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Around the Galleries
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Half Breeds has a Dual Meaning
By Leah Ollman



“Half Breeds,” the title of Fay Ku’s stirring show at Sam Lee, refers to two kinds of hybrid: the cross-species creature common to myth, and the hyphenated American. Born in Taipei and raised in the U.S. (she lives now in Brooklyn), Ku conjures up the frictions inherent to both types in drawings of uncommon fluidity. Ku’s line has urgency, grace, dynamism and an animate, tensile strength. It brings to mind a mixed ancestry of its own, borrowing from Japanese woodcuts, classic fairy-tale illustration and perhaps even the high-contrast linearity of ancient Greek vase painting.

The most arresting works are drawn in gold on large sheets of black paper. “Owl Hunt II” (50 1/2 by 59 1/2 inches) shows a magnificent woman warrior, fiercely beautiful and epically tough, conquering a swarm of demonic owls with human faces. In gorgeous calligraphic line, Ku stages a scene that merges the theatrical and ornamental. Like all of her drawings, the image is mildly disturbing, invoking a violation of the presumed natural order.

In another fascinating piece, human and animal collide with some sort of dark, strategic intent, as grasshoppers lay their white, rice-like eggs in the hair and ear and knee-crook of a goddess of sorts, the human queen to an insect hive of fertile workers. Sexual hybridity charges this scene, and also “Lust Garden,” while “Assimilation” pictures a kind of self-imposed mutilation: Two mermaids bloodily split their tails to blend in with the two-legged, sacrificing one identity to lay claim to another. They mentor a second, pre-op pair, innocents succumbing to the call of the mainstream.

Not all of Ku’s drawings soar. Some lapse into melodrama, and in some she dilutes the power of her pure line with efforts at texture and collage. At their best, the works are vexing visualizations of metamorphoses past and present, fictive and familiar.

Sam Lee Gallery, 990 N. Hill Street #190, Chinatown, Los Angeles, (323) 227-0275, through February 19. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays. www.samleegallery.com.