

Press release

May 22nd
July 3rd, 2021

Opening
Saturday, May 22nd
from 11am to 8pm

Not So Healthy

Hein Koh

Hein Koh's Vegetal Angst

Broccoli is good for you... but what's good for broccoli? Hein Koh's latest suite of drawings and paintings anthropomorphize the leafy green vegetable, creating an avatar through which the artist can navigate contemporary anxieties. There's a playful goofiness here, as Koh's broccoli-woman struts through the snow or rain, but there's also pathos. Like Philip Guston's restless, insomniac smokers, these characters offer a way to address real loneliness, insecurity, and alienation.

Known for labor-intensive, whimsical soft sculptures, Koh has only recently detoured back into two-dimensional media. Mostly made during the pandemic's year of stress, these works track a familiar oscillation between despair and optimism. We see Koh's protagonist reclining in a field of flowers—but also puffing manically on a cigarette, or examining her single Cyclop's eye, bloodshot and beat. *It's Ok* finds her mounting a mysterious staircase, exhaling smoke, trying to reassure either herself or the viewer as darkness creeps in around the edges.

The domestic claustrophobia of quarantine is counterposed against moments of relative freedom: driving a car at night, painting a self-portrait while texting with friends...fantasies of escape and release in an age of lockdown and isolation. One of the strangest of many strange drawings here is *Tree of Life*: broccoli-woman reclining in a subterranean cave or grave beneath a tree, its roots apparently fed by her green body. Has she given up? Or merely come to find some peace and quiet, an acceptance of nature's cycles, the fact that shit happens and the world keeps moving on?

An undercurrent of empowerment and eroticism courses through these works as well, even if it's relayed with tongue slightly in cheek. *Break on Through* imagines broccoli-woman as a sledgehammer-wielding boss, smashing a brick wall to reveal a mysterious eye beneath it. Sporting thigh-high black leather boots and fire-engine red lipstick, she's empowered and fierce, in no need of anyone's attention or approval. The sex appeal is both serious and winkingly ironic—something of a call-back to an earlier Koh photo series in which the artist herself posed nude, pin-up-style, alongside her own sculptures.

Like Ellen Berkenblit or Carroll Dunham, Koh borrows the aesthetic logic of the cartoon to dig up deep, universal truths and emotions. These drawings and paintings are unexpectedly affecting: *VeggieTales* through the prism of contemporary psychology and self-care. "Eat your broccoli!" a parent nags, pressuring their grumpy child toward better habits. Koh takes that archetypal symbol of health and complicates it—makes it chainsmoke, makes it run itself ragged. This broccoli is no kind of role model.

There's how we know we *should* live, and how we *actually* live, and the chasm between. One confounding and irritating narrative of the pandemic has been the opportunities it supposedly presents for self-improvement. Sure, we're stuck at home, or out of work, or desperately trying to home-school kids—but isn't it also a *great* time to start riding a Peloton, or getting into baking, or learning Japanese? Koh's scenes of a broccoli, alone and struggling, are far more

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relatable. Like us, she's just been getting by—through the boredom, anxiety, and doubt—and hoping to come out the other side, not too wilted.

Scott Indrisek

Scott Indrisek is a writer living in Brooklyn. Formerly, he was the editor in chief of *Modern Painters* magazine and the deputy editor of *Artsy*. His work has appeared in *GQ*, *The Believer*, *Artforum*, *Garage*, *Bookforum*, and various other publications. He is also the co-founder of Teen Party, an apartment-based exhibition space in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, which operated from 2016 to 2019.