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Robert C. Morgan, *For a World Losing Its Head, an Artist Proffers Shamanism as a Solution*, May, 2016

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Art **Reviews**

For a World Losing Its Head, an Artist Proffers Shamanism as a Solution



by Robert C. Morgan

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Hyon Gyon, "Headcount" (2016) (all images courtesy Shin Gallery) (click to enlarge)

The terror incited by the sight of heads rolling down the plank of a guillotine one after another is difficult to conjure in the 21st century. However, at one time, in addition to providing the public with a spectacle, the motive behind chopping off heads was to contain the threat of an uprising or, worse, an organized revolution. Whether in Europe, Britain, or the Middle East, the process of decapitating or dismembering human bodies wielded a fortuity of iconic power. The seriousness of the debacle was quantified by the headcount lay to rest in the pile at the end of the plank.



Detail of Hyon Gyon, "Headcount" (2016)

Emotional Drought, the current exhibition at **Shin Gallery** on the Lower East Side, is the latest in a triad of exhibitions by Korean-born painter **Hyon Gyon**. Its focus is a large, freestanding painting/installation titled "Headcount" (2016) and situated diagonally in the middle of this storefront gallery. A taut, expressionist image of a raging female shaman appears to have usurped the function of the guillotine. Positioned off the floor on a wooden platform, the shamanist matriarch is surrounded by 300 oil-painted heads, each on its own cotton, hand-sewn pillow. In addition

to the major pile, there is another wooden crate with heads to drive home the point. A small, gold-fringed banner hangs in front of the display reading: "God told me to hate you."

Each head painting is unique, thus suggesting a massive execution, perhaps over a long period of time. It is difficult to know whether the heads were separately imagined by the artist or metaphorically observed in the workplace as in the general line of cultural production, where often-vile competition replaces inspiration and self-fulfillment. Some of these presumably deposed physiognomies appear male, others female, and still others androgynous. The style of these deceptively paltry pillow paintings is rigorously expressionist, but less manic than the invidious, bare-breasted shaman who rises up from her spoils.



Detail of Hyon Gyon, "Headcount" (2016)

In the exhibition's press release, the artist suggests these heads represent those circumscribed by media. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that each painting is given the gentility of a soft fabric cushion yet is inevitably isolated, an appropriate metaphor for the current art world. Ironically, it raises the question: If the art media are the culprits, what is the role of the shaman? Is she a symbol of the pervasiveness of media? Or is she the protectorate of those "decapitated" in the pile below? The ambiguity is interesting. To the artist's credit, she does not attempt to literalize the narrative. What we do know is that shamanism came to the Korean peninsula 5,000 years ago, undoubtedly by way of Mongolia. Throughout the dynasties, from 57 BCE to 1910 CE, shamanism maintained a presence as the essential religion in Korea, which gradually changed after the Occupation (1910–45) and the advent of the so-called Korean War.

In addition to "Headcount," three other paintings are included in the exhibition. Installed on the back and side walls, they are collectively titled "Harlem Gold 1, 2, and 3" (all 2015). Each painting is vertically positioned on the walls, with gold, silver, and copper leaf generously applied to each canvas and automatist scribbles etched into the varied surfaces. In fact, the three canvases are quite similar to one another, with the gold leaf dominating, particularly in the lower and upper thirds of the paintings. Mysteriously, somehow, these paintings (done last summer at Hyon's former studio in Harlem) suggest a kind of necessary decorum, a countervailing

innocence, perhaps, used to augment the overall impact of the artist's indulgent obsession with a modular "headcount."



Hyon Gyon, "Harlem Gold 1, 2, and 3" (all 2015)

The power of the central installation — in fact, the entire space — is staggering, largely due to the emotional structure being dispelled through the re-evocation of a shamanist presence. It suggests that it may be time to bring shamanism back into our thoughts and emotions. In doing so, we might consider "shamanizing" the virtual aspects of our "global environment" that are becoming increasingly abstract and distant from how we actually think and feel.

The overall message I glean from Hyon's *Emotional Drought* is to suggest another way of seeing outside the specter of a universalist paranoia. Traditionally, the role of the shaman is about coming to terms with those unreflective indulgences and invisible traumas that media appear to either repress or disguise. To confront the absurd, massive pile of heads is to retrieve the sense of being human in the process of one's work and, indeed, one's life.