

Density of the Body Towards Emptiness

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Kang So Lee's works exhibited at Gallery Shilla are divided into three categories: canvas works, soil sculptures and photography. One keyword that is common to such a diversity scope of his works is 'body.'

First, there is a canvas work titled <Emptiness>. His recent work reveals tiny and specific images of a duck or a house which contrast with a relatively large abstract stroke that emulates a brushstroke or a body gesture. No matter where he images or writing stroke that appear in his works are derived, they are likely to fully show a body just like a drawing or a dancing.

Bodiness (Körperlichkeit) that has rapidly emerged in the Western world with the intrusion of light electrical devices (that is, devices that reinforce the body like a mobile phone) into the body since the 1990s as well as reflections on the modernism has topped the agenda in the contemporary art. In the mainstream genealogy of the Western philosophy including thoughts of Plato and Descartes, the body and the mind are strictly separated, and the body has been regarded as a much more inferior one compared to the mind. There is even a Greek saying, 'soma sema,' which means "the body – a grave." In this case, body's prestige plummets to the level of a material chunk that can be experimented and analyzed while being reduced to the state of machinery that can be disintegrated/assembled and detached/attached. Although the perspective towards the body in the contemporary art has been restored, it has not fully stayed away from the mechanical point of view.

However, the body means something different to Lee. In the Sinosphere, the body(身體) is a combination of two words: body as mind(身) and body as the physical one(體). While the body (just like the body of a car) means that as mentioned in the Western world, the mind refers to character and psyche. The body that Lee wants to exhibit is the body as the mind, which is distinctively different from the body referring to a physical and mechanical structure.

The body that he refers to can be encountered on the canvas, which plays two roles: a window as

a visual outlet that is thoroughly detached from the body as seen from the traditions of the Western art; and a shield that is confronted when the body is directed towards the outside as seen in the Oriental Art. A window as a plane that is perpendicular to the view has a vanishing point in perception. This is the space of Topos reached by the antenna of a physical sense. Beyond the vanishing point is the 'universal space' where logics and order dominate beyond the scope of visual perception. All abstract concepts lie in this universal space: the so-called the conceptual art even resides in this space.

Meanwhile, the canvas as a shield that surrounds the body/physical space of the artist exists as a resistor which his first-person inner pressure hits. Beyond the shield lies in the awareness of wholeness that transcends the awareness of individuality embedded within the body. Just like the Western contemporary artists strived to move towards concepts or the conceptual art beyond the vanishing point, that is, the visual limitation, there is a body gesture that can be created by the Oriental contemporary artists that seek to reach the awareness of wholeness beyond the individual one. Lee's works belong to the latter. His strokes hit the shield, but it is not an expression. Usually, most expressions possess the first-person inner pressure – a state of a surplus ego. When the inner pressure is starkly different from the world beyond the shield, it is a state filled with yet an unstable energy.

However, the body in a state of practicing one's own body for education tries to maintain this world and the state of equilibrium by reducing and controlling the pressure on its own. The body is converted into the density of psyche, which, in turn, is scattered on the canvas through strokes. At the same time, the energy in a state of chaos within the artist becomes mild since the energy is refined. Between the artists, the canvas and the world, there is no longer a difference of pressure. On the canvas, there remain only the remains of the mild and refined body. This is the fundamental difference with the conceptual art or minimal art, the pinnacle of the Western modernism. Minimal art is an art of geometrical order within the universal space beyond the vanishing point. Here, the body is thoroughly omitted. However, Lee keeps moving towards the world with the body; and yet, the body is not the one in a disorder in the pressurized state waiting for expressions but the one in an order in harmony with the nature through the process of practicing one's own body for education.

Images of a duck or a house that repeatedly appears in his works could be seen as a pattern that continues to back up Lee's reasoning on 'emptiness.' The pattern serves as a compressor for reasoning. When the pressure is decompressed, there appears a message on the world of essence (emptiness) - an open serenity – beyond the phenomenal appearance and disappearance. The

body as his psyche wants to move towards the world of the very emptiness.

There exists no window or shield in sculptures unlike in a canvas because they are open to all directions. Therefore, the artist's body cannot feel the window or the shield. His soil sculptures titled <Becoming> could be dubbed as a 'soft sculpture.' They are distinctive from solid sculptures, and the distinction depends on the possibility to resist to gravity. Most sculptures tend to take an architectural structure (architecture means standing on the land) by raising the body while resisting to gravity. However, wet soil is extremely weak to fulfill such a will. Soil chunks in the same size and in a similar form might be seen as a grid towards a certain structure. Usually, a grid expands itself under a successive order and a geometrical order. This kind of repetitive process is likely to pursue a concept of spatial amplification in a gravity-free state, but the soil piece grid cannot maintain the geometrical order any more due to the irresistible force of gravity.

Here, it is impossible to calculate the universal space after the vanishing point and establish a concept to expand into infinity through the repetitions of the grid as with sculptures in minimal art. Instead, the heavier the soil sculptures get, the mellower the order of materials becomes, intending to identify their fragile being in the space of Topos. They end up giving up their will towards a structure by squeezing their form due to the gravity and physical properties. These grids, with the passage of time, are intermingled to grow into an appropriate size of an organic being. That the materialistic density of soft sculptures must adapt to gravity is most similar with the body and destiny of the artist – similar with contingency of possibly being squeezed in some way, physical uncertainties or unpredictable freedom thereof.

His photography <A Dream> is distant from the artist's body from the very beginning. The camera is an independent mechanism seeking to see the world 'in his eyes.' Therefore, there is no room for the first-person view from the beginning. Normally, photography (as with paintings) has no expression, and requires no process to compress even the minimum expression. Most paintings are destined to embody an event or a state that happens according to the axis of time like a video, and yet in a still image, so there is always the process of compression and decompression (in the view of observers). The ways to do compression differ among individuals, and there occurs distortion at all times, which might be described as 'individuality.' Since photography embodies a still image as it is, there requires no compression or decompression, thus lacking in individuality. Without individuality, photography is always fair because it is seen 'in his views.' The physical density and intervention are rare from the beginning. In Lee's <A Dream>, the camera indifferently looks are banal and routine scenes that are reminiscent of déjà vu to any viewer. There is no means or trick to connect and complete the narrative and structure. Just like one

would not find it strange to have dreamed such an illogical dream, regardless of his or her will, life and art do exist without having to be conceptualized. Rather, his photography intends to tell that there is lesser distortion on the truth of an object due to a lack of concept.

Depending on the genres, whether they are paintings, sculpture or photography, the body that Lee tries to portray slightly adjusts the density. This can be interpreted to mean that he is strongly aware of the body. In interviews, Lee said that he is not a conceptual artist: it seems that instead of an art that constrains or rejects a body, he seems to trust the art where 'the body as the mind' is realized. Seeking for a new art through the body and newly disclosing the physical sense of yore seem all very important. Just like such efforts are seen in his works, it is time to find and check out the point where our body and the contemporary art of the global trends encounter each other. This is the blessing for all of us.