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An artist's rendering of clichés, by South Korean Jung Lee

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South Korean artist Jung Lee's series of works — “Aporia” and “Day and Night” — delve into the emotions behind phrases oft-used in love and hate

By Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review

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Image Credit: Supplied

I Want To Be Your Love, 2012

“I dream of you”; “I still remember you”; “How could you do this to me.” These are words we hear all the time. And we hardly ever stop to think about what they really mean. But South Korean artist Jung Lee has spent a lot of time trying to understand the connotations of these common clichés and delving deep into the emotions behind these words.

In her photographic works, she combines neon sculptures of everyday phrases with various outdoor environments to create haunting landscapes that invite viewers to contemplate on human relationships and the sense of isolation that is part of modern urban life.

Lee's artworks are about longing, loneliness and loss. But they are also about love, beauty and hope. The artist is displaying two separate series of works, titled “Aporia” and “Day and Night”, at her first solo show in Dubai.

“I am interested in the relationship between text and image and the space in between. When I was a student in London, I heard common English phrases such as ‘I love you with all my heart’, and it made me think about how these words could mean different things to different people. I tried to capture this concept in my work by creating a visual representation of the words and the feelings behind them. I picked phrases that triggered my imagination and I put in a lot of effort in looking for places that resonate with the words and make them come alive,” Lee says.

Although she has chosen simple everyday phrases for her work, Lee did extensive research, speaking to people from all walks of life and reading classical literature to gain a deeper understanding of their meaning. Her “Aporia” series is inspired by French philosopher Roland Barthes's book, “A Lover's

Discourse”, which is about the delusional, idealistic world of lovers seeking to understand the mysteries of love.

Here, Lee has used clichéd expressions of love and hate such as “I want to be your love”, “Once in a lifetime”, “Why” and “The End” for her neon sculptures. And she has placed them in stark landscapes of snow-covered fields, barren desert and uninhabited areas outside the city. The illuminated words stuck in those bleak surroundings speak about the loneliness of the lover and the sorrow of unrequited love.

Resembling the cold neon lights of the city, the empty phrases in empty places draw attention to the emptiness in modern urban life. But the serene pictures also speak about how beautiful love and life are.

“Aporia is a Greek word that means ‘coming to a dead end’. Barthes says that when you are in love your mind is full of endless questions and unrealistic expectations about yourself, your lover and the idea of love. These result in lies and conflicts that lead to a dead end in the relationship. He describes love as a living thing that is wondering, shouting and constantly changing.

“The book helped me to understand the deeper nature of love and to visualise the neon lights as city people. I started this series with the word ‘Why’ and I want to convey the feeling of being isolated and distant, wanting to forget and reaching a dead end. But I also leave this open space beyond, which could be a door to something new,” Lee says.

Her “Day and Night” series is inspired by Dante’s “Divine Comedy”. Here a cluster of words such as “love”, “god”, “death” and “forever” are seen floating in the sea or arranged in a heap. The neon words are sharply visible against a totally dark background.

“Dante believed that true faith and love lead to paradise. I am drawn to Dante’s search for true light, but I wanted to interpret it in my own way,” Lee says.

“My work is about endless questions, human desires, dreams and relationships; it is about loneliness and the desire not to be lonely. I have chosen words that everybody can connect with. They mean different things to different people depending on their personal experiences and the meaning could change with changing times and circumstances. I want to convey this dynamism by making the words look like they are alive and travelling and interacting with the surroundings. I want viewers to engage with these words and landscapes and to use their imagination to construct their own stories,” she adds.

The show will run at Green Art gallery until October 23.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

Fact Box

Total Arts at the Courtyard is hosting a group exhibition by leading Iranian artists Mehdi Ahmadi, Zubin Amiri, Shaqayeq Arabi, Fereydoun Ave, Priya Assal Gheysari, Aharon Gluska and Mamali Shafahi. The show titled “On the Brink of Change” features paintings, drawings, photographic works, installations and objects, bringing together the diverse personal narratives of the artists.

The artworks on display range from Ahmadi’s contemporary interpretations of history and mythology, to Amiri’s abstracted forms and materials inspired by his work as an architect. While Arabi transforms everyday objects and her own earlier paintings into interesting new artworks, Gluska creates landscapes and seascapes charged with emotion. Gheysari is interested in examining issues of gender and religion

from the perspective of an Iranian who has returned to her country and Shafahi comments on socio-political issues through the powerful symbolism of a map of Iran.

The show will run until October 28.