

## Portrait of a Woman Standing at the Border of Existence — At the Intersection of Tradition and Modernity

Hanji is one of the most representative mediums of Korean tradition. Its tough fibers, soft texture, and its simultaneously transparent yet solid qualities have long permeated the lives and art of the Korean people. In her series “*Her*”, artist **SoonHee Lee** raises profound questions about the identity and existence of women through the texture of Hanji. Through the demonstrative pronoun “Her,” she portrays a specific yet anonymous figure, blurring the boundary between individual narrative and collective identity. This work symbolically reveals the position of women in contemporary Korean society and the complex structures they face.

Hanji’s texture is generally used in various fields such as painting, crafts, and design. Works that use torn or crumpled Hanji offer a raw yet natural feel, while those lacquered provide a luxurious and distinctive texture. The bleeding effect of dyes in particular brings out softness and subtlety. Combining Hanji with diverse materials or using digital technology can add a modern touch. Hanji’s texture also lends itself to the creation of lighting, furniture, and interior accessories to evoke a special atmosphere. Among these, the fibrous quality of Hanji, which **SoonHee Lee** particularly favors, offers a major advantage for expressing natural texture.

This was immediately clear to me when I participated in **ART CAPITAL 2025**, held in the magnificent exhibition hall of the Grand Palais. As soon as I saw SoonHee Lee’s work “*Her – Fragments of Identity*” in the *Salon des Indépendants*, I intuitively understood why European consumers continue to spend lavishly on premium skincare products despite economic hardship. This is because Korean beauty trends like “porcelain skin” or “radiant glass skin” are spreading, driving increasing demand for Korean cosmetics.

The female figures depicted by **SoonHee Lee** on Hanji are often deconstructive images that transcend conventional frameworks. They reflect the desire and resistance of women to break free from the societal structures that define them. This shows that women’s lives are not merely stories of “preservation” or “compliance,” but rather a process of “recreation”, overcoming wounds and constantly renewing themselves. Thus, the association of Hanji and the feminine in **SoonHee Lee’s** work can be expanded as a point of connection between Korean identity and global feminist discourse. Her work simultaneously portrays the traditional media of the East and the expressiveness of modern art through the blending of Hanji, ink, coffee, and acrylic.

The “Her” figures of **SoonHee Lee** appear without given names. This goes beyond mere anonymity. It reflects how easily women are socially generalized and objectified. At the same time, this anonymity gives “Her” a universal voice that transcends individual identity. Each “Her” contains a personal narrative, yet also functions as a collective portrait representing the stories of all women. These “Her” figures are sometimes rendered in monochrome and static composition, other times through distorted forms and anxious expressions. This appears to be **SoonHee Lee’s** attempt to visually symbolize women’s inner conflicts, social oppression, or moments of liberation.

In **SoonHee Lee's** paintings, boundaries and fractures appear repeatedly. The lines between figure and background are often blurred, and the bodies themselves seem incomplete. This reflects the unstable identity of modern society, where the existence of women is continually defined and deconstructed. In some works, parts of the body disappear beyond the frame, or the composition is deliberately disjointed. This expressive technique reveals visual imperfection and, through it, how women's lives are frequently distorted by their context.

Ultimately, **SoonHee Lee's** "*Her*" series is not simply a portrait of a woman. It is a contemporary critique that addresses identity, social oppression, and the ambiguity of existence. By layering multiple meanings onto the word "Her," the artist invites the viewer to encounter a female face that is both familiar and unknown. "Her" is someone who surrounds us all, and yet whose identity we cannot clearly define. **SoonHee Lee** interprets women's existence precisely within this contradiction and tension, and through it, proposes a new social role and personal narrative in contemporary art.

**Pierre Coureux**

*President of the International André Malraux Association*