

ON THE COVER

Untitled by KwangHo Shin

Portions of the following are based on email exchanges on August 26 and 30 and September 2, 2025, and on a video recording of the artist at work in his studio.

Christopher Columbus, on arriving in the Bahamas in 1492, named the indigenous people *Los Indios* (“Indians”). The Spanish later amended the term with the addition of “West.” Despite being based on ignorance and error, the name stuck through the centuries. The point is that what people or things are called, especially the first time they are encountered, matters. And not always in a good way. Because naming what we see limits what else it might be. At least that is the view of our cover artist, KwangHo Shin, who refuses to provide any of his paintings with titles.

True to form, this month’s cover image is untitled. Still, it is hard not to discern most of a featureless yet human face, a motif that Shin has used many times in variation. He is quite willing to admit this fascination, finding the face compelling because it “... is the part that closely conveys ... emotion.” But “there is no particular message.” Painting is just one way in many that he expresses himself. Shin thinks that creating pictures with emotional impact is important and so is beauty. He likes to work with primary colors, often thickly applied and impasto, using a palette knife. Pigment is smeared or scuffed in bands and patches across the surface in artistically dangerous proximity to one another—dangerous because great control is required to preserve purity of color and to prevent mixing, which can turn into visual mud if overworked. Shin has this control. The result is a wild and textured movement of paint, swirling its way across the canvas but within the confines of a human outline. He has developed mastery of this technique over the course of his prolific output. He “loves” oils but also likes acrylic paints and denies a set preference, choosing one or another at different times.

Shin was born in Yeongdeok, South Korea, and studied art in high school and at Keimyung University. His parents initially opposed but later supported his decision to become an artist. He always made things and drew in childhood, especially cartoons, and learned to appreciate both Korean and Western art history. Sung-min Park was an art teacher and early influence, producing meticulously lifelike renderings of

fruit bowls. Hence, Shin’s paintings in art school were also representational. But then he moved increasingly to Western Expressionism, which subordinates fidelity of appearance to emotion. Oskar Kokoschka, Alberto Giacometti, and Lucian Freud are mentioned as favorites. Where is the Korean influence? There are no obvious echoes of traditional Buddhist iconography, landscape, animal and nature themes, mythology, or symbolism in his work. Moreover, his country’s traditions in painting place a premium on representation. Shin says the Korean aspect is there in the way he works quickly to complete an image “in a single attempt” as he puts it. There is also, perhaps, a redolence with calligraphy and its rapid, forceful strokes and sense of spontaneity despite being tied to writing. Whatever the ingredients of culture and history, the result is a success, and he is a full-time artist. Shin has shown in South Korea and at galleries in New York, Houston, and Miami in the United States and in Cologne and Berlin, Germany.

Titles can be guides to an artist’s vision for a work and thereby enhance the viewer’s experience without preventing interpretation. There is also no doubt, however, that they can mislead, confine, and misdirect. The brilliant 18th-century German sculptor Franz Messerschmidt developed schizophrenia at the height of his career. Cast out of his position at the Imperial Academy in Vienna, he ended his life in a studio on the outskirts of Bratislava. After death over 60 sculpted heads were discovered in his workspace, each with a different facial expression but no title. A pundit decided to give them fanciful names like “The Angry Man,” “An Obstinate Soldier,” and “The Vexed One.” The names persisted to the present day, despite the truth discovered by a contemporary who visited the artist during life. It turned out that the sculptures were self-portraits completed by Messerschmidt while looking in the mirror and in the throes of being tortured by an imaginary demon. The sculptor believed that representing himself in this way controlled the demon’s behavior. So yes, titles can be helpful in art, but some pieces are best left untitled. This month’s cover artist is likely to agree.

 R. Walter Heinrichs
Art Editor