


ARTS

Ara Koh Brings Clay to Life in Hamiltonian Artists *Grounding; Grounded; Ground*

Sourced and shaped by her hands, this solo exhibition by Hamiltonian fellow Ara Koh centers clay as a lively being, and suggests new definitions of landscape painting.

 by **IRENE BANTIGUE**
NOVEMBER 8TH, 2023



Ara Koh, "Ground Cast Water," 2023

On Oct. 28, Hamiltonian Artists, a gallery tucked between a nightclub and a wine store in D.C.'s lively U Street neighborhood, invited guests to interrogate an alternative world. Clay was the main character.

The exhibition *Grounding; Grounded; Ground* consists of new sculpted works by [Ara Koh](#) and is currently on display at Hamiltonian Artists. A native of Seoul, South Korea, Koh studied ceramics throughout her academic career in her hometown and in the United States. In 2020, she graduated with an MFA in Ceramic Art from Alfred University New York State College of Ceramics. Today, she lives and works in the D.C. area, and is a 2021-2023 [Hamiltonian fellow](#).

Since 2007, Hamiltonian Artists has supported early career artists like Koh in cultivating their creative practice and business acumen. **Paul So**, an avid painter and physics professor at George Mason University, founded Hamiltonian Artists and Hamiltonian Gallery—then two separate entities—with [big visions](#) of “creating an innovative career incubator program for emerging visual artists.” The two-year fellowship program provides professional development opportunities like one-on-one mentorship, institutional access, and more. Fellows also showcase a landmark exhibition or gallery activation during their final year.

In her solo exhibition, Koh explores the relationship between humanity and earth, specifically how they shape and reflect one another. True to Hamiltonian Artists' emphasis on innovation, Koh offers fresh takes on landscape painting, a style that depicts natural scenery and varies from realistic to impressionistic interpretations.

Like typical landscape paintings, Koh centers nature's five elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space. Her artworks evoke the same sense of wonder and connectedness to the world that the genre is known for. Koh, however, does not limit herself to painting alone. She uses clay, which she molds by hand, to represent the earth and create the exhibition's sculpted works.

Although Hamiltonian Artists' gallery space is long and narrow, Koh's work asks visitors to look to the ceiling and floors as much as the walls. Her exhibition consists of fired clay vessels and unfired clay on unstretched canvas, freestanding forms, and draping, wall-hung terrains. The gallery experience, as activated by Koh, arguably demands more attentiveness relative to large museums—where art enthusiasts typically scan one landscape painting after another, hung on the building's perimeter.

Additionally, when you first enter, the sculpted works closest to the door are forms that “humans may be more familiar with,” Koh says. “Different Warmth” (2023) features terra-cotta slates seemingly assembled like floor tiles. But as you delve deeper into the gallery, the artworks become more bleached in color and pure in form.

“Those that sold to us pretty” (2023) is mute in color but rich in its incorporation of other earthly elements like pine cones and pine needles, and personal memories of Koh’s upbringing in South Korea.

The work “When the painting was done, she walked into the painting” (2023)—Koh’s largest work made of kaolin on canvas, hangs from above and prompts visitors to see their shadows as they peer over, under, and beside the piece. Their shadows mix with the artwork and are a final reminder of the exhibition’s core premise: The earth is us, and we are earth.

Ara Koh will present a [virtual artist talk](#) on Nov. 16 at 6 p.m. Grounding; Grounded; Ground runs through Dec. 2 at Hamiltonian Artists. Thursday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. [hamiltonianartists.org](https://www.hamiltonianartists.org). Free.