

Artist

NIGHT RIDE WITHOUT MAPS: Leelee Kimmel's Journey of Painting

Writer - Xiaoxiao Yan



Portrait of Leelee Kimmel © Leelee Kimmel - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech
Photo: Charles Roussel

Imagine a journey. The knight is tired of following the monarch, and he sets off on his own at night, forgetting the map and entering the labyrinth. A world of colorful alienation unfolds before him, a sea serpent slithering in blue light, a bright red lyre tipped on its side, golden beakless birds flying on wings from the dark treetops. The knight walks through the infinite labyrinth, capturing the lines, shapes and air that tide towards him with his eyes.

Imagining such a knight and his journey is one of the easy things to do when looking at one of Leelee Kimmel's large-scale paintings, but of course this does not mean that this is the only possible version of the story. The titles of her last two solo exhibitions, from *Nuwar* (a combination of New and War) in 2019, to *Night Ride* recently shown at Almine Rech Gallery Shanghai, and even one of her most recent works, *Knight* (2021), all suggest a certain kind of repetition in their conceptual consistency. The landscape of earthenware and self-chasing. Kimmel confesses that she "wants people to jump into my belly", so that we can be sure that the source of these landscapes need not be sought from outside, but come from her profound inner world.

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Leelee Kimmel, *Night Rider*, 2021, Oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 193 x 274.3cm © Leelee Kimmel - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Charles Roussel

The otherworldly world generated from within

Kimmel's iconic painting vocabulary is a thousand meandering motions that allow the colorful acrylics to compose a variety of unexplainable forms on a huge canvas. These movements, including dense weaving, thick painting, outlining, blocking, swinging, swirling, etc., seem to coexist in a completely uncontrollable manner, exploding in the field of view and making people forget to talk about them. The way those indefinable objects are shaped within her paintings, and the way they are connected, squeezed or distanced from each other, are beyond the realm of figurative or abstract definition, and have long been critically categorized as some kind of "biomorph" appearance.

The earliest descriptions of the term "biomorphism" in art include those of the 1930s by the critic and first curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, Geoffrey Grigson, and Alfred H. Barr. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, emphasized the distinction between modern geometric abstraction, based on intuition and emotion, and less structured curvilinear forms. In the case of Kimmel's work, the creation of "biomorphic forms" also inherits a certain aesthetic experience linked to the organic abstraction of Surrealism, from Joan Miró, Wassily Kandinsky, Jean Arp to Yves Tanguy. But if there is a common thread between Kimmel and these distinctive masters, it is not so much the abstract forms associated with the living forms of nature that are so popular, but rather the source of the images that lie behind them, from the individual subconscious to the collective subconscious of the entire art. As Yves Tanguy once said, he could not give a clear definition to any of his images, otherwise it would "become his own prison", and Kimmel also made it clear that in her works, there is no reference to the material world of incense rubbing, from the total image shown in the whole picture to the smallest empty element. For her, if she were to find a source

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for them, the answer would be: “They are born from within, and they have a mind of their own.” Perhaps we can turn to the sense of need provided by Henri Bergson’s “intuition”! To get to the feeling of Kimmel’s work: when Kimmel depicts herself entering the studio as “unable to predict anything”. While “intuition” serves as another important channel of understanding the world, opening up a quick knot of spiritual power for her, Bergsonian “élan vital” also provides a creative endeavor, rolling into a hot street image at the material world’s end, condensing into a stable form of energy or composed life image, which then grows on its own.

Despite certain commonalities, Kimmel’s creative circle does not follow any stylistic genre in the history of art to complete the aforementioned life image; she consciously allows her approach to follow unfamiliar paths, not by spending a lot of time in the studio, but by the subconscious, which, under meditative time, gives birth to the natural direction of the work. At the same time, the physical fashion or cultural fashion itself is not perceived in her works, she tries to create works that exist in the past, present and future at the same time, in a spiritual dimension of time.



Leelee Kimmel, *Nuwar*, 2019 © Leelee Kimmel - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Rebecca Fanuele

A balance of impulse and restraint

Although it is not easy to see through the playful lines of her writing, it is not difficult to realize the energy of a certain “balance of life” that is easily manifested in her creations. That’s not all! Kimmel has never shown a preference for certain colors or types of colors, and maintains a balance of colors even in her most minimalistic images. At the same time, it is obvious that we can perceive a similar tendency in each of her paintings: whether from a microscopic or macroscopic point of view, her works have both a spiritual tension and a horizontal balance, which, on the one hand, gives one the urge to analyze and interpret them in a formalistic way, and on the other hand, constantly creates a mystical atmosphere, as if clusters of flowers are budding in deep water, and then blooming into spells. The spell of the mystical atmosphere is like a cluster of buds in the deep water, and then blooming. Different helium atmospheres and different textures of energy are secretly balanced in her writings in a variety of movements, it has never been purely stationary, but it has never been tilted to any side. The balance of restraint and creation are

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both contradictory and harmonious in Kimmel's works, and they are her way to continue to doubt her inner creative energy.

In her previous works, Kimmel's paintings are often pure, but sometimes with a pure white background! As a complementary presence to the main subject of the picture. The most common black background seems to be a deep mix, and also like the word "void", with different combinations of enjoined shapes floating on it, as if it has no beginning, no end, and no destination. The deep, bottomless background and the immersion of space brought by the large size of the work: it is not like a white space that creates a mood, but more like a chanting path that unlocks the knot of different time and space. Just as Kimmel's 2018 London homonym *Wormhole*, the entire street home also intentionally allows such passages to emerge: drawing people to explore the script of the universe in other time and space. Kimmel says that she hardly has a sense of direction in her life, and that when facing her paintings, she should not fix the top, bottom, left and right, and that this lack of direction also supports the balance in her written works from another perspective.

The new works of recent years that appear in Kimmel's Shanghai solo exhibition *Night Ride* have a new pattern. This shift began as early as 2018-2019, when Kimmel became a full-time artist and went through a productive year, gradually slowing down her pace. The fullness of the picture gradually replaces the floating feeling of the main body of the previous works! The "biomorphic energy" that used to be generated almost exclusively by the artist's physical and mental gestures! The relationship between them is not as loose as before, and they are nested together in the same breath. The black background does not disappear completely, but meets the building surface in a state close to a gap, calling for a certain balance of brokenness to sink, and a new form of interaction to continue the state of living together.

The Void of the Meeting of Body Sense and Painting Nature

Kimmel's painting style has been largely established since her first solo exhibition *Channels* in 2018, using high-color Merkley paints and poisonous cloth to create her works. She constantly performs a whole range of fantasy between color, brushwork, interface, texture, and other elements of painting, turning the inner world into a surface that is either flat as a mirror, or waking up and winding, or like the fishing degree of oil paint, or like the dense weave of red weaving, or like the back and forth positioning of sketching! Driven by the acrylic paint in her hands, Kimmel constantly creates images of interest from all walks of life.

In contrast, her works refer to a number of bodily sensations. The first is the artist's own sense of physicality. Kimmel once referred to the way she moves when she paints as if she were playing Twister! Especially during the first few weeks of working on a painting, she is faced with a huge canvas stretched out on the floor of her New York studio, and she works with her body on all fours, adjusting and maintaining her balance as she works. She confesses that the whole day's work often causes her body pain, but it is "the pain of free choice", a pain that must be experienced in the process of growing up, or before achieving success. As an artist working on a huge canvas, the only thing in her field of vision is the canvas that is slowly emerging with color and shape, as if the world outside of it no longer exists, and this form is enough to allow Kimmel to immerse herself in the world she is creating while inking.

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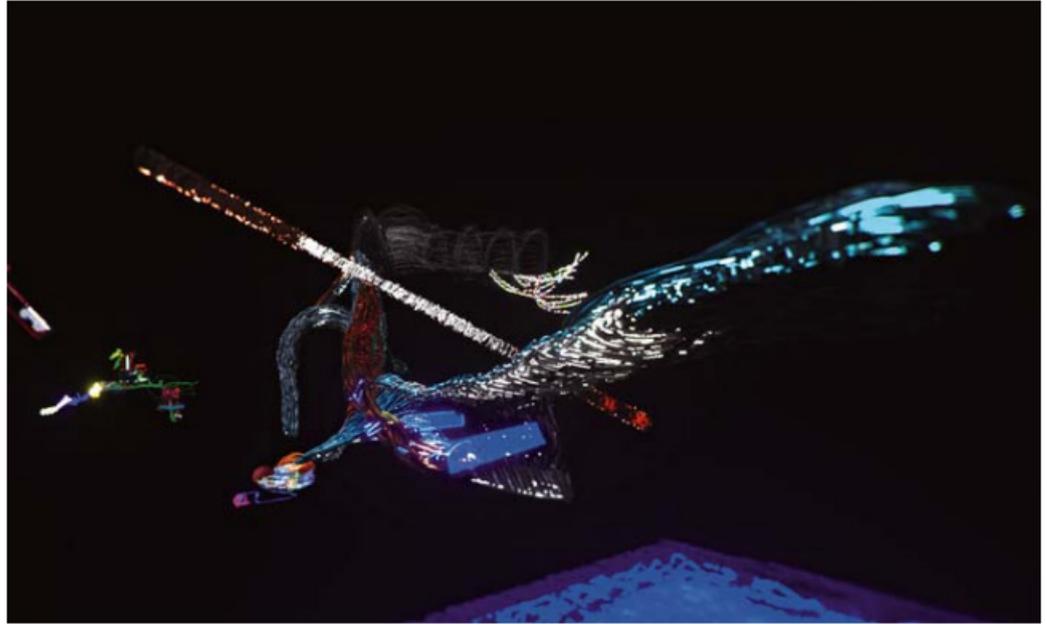
Leelee Kimmel, *How Many Birds Nocturnal Jungle*, 2021, Oil, oil stick, acrylic on canvas, 165.1 x 175.3cm © Leelee Kimmel - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech - Photo: Charles Roussel

After a certain number of steps, when the artist is sure that the “creature forms” in the picture have begun to develop their own stories, he hangs the cloth vertically and continues to work in the same way until the work is completed. At this point, Kimmel is no longer the same as the one who is completely immersed in the end, but has become a general at the helm of a warhorse, who is able to control the whole situation.

Finally, it is the viewer’s body that has the breadth. In front of such a magnificent work, even though the abstract interest rolls one’s attention to the pictorial elements and decorations from time to time, the appropriate size of the entire written work is feasible, desirable, tourable, and inhabitable - the labyrinth - like structure brings a certain degree of playfulness, but it is enough for one to gradually accommodate the darkness hidden inside the artist’s body, which then emerges like a deep mix of attraction.

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Leelee Kimme, *Wormhole*, VR video, 5 minutes, 2018 © Leelee Kimmel - Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech

Night Rider's Far Journey

In her solo exhibition *Wormhole* in 2018, Kimmel used digital tools to create VR works, transforming the maze on the canvas into an interstellar space that envelops herself and the viewer. However, painting is still the most desirable medium for her. When she sincerely confronts the problem of the medium, she finds that being in the digital space “the body and soul of the creator are at risk of being out of sync”, and although the virtual space offers the freedom to create on a very large scale, the magic of touch and smell felt on the canvas always calls to her.

This *Night Rider* exhibition will show the new creative direction of Kimmel in recent years, and also the life essence of a dreamer who has been in constant dialogue with her own internal “life force” for a long time, which has been transformed into a crystallized life essence through the natural flow of the drive. The Night Rider's journey in an unknown land has just begun, and the strange scenery along the way will become its points, guiding it towards a more profound future.