

Decolonial Subversions

2023

“Trying to Find a Place to Call Home” in the *Maelstrom*: An Interview with Artist Jenny Lee

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¹ <https://leejennystudio.framer.website/>

Discussion

Artist Jenny Lee discusses her painting Maelstrom in this interview. She reflects on the symbolic forms of communicating meaning that are rooted in her connection to her family's experiences. She discusses how art can act not only as a vehicle for engaging with the colonial, for telling a story about it, but that it can move the viewer to feel and act. The interview points to the complexity of emotions that constitute a political engagement with artistic expression, those that blend melancholy and hope.

IA: How does your painting engage with colonization and decoloniality? Please describe your work, the images, and the meaning that it communicates. What stories does your work tell, or what ideas did you explore in this work?

Lee: My painting's narrative focuses on colonizers and the loss of a home. I explore using iconography as a powerful storytelling tool. Some icons I focus on are coyotes symbolizing the trickster or cunning, and a weeping willow tree representing grieving or mourning over the horrendous events occurring throughout history in correlation to colonization. Some positive icons are the full moon and a daffodil symbolizing new beginnings with the overarching theme of displacement. The coyotes are a symbolic reflection of colonizers taking what rightfully belongs to others. Depicting a simple house and mountains in a moody color palette emphasizes sentimentality and immerses the audience in an evocative narrative. The painting encourages transformation and inspires positive change for our future by inviting the viewer to discover a sense of hope in the emotional state of the current political situation.

IA: What is the relationship between your artistic expression, your identity positions or lived experiences, and your background as a Hmong American Muslim woman and also second-generation migrant?

Lee: Some background knowledge about my identity is that Hmong tribes are known as mountain dwellers and for generations, they have endured displacement. My parents faced hardships during the Vietnam war. Hmong people found a way to express their stories through the beautiful Hmong tapestries, illustrating the painful reality of never having a home. The mountains are in the border of these tapestries as a reminder of who we are and where we came from, so I wanted to portray that in my work. Their stories have greatly affected my present artwork subconsciously in trying to find a place to call home.

IA: How would you describe your identity as an artist and the process that you use to create your art? What ideas, places, and people are important to you and why? Why did you choose to paint and how do you imagine your future?

The places I find most inspiration from are urban and rural landscapes with artificial lighting. My experiences with my mother are influential when I think about urban and rural landscapes because her outlook and how she tended to her own home and garden left an impact on my perception of these environments. For my process, I find references or use my own to build my composition and sketch prior to painting. I work from dark to light when I paint, and the overall feeling is melancholy or nostalgia. I focus mostly on light because it acts as a human presence in a space without human figures. My artwork allows me to express what I cannot describe instantly with words. I chose to paint to find ways to explore

concepts to challenge myself. I imagine continuing with my current conceptual work and gravitating towards my cultural identity as a Hmong American for future work.

IA: What is the relationship between art and social, economic, and political issues in the world? Does art have a responsibility to respond to and engage with these issues? What is art capable of doing and what are its limitations?

Lee: Art can act as a powerful reflection or critique of social, economic, and political issues. It raises awareness on present issues and can advocate for change. Symbols have been used since before humans could write as a language to communicate through icons. Art cannot always be understood universally due to one's own personal experiences and knowledge. It also cannot serve as a solution for practical problems like environmental issues but can bring awareness to the topic.

Editor's Reception

Jenny Lee's painting invites the viewer to consider the veil of silence and darkness in relation to settler-colonialism. The image of the home is enveloped by the shadows in the distance, not central nor illuminated, no longer accessible nor comforting. The viewer automatically feels helplessness in the instance when she recognizes that she has left the house behind or that she has been removed, displaced from it and the expansive span of land within which it is rooted. The scene is thick with a dominant silence, in that the viewer cannot help but imagine the coyotes surveying, encircling, inching closer. The coyotes look away from the viewer, without concern, and the viewer is dispossessed of the ability to act and even of their longing for home. The longer one gazes at the painting, the more one feels movement in the grasses, as if the painting flows, telling a story all at once ancient and new, telling of a history that is recurring and one that is characterized by a constant movement toward and away. The viewer does not know if there are mountains in the background or the rush of ocean waves ready to carry her elsewhere. As a Palestinian woman, a child of Palestinians who sought refuge after the Nakba of 1948, it invites me to consider my own relationship to the forced migration of my parents, and my place in the collective trauma that is alienation resultant from displacement. It calls me in my visceral reaction to the painting to consider, in an embodied way, how settler-colonialism is something momentary, but then persistent and continuous. Even the longing for home becomes a political act.

The uprooting that the painting suggests, however, is complicated by the rootedness of the flower on the lefthand corner. The viewer sees it out of the corner of her eye, drenched in yellow light, feeding itself from the refracted light of the moon, itself persisting in life as it invites one, in its subtlety, to locate hope in the longing for home. It speaks to Sara Ahmed's discussion of sharing space. She writes, "[T]he very experience of leaving home and 'becoming stranger' leads to the creation of a new 'community of strangers' . . . The forming of a new community provides a sense of fixity through the language of heritage—a sense of

inheriting a collective past by sharing a lack of a home rather than sharing a home.”² To me, this speaks to the hope in solidarity and collective struggle, the forming of networks of care that are radically rhizomatic and that initiate collective growth. The lone flower looks to the viewer, beckoning them to open themselves up to the possibility of locating hope both in remembering and in looking forward. Though there is only one, there is the possibility of locating in community with the viewer the power to imagine an alternative space in a relational engagement with the other. I saw this in my dialogue with the artist.

In December of 2023, I discussed the painting with Jenny Lee, and we agreed that I would send an interview to her in writing since a well-known artist whom I wished would provide a reaction was unable to do so. After she provided the responses, I felt that there was something missing in my dialogue with her. I wondered how to engage with hospitality, and how to invite her into discussing her own lived experiences and their contribution to her art. I scheduled a time to speak to Jenny over the phone. I asked her further about her identity as an artist and her background, and I emphasized that I wanted to challenge the coloniality inherent in the distant objective observer; I wanted to center her voice. I was impacted by how her answer made me think about the complexities of decoloniality in resistance to individualism and as an engagement with silenced knowledges. She answered, “The work speaks for itself” and that she wanted the viewer to receive the work themselves, to think about it and its impact on them first. I told her that when I engage with a work of art, it is important for me to understand how this speaks to the artist’s lived experiences and historical contexts. In response to this, she asserted that the work carries its own meaning and I realized that, in this instance, I had overlooked how a visual work could constitute a speech act, that it did not require hegemony of the written word to translate it into being. The author did not want her role to be translation of her own work after the fact. It was enough to invite the viewer to feel along with her, or to create meaning in the moment of interaction with the artwork. At this moment of interaction--that is a dialogue between the viewer, the artist, and the work-- the artist’s identity and experiences would be communicated in complex ways through strategic symbolic visuality and storytelling. The artist carries with her imprinted in the strokes and the images the histories of women who told symbolic tales about the colonial, and they defied silence without saying. They were there even in absence, resisting colluding with the colonizer. The power of their stories is in their ability to breach the boundaries of the work to affect, to act upon the viewer. Indeed, resistance to oppression and coloniality should center the affective, should begin from a complex dialogue and produce connectivity, thereby resisting hierarchy locating out of loss an alternative communal space.

I, therefore, write my response to Jenny Lee’s painting in recognition of her agency to assert voice through her cultural production, and as a way for me to enter this relational alternative space by being vulnerable and engaging affectively with her symbolic storytelling. I respect the artist’s right to assert that her work moves viewers into awareness,

² Sara Ahmed, “Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (December 1999): 336. doi:10.1177/136787799900200303.

that it comes to affect them in ways that open them up to their own memories and experiences. In my discussion with the artist, I found the power dynamics different than I had expected, with me not playing a role in facilitating hospitality, but in the artist being hospitable toward me in allowing me to share in the space of engagement with her work.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (December 1999): 329–47. doi:10.1177/136787799900200303.