

A DIFFERENT KIND OF ART GALLERY



ABOVE: Mary Jo Karimnia and Yangbin Park sit below a perfectly pink painting by Keiko Gonzalez.

RIGHT: Park's "Echoes of Home: Exploring Memory and Belonging" invites passersby to look in the front porch window at the Studiohouse on Malvern.



ARTIST
MARY JO
KARIMNIA
WANTS YOU
TO LOOK
INSIDE HER
WINDOW.

BY ABIGAIL MORICI

ONLY ONE PINK HOUSE STANDS ON MALVERN STREET IN MIDTOWN. OWNER MARY JO KARIMNIA swatched maybe 20 shades of pink before landing on the right one for the siding of what she calls her studiohouse. "Somewhere between coral and Barbie pink," she says, her light pink pigtails resting above her shoulders. "That's my color."

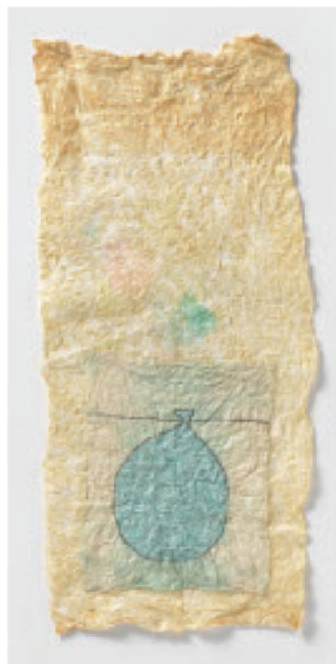
Besides its unusual pink hue, perhaps the most striking feature of the house is the window beside the front door. A peek through the glass pane reveals a box, home to a small art exhibit filled with sheets of thick paper of muted tones hanging at various heights, carrying childlike drawings of things like buildings and cars. This, Karimnia says, is the Porch Window Gallery, and right now, through late summer, Yangbin Park's "Echoes of Home: Exploring Memory and Belonging" is on display as the gallery's first show, only a block or so away from Crosstown Concourse.

While most people would be wary of strangers approaching their front porch, Karimnia, who is Crosstown Arts' residency manager, welcomes anyone to take a gander through her window. "The nice thing is, it's open 24 hours a day," she says. "When you drive by at night, it's lighted; you can see it from the road.

People can come up on the porch, walk, bike, anything." Best part is, you can't miss the pink house. Inside, after walking under a sparkling pink disco ball hanging from beams, we sit at Karimnia's red kitchen table that faces a tufted pink couch. The floor is tiled orange, pink, and white, and a pink minifridge sits in

the corner. Her tiny-beaded and felted landscapes in the style of vintage postcards hang on the wall. Karimnia renovated and designed the house herself with the help of a contractor, taking it from a duplex in bad shape to the delightfully pink space she now calls the Studiohouse on Malvern. She co-owns the house with

Bolivia-based painter Keiko Gonzales, whom she has known since college — "100 years ago, it feels like," she chuckles. Gonzalez comes to Memphis a couple times a year and stays at the Malvern place. But the Porch Window Gallery is Karimnia's baby. When asked about the inspiration for the project, she shrugs



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Clothline, 2013;
Mr. Kim, 2013;
Blanket, 2013

with a grin, saying, “I just made it up.” At first, all she knew was that she wanted to use her new studio space to nurture community. “A lot of my work is community-based,” she says.

In the past, she organized the “Unchained” series of art exhibitions, where she invited artists she didn’t know well to participate in the first show and asked them to come back for the next one, creating a domino effect. “I still have friends from that very first ‘Unchained’ show,” Karimnia says. “I was trying to get to know the Memphis art scene, and [the ‘Unchained’ series] worked. I think we had three shows.”

The Porch Window Gallery operates on a similar basis, she explains. Karimnia invites an artist, who then invites the next, who then asks the next, the condition being that anyone an artist invites must be an artist they don’t know well.

However, before she invited the first artist, Karimnia tested the concept of the Porch Window Gallery herself, earning



a Bridging the Distance grant from the UrbanArt Commission which called for small-scale community-focused projects in response to the Covid pandemic. “The idea was art that you could experience without having to be in a crowded room,” she says. So in April of last year, in the midst of renovations, she displayed her cut-outs of disembodied eyes in the box hung in the front porch window, harkening to the idea of the Evil Eye as a form of protection from evil spirits.

Fast forward to March of this year. With renovations complete, Karimnia was ready to pass the torch — or, rather, the window

box — to the artist whose work would officially launch the Porch Window Gallery: Yangbin Park.

IDIDN’T KNOW YANGBIN really,” Karimnia says, “but I knew about his print practice.” Having moved to Memphis last August to start his job as professor of printmaking at the University of Memphis, Park is relatively new to the area and says he accepted the invitation to meet local artists and make friends. Already, through this project and, consequently, his newfound friendship with Karimnia, who frequently hosts

groups of artists at her studio, Park has connected with artists he might not have otherwise. He even ended up inviting not just one but two artists — Johanna Moscoso and Emma Chauvin — to participate in shows following his.

“This project is experimental,” Park says. “It’s not a common way to present your work. It’s not a common practice for artists because you are given this box that has a predetermined, intimate size. I thought about all the work I have created that could possibly serve this project, and I’d been thinking about the *joomchi* prints that I created years ago.”

Joomchi, he explains, is the traditional Korean technique of papermaking, using *banji*, paper made from mulberry tree bark. “It’s light and it’s flexible,” he says. “It’s very adaptable.” Most importantly, though, *joomchi* holds an emotional connection for him, reminding him of his native country of South Korea, which he left in 2008 at age 26 to attend graduate school in the States.

“Once you are so far from your home, your family, you think more of it in an urgent way,” Park says. “While I was in Korea, I didn’t think about my cultural heritage as much because it’s already there. But once I relocated to the United States, I got interested in digging into our culture and heritage, my identity and my family.”

Although he now thinks that he might settle down in Memphis, Park admits that since moving to America, he hasn’t felt at home. “I never had a sense of certainty,” he says. “I came to the U.S. as an international student, and my immigration status was nonexistent. Now, I have a ‘semi-status,’ but you’re still uncertain about your future. You just don’t know where you’ll be going.”

So embracing *joomchi*, a process he’d previously dismissed, allowed Park to have a physical reminder of home. “It’s a bit of tangible evidence of history, memories, but I kind of forgot

about it,” he says. “My work became very installation-centric — big-scale structures and printmaking. But this [project] reignited my passion in *joomchi* and *banji* because I really felt something for the tangibility of it. I’m not just dealing with the material, but also I’m negotiating with it. The paper must be agitated for hours. So you can say it’s very labor-intensive, but then it holds the history of your craft, your artistry.”

For his Porch Window Gallery show, which he titled “Echoes of Home: Memory and Belong,” Park printed images on the *banji*, fusing layers of the paper together to make a more resilient product to string on clothing lines within the window box. The images, drawn in a child-like fashion, he says, represent his fragmented memories of Korea: his blanket and pillow, his boots from his military service, his old apartment building, the moving truck he packed with his belongings to move to New York for school.

In the center, at the forefront, hangs a piece of paper with “Mr. Kim” scrawled on it, a nod to the Kim family ruling over North Korea. When Kim Jong Il died and Kim Jong Un assumed power, Park says, “A very dark cloud approached the peninsula because there could be a war crisis. What will North Korea do? Will they go to war with South Korea? I did receive a letter from the South Korean army that I might be conscripted if something happened. It felt very concrete to me. It’s not like something you just see on the internet or in the newspaper, like, ‘Oh, something happened. It’s terrible, but, okay, let me move on.’ Now, I see how that kind of historical event can affect an individual.

“I just couldn’t let it sleep,” Park continues. “So, the images are either from a memory, but there are some from events that actually affected me.”

Yet, even though these images are personal to Park’s life, they in-

vite the viewer “to reflect on their own sense of home and belonging.” In fact, Park drew the images as a kid might to maintain simplicity, so anyone can recognize the elements and connect with them. And the Porch Window Gallery space amplifies this message, simply by the nature of the space being a residence unlike a traditional gallery space. “The images [I’ve chosen] tend to be very domestic images of things,” Park says. “Although they’re kind of foreign here, they’ve found a new home here. After installing my work, I didn’t see any theoretical or etheric rupture by displacing my things that feel very personal to me. They just blended into this new house.”

In a way, the artwork provides insight into the artist, just as peering through a window would reveal about a home’s dwellers. At the same time, as the viewer inevitably witnesses their own reflection cast upon the glass pane, the viewer must also consider their own position in relation to the art and the artist.

“I personally like artwork that kind of lets me in,” Karimnia says, pointing to Park’s art as the perfect example. “I don’t much enjoy looking at work that dictates and tells me what to think, what to see, what to feel. But with work that leaves space for me to come with my own idea of what home is, it’s a richer experience.”

“It’s a huge benefit for me to come to the studiohouse and walk by Yangbin’s work every day,” Karimnia adds. “It’s a real pleasure.”

AS SHE LOOKS FORWARD to future shows that’ll take place in her Porch Window Gallery, Karimnia says that she mostly looks forward to the unknown. “As a curator, I’m letting go of the curation,” she says, especially since each artist chooses the next. “I’m allowing the process to flow. I’m not going to cu-



rate their work. I’m going to give them this box to figure out what they need to come up with their own vision. Of course, I’ll help them if I can.” But, ultimately, she says, the Porch Window Gallery is in the hands of the artists.

So far, she’s scheduled out the next two years for the Porch Window Gallery, though even that is flexible. Maritza Dávila will follow Park, with her work likely being on display in September, and eventually Johanna Moscoso and Emma Chauvin will participate as well. “I think I’m going to do maybe like five or six months for each exhibit,” Karimnia says, “then maybe a month to change out and then have the next artist come in. ... I’m interested in how this project will evolve.”

Beyond the Porch Window Gallery at the Studiohouse on Malvern, Karimnia speaks of tentative plans for musical performances, open houses, and a light projection show by Nelson Gutierrez, hoping that events like these will further foster community. “This neighborhood is really becoming activated in an arts way,” she says. “The neighbors have been really supportive, and I’ve tried to nurture those relationships. They’re invested in the things that I’m doing as well.”

For now, though, nothing is set in stone. “I’m in the process of figuring out where the Studiohouse on Malvern fits in the art ecosystem,” Karimnia says. “I don’t have super concrete goals. I kind of like to see what happens.”

Purchased in 2019, the Studiohouse on Malvern took two years to renovate. “We totally rehabbed it,” Karimnia says. “It’s a new interior, new exterior, new plumbing. We put in heat and air. I did all the floors, painted all the interior.”

The Porch Window Gallery at the Studiohouse on Malvern is located at 418 Malvern Street. Stay up to date with the gallery on Instagram (@STUDIOHOUSE_ON_MALVERN). “Echoes of Home: Exploring Memory and Belonging” will be on display until August (or maybe September). Follow Yangbin Park on Instagram (@YANGBINPARK).