belief in the power of the artist to reveal truth ("The Art Story...", 2021). Yue's laughing man emerged at a time in China when individual freedoms were being suppressed by the government. Yue described laughter as the only "revolutionary weapon" available at that time (Alex, 2021). The smile emoji in my work is used to highlight racial discrimination, a worldwide social problem.

Yue's work can be both political and apolitical (William, n.d.). His laughing figure permitted him to go beyond politics to honour the individual and something as simple as freedom can be represented by his figures (William, n.d.). In my work, I too focus on the idea of individual freedom, to be able to just be myself.

Yue's paintings are very surreal (ChinaArtlover, 2020). He was influenced by Pop Art but surrealism in Yue's paintings is also evident from the bright colours and dream-like imagery (Artnet, 2016). Surrealistic art is known for its dream-like visuals, its use of symbolism and for its collage images (Sharon, 2019). My art incorporates all these characteristics. Contemporary surrealism is also not bound by the more strict rules concerning the concept and style of early surrealism. My style incorporates dreamlike imagery, but it is not based on actual dreams. Also I do not place emphasis on the early surrealist principle of automatism, a release of the unbridled imagination of the subconscious. My art does not contain strange creatures, for example, or what viewers may call "creepy".

One of the key figure in the surrealist movement whose influence is evident in my work, was the Belgian painter, René Magritte (1898-1967). In his paintings, he distances objects from their prescribed purposes. Most well-known is his image of a pipe, with the caption "This is not a pipe" ("René Magritte and ...", n.d.). In the same way, my smile emoji is not a genuine smile, it is just a representation. My paintings are like Magritte's, being not a mirror of the surrounding reality, but a mirror of the reality I imagine. Magritte was known for his use of simple graphics and everyday imagery (Biography, 2019). My artwork also consists of simple graphics and everyday imagery as I seek to highlight the other emotions that can be hidden behind a smile.

# de

# conclusion

This essay examines my individual studio praxis developed at Michaelis, focusing on my final year work. As a discursive framework for this essay, I have selected an interview conducted with an accomplished Asian artist, whose work has connections with mine. In 'Interview with Yue Minjun' (2007), Karen Smith, curator and critic specializing in contemporary Chinese art, interviewed cynical-realism pioneer, Yue Minjun. After a discussion of Yue and his works, this essay examines my final year work. Specific connections between my work and that of Yue Minjun are explained and also how these connections help to situate my practice within an artistic field that can be defined as contemporary, incorporating both symbolism and surrealism.



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**gallery**

























