

# Reflection and Re-Invention: the art of Hye Rim Lee

by Mirabelle Field

Hye Rim Lee reflects that her art is about binaries, images created at the cutting edge between meanings, where symbols shift and the duality between different forms come into being. Working in the complex medium of animation is not always an easy task, but it allows Lee to explore a huge variety of different meanings and to bring a distinctly contemporary and modern twist to established narratives, combining innovation with social critique and personal investigations. Hye Rim Lee has been creating her ongoing TOKI/Cyborg project since 2001, developing her animated TOKI character throughout various evolutions and conceptual advancements.

Lee's earlier iterations of her now famous TOKI figure played heavily into feminine beauty ideals, cyber-culture, and the hyper-sexualisation of the female form in the media, animated video games and 3D animation. TOKI is a hybrid form, an idealized human-animal creation that is part bunny and part woman. Lee's work exists at the intersection between East and West, examining the cross over of expectations of the female body - the effects of the ever-increasing demand for female plastic surgery in Asia, as well as in major parts of the West, the often dehumanized and overtly sexualized female characters in mainstream video games, Japanese Anime, Manga and, increasingly, social media and popular culture.

Lee's work examines the move away from reality in our expectations of the female body, away from the attainable ideals of the past to the plasticized and medicalised exaggerated hourglass physique that is constantly on display in our image saturated culture. This is a symptom of a deeply rooted social issue that allows women to take up space only when they successfully perform an idealized beauty, only when they give something in return for their public presence. The form of TOKI has seemed to predict or pre-empt these growing societal concerns since her first iteration in 2002. Lee herself notes the potential for the artist, in their contemplation of and interaction with the cultural and social concerns of society, to become a kind of prophet, to recognize the signs of a growing social issue before others take much notice. The TOKI project is a key example of this divine, omniscient artistic power.

This exhibition features two distinct iterations of Lee's work, one which has been internationally exhibited and acclaimed, and one which has never been seen in New Zealand. *Crystal City* (2007-2008) continues this investigation into hyper-sexualisation, moving past the examination of feminine body ideals to explore ideas of sexual politics and the interesting relationship between bodily autonomy and technology. This exhibition features a series of digital prints taken from the 3 minute and 17

second 3D animation *Crystal City Spun* which features TOKI and YONG; another character of Lee's creation, playfully interacting around a series of highly stylized sex toy formations. These toys appear as a city, their unique curvature and polished glass surfaces morphing into tower blocks and modern infrastructure. Here, the taboo becomes the commonplace, an alternate reality in which something customarily small and hidden grows to mechanized, gargantuan proportions.

YONG, in Korean culture, means powerful dragon of the sky. This magnificently rendered dragon can be seen as a symbol of the identity and essence of Asia. Born out of TOKI, YONG has inherited TOKI's eyes and undertaken her role as a vehicle of sexuality, giving power to the female figure as they interact with one another. YONG is exceptional in his highly detailed appearance, featuring multiple curving spines and an elaborate tail, whose swirling details reference the prominent Māori koru motif. The intersection between human and animal forms reveals Lee's interest in the binaries present in everyday life, emphasizing the way in which mythology, childlike playfulness, and eroticism can exist simultaneously in her work.

*Crystal City* has been exhibited in various forms throughout the globe, including Seoul, Tokyo, Berlin, Canada, Venice, Spain, and the USA. Interestingly, Lee notes that the place where she encountered the most controversy surrounding censorship was Los Angeles, which stood in stark contrast to the whole hearted acceptance of the New York art scene. The continued fear and oppression of the exploration of ideas about sex and sexuality in artistic practice, and in wider media, is an issue which needs to be addressed in society as a whole. Sex and sexuality have always been an underlying bedrock of issues for

humankind. Both are a universal and natural part of the human condition, and indeed the animal kingdom, but the acceptance of these ideas and the way in which they are treated by society becomes an issue that is affected by time, culture, and religion. In this light, *Crystal City* becomes far more than a series of images of a sexually charged scene involving two human-animal hybrid characters, it is a comment on the most intrinsic ideologies of modern society – technology, sexuality, censorship, human interaction.

Each iteration of Hye Rim Lee's artistic practice can be seen to take on a new form. They build on each other, certainly, but her 3D animations are so tied in to the artist's journey and to her understanding of the world around her that they simultaneously speak to each other, and speak for themselves. If *Crystal City* addresses issues of identity and society through the lens of sexuality and fantasy, *Black Rose* is the embodiment of those issues, and the manifestation of a personal artistic journey. Here, TOKI has evolved from her hyper-sexualised bunny persona to the *Black Rose Queen*. A character who, in the artist's own words, "resists the playfully passive readings of TOKI to date and connects to a more personal narrative, exploring ideas of isolation, oppression, lost love, hopelessness, and a sensibility of imagination and darkness in the mortality of human".

This animation is an entirely new work, born of a long creative journey. Representing a new type of artistic expression for Hye Rim Lee, this is the first time that *Black Rose* has been on show to the public in its completed form. *Black Rose* is the result of artistic development and creation over an extensive period of time; the animation has been under construction for over eight years. During this time, Lee has made numerous

changes to the meaning of the animation, and the technique involved through artistic and technological developments. She has experienced a profound and life-changing personal journey, reflected in the journey that her artistic practice, and her TOKI character, has undergone.

*Black Rose* is a dreamscape where TOKI floats and spins through a fantastic mushroom wood, displaying the intersection between nature and cyberspace, trying to escape the trauma of death and lost love. Throughout this animation the 'Rose', a physical manifestation of these concerns, follows TOKI as she travels between different states of being through changing landscapes. At the culmination of this transformative narrative, she dives into the *Black Rose*. Thorns grow out of her shiny glass-like body, as she becomes the *Black Rose Queen*. In the words of the artist, "TOKI is a shape shifter and Princess, Queen and Rose... *Black Rose* depicts a diamond dreamscape for a journey of TOKI's shifting identity. A floating, shiny, glossy glass TOKI becomes a *Black Rose Queen* in a never-ending, ever-moving infinite dream."

As the *Black Rose Queen*, TOKI moves away from her usually scantily clad or entirely nude configuration to don a voluminous black rose gown and a crown. Accompanied by a dark and moody colour palette of purples, blacks, and translucent, gleaming glassy tones. Here, Hye Rim Lee's interest in the interplay between distinct dichotomies comes to the fore. The qualities of glass, at once beautiful, delicate, brittle and dangerous, and the diamond, the most

sought-after material in the world, rare, expensive, and pure, are played out through her animation. Lee constructs these materials and shatters them again and again, constantly reforming and recreating, much like the character of TOKI herself. Lee outlines that for her, the medium of glass represents a fluidity, a changing of form and material from soft to hard, liquid to solid, which comes to be representative of a narrative for shifting identities and the potential for reflection and change within human nature. Similarly, the diamond, as an unbreakable and multi-faceted material, becomes analogous to the creation of life and the reflective nature of humanity and society.

During the climax of the animation and the music, the *Black Rose Queen* armours herself entirely in glass, transforming into a warrior like figure complete with glass spikes along her body, ready to protect or perhaps to attack. For the artist, these growing thorns represent wounds, trauma, and pain. But, the complex potential of glass ensures that the possibility of shattering, splintering, and recreating oneself is always present. In this way, Lee explores the inherent binaries of glass, and of humanity, through the *Black Rose Queen* and presents us with a spiralling and fantastical journey of self-discovery, reinvention and multiple symbolic layers, multiple meaningful possibilities. TOKI becomes a shape-shifter through the course of this animation, taking on a new identity and escaping from past tragedy through personal growth and change, mixing the creative potential of the dream with the organic landscape of reality.

# HYE RIM LEE

**Black Rose**      흑장미      黑玫瑰  
**Crystal City**      수정도시      水晶城



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Hye Rim Lee  
*Red Rose*, 2021  
c-type print  
1200mm x 1200mm