

서용선: 모건 애비뉴 300

Suh Yongsun: 300 Morgan Avenue

Text | Juyeon Kang, Gallery JJ Director

"Today, tomorrow, yesterday, the bland world gives us back our own reflection." – Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, 1857

Gallery JJ is pleased to present *300 Morgan Avenue*, a solo exhibition by Suh Yongsun, renowned for his profound exploration of human existence through painting. Marking his fifth exhibition with Gallery JJ, it features works created during his recent residency in New York, highlighting a key aspect of his ongoing city painting series. Since his first visit to New York in 1992, Suh has returned about 20 times, with each stay lasting between two and six months. Over the years, New York has increasingly informed his *city series*, as his perspectives on urban life have been refined through years of local experience and deepened sensitivity. This exhibition delves into his firsthand encounters with the city, emphasizing the expansive and diverse expressions within his painterly space, and reflecting on the universal conditions of contemporary existence and the impact New York has had on his artistic practice.

300 Morgan Avenue refers to his summer 2024 residency address in Brooklyn. Featuring recent city series from 2024 alongside earlier works, the exhibition contextualizes his three-decade-long engagement with New York. Works on view include large paintings spanning over five meters, such as *34th St.* (2017-2024), works on paper, and journal sketches. Suh portrays the discomfort and vulnerability of urban dwellers lost in the crowd, exploring how anonymity deepens isolation in the scenes of streets, cafes and subways. Nearly half of the exhibition is dedicated to subway scenes, including *Metropolitan+Bushwick Station* (2024), drawn from the station he frequented this past summer. His unique urban odyssey reframes these familiar public spaces, shedding new light on often-overlooked routines in urban transit. Given Korea's political and economic resemblance and ties with the United States, the capitalist mode of life in New York may resonate particularly well. The exhibition invites viewers on a fascinating journey to encounter themselves and their lives through the artist's keen vision, fostering critical engagement with the social systems we inhabit and the divide between ideals and reality.

"The sound of haulers' engines echoes outside the window. I hear the rush of air slicing through the dawn as vehicles speed by, and the dust-laden air of Brooklyn seeps into the room." – Suh Yongsun, journal entry, New York, 2024

Based in Seoul, Suh Yongsun has spent years in his studio in Yangpyeong while also immersing himself in metropolises worldwide, including Berlin, Melbourne, Sydney, Beijing, Paris, and Seattle. His time in New York has notably increased in recent years. This journey is not merely fueled by nomadic curiosity or a romanticized media image; rather, it involves an embodied engagement with the real, lived worlds that form an essential ground for an artist committed to exploring human condition and modern life in urban contexts.

Suh's work is instantly recognizable for its expressive brushstrokes and bold imagery, interwoven with tightly ordered structures. Each visual form speaks to his exploration of painting as a medium and, at its core, an enduring curiosity about humanity – modern individuals whose lives are constrained by society. It manifests through his recurring themes of history, mythology, cityscapes, and landscapes, alongside portraits and self-portraits. He revisits historical figures *Prince Nosan*, and *Kim Siseup*, or pivotal events like the Korean War, eliciting images through the lens of the forgotten, in his quest for the archetype of humanity. He has also undertaken projects in places of historically significant sites,

including *Cheoram*, a former mining town he has visited since 2001, and *Amtaedo*, a site of tenant farmers' struggle, where he continues to work today. Following these on-site works, he continues to develop the city series, exploring the mental state of city dwellers and the stark reality of modern life.

His work juxtaposes individuals and their circumstances, focusing on marginalized historical figures and the impassive individuals he sees in cities today that manifest the invisible forces at play within the absurdity of their asynchronous yet layered lives. Such elements appear as a mysterious tension on the canvas through demarcated lines, distorted forms and robust colors. His longstanding focus on the human form and 'expressing narrative reality' has evolved from a fascination with primal act of 'depicting' found in Egyptian and Goguryeo murals, and the resurgence of figurative art in the 1980s. This exploration between representation and abstraction leads him to express the 'human form marked by modernity' and engage with historical awareness. In visually reconstructing traces of events and memories, he began his city and history series four decades ago, continuing today with unceasing observation and reinterpretation, presenting each subject without definitive judgment.

The present moment is both future history and a trace of the past. For Suh, the city embodies living history, with his cityscapes serving as historical narratives. His city series began around 1984 when he debuted in the art scene, depicting the evolving forms of life in modern times. Since then, it has expanded from Seoul to other major cities worldwide, continuing to this day. Cities have encapsulated the course of human history, acting as places for all modes of life. This body of work, especially those of New York, connects his oeuvre across contexts, inviting multiple interpretations.

"At the Starbucks entrance, I saw, a singing man, and subway riders embody their daily life, affirming the era I live in and prompting a comparison of our memories to its reality. This invites us to examine our perception through form and materiality, while the act of painting captures the gestures of these individuals, upholding universal actions of our time. These paintings also hold meaning as scenes within the world." – Suh Yongsun

New York

"How do I get to Broadway? I want to get to the center of things!" – John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer*, 1925

Street scenes outside Suh's studio window, the concourse at Rockefeller Center, and subway car interiors are populated by people absorbed in their phones and indifferent to one another. Unlike the vibrant café scenes of Sydney and Melbourne or the lush greens of Berlin, New York has been often depicted in dark browns and grays with sharp lines. However, this time, he brightens the palette, shifting from deep browns and edgy reds to more luminous tones. This change reflects his growing affinity with the city perhaps. In *Macy's* (2022, 2024), he deliberately enlarges and accentuates the iconic red star and a dancing woman, capturing a celebratory event taking place outside the store as a facet of consumer society. The red star, emblematic of Macy's – the oldest department store in the U.S. from the 19th century – represents the scale of modern consumerism with its vast chain of over five hundred stores.

New York is both a cultural capital and symbol of economic wealth, teeming with urban chic hallmarks: a myriad of museums, galleries, skyscrapers, fine dining, and luxury brands. Yet, his focus remains on everyday urban dwellers in modest spaces like Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks, as well as on inexpensive and fast public transit. Much like his other adventures beyond his comfort zone, he observes the surroundings at nearby venues or while shuttling between Manhattan and his Brooklyn studio. While such activities may be confined to the limits of his routine, his gaze, despite the city's opulence, remains fixed on the pressured, ordinary individuals navigating this post-capitalist system, often excluded from genuine values. This perspective echoes the isolation and fragmented realities exposed within a highly

commodified environment.

As a cornerstone of modern art since World War II, New York remains undeniably enchanting with its trendsetting exhibitions and a rich array of notable works from Western art history. Suh recognizes the immense power of capital behind cultural phenomena, from various commercial events to extensive museum collections. His works underscore the signs dominating urban landscape, revealing the city's pervasive commercialization through the unavoidable presence of signage from Chase Bank and Macy's. Ongoing curiosity about these texts occupying the city and the anonymity of its inhabitants, especially the relationship between public transit riders' movement and the pace of contemporary life, remains a central theme in his work.

City

New York first captured Suh's attention with its urban density, vibrant cultural scene, and diversity. For him, it is a place where modern desires, social dynamics, and emerging technologies converge more vividly than anywhere else. Few cities can visually manifest the defining features of contemporary life as clearly as New York, including advanced architecture, science and public transit. This massive construct, born from human ambition and embodying a utopian longing, feels less like an external object and more like the very ground we inhabit, akin to Merleau-Ponty's description of nature. While some cities fade, others are reimagined as futuristic hubs driven by innovation. The modern city, severed from nature, reflects our chosen way of life, and its essence lies in the people who inhabit it.

"National borders blur, exposing only the power that controls them. We meet new people and new cities. Paintings are things that emerge from such new ideas." – Suh Yongsun, 2017

As societies entered the modern era, rapid urbanization brought new conditions that reshaped how people live. Baudelaire was among the first to describe a specific attitude toward this shift as *modernity*, while for Walter Benjamin, the metropolis was where modernity most visibly unfolded. Modernity implied a departure from traditional ways of living towards a new paradigm. Suh personally experienced the rapid urbanization of Seoul in the 1970s and 80s, recognizing the city as a defining symbol of modern life. The city became both the subject and lens through which to express critical issues of modern society in his paintings, capturing the traces of people shaping the urban landscape and the ways they navigate life within it. His paintings of 1990s Seoul portrayed scenes from his commute, crowded streets with vehicles and advertisements for brands such as Samsung and Coca-Cola. While some of these works depict subway entrances like *Yeoksam Station*, his New York paintings now shift the focus to the subway as a primary urban space. His city series questions the psychological pressure and social norms individuals face within its rigid system where the public operates under anonymity.

Subway

"Thinking-Walking, 18th Ave... The sight of an elderly man sitting on the subway to my right became a fleeting memory from my walk. His worn clothes and tired expression..." – journal entry, New York, 2023

Walking, thinking, seeing, and sketching are integral to Suh's daily routine in New York, which he refers to as '*walking-exercise*,' with walking and the subway as his primary modes of transport. He carries a sketchbook to capture fleeting moments by quick, on the spot drawings. The subway symbolizes modernity and is an indispensable element of the urban phenomena he observes. His renowned subway paintings are distinguished not only by their sheer volume and subject matter, but also the way this ordinary space is seen and depicted, contributing to the sense of enigma and

intensity conveyed on the canvas. Since *Manhattan Subway* (1995), his subway paintings have deliberately featured lines like N, L, D, F, 6, and 7, alongside stops like 14th and 34th Street, and directions like Downtown or Queens. They reflect the distinct atmosphere he experiences on each ride, where various situations of each person unfold over time in this confined space. The dynamics of ascent and descent in the underground are emphasized, while the ambiguous interplay between the train's interior and exterior views creates a disorienting effect reminiscent of *dromoscopy*. The movement of observed figures and objects results in striking distortions of size, color, and line, highlighting the surreal intensity of these moments in the city.

Suh notes that the subway experience in New York starkly contrasts with that of Seoul, where exposed steel H-beams erected over 120 years ago create a jarring visual impression, while the deafening screech in the subterranean space evokes a primal sensation that can be genuinely intimidating. The ever-expanding transit system, structured by state control, efficiently moves large numbers of people and goods to every corner of the city, echoing Virilio's idea that the speed of subway parallels the rush of capitalism. Modes of movement and communication fundamentally alter our relationship with objects in space and time. Here, anxiety arises as an instinctual awareness of such power and speed that exceeds our bodily perception. As sociologist Georg Simmel pointed out in the early 20th century, mass transit systems can create a sense of alienation and inhibition, leading modern individuals to experience a new kind of space. Suh's subway scenes convey the sensations of being physically propelled in acceleration, facing lassitude, and existing as a restrained body in dissociation with strangers in confined spaces. It denotes the fragmented nature of human interaction in modern cities. He suggests that the image of powerless city dwellers in such means of movement prompts us to ponder whether we are content with the limited spaces assigned to us by the system.

When visiting different cities, Suh identifies their main modes of transit: canals and subways in Berlin, trams and traffic sign crossings in Melbourne, buses and cyclists in Beijing. Some drawings from his first trip to Tokyo in 1985, such as *Tokyo Station* and *Tokyo Subway*, demonstrate how this particular interest took shape early on in his career. *New York, Subway Entrance* (1997, 1998) echoes his earlier piece, *Sookdae Entrance 07:00-09:00* (1991) from Seoul, where a male figure in a suit ascending from the underground reflects the daily routine of commuters he witnessed at the time, evoking a bleak, unstable nuance in metropolises through striped patterns and cage-like mesh forms. Once dark, empty, and unsettling, the subway stations of the early 2000s now buzz with crowds and buskers, softening the grind of commuting. These spaces are filled with signs devised to enforce order and subtly regulate behaviors in the maze-like underground. The frequent appearance of exit signs in his paintings serves as a reminder that this space is meant to be escaped as much as navigated.

Text often plays a pivotal role on his canvas, occasionally leading the entire composition. In *Korea Town* (2024), the jam-packed signage adorning the façade of buildings on 32nd Street connotes Korean immigrant culture and functions as visual markers, reminding viewers that this unique place in America is a melting pot, a nation of immigrants. These words, layered with time and reflections on life's struggles and hopes in a foreign land, are tightly arranged in a grided composition that confronts the viewer directly, leaving no room for distraction.

Suh Yongsun explores the lives of urbanites and immigrants, particularly in Harlem and Brooklyn, engaging with new ways of living through encounters with people of Latin American and African communities. These experiences push him to deeply understand others while recognizing and dismantling his own ingrained prejudices. He notes that he, too, is being reborn through this process. He consistently presents the observed reality that can never be objective via his pictorial realm and reaffirms his own existence. Inclined toward the heterogeneity that is absent in scenes from Korea, his latest city paintings, rooted in New York's multiethnic and multicultural milieu, convey a profound empathy

for humanity. Certainly, his artistic practice continues to delve into the condition and intricacy of life in New York despite various barriers he encounters as a foreigner. In a world detached from metaphysical values – adrift helplessly in a fleeting, media-driven climate – Suh Yongsun’s inquiry into the essence of being and objects becomes ever more precious and meaningful.

“Humans are inherently limited, yet we strive to transcend those boundaries, and there is something deeply resonant in such struggle. I often wonder how to capture this sense of grace - the unwavering commitment to push forward through one’s work – as a form within my paintings.” - Suh Yongsun, interview, New York, July 27, 2024