

Moka Lee

Persona Works

July 10 – August 22, 2026

Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Persona Works*, a solo exhibition of recent paintings by South Korean artist Moka Lee. Lee's first exhibition with David Kordansky Gallery also marks her first solo exhibition in the United States. *Persona Works* is on view in Los Angeles at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl. from July 10 through August 22, 2026. An opening reception will be held on Friday, July 10 from 6 – 8 PM.

Moka Lee makes paintings that simultaneously register the psychological landscapes of her subjects and the digital gloss they live behind. At once pleasurable to look at and unnerving to contemplate, Lee's portraits and still lifes are masterfully executed responses to the contemporary muddling of person and persona. Her pictures evoke the familiar unease, in our algorithmically determined reality, with which the illusion of virtual connection becomes the lived experience of atomization, vulnerability underlies facades of self-possession, and what is beautiful conceals, on closer inspection, telltale signs of instability.

The paintings in *Persona Works* span Lee's primary typologies, conveying the breadth of her practice both formally and conceptually. The largest paintings in the gallery belong to the *Ego Function Error*, *Innuendo*, and *Surface Tension* series, which apply the tenets of portraiture to an age of technological acceleration that includes the unprecedented accretion of images. With their dewy complexions and lustrous hair, the young women on display originate in images the artist culls from the social media accounts of strangers. In selecting sources, Lee looks for pictures that might pose a painterly challenge or opportunity—a point of entry by which the traditional human sitter can be reassessed as aesthetic data. At the same time, she's drawn to those facial expressions, gestures, and props that reveal the affective strata of her subjects, despite their best efforts at concealment. After legally acquiring the rights to a picture, Lee makes few adjustments beyond changes in scale or shifts in hue.

Throughout the exhibition, a dynamic tension emerges between the triviality of a snapped selfie and the lasting monumentality of an oil painting, created over countless laborious hours in the studio. As the first step in her process, Lee builds up a tactile gesso underpainting characterized by scoring and spontaneous markmaking. She then applies pigment one color at a time in near-translucent layers to form a laminate-like surface signature to her practice. This method—along with the choice to work in a restrained palette anchored by black, white, blue, and red—links the artist's approach to the analog mechanisms of CMYK printing, whereby an image is reduced to pure chromatic information, created pass by pass. With their subtle evidence of stains and seepages, the resulting paintings communicate their own multistep method of becoming even as they suggest the immutable veneer of the readymade. In the way of photographs, Lee's paintings seem at once real and unreal, documentary and produced.

In another typology, the artist extends the same process of online image-sourcing to the childhood photos that pop up across social media accounts, then renders them in depictions of expressive realism. Small in format and tightly framed, these paintings emphasize the wide-eyed innocence of subject-as-baby: artifacts of a person's

earliest chapters. Read in relation to the pathos exuded by Lee's young women, these infants suggest the presence of an uninhibited former self, innocent to standards of beauty or pressures to perform. As visual studies, Lee's babies exemplify several of the artist's formal interests: the equipoise of light and dark, the compositional potential of the figure and face, and the ways in which subtle chromatic choices influence a picture's mood—for example, how a tinge of blue on opalescent skin suggests the artificiality of screen light.

The still lifes on view reflect similar themes of surface versus substance. Staged in isolation, dramatically lit, and topped with flaming candles, Lee's birthday cakes appear shrouded by a muted haze, the products of memories or dreams. Here, the cake's primary function as food is eclipsed by its status as a visual object, sculptural in its formal elegance and ornamented by icing. Upon closer inspection, however, the decorative, carefully-constructed shell succumbs, in places, to mold—evidence of an inherent vulnerability and subtle decay. In the tradition of the vanitas image, these confections both communicate and arrest the unstoppable passage of time, whereby no amount of preservation or adornment can save us from mortality. This reckoning, foundational not only to the human condition, but as a longstanding topos in the history of painting, also applies to the seductive appeal of a dematerialized online existence, in which pixels, code, and data will always outlive their human and material counterparts.

Standing face to face with enlarged embodiments of yearning, *Persona Works* situates viewers in the position of the phone-turned-camera—the mirror of today—replete with its many conflicting capacities for modification, dispersion, critique, and approval. This vantage speaks to the familiar hybridity of daily life, in which we toggle between multiple manifestations of the real, and of ourselves. While Lee's paintings acknowledge the heterogeneity of contemporary experience, first and foremost they compel our identification with the distinctly human consciousnesses that call out from the polished surface, and whose efforts at perfection are as futile as they are relatable.

Moka Lee (b. 1996, South Korea) has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Carlos/Ishikawa, London (2025); Jason Haam, Seoul, South Korea (2023); Gallery ANOV, Seoul, South Korea (2020); and Yugiche, Busan, South Korea (2020). Notable group exhibitions include *Second Body*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (2025); *MOSS : The Damp and Shaded Green Mass*, Seoul Museum, Seoul, South Korea (2025); *SeMA Omnibus: At the End of the World Split Endlessly*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea (2024); *Masterful Attention Seekers*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Busan, South Korea (2024); and *Artificial Tears*, Museum Head, Seoul, South Korea (2024). Her work is in the permanent collections of the Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea; Longlati Foundation, Shanghai, China; and Kistefos Museum, Jevnaker, Norway. She lives and works in Seoul, South Korea.