

# WHEN SALLY MET EUROPE

*Sally J. Han's colorful figurative painting has already taken the discerning New York public by storm. Barely 30 years old, she has already been handpicked by the legendary gallerist Jeffrey Deitch and by the artistic director Massimiliano Gioni at the New Museum, who showed her art at the Aïshti Foundation in Lebanon. In November, she has just finished her first solo exhibition at Belenius after having previously included two works in the group exhibition »You were bigger than the sky, you were more than just a short time«, which was shown at the same gallery last spring. With her to Stockholm, she not only had a new series of paintings, but also her two New York gallerists Fabiola Alondra and Jane Harmon and the accompanying artist colleague Trude Viken, who had driven here from Norway.*

*The exhibition at Belenius is your very first solo exhibition in Europe. Did you think Stockholm would be first?*

It came as a surprise, but I'm very happy that it turned out that way. When I was young I dreamed of seeing Europe but if I were to come here it would be for the sake of art. And now I'm here!

*What do you think of Stockholm? Have you seen anything yet?*

- It's very beautiful. Clean and quiet. Maybe that's why it's so nice here. Because everyone is so quiet. I hope that every city in Europe will be like Stockholm.

*Is this the first time you see the paintings together now at the exhibition?*

- Yes. When I finish a painting I turn it over. I can't bear to look at it

*What did you think when you saw them together?*

- Not so playful hahaha.

*How do you choose subjects for your paintings?*

- My paintings are like a visual diary of things I've been through and what I fantasize about. I prefer not to talk too much about them because I want to maintain the mystery surrounding my paintings.

*Are what we see in the paintings things you have around you in your everyday life?*

- Not necessarily.







# I LOVED IT! WITH NO PARENTS, I COULD DECIDE EVERYTHING MYSELF. WONDERFULLY!

The exhibition is dominated by cats. Why?

- I have always been fascinated by the personality of cats. Cats have many similarities with us artists. They are independent but not quite that independent. Sensitive, selfish and self-absorbed, haha. But at the same time very mysterious creatures.

And fun to paint I guess?

- Yes! I love dark humor and I enjoy making fun of myself. The paintings that now hang at Belenius are not too happy in my eyes, although many may see them as such with the color scale and motifs.

Do you have a cat yourself?

- I had a cat when I was ten years old, but unfortunately it doesn't work anymore because I'm allergic. However, I have two playful and disobedient birds. They appear in my paintings. In my childhood we moved around a lot. There was no one else in the family who liked cats but me.

Sally J. Han was born in 1993 in the multimillion-dollar city of Shenyang in north-eastern China. The family moved to South Korea when Sally was a couple of years old. She counts ethnically and culturally as Korean; her grandparents moved from Korea to China and after the Cultural Revolution they could not move back. Growing up, the family spoke both Chinese and Korean at home and followed the Korean traditions. She has been living in the United States for 13 years.

How do you live in New York?

- I have a rather small apartment in Midtown near Grand Central Terminal. But that's okay with me because I'm quite small myself. Next year I'm moving back to the East Village that I left because I wanted to stay away from my community for a while. Now I have regretted it. Midtown is too much finance and offices for my taste.

The J in your name stands for Jingmae which is your Chinese name. Did you take Sally when you moved to the US

- No, it was already when I started in the sixth grade. We had English at school and so we each had to choose an English name. I chose Sally because it sounds so innocent to my ears. I just like it and it has stuck with me ever since.

What is the best and worst thing about New York?

- The best thing is that it is a very practical city and that there is such a rich and multifaceted art scene. Despite the size, everyone is close to each other. The worst is probably the rent level.

Is it tough competition or do you help each other?

- A bit of both, I think. But competition is also healthy. It spurs. But when I meet my colleagues, we talk about everything but art.

Has New York become your home now?

- I would probably say that. I have spent ten years in South Korea, seven years in China and 13 years in New York.

How did you find art in the first place? Was it around when you grew up?

- Not at all. Dad worked at Samsung and art was seen as a hobby. How can you make money from it? It did not exist in my parent's culture at all. Just after the opening of my first solo exhibition in New York, 2020, my mother asked me if it wasn't too late for me to get a regular one profession, haha. I'm the only one in my family doing art.

When was the interest sparked?

- Early. I was introverted as a child and I most enjoyed when I got to sit and draw indoors. I wasn't the kind of kid who liked to be outdoors with others. In a way, it is like if I have never stopped drawing. But never did I think as a child that I would be a successful artist that makes money. The only thing I knew was that I didn't want a full-time job, but I wanted to find different ways to make a living as artist. I am very single-tracked that way. When my parents divorced I lived for a while with my father in Beijing before he sent me to boarding school to the

USA. I was 17 years old.

What was it like to be sent away?

- I loved it! With no parents, I could decide everything myself. Wonderfully!

How did your collaboration with the NY gallery, Fortnight Institute, begin?

- We met in 2019 after my master's degree from the New York Academy of Art.

How did you get in touch with each other?

- Via Instagram. One of the gallerists, Fabiola Alondra, first saw my work on the art school's website and afterwards she started following me on Instagram. I was so happy because during my school days, no gallerist had shown interest in my work. One day I visited the gallery to say hi. I dreamed and hoped to make an exhibition and that was it.

Your technique is acrylic paint on paper which then mounted on panel. Do you always have worked like that?

- No, in the beginning I tried oil on canvas and also egg tempera while I

was a student. I also tried watercolor on paper. But I am very finicky and sensitive to the material so in the end I got stuck with acrylic on paper.

Why does it suit you?

- My paintings look very precise and accurate because I build up my paintings with many layers of paint. The paper may become slightly crooked and twisted underneath the process. I don't mind that the texture of the paper changes with the different layers of color, however, I want to have something sturdy that supports the work as it gains weight. That's why I mount the paper on a pad, so I can continue the process of building up additional layers of paint. The acrylic paint I make is thinned by mixing it with water. So it becomes a bit like working with watercolor. Because I live and work in my apartment, it is convenient to use acrylic because it does not smell.



# IT CAN BE DANGEROUS TO SEE OTHERS' WORK WHEN YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF YOUR OWN.

Do you work quickly or slowly?

- I would say it depends on the size of the work and the subject. And on the deadline, of course.

Do you work with one work at a time or several in parallel?

- Max three at a time. But mostly I like to work on one big and one small piece at a time. When I need a break from one work, I switch to the other.

When I see your works, I get images of Chinese propaganda posters from the 60s and 70s. Is it something that interested you?

- No, I don't have that as a point of reference. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I grew up in China and it's there subconsciously somehow. I see what you mean because the posters are very colorful and funny but I never thought about that. When I paint, I

usually look at a reference photo in black and white. I start the paintings in black and white and then I add the colors. I also get more ideas from reading literature than from looking at pictures.

What do you read?

- For a period I was totally into Japanese short stories. I have referenced Kobo Abe's books in my previous works. He has been significant to me. And when I was at the Wonder Women exhibition last year at Jeffrey Deitch in New York, I read Schopenhauer for the first time. In my eyes, they are both so dark that it almost feels like a positive.

Do you keep up with the art world? Some artists are very up-to-date, while others are completely inside their worlds.

- I'm probably a bit in between. When

I'm working on a new exhibition, I don't usually look at other contemporary art. I want to be completely focused on my own work. However, I can go and look at older art like at the Met Museum for example. It can be dangerous to see other people's work when you are in the middle of your own.

Do you have the habit of saving works from your various suites for the future?

- No, I don't want to do that. When my paintings are finished, I let them go to live their own lives. It's not my responsibility anymore. It's like a parent-child relationship, I think. When the children move away from home, you shouldn't get involved anymore. And in the future I can make new even better works.

