psb

Fish have to swim

Anna Choi

14 March 2025 - 19 April 2025
Paint Shop Berlin

Have you ever found yourself in a conversation saying, Oh, I don't really remember… while, in truth, every detail is etched into your mind? The station you got off that day. The good excuse you came up with to treat yourself to an iced latte. The way your clothes felt — too warm, too cold. And yet, to acknowledge all of this — every insignificant-seeming but oddly persistent detail — feels like an exposure of something unspoken. A proof of presence, of attention, of attachment. It is easier to feign forgetfulness, to let a moment dissolve into vagueness rather than admit how precisely it lingers. But what if someone else remembers too? Not just the broad strokes, but the minutiae — the sound of ice cubes rattling in your to-go coffee cup, the station where you met, the shade of light at that particular hour? It's nice, isn't it? A token of recognition, perhaps even true fondness.

Memory is deeply personal, subjective, and selective. When Berlin-based painter Anna Choi says she paints from memory, she invites us to believe she is simply recalling something external. But do not be distracted. Her paintings are not just memory exercises; they are intimate reconstructions of what lingers in perception long after the moment has passed.

Choi's practice is rooted in an attempt to navigate the tension between distraction and deep concentration. Her artistic process begins with carefully chosen film stills or opulent paintings sought out at the Gemäldegalerie — images that catch her attention and demand to be remembered. Through drawing, she isolates and distills specific details, removing them from their original narrative. These drawings are not static studies but a transitional stage. She does not bring them to the studio but instead commits them to memory, allowing them to shift and transform in her mind. By the time she translates them into paintings, she is no longer reproducing an external source but reconstructing the memory of her own drawing. What remains is not a direct representation, but a visual echo, shaped as much by what is remembered as by what is forgotten.

Initially drawn to cinema writing during her studies in Seoul, Choi experimented with different ways of expressing emotion. Over time, she became increasingly interested in the ways painting could capture nuances that words could not, leading her to shift her focus towards the visual language of abstraction. Inspired by the visually intricate films of Federico Fellini, an Italian filmmaker who shaped mid-20th-century cinema with his dreamlike, highly stylized storytelling, Choi identifies a similarity between cinematic storytelling and painting — both are visual narratives that hold detail and intensity.

By stripping her images of context, Choi allows them to exist in a space between recollection and reinterpretation — a process both deliberate and elusive. In "Fish have to swim," she invites the viewer into this space, where recognition is uncertain, where what was once distinct has softened, and where, just like memory itself, clarity is always just out of reach.

Text: Helen-Sophie Mayr