PhilippvonRosenGalerie

Cody Choi
Animal Totem + NFT
September 2 – October 28, 2023
Opening on September 1, 2023, 6–9 pm

We are thrilled to inaugurate our second solo exhibition with Cody Choi on September 1 as part of the DC Open weekend. In *Animal Totem + NFT* we will be showing data-based works on canvas that combine digital data printing with traditional painting techniques, as well as NFTs.

Long before the mainstream media focused as intensively as it currently does on the subject of artificial intelligence, and long before it flooded the art world, Cody Choi (*1961 in Seoul, where he lives and works), who is not only a visual artist but also a theorist, had been exploring digital data and algorithmic processes as the basis for art. He had been researching concepts of data creation and digitization of masterpieces from 1997 to 1998 and was firmly convinced that digital data would replace imagination as a resource for creativity in the 21st century and that the algorithmically initiated, autonomous growth of data would replace the creative act of artists.

Cody Choi's work on his so-called *Database Paintings* began in 1998 with a digital image that his kindergarten-age son Joy drew using a computer drawing program called "Crayola Magic 3D Coloring Book". Choi observed how his son was not learning to draw with pens on paper, but rather with a computer mouse on a computer screen. In light of his theoretical reflection on the subject, his observation of the influence of digital technologies on children's learning behavior and creative development was the impetus for his own artistic exploration of digital data and algorithmic processes. However, his son's digital drawings were not only the basis, the intellectual inspiration for Choi's "data-based paintings" in a figurative sense, but also in the literal sense.

More than 10 years before Bitcoin was introduced, Choi developed algorithms similar to blockchain technology in terms of chain reactions. He exported his son's digital drawings – pictures of cats and dogs – magnified and split the data, then ran his algorithms over them. Thus, the drawings were subjected to "smart layering", where they were overlaid from 400 to thousands of times. In this process – based on the original drawings – new images developed continuously and automatically, each based on the previous one. Choi stored these images at the time. Today, he uses selected images to create *Database Paintings*, a new genre he initiated. The digital images are UV printed on canvases and then partially painted on with acrylic – thus transferring them from the status of being more or less "digital" into the analog world. With the *Database Paintings* Choi creates a hybrid: traditional painting meets digital technologies and printing techniques.

Choi's occupation with cultural hybrids is rooted in his biography and initially has little to do with digitality. He grew up in Seoul, but when he was in his early twenties, he and his family had to flee from South Korea to the United States for political reasons. While the family had lived a good and materially secure life in South Korea, they found themselves living a life marked by uncertainty in the U.S., where they settled in Los Angeles – and had to start all over again. After briefly studying sociology in Seoul, he began studying art in Los Angeles with Mike Kelley in 1985. Choi experienced the U.S. as a chaotic and frustrating place. The differences between American and South Korean cultures became apparent to him not only on an interpersonal and social level, but also in terms of art practices and the art market. Reflecting this, his work also explored the theme of Asian identity formation in U.S. society.

Since the 1990s, the artist's interest in cultural hybrids and social phenomena that constantly (re-)produce themselves has extended to an examination of the emerging digital culture. The *Database Paintings* can be read – psychologically – as symbolizing the death of an authoritarian father (pre-digital art and the creative, autonomous nature of artists). The totem that stood for social solidarity in the pre-digital era is replaced by the digitalized animal image borrowed from the son. Choi, who foresaw very early on that the Digital World would dominate the 21st century, and who understood that the "double brain" structure in which virtual and real things coexist would

become commonplace, now also questions what NFT art means – by almost pulling himself out as the author and letting the computer "do the work". He believes it is time to define the concept and aesthetic foundations of digital art and to reconsider its art historical value.

Cody Choi studied art at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. He lived in New York in the mid-1990s; with his 1996 exhibition *The Thinker* at Deitch Projects in New York, he was one of the first Korean artists to locate himself in a globally connected world. From 2015 to 2017, he had a retrospective traveling exhibition at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Musée d'Art Contemporain de Marseille, Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, and Malaga University, curated by British art historian John C. Welchman and others. In 2017, Choi was one of the two artists representing South Korea in Venice at the Biennale. He lives in Seoul since 2003, where he holds a professorship. His publications include *Topography of 20th Century Culture* (2006) and *Topography of Contemporary Culture* (2010), which critically examine contemporary society and culture.

For more information and pictures please contact the gallery.

Cody Choi, *Database Painting Animal Totem „Hello Kitty #C1"*, 2022-2023
Data, mixed media on canvas, 120 x 150 cm