

## SANG-AH CHOI







*About Beautiful painting and painting beautifully\_ Animal #3, 2015*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, molding paste, glitter, resin on wood panel  
19½ x 8½ x ½ in



*About Beautiful painting and painting beautifully\_ Landscape #5, 2015*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, masking tape, glitter, sticker, resin on wood panel  
19½ x 8½ x ½ in



*Time-square, 2010*  
Acrylic, sumi ink, glitter, felt tip pen, resin on wood panel  
96 x 96 x 1 in

*Previous page*

*We see what we want to see: Invisible Visible (detail), 2019*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, graphite on paper  
50 x 94 in (each of 3)

## WE SEE WHAT WE WANT TO SEE

Linda Tesner

A consistent theme in the work of Sang-ah Choi is a pair of closely related questions that she poses to the viewer: What do you see? And what do you perceive? As a Korean artist living and working in the United States, Choi is imminently aware that the answers have much to do with the viewer's own cultural influences, including ethnic references and pop influences. Choi has made an expansive practice of playing with dual meanings in both large and small scale.

*We See What We Want to See* (2019) is a splashy, candy-colored painting on paper—23.5 feet long, divided into three panels—that reads almost like decorative wall paper—or a vertiginous landscape of pattern. Choi's work most often refers to the history of Korean painting, specifically Sip-Jang Saeng Do, a tradition which includes the depiction of ten symbols of longevity. These symbols include: the sun, mountains, water, bamboo, pine trees, mushrooms, clouds, cranes, deer, and turtles. In this painting, Choi transmogrifies these symbols into hybrid characters that seem simultaneously Korean and American, and both sacred and profane.

Choi says that she includes all of the Sip-Jang Saeng symbols within this painting, but it takes some serious investigation and even imagination to locate the symbols within the painting—the fractured picture plane has a serious “Where's Waldo” sensibility. The painting is a triptych; each panel has its own subtitle that cues the viewer to the tension and dichotomy between what the viewer sees versus perceives.

The left panel is called *Rise Fall*. Literally, the construction of the patterns in the painting confuse the viewer—are the lighter elements in the bottom half of the painting floating upward? Or are the darker components drifting downwards, percolating toward the lower edge of the picture plane? The images within the panel are ruptured and not necessarily identifiable. This is due to Choi's process, which involves painting images, then taping some of them off and painting over the exposed parts over and over again, so that the finished painting is similar to a flattened Photoshop file, with the various stages and fragments of Choi's painted images compressed into a single plane, with many shapes and icons hidden from the viewer. But careful observation reveals interesting remnants of the longevity symbols, only here westernized into American commercial emblems. For example, a circumspect viewer will discover orchid-pink Bambi-like deer shapes, as well as blue birds that replicate the ubiquitous Twitter logo.

Similarly, the central panel is subtitled *Invisible Visible*. The red/yellow/black “poppy” form that scatters across all three panels were inspired by the

California poppies that were in prolific bloom during the time that Choi was working on this painting. Choi was fascinated by the notion of endless fields of blossoms (which, even in a photograph, confound the viewer in regard to the horizon line). Then there is the allusion of poppies and their association with hallucinogenic opium varieties (remember the scene of Dorothy and her friends being lulled to dizzy sleep in the poppy fields in *The Wizard of Oz*?). In Choi's painting, the “poppy” pattern creates a camouflage effect and assists Choi in playing with perspective. There is a horizon line in the painting—actually, *many* horizon lines—as the poppies, bigger here and smaller there, serve as formal elements that confound the viewer.

I originally, naively, interpreted the tents in this panel as a visual allusion to the shell of the turtle's longevity symbol—Choi contends that this was not her intention, but my “mistake” reinforces Choi's persistence that we see what we see. Instead, the tents evolved from Choi's experience of confronting homelessness in San Francisco, an urban element that one can't ignore, but paradoxically often one tries to *not* see because of the uncomfortable feelings that homelessness generates. Within this panel, too, are passages of writing—those black “squiggles” are portions of the words “Good” and “Evil” in both English and Korean, a reminder that sometimes we see something as one thing, but it could just as easily represent the opposite.

The third panel, on the far right, is subtitled *Fiction Nonfiction*. Choi was working on this panel during the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination in 2018. While working in her studio, she was listening to the confirmation hearings on the radio. She was thinking about the phenomenon of how and why people lie, noticing that truth and untruth are often intertwined yet, most times, people need to make a decision about which “truth” to believe. In *Fiction Nonfiction* there are three fanciful deer-like creatures playing what seems like a flute, but which could also be read as a lengthening nose, suggesting a Pied Piper or Pinocchio figure, underscoring Choi's theme of what is truth and what is a lie?

In combination, the format and orientation of *We See What We Want to See* is reminiscent of traditional Korean landscape painting, but it is deconstructed and conflated into a joyful explosion of color and form. Choi's traditional imagery morphs into collapsed and ambiguous patterns. This puzzling aspect of *We See What We Want to See* is purposeful, as Choi intends to challenge the idea that any single reading of anything—a news story, a fairy tale, a corporate logo—is subjective and slippery. Absolute truth is an illusion. Eventually, and for better or worse, each of us has to choose a version of “truth” for oneself.

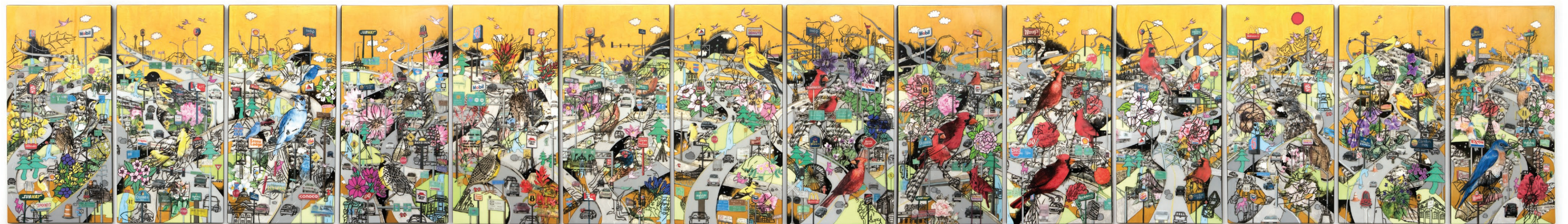
Linda Tesner is an independent curator and arts writer.





*We see what we want to see: Rise Fall, 2019*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, graphite on paper  
50 x 94 in (each of 3)

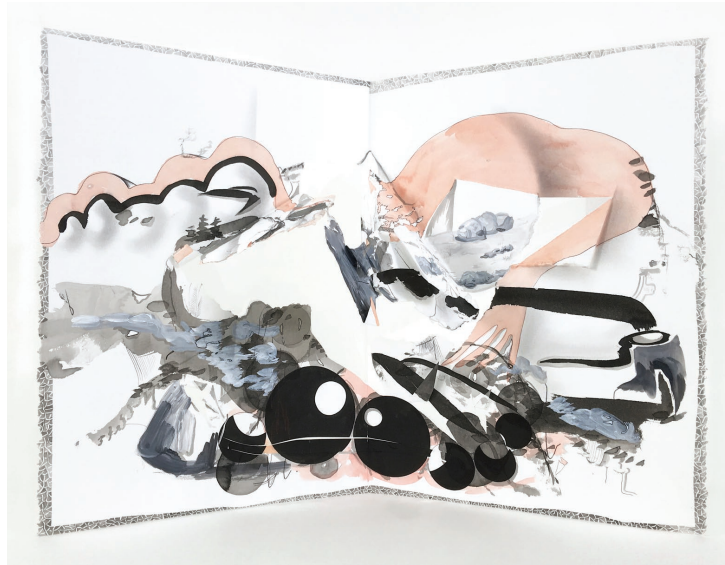
*We see what we want to see: Fiction Nonfiction, 2019*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, graphite on paper  
50 x 94 in (each of 3)



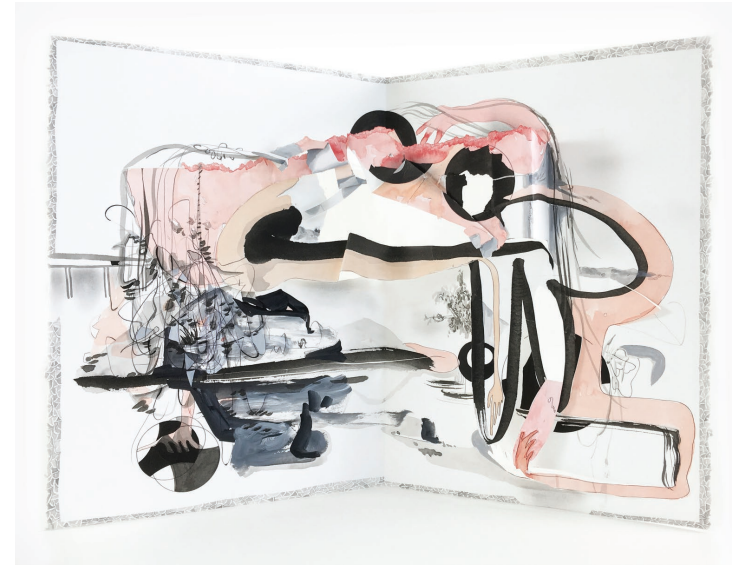
*Transcontinental flower and bird painting: NY to OR, 2009*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, glitter, sumi ink, resin on wood panel  
24 x 48 x 1 in (each of 14)



*Landscape #2, 2017*  
Acrylic, sumi ink, ball point pen,  
graphite, watercolor on paper  
22 x 14½ in (pop-up)



*Landscape #3, 2017*  
Acrylic, sumi ink, ball point pen,  
graphite, watercolor on paper  
22 x 14½ in (pop-up)



## SANG-AH CHOI

*b. 1971. Lives and works in Mountain View, California  
2011 Hallie Ford Fellow*

Originally from Seoul, Korea, Sang-ah Choi lives and works in the South Bay area, California. She's interested in paradoxical ways of seeing and the complexity of visual cognition on cultural/social landscape. Choi earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts from Ewha Women's University, Seoul, Korea and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her works have been featured in solo and group exhibitions including Doosan Gallery, Sandra Gering Gallery, and Arario Gallery in New York, New York; Sarubia Dabang, Seoul, Korea; Today Art Museum, Beijing, China; and The Art Gym, White Box and the Portland Art Museum, in Portland, Oregon. Choi's work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art and New York Public Library, New York, New York; Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg, Virginia; and Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

*Alice in the beautishlandishthing #5, 2015*  
Acrylic, felt tip pen, ad flyer paper, sticker  
on paper, stuffed animal in plexiglass frame  
28½ x 62 x 1¼ in



**Hallie Brown** was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

*Anne C. Kubisch*  
*President, The Ford Family Foundation*

**The Hallie Ford Fellowships** are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit [www.tfff.org](http://www.tfff.org).



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VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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*Landscape #3*: Courtesy the collection of  
the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art,  
Hamilton College, Clinton, NY

All remaining works: Courtesy the artist