

## Lee Kang-So: The Deepening Middle

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1.

Lee Kang-So is a second-generation Korean Monochrome artist who in his seventies is making his best work in his career as a ‘practitioner of painting, sculpture, and photography.

Having said so, however, I would like to qualify in haste: what is called “Korean Monochrome School,” or Tansaekhwa (literally “monochromatic painting”) is a post-hoc term that was given to a group of Korean artists who achieved a certain type of expression in the 1970s and 1980s when their work increasingly attracted attention in Euro-America in recent years. The label is inappropriate and in fact misleading, wrongly characterizing the essence of their work. In my opinion, this is a case of applying a Euro-American art-historical term to a non-Western movement. It reminds me of the troublesome precedent of the Japanese Mono-ha (School of Things) being categorized as “Minimal Art.” I hope that a suitable term will be devised sometime soon. However, for the time being, in this essay I would like to use the term “Seoul School,” which I have adopted from “École de Seoul,” the term invoked by these artists themselves in their group exhibitions during this period, when I closely observed their activities.

In the Seoul School, the first-generation artists, including Chung Chang-Sup, Yoon Hyong-Keun, Park Seo-Bo, and Ha Chong-Hyun, were born from the latter half of the 1920s to the first half of the 1930s, while the second-generation practitioners, including Shim Moon-Seup, Lee Kang-So, and Lee Dong-Youb, were born in the first half of the 1940s. We may be tempted to generalize that in Korean society, one’s age and generation are of particular relevance, especially in reference to his or her experience with Japan’s imperialist rule, the following periods of the civil war, and the following military rule. Still, the situation I observed with this group contradicts our expectation. The two generations of the Seoul School maintained unity as an artistic community before—and even during—the 1980s, or an era of “discord and struggle,” as characterized by the critic Kim Pok-Yong, when the left-leaning Minjung art emerged in fierce critique of the military regime and Korean art joined the worldwide return to imagery.

Kim Pok-Yong defined the unified character of the Seoul School as modernist. An appropriate observation, if we take “modernism” as a broader periodization. In retrospect, 1960s vanguard movements in Japan, which rebelled against modernism, and even Mono-ha that critiqued them as the remnant of Western modern art, can be considered well within the parameters of modernism when seen from the postmodern perspective that emerged in the 1980s. Should we consider artistic modernism not as a monopoly of the West but as a universal and inevitable achievement of humanity within the evolution of consciousness, it is impossible to confine our discussion of modernism to one particular period or civilization.

If so, what is important is not so much to classify the Seoul School as modernism as to understand how it consciously embraced the specific traits of Korean culture. When I wrote “unity as an artistic community,” I meant such area specificities. In 1993, more than twenty years ago, when all the artists mentioned above were shown in *12 Contemporary Artists from Korea* at the Miyagi Museum of Art in Sendai, I contributed an essay to the catalogue in which I outlined four

common tendencies of the group. They are: 1) repetition of a same single gestural or morphological pattern; 2) a revealed penchant for permeation or burying things beneath as a means to conceal the author's hand or presence; 3) respect for the middle (intermediate); and 4) the will for *totalis*. Especially the first and second characteristics are more typically found across the generations, resulting in the rigorous self-restraint and craftsmanlike tendency of the group as a whole.

Granted, the degree of each characteristic that a given artist demonstrates differs from individual to individual. Still, it is significant that Park Seo-Bo, who is deemed the group's central figure by his own reckoning and in the opinion of others, shows all these four traits strongly, asserting the intensity of self-restraint and a kind of craftsmanship.

With this preparation, I would like to turn to Lee Kang-So.

There is no question that Lee, along with his contemporary, the sculptor Shim Moon-Seup, represents the second generation of the Seoul School. His work is crucial to studying and evaluating the group. Interestingly, however, Lee does not have all the four traits in equal measure. To the contrary, he never revealed the first tendency (namely, repetition of the same gesture or form), thereby remaining far freer from craftsmanship than anybody else in the group. Shim, too, does not depend on repetition, probably because he is a sculptor who fundamentally examines "being." However, it is of special note that Lee does not share overwhelming reliance on repetition with other painters around him. The second trait (namely, the penchant for permeation and burial) does not manifest in his painting, either. What motivated the other painters to follow this tendency was the desire to restrain the manifestation of the artist's subjectivity through which he "makes," so that the work can assume the power to "become." Lee does share this desire, which however functions in his work in a larger framework that transcends the matter of technique and prevents his expression from falling into a craftlike pattern. When combined with the awareness of the middle, which I will discuss next, this has a profound meaning.

What, then, distinguishes Lee's work in the Seoul School? The answer is the third trait, his respect for the middle, accompanied by the fourth, his aspiration for *totalis*. In the case of Park Seo-Bo, he, too, originally began his work from this awareness. Still, his versatile nature brought about an excess of the first and second traits. In contrast, Lee, who innately understood that art is a site where the middle above all prevails, appears to have devised his work in such a way to enhance this reckoning in its core and shed all unnecessary details. In other words, it is as though he intuited that the essence of art cannot be found in either extreme of subjectivity or objectivity, artifice or nature, freedom or restraint, finite or infinite; instead he had the correct insight that art lies in the vast middle field wherein he must take the risk of getting lost, treading and pulling through not by reason but by creation. Perhaps because of this awareness, Lee's style is seemingly unstable. Neither figuration nor abstraction, his work seems to respond to the shifting tide of time without being subsumed by it. Intent on pouring his energy into painting, he also freely enacts "becoming" in his ceramic sculpture. In fact, a vast body of his clay sculpture is titled *Becoming*. In photography, he deploys the camera that was originated as a machine to capture the appearance of "objects" in order to capture formless, nonobjective spaces and things such as patches of grass.

Is he an eclectic who, unable to persevere, knows only to playfully follow the saying, "A rolling stone gathers no moss"?

Of course, things are not so simple. What I want to say is this: the Korean artist Lee Kang-So's sensitivity is deeply grounded in the idea of "middle" that has been touted to contain the most important truth of ethics and ontology by numerous intellectual luminaries East and West, ancient and modern, ranging from Aristotle to Confucius and his followers, from Gautama Buddha and Nāgārjuna to Pascal. I may sound preposterous. But I do not mean to indulge myself in a philosophical discussion. Rather, I want to say that the idea of middle, as expressed in art, has a long history in the intellectual undertakings of humankind. It surfaces here and there, now and then, emerging from beneath modern oblivion to serve as an essential law of artistic production, wherever and whenever a deserving artist rises to the occasion. And I contend that in Lee's painting, we can see a precious occurrence of its emergence.

As I mentioned above, the Seoul School as a whole is characterized by their respect for the middle, which I believe derives from the longstanding Korean understanding of human existence enveloped by nature, along with the ethics of "middle" embraced by the Chinese teaching of Confucius. The people of Korea came to reaffirm the idea of middle as their ethnic identity when they arrived at a historical turning point at which the modern and the contemporary clashed. Yet, no painter has understood its significance in a more straightforward and less ideologically bound manner than Lee, who has freely and pliantly adapted it in his work to achieve a universality of the art of painting.

2.

In its evolution since the mid-1980s, Lee Kang-So's painting reveals a few shifts in his style and subject matter but never fails to assume one characteristic: his thick brushstrokes always take a central part in the picture, overriding any other elements.

This central player however never shows an air of autonomy and self-sufficiency, neither functioning to depict some form or sign nor contributing to generate a pictorial space through *matière*. The movement of his brush relates to other movements and factors in his painting yet keeps distance from them. His brush looks around, sees through, and watches over the entire surface and its own tentacles, sometimes nonchalantly and sometimes expectantly. From 1990 onward, when deer, boats, and water birds appear in his painting, these appealing forms assume a singularly tense task of looking around, seeing through, and watching over the surface and us the viewers. Yet, their emergence is distinguished from the return to figuration adopted by many contemporary painters, because his forms appear to be mobilized to enhance his ambiguous brushwork that is at once descriptive and autonomous. Put differently, these forms do not function as a protagonist in the picture, unlike the images concocted by other painters. In his painting, his form and the flow of his brush merge as one, while looking around, seeing through, and watching over the relationship between the anxious movement in his painting and our gaze upon it.

Thereafter, his brush became freer, as though chasing after the subtle moment in which an image appears and disappears like a misty mountain or a cloud that cannot be firmly captured. In his production, informed by this search—or perhaps we should call it play—the water bird, the boat, and the house, which had initially retained the figment of their original morphologies, were miniaturized and simplified. They now found their places in the corners of a picture, together serving as a model book or an instruction manual for brushmanship, as it were. Certainly, his

painting for a moment makes us believe that it moves toward figuration; but it signals that his true aim was not to depict concrete forms or images. Fat brushstrokes began to orchestrate a soft and inter-provocative dialogue between appearance and disappearance of spaces and formless images they generate, and between small forms akin to accompanying children or supervisors. As years went by, small forms at times disappeared; and his brushstrokes would more and more ruminate on and watch over a tension-filled dialogue.

Does it mean a shift from figuration and return to abstraction? I don't think his quest concerned such a superficial stylistic change. He never pursued distinct abstract forms to replace boats or water birds. He never attempted to unify his color scheme or organize a systemic brushstroke pattern. He would make fat strokes in a monochromatic spectrum ranging from gray to black that run and dance on white ground, on which shockingly vivid red or dark red occasionally rush through, pleasantly dashing our desire to define his work as Monochrome.

In brief, throughout his 35-year career, what set Lee's painting apart from all others was neither form nor color, neither shape nor image, neither subject (subjectivity) nor object (objectivity), but the working of his brush that touches upon all of these elements without adhering to, identifying with, or being subsumed by them, thus maintaining its multivalent and anxious autonomy. What enables his brush to endure such an anxious autonomy was his awareness of middle. He may not have acquired this awareness solely through his own insight. Even if so, that's no shame on his part, because the kernel of awareness for middle transcends the individual and is considered to be located within the brush, the most humble tool that humankind ever invented.

What, then, is the brush? This is a question we must address.

Certainly the brush is a humble tool with which to draw pictures and write characters. In Western painting, form and color are traditionally emphasized as essential elements, as are, to varying extents, depicted subject matter, imagery, *matière*, and illusionistic space. However, there is little discourse on the brush. In contrast, in China, as early as the sixth century, ink and brush were given importance in equal measure. Indeed, the Chinese unambiguously conceptualized that painting should acquire its life through the working of the brush. It is meaningless to explain this away with the situations specific to one cultural sphere, pointing to the Chinese tradition of seeing no distinction between writing characters and drawing pictures or the long history of ink painting in China that nurtured the working of the brush. Such logic mistakes cause for effect. To being with, why did the Chinese so extremely revere the brush in writing characters? Why did they become so partial to monochromatic ink painting made by ink, water, and brush to an extent that they forsook the pleasure of applying vivid colors? The reason cannot be understood unless we go back to something outside the materiality of tools—that is, the spiritual motivation.

Simply put, in ancient China—I don't know about contemporary China—it was believed that what gives life to things is not object or "I" (self) but something that lies in the middle and mediates between the two. This something was, for example, *qi*. What gives a material body to this "in between" something is the brush in painting and the knife in cooking. Coincidentally, knife in Japanese, 庖丁, or *hōchō*, derives from the name of a Chinese cook adept at beef butchery as recounted in *Zhuangzi*. In other words, the person's name later became the tool's name. The tool outlived the cook who used it or the cow which was cut up. Likewise, the brush that is a humble tool became as important as

numerous masters or famous scenic sites, in fact, so important as to regulate the life of painting.

Is such respect for the brush and the significance given to the middle specific to the Chinese cultural sphere? It cannot be. True, Western painting endeavors to capture an object as an object, so much so that the realistic techniques for this end reached a supreme height. Thus, the emphasis on the object, one protagonist of painting, resulted in the tendency to conceal the artist's hand, or his craftsmanship, another protagonist in the pictorial drama. Yet, when modern painting kicked in, prompted by the awakening of individual consciousness that followed the French Revolution, the brushstroke ceased to be a subordinate factor, resulting in the work of Manet, Monet, Cézanne, et al. That elongated brush of Matisse's was perhaps too long, but the modern master learned well from Chinese painting to understand the meaning of the brush and its corporeal dimension. In a sense, the most profound progress that modern painting in the West made is neither learning the immediacy of color-field composition from Japan's *ukiyo-e* nor inventing the optical mixing of colors on canvas by incorporating the scientific color theories, but coming to its senses with the crucial significance of the working of the brush and the resulting touches. In doing so, Western painting all at once eliminated several hundred years of delay behind Chinese painting and comprehended that the essence of painting lies neither in subject nor object, but in the working of the brush that emerges in between the two.

Later, painters of East Asia who did not recognize this modernist turn-around would seek their model in the realism of premodern Western painting or misunderstand the principle of color and brush in and after Impressionism so grossly that they made foolish and crude imitations. This misunderstanding is also widespread among contemporary Western painters who frequently subordinate the brush to the concept and emotion of self, or "I," thereby turning painting into an unbridled act of expression of subjectivity. This has happened because they did not understand the true meaning of the brush.

3.

The main body of the brush is a stick. A stick, not too long or not too short—that is, a stick of medium length—does not belong to the picture-making subject or the object made into a picture. It carefully measures and calibrates the breathing of the two in order to open a third space that is neither subject nor object. At the least, a principled training makes such a maneuver possible. We may compare the brush to a bridge between two shores, but this bridge is never immobile. The bridge itself moves, inevitably bringing about changes to the breathing of the two shores and creating traffic between the two. It literally constitutes a living middle. Both in the figure of speech and in actuality, the brush's stick is a soft intermediary that melds the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity and a vehicle that creates traffic between "I" and the world. It is a pity that contemporary painters worldwide who aspire to transcend modernism have failed to understand this, unthinkingly having banished the brush from painting, and eventually having departed from painting itself.

However, likely through his innate insight, Lee Kang-So must have fully comprehended such a function of the brush and made a slow and steady progress on a quivering path. A quivering path, because this path is not a firm object or an easy objective. Faintly visible only between houses, between towns, between fields, the path reveals itself to the brush-holding painter who advances carefully, materializing itself as that which unites and transcends the two world of "I"

and “He.”

If the brush is the secret of painting, it is central to the linguistic activity of painting. In the West, when photography was invented in the mid-19th century, almost all the elements hitherto regarded as essential to painting turned out to be not so, and Manet and a handful of his fellow painters for the first time realized that painting lay in the working of the brush. Their reckoning came 500 years later than Yuan-dynasty literati painters, but this temporal gap is not of my interest. More problematic is the absence of the brush in the discourse of modern painting during the time of Manet and after. As Western painters undertook the innovation of painting, which inherently encompassed the institutional critique and self-definition of painting, the working of the brush should have figured prominently in their thinking. Manet, Monet, Cézanne, et al., however, were taciturn about the significance of the working of the brush and the resulting touches, which they nonetheless demonstrated in their practice. Yet, those talkative counterparts (say, Maurice Denis and Wassily Kandinsky) merely continued the age-old discussion of painting as an objective construct or a subjective correspondence, oblivious to the brush which should occupy a central place in the pictorial language. The reckoning for the brush did not come until after World War II, when action became a central concern both in theory and practice of painting.

This delay *did* bring about an unfortunate distortion to 20th-century Western painting. Even though the modern critical mind made it possible to recognize painting as a system of language, Western painters neglected the presence of the brush, which is central to this system; as a result, their understanding of art itself easily degenerated into an excessively objective formalism or, conversely, assumed an emotional anti-logocentrism. Which is to say, their failure to understand what the brush is prevented them from understanding that the pictorial language is itself a system driven by the middle.

In modern aesthetics, or at the latest in Structuralist art theory, it should be a major discovery that all the artistic expressions, including painting, are systems of language. Unfortunately, this idea has been concealed under a range of loud statements, from the social efficacy of art to formalist reductionism, from conceptualist hybridity of art to illusion for poetic transcendence. During the time when the Seoul School was formed, the French poet-critic Marcelin Playnet proposed the “relative autonomy” of painting, likely hoping to sublimate the theoretical polarization through the application of Mao Zedong’s “On Contradiction.” It is unfortunate that Playnet lacked an insight into the brush on which the contradiction specific to painting is hinged, and was thus unable to uncover the intermediate nature of pictorial language.

Without understanding the brush, one cannot squarely confront the relative autonomy of a language system that is painting. Through its duality, the brush touches upon either pole of the binary—doing and being done, I (self) and object, subjectivity and objectivity—while elevating their gap and opposition to a higher dimension. Such duality sustains the middle that propels painting as a system of language. Including painting, any system of language maintains the middle that is singular to it. That is why language can exercise its own playfulness, self-creativity, sharing between subjects, and continuity free from individuality and history, without being confined to the function for communication. The brush that wavers. The brush that is indeterminate. The brush that walks the void in self-reflection. The brush that sometimes fiercely self-propels. The brush that adores an object yet comes to its senses. Other than these working of the brush, what else can

richly reveal the linguistic nature of painting?

I am sorry to say, but since Ni Zan and Bada Shanren, or since Manet and Cézanne, we have few giants capable of shaking up the pictorial language. Does contemporary civilization that lacks the middle and issues nothing more than loud slogans prohibit them to arise? But we should not despair too quickly. In our time, we have painters like Cy Twombly who fled the U.S. split between the hotly loaded Pop Art and the icily empty Minimal Art and moved to the Mediterranean, where, with a brush in his hand, he kept rushing about, revolving around, and whispering between the diametric opposites of meaning and non-meaning, nothingness and abundance, artifice and nature, instant and eternity. Why can we not expect contemporary painters in East Asia to invent a similar escape route? Speaking of which, we do know that Lee Kang-So has emitted an intensely evocative signal. We must not overlook the presence of such a serious painter.

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