

JOHN HEE TAEK CHAE
SHED YOUR EYES
February 8–March 25, 2023

MARCH is pleased to present John Hee Taek Chae: *Shed Your Eyes*, a series of drawings engaging with the lore, paraphernalia, and philosophy of the Boy Scouts. This body of work weighs the dark side of collectivity, questioning the source of supposedly-inherent values and notions of division and identity.

“Maybe there is a beast... maybe it’s only us.”

—William Golding

A fresh and haloed figure confronts from the heart of the landscape, the lone master of this wild and unknown country, and he is at the cusp. A child with eyes still new and curious for the world, with each sunrise he grows more capable of true and irreparable harm. Elsewhere, a boy’s face is lost in shadow as Scouts arrange his hair and neckerchief with forceful certainty, light gleaming off their neat hats and shirtsleeves and determined hands. This is the order intended to save him from weakness, to build his character with bravery, obedience, and a host of other tools with which he may come to master the world.

Idyllic illustrations, troop portraits, and postcards of Boy Scouts worldwide are mirrored in John Hee Taek Chae’s *Shed Your Eyes*. This curious reprise invites a critical eye to the romantic imagery of the Boy Scouts, a fundamentally American and Christian organization with global reach, celebrated for its principles of community, valiance, and strength—principles borrowed from Native American ideology and disguised by Western military customs. From this warping and repurposing of unacknowledged culture was born a collective convinced of its purity.

If we are born with some inherent identity, it cannot be the same one which is later taught to us by country, community, or family. Still, we persist in claiming objective truths of righteousness and wickedness. Formed in part by the present swell of anti-Asian hate crimes and white nationalist ideology, Chae’s series gestures to ways in which the powerful may ignore stolen origins to achieve a new paragon. Here lies a dark idealism, praising values so deeply ingrained that they are mistaken for natural truths. Chae’s Scouts study, make meals, play games, and stand in prayer. They share in order and courage and togetherness. Yet their innocent loyalty is rooted in obedience, their mastery of nature positioned as an instrument of dominance. Those they aspire to be are long gone and perhaps never truly existed. Curiosity grows into hunger, and good intentions are their absolution.

Chae engages with prototypical American mythology throughout his wider practice, repositioning cowboys, horses, Boy Scouts, and homesteaders in alternative depictions of life and conflict. Within these drawings lies sympathy—the artist sees the innocence of his subjects as clearly as he does their flaws and in subverting the status quo, he weighs both sides. In the depictions of single Scouts drawn from postcards from around the world, Chae echoes the organization’s celebration of inclusivity alongside a more sinister recognition of global compliance. Like good-intentioned and persuasive missionaries, the Boy Scouts have come to influence people all over the world, teaching youth to be loyal and kind and to take care of their own—an evidently noble code until we ask what is to be done with the others.

John Hee Taek Chae was born in Boulder, Colorado in 1988. At the age of eight, his family returned to Seoul, where he attended an international school founded by American missionaries and joined the Boy Scouts. Chae received his BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2010 and his MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2020. His previous solo exhibitions include *Western Paintings* at D.D.D.D (New York, NY), *good faith* at The Anderson Gallery (Richmond, VA), *Make. Believe.* at MOCA Jacksonville (Jacksonville, FL), and *Fermentation* at CoRK Arts District (Jacksonville, FL), and he was awarded the MacDowell Fellowship in 2022. Chae lives and works in Richmond, Virginia.