

HYE RIM LEE. BLACK ROSE AT AHURIRI CONTEMPORARY. 2021.

Accompanied by what sounds like an android's lullaby and seemingly released from the childhood nursery, (that ur-space of our deepest formal desires and most intractable associations) squadrons of weightless soap-bubble bunnies parade and poop diamonds while colonnades of mushrooms pulse and rotate like glowing turbines. Out of the centre of this soft machine emerges a glassy doll, an avatar-queen with impossibly pneumatic breasts, come to bring balance to the forces of a 3D animated universe.

This is 'Black Rose' by Hye Rim Lee, and its modest 5-minute runtime belies its epic feel. The combined effect isn't a million miles from the spectaculars produced by [Busby Berkeley](#) in Hollywood in the 1930's where elaborately choreographed troupes of dancing girls performed kaleidoscopic routines for the levitating camera. Hye Rim's cosmic dance produces more than just patterns though; its '*ecstatic computation*' (thank you Catarina Barbieri) seems to generate a theory of being. In this, the artist's desire to explore, via an allegorical construction, a personal mythos, echoes that of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* of films, particularly [Cremaster 1](#) where the choreographic language of Berkeley was consciously employed.

Together with a screening of *Black Rose* (2021), Napier's light and spacious upstairs gallery, Ahuriri Contemporary, has been showing a collection of Hye Rim Lee's recent work, consisting of mostly large, beautifully presented c-prints and PVC prints. The images are elements/characters generated directly from their founding genesis document, the animation itself. The surfaces of the prints are as flat and impersonal as screens, which gives the works an air of simulation and the bite of the artificial within a context in which we expect to encounter materiality and the evidence of the hand-made. This is machine art, sci-fi art, art for an age of gifs and NFT's, the spectral emanations of the cyber age.

Dominating the show are a series of images of single roses, their stems and thorns intact, each presented in a different attitude and colour. The rose has variously been a symbol of love, purification, healing and secrecy for hundreds of years. Hye Rim's almost fetishizing presentation of what is perhaps Western culture's most ubiquitous and therefore potentially *kitsch* bloom, underlines its talismanic function in her symbolic schema. Like all of Hye Rim's imagery, they are rendered as flawless crystalline objects, exquisitely reflecting only themselves in a dustless eternity. As an example of the technological sublime they have something in common with [Jeff Koon's aluminium balloon animals](#), but shorn of the irony. They are simultaneously monumental and intimate, austere and tender, synthetic and evocative.

The other highlights for me (in a show full of them) are the series of five tondos framed in black lacquered automotive paint. These works are smaller and focus their images into tight symbolic vignettes. Again, the *Glass Queen* (2021) holds the centre from her home in the dazzling centre of a diamond. It's a baroque and detailed image, but the simpler, more consciously abstract pictures flanking her intrigued me more. *Black Rose* and *Black Mushroom* (both 2021) operate like microcosmic renderings of a developing spherical cosmos reminiscent of [Robert Fludd's](#) Seventeenth century alchemical illustrations. Hye Rim here encapsulates her narrative into glistening black contours and folds that seem to emerge from the void with an ineluctable desire to reflect, to mystify, to clarify and to elude in equal measure.

Michael Hawksworth.