



Slow Magic: Soey Milk

Soey Milk's figures are at once enticing and alluring, with a beauty that enchants like that of fairies, or sirens of the sea. These figures can be mysterious, with a challenge in their stare that says, "Dare or don't dare." They can be innocent or coy, tamely or ferally feline, purring one moment and biting the next.

Even if at other times her sensual figures turn from the viewer to the intimacy of their private thoughts, eyes closed, Milk's drawings and paintings often convey a sense of the dynamics of human interrelationships. Though not always or even often, this dynamic can be sexually charged, and suggest relationships of power and control, surrender and consent.



Opposite: Soey Milk in her studio with her painting *Slow Magic*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 48". Photo by Dorian Qi.
Above: Soey Milk, *Slow Magic*, Study, graphite and watercolor on Bristol, 29" x 23"



Soey Milk, *Ho Rang*, graphite on paper, 17" x 14".

Most viewers take for granted that paintings of women, particularly young women depicted nude or seminude, in certain poses and with certain manners of expression, have come from the brushes of men. The traditional image is that of a male artist painting a nude female subject, as Pierre-Auguste Renoir did of Andrée Heuschling in more than a hundred works. But in Milk's paintings the dynamics of the relationship between artist and subject continue beyond the traditional, and it's also one of power and control.

Or is it one of love and sharing?



Soey Milk, *Iri Nari* (wolf lily in Korean), oil on canvas, 36" x 24".



Soey Milk, *Phantom Skin*, found silk embroidery, polyethylene chips, resin and oil on panel, 48" x 36".

Milk, who was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1989 and raised in the United States, is a meticulous draftsman who works from live models, all of them her friends. Her latest exhibition at Evoke Contemporary, *Slow Magic*, derives its title from a showpiece of the exhibition.

A popular artist and influencer with a whopping 288,000 followers on Instagram, and whose work speaks to the generations raised on anime, Milk creates paintings that seem to boast of fantasy while remaining classical in composition and recalling an era of so-called Orientalism. They're also rooted in what's real—even if it's only the artist's studio, where colored textiles are lovingly draped for the model to sit, and a wallpaper-like aura of abstract gestural brushstrokes envelops her, the background layered in a silhouetted pattern of florals.

Slow Magic, which is among Milk's most recent paintings, conveys all of this. But the subject, a young woman in pink fetish lingerie, is posed in an open,

inviting stance that's still somehow defiant, our expectations of submission and control upended when we realize that she embodies both. Colored tendrils of ribbon or rope lie beneath her seat. If these ropes once held her back, she is now unfettered, holding in her right hand a rope like that used in *shibari*, or Japanese rope bondage. But here it dangles freely, knotted only to itself.

Shibari ropes are a persistent motif in Milk's oeuvre, stretching back to her days as a student at the Pasadena Art Center, from which she graduated in 2014. "They're frequently portrayed in my work, partially because I love the fact that I can have fun with them," says Milk, who still lives in California. "As an artist, they're a challenging enough thing to paint when they're not even tangled. Symbolically, I've been using them in my work as analogies to relationships and life."

Milk's larger works in oil—e.g., *Slow Magic*, *Sonagi Sowing*, and *Phantom Skin*—begin life as drawings or studies. Each is then rendered with careful attention to detail, even in the abstraction. Milk works steadily, taking her time, weaving her magic to convey a fluid interplay of the abstract with the representational, background with foreground.

Beauty, in the form of Milk's subjects, including her self-portraits, often verges on innocence, perhaps because her love for those subjects is pure and uncorrupted. But Milk faced controversy when, at the age of 32, she posted a nude self-portrait that wrung cries from her fanbase. They protested that she was posting child porn simply because she had a youthful face and a petite frame.

"I was really humbled by all of these women, or people who identify as women, who are often called childlike or cherublike or are flat-chested, come out and say, 'How dare you say that to an artist who can paint her own body?'" she says.

When viewing *Slow Magic*, it's best to check your assumptions at the door. Look closely. Look slowly. The lure of innocence fades and the subject's experience remains. It was always there.

"Nobody has an easy life," she says, stating that relationships rarely flow easily and loosely, but, like ribbons and rope, "have knots and tangles in them. Nobody has a simple life. I wanted to convey that."

Implicit in the tender ways Milk paints and draws her circle of friends is her outpouring of empathy, compassion, and love. "Because I know these subjects, and I'm also starting with a very traditional white piece of paper, it's a first step in falling in love with that person. In this case, I think I'm kind of cheating, because I'm already in love with them."

—Michael Abatemarco



Soey Milk, *Mei in April*, oil on Claybord, 12" x 12".