

# WELCOME TO WONDERLAND

Inside the **inventive** universe of **JooYoung Choi**, where puppets run wild, bearing **social consciousness**.

By Catherine D. Anson. Photography William Issac.



**T**oys, especially stuffed animals, are not new in contemporary art and design; witness the works of Mike Kelley, Joyce Pensato, and the Campana Brothers. When one gets to puppets, we move into TV and film icons, from Pinocchio, Lamb Chop, Topo Gigio, and the kingdoms of Mr. Rogers and Captain Kangaroo to Ernie, Big Bird, and Kermit. Such are the lessons of play. Now one Houston-based artist has transformed herself into a feminist Geppetto. In a *PaperCity* exclusive, we visit the studio of **JooYoung Choi** on the eve of her **Moody Center for the Arts** opening (Thursday, May 25), followed this July by a solo at **Inman Gallery** and wrapping the year with a turn in **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's** 75th anniversary exhibition, "Six Scenes From Our Future."

When we first met JooYoung Choi a decade ago, she had just moved to town to join her fiancé, artist Trenton Doyle Hancock. In 2016, the pair wed at the *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*-featured Toontown Tunnel at Griffith Park in L.A. and celebrated at Disneyland — which makes sense if you know this couple and follow their artwork. To date, *PaperCity* has done three studio visits: in 2014, 2019, and now this spring.

When you first look at images from Choi's new studio, you might mistake the location for the set of a children's TV pilot, but this is actually the creative environment of one of America's future art stars. Don't let the bright colors, menagerie of toys, handcrafted props (such as giant lollipop-shaped trees), and wall bearing all manner of puppets fool you. Amid this universe of jubilation and joy, there's a serious message, one inspired by Disney's 1966 ride *It's a Small World*. It's both retro utopian and on point now. Choi's art, which reflects her unique upbringing and her search for identity, bears messages about tolerance and inclusion — racial, sexual, cultural — and is intensely relevant today.

#### A Brief Bio

The Korean-born Choi came to America as an adopted infant, raised by Caucasian parents in the non-diverse state of New Hampshire. She holds academic credentials from Boston-area institutions: a BFA from Massachusetts College of Art and Design (2010) and MFA from Lesley University (2012). Along the way, study at Berklee College of Music — helpful in composing her own cartoon scores later — added to her repertoire. Before completing her education, the artist took the bold step of



William Issac, and yours truly, others were present the day of our shoot — but they weren't human. Nearly 50 soft and cuddly creations took over a wall, holding court in a sort of tryout for the installation at Moody Center, which will center around a pivotal, interactive gallery of ... puppets. While I'd been introduced previously to the endearing, human-sized Poundcake Man and handheld Putt-Putt the pink octopus, what was new was an imaginary world of freshly conceived beings, including

People fall in love with the puppet. I also like video art because it's got a lot of humor in it. And then, like the puppets, it makes people feel comfortable." Reflecting on her trajectory as a puppeteer and filmmaker, she says, "I love making them and making them dance ... especially the ones where it takes two people to make the puppet dance. One person is doing one leg and the other person is doing one leg and the other person is doing the arm, then you put on the green-screen suits, and we all disappear. You see this thing come alive. And we did it together."

In many ways, Choi's studio-turned-puppet-workshop represents a reconnection with childhood. The artist also hints about the possibilities of someday having her own TV program, not unlike the cult fave H.R. Pufnstuf she grew up watching in reruns. "This is what I was thinking about when I was eight," she says.

Looking ahead to her Rice opening, which is curated by Moody Center executive director Alison Weaver, Choi says, "I know for now that they're interested in having a cake-like thing with different puppets all around it. I will make a new series of puppets along with some of the old favorites. But I want to do it rainbow style, so there are all red ones, all orange ones. It'll be a fun opportunity to challenge myself —

how many orange characters can I think of making. There have been a lot of people over the years that I've met that I've wanted to make a puppet to represent them ... We're going to have some podiums with different main characters who run an infinite pie-delivery service. They travel across the universe on a giant Pegasus-Giraffe, which, through the magic of film, you can make look ginormous. She has a house that straps to her back, so it looks like she's flying throughout her city ..." Stay tuned. "*JooYoung Choi: Love and WonderVision*," at Rice University Moody Center for the Arts, May 25 - August 26, [moody.rice.edu](http://moody.rice.edu). "*JooYoung Choi: Discovering Truth Will Make Me Free*," at Inman Gallery, July 8 - August 26, [inmangallery.com](http://inmangallery.com). "*Six Scenes From Our Future*," at CAMH, October 27, 2023 - January 21, 2024, [camh.org](http://camh.org).

Choi's first nonbinary puppet. Many of these charming stuffed personalities will be voiced by fellow artists and friends, debuting during Rice's Moody Center solo, as well as a collection of videos. We met Kirnop, PomPom Thunder, and her first puppet ever, Ohghee Tohkee. While her soft sculptures may look sweet, they also allude to race, gender, and cultural identity — ideas that form the central tenets of Choi's work. Discussing them for the art-goer via Choi's nonthreatening sculpture is not only joyful but somehow soothing and uplifting. It's the perfect anecdote for these turbulent times, one that points the way towards a to-be-hoped-for more inclusive and compassionate future.

traveling to Korea in 2007 in search of her birth parents, reuniting with them and gaining additional family members. Her career in her new hometown of Houston — the most diverse city in the U.S. — has seen her embraced by its institutions (witness the upcoming shows at Moody Center and CAMH), where Choi has contributed a welcome dialogue about immigration and inclusion.

#### Whom We Met in Choi's Studio

Besides the artist, studio assistant/UH intern Gale Rodriguez, photographer

"The puppets are a bridge," Choi says. "They let people feel welcomed into the world because painting and sculpture can be very intimidating.