

Fragmenting Realities



Anna Park photographed by Luis Corzo. Courtesy of Half Gallery.

With Anna Park

By: Bill Powers

On the eve of her first solo show in Asia at Blum & Poe's Tokyo gallery space, Bill Powers sits down with Anna Park to discuss the rapid evolution of the 24-year old's burgeoning practice, her upbringing as a South Korean immigrant in Utah, and what comes next for the Brooklyn-based artist whose gritty, frenetic, charcoal drawings have captivated the artworld.

● **Bill Powers:** People have so many different takes on your drawings, Anna. Some see a new vision of Futurism or even traces of Joyce Pensato and Cecily Brown. Do any of those references register with you?

Anna Park: I feel like my hand naturally breaks up form. But I wasn't directly influenced by the Futurist movement. It was an organic progression for me, switching up perspectives and playing with spaces.

Bill Powers: When I first saw your artwork at The New York Academy of Art it felt...maybe not hyper-realist, but considerably tighter than your drawings now.

Anna Park: My work early on was definitely more discernible. Now, I'm trying to operate from the memory of people or places and what that distortion feels like as opposed to a depiction of reality. I think our memories are intrinsically fragmented, discombobulated.

Bill Powers: Do you read your compositions as compressed chronology or are you truly aiming to capture a snapshot in time?

Anna Park: I'm jamming a bunch of disparate moments into one image. It's how we're fed information now - like through our phones - this bombardment. I'm trying to key into some recognizable moments, which inevitably break down into these abstract marks.



Installation view of 'Pluck Me Tender' at Half Gallery. April 8, 2021- May 8th, 2021. Courtesy of Half Gallery

Bill Powers: Talk to me about the sex drawings. Is that a harder subject than, say, a tea party scene?

Anna Park: I think so. Our desire is so deeply rooted within us - and completely natural - but then the idea of making an orgy scene or explicit sex scenes makes me feel like some creepy, weird voyeur. Maybe I'm just a prude...

Bill Powers: Are you concerned that viewers will imagine it's autobiographical?

Anna Park: You can never completely separate the art from the artist, right? And I think you should be as honest as you can while making the work, so maybe that's why it stresses me out sometimes. It feels like I'm exposing myself...

Bill Powers: Is this fragmenting in your recent work partially some attempt to camouflage your own presence?

Anna Park: I'm trying to leave the narrative open ended, but there's probably some self-masking going on as well.

Bill Powers: When you won the AXA Art Prize in 2019, what was the drawing you submitted?

Anna Park: I like having double meanings in my work and punching up the humor. I remember being fascinated by office parties. So, in that vein, I was thinking, what would happen if a parent/teacher conference - the underbelly of social interactions - went awry? That thought ended up forming the basis for 'Parent Teacher Conference' which I ended up submitting.

Bill Powers: You still maintain an element of humor embedded in the drawings. For instance, I'm thinking of the newlyweds atop a wedding cake cutting their own heart in two.

Anna Park: 'First Marriage' probably reflected my skewed vision of marriage. I didn't have a ton of great examples from my own childhood. I didn't really see the sanctity in it and I marveled at how people become fixated on the ceremonial aspects: the flowers, the cake. That drawing came from this Bridzilla moment where she's so consumed by all the material stuff that she forgets it's really about the couple...to the point that she's almost shoving the groom out of the picture.



'First Marriage' (2021). Charcoal on paper mounted on panel. 60 x 72 inches. Courtesy of Half Gallery.

Bill Powers: What about the drawing of the two women in the nightclub saying hello even though they kind of hate each other?

Anna Park: ‘The Frenemies?’ I’m always interested in social dynamics and people watching, and the level of fake niceties we are all forced into at times; like how two girls might be warm and friendly at a party and then immediately go home and talk shit about each other.

Bill Powers: Throughout your work, you consistently play with this theme of social engagements mostly being a lot of fake white noise. I’m thinking of the birthday party drawing depicting revelers chatting but without much substance or connection in their interaction.

Anna Park: We often get caught up by distractions which seem to warrant our attention, but we end up not really being present in any particular moment. Who doesn’t crave genuine interaction? I think when I moved to New York from Utah to go to Pratt, I was overly stimulated, but, at the same time, I was so hungry for it. I almost felt high off of these social interactions. I wanted to capture moments as a witness to these events where we are all thinking the same thing at a party except no one ever says it out loud: What the fuck am I doing here?

Bill Powers: What was it like in high school in Utah? Let’s be real for a second.

Anna Park: I was weirdly super-focused. I used to get uptight about grades to the point where even my mom was like, “chill out a little.” I was a pretty angry kid in high school, and I think I saw academics as my way out of Utah.

Bill Powers: You felt that you needed to achieve your way out of your circumstances. Do you think you had seen that modeled by your mom becoming a pharmacist as a means to leaving South Korea?

Anna Park: Yeah, she adopted the role as the breadwinner for the family when we moved to the US. She set a high bar for me. I was definitely more of a recluse in high school. I liked being alone, which was kind of perfect for making art.

Bill Powers: And why were you so angry?

Anna Park: Maybe a better term would be angsty. I just knew I wanted to get the hell out of Salt Lake City. We moved around a lot when I was a little kid, so I had a varied perspective as a result of coming from New Zealand and California prior to Utah. I also remember visiting New York with my mom when I was maybe 14 or 15 and telling her I would eventually move here. I didn’t even know why. But it was important to have that dream. Originally, I had thought I’d move back to Los Angeles one day to be an animator, only

I’m not very good with computers. I wanted to do hand-drawn animation cels, but apparently that’s a dying art form.

“I think our memories are intrinsically fragmented, discombobulated.”

Bill Powers: Did you enroll in illustration courses when you first entered college?

Anna Park: I started as an illustration major at Pratt because I thought that would make it easier to get a job after I graduated. In the middle of my freshman year, though, one of my teachers pulled me aside and asked me why I wasn’t concentrating on painting and drawing. That’s when I scoped out The New York Academy of Art and switched schools the next year.

Bill Powers: Do you think it was helpful to start in illustration just to learn about anatomy and proportions?

Anna Park: Pratt was actually way more conceptual at the time and the grad program proved fairly traditional so it was kind of the opposite of what you might expect. I wanted the structure to learn form and figure which the Academy was great for.

Bill Powers: Did you ever feel the pressure to become a painter?

Anna Park: I think I felt that way the whole time I was in grad school. It’s a painting school, mostly. I wanted to be in the conversation about what drawing could be.

Bill Powers: Were there any specific artists who had opened that door for you, mentally?

Anna Park: I went to a Robert Longo show at The Brooklyn Museum and he walked our class through the exhibition. Also, Kara Walker was a big influence. They helped me see that there wasn’t a hierarchy of mediums. It’s about the ideas you’re putting out there. The medium informs your concept through language.

Bill Powers: It’s interesting how you approach depicting ethnicity in your drawings – and I’m not saying it’s an overt strategy – but a viewer would be hard pressed to guess you are Korean from looking at your work. Contrast that with, say, Kehinde Wiley, where many people might assume the artist is Black.

Anna Park: I've gotten that in critiques before: Why are you not portraying Asian people? That really surprised me. I was just drawing from my own experience. My formative years were in Utah, and my adult years have been in New York City. I feel the most awake right now so that's where most of my content comes from. I haven't felt ready yet to reference back to my Korean roots in my work. I think, perhaps, as I grow older, I will be able to discover a more nuanced way of depicting my experience. Having spent almost the same amount of time split between Korea and the US, American culture is now as much my culture as anything Korean.

Bill Powers: Did you ever feel bias toward you as an Asian immigrant?

Anna Park: I was 11 when I moved to Utah. I hadn't ever felt so much like an outsider. Of course, I've been called every racial slur in the book. I think the worst part, though, are the micro-aggressions where you're targeted without even knowing it. I'd rather have things said to my face than feel othered. Maybe that's why I'm so happy in New York, to live among such diversity.

“There isn't a hierarchy of mediums. It's about the ideas you're putting out there...”

Bill Powers: What are your thoughts on the rise of emerging Asian artists? I'm thinking of Dominique Fung, Matthew Wong, and you, of course...

Anna Park: I think it's really exciting to see. Artists like Sasha Gordon, Lily Wong, and Sally Han, too, just to name a few who I look up to and get inspired by. Obviously, Asian is not a monolith, and what is so great to see are the many different ways that each artist is portraying their specific experiences through their work.

Bill Powers: Part of your origin story is that when they honored KAWS at The New York Academy of Art three years ago, he was so impressed by your work that he bought a drawing, posted it on Instagram, and then all his fans started hitting you up. Am I getting that right?

Anna Park: It was a life-changing moment for me, but I couldn't see that in real time. I didn't fully comprehend the

impact and how much it shaped my career now. Also, I'm not great with faces so I remember asking him if he was an artist, which, in hindsight, is so embarrassing. I felt so dumb.

Bill Powers: Are you thinking at all about the audience for your Blum & Poe show in Tokyo this September?

Anna Park: I've never shown in Asia before, and I wanted to keep in mind the audience in Tokyo. But I don't think I would have done anything that I wouldn't have done for a show here. What excited me was the incredible history Tokyo holds for works on paper and the practice of drawing, as well.

Bill Powers: There's a new rodeo drawing in your studio. Am I correct that you are often drawn to scenes of Americana?

Anna Park: This new show is kind of a part two of my New York show. I want the themes to revolve around performance and performance anxiety, and how people brand themselves. For instance, a girl with this really bad spray tan. Or, a girl playing violin who suspects no one in the crowd is actually listening to her.



'Mind Over Matter' (2021) from the artist's forthcoming solo show at Blum & Poe in Tokyo. Charcoal on paper on panel two parts; 86 x 60 inches each. © Anna Park, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

Bill Powers: What does that say about you psychologically? I'm thinking back now on your beauty queen drawing where we see this pageant winner drunk on attention. Is that autobiographical?

Anna Park: For sure. She seems disassociated and almost like she's not really there. It's definitely a fear of mine. Like I want my work to be seen, but I also hold a lot of anxieties about being judged. And, by the way, no one is putting a gun to my head to make these drawings.

Bill Powers: Is there a moment where you felt like you had made it?

Anna Park: I think when my mom could retire. I wanted to help her retire and to pay off my student loans. ■