

Towards the principles of paintings

Lee Jin-myung (Chief Curator, Daegu Art Museum)

2018-2021

Throughout the Han and Tang dynasty Confucianism in China was a field of study that focused upon leading its followers towards a state of becoming the "superior man" in society. Beginning with the Song dynasty Confucianism eventually shifted its focus to concentrate upon the notion of the harmonious mind of the superior man. While forms and customs remain constrained by the conventions and the bias of the previous era the mind is now free from the traditional binds. Though it is hard not to take notice of the forms and concepts that Lee Kang-So has built up over the years, I want to devote myself to looking at the artist's mind. Over time there have been changes in the forms and concepts of Lee Kang-So's art but there remains a consistent underlying principal penetrating throughout all of his work.

The fundamental ideas of Eastern cultures are contained in *The Analects of Confucius*. A novelist goes through great pains to write the introduction of a novel, the opening line may be construed as the most important sentence in each text. *The Bible* states, "In the beginning was the word." The "word" refers to the logos of God, one consisting of language, logic, and law. This is an external form of reasoning, one that exists on the outside. *The Analects of Confucius* begins with the passage "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? (學而時習之, 不亦說乎.)" The next chapter states, "The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission! - are they not the principles of all benevolent actions? (君子務本, 本立而道生. 孝悌也者, 其爲仁之本與.)" The first concept or principle mentioned in this text is one of learning. The next highlighted principle refers to love for parents and siblings as well as the fundamental idea of universal love. Learning is about knowing the fundamental ideas, cultivating the virtues inherent in us. Therefore, Asians try to seek and build the moral characters within us. That is easy. (簡易) This experience can be translated into a word, nature (順).

The principle refers to the root of a tree, the root grows into branches that produce leaves and fruits, that is the direction of nature. We love our parents and care for our brothers and sisters. This loving heart grows generous loving trees and plants, mountains and rivers. Ultimately, the

heart realizes that all things are not distinct from one another. (萬物一體) Even things beyond the targets of objective understanding can reach the point where they are no longer two separate things. The feeling that constantly flows throughout his artworks dynamically changes, never remaining with specifically fixed forms, this exhibits his attempt at realizing the fundamental principles. Artists who continuously work towards questioning the fundamental principles as well as examine reason are great, they rarely exist.

I believe the greatest artist alive in the West is Michelangelo Pistoletto. In the East, Lee Kang-So is surely the one. Michelangelo Pistoletto is best known for his "mirror paintings". Pistoletto's understanding is that Western art history has been fighting against illusion. Socrates explained the truth through the Allegory of the Cave, describing prisoners chained in an underground cave that thought the shadows on the cave walls were the real. As one of the prisoners escaped from his bindings he left the cave only to discover the sun and the world outside. The prisoner then returned to the cave to inform the other prisoners of his findings. The prisoners did not want to believe this inconvenient truth, this disturbed their reality and in the end the prisoner who witnessed the outside world was killed by revealing his truth. Jesus and Socrates are similar to the prisoner who realized the truth. Western art history has been devoted to imagery most close to the visual reality. It has regarded reality as the sun.

Pistoletto wanted to remove the history of illusion through by using the movements of gallery visitors vividly reflected in mirrors noting the passage of time. In western cultures it was believed that the surface of the water that Narcissus stared at, just as the shadows that the prisoners saw in cave, reflected an illusion. Artworks are considered to be another form of illusion and just as the images in the mirrors, in the past they were thought to be of low ontological standing as they exist several notches away from reality. Pistoletto reversed this bias. Pistoletto thought the temporality that occurs in the mirror imagery was truly a new area, one that paintings cannot enjoy however he failed to throw off the yoke of Platonism. Mirror paintings are an attempt at disobedience, an action directly addressing and deconstructing Plato's ontology. Yet the struggle remains and is pulled into the same kind of swamp. Early on the artist Lee Kang-So has easily overcome this way of thinking.

Sitting next to a stream Confucius looked at the continuous flow, pointing at it he stated, "In the way of virtues, there should be no stop, same as the water, flowing day and night, without stopping their course. (逝者如斯夫, 不舍晝夜.)" Water flows, no one knows who or what makes

that happen. Gravity is a concept of the modern era yet modern physics has not discovered exactly what gravity is, nevertheless something makes things flow continuously. Spring, summer, winter, and fall rotate. All things circulate, bear and rear one another and celebrate. The study of this recognition is called the Ontology of Ren (仁學本體論). There is a saying called "the birth of life is called yi (生生之謂易)". The universe aims at infinite harmony and infinite nurturing, it is like the purposefulness of little purpose. It is seen that benevolent affection creates the universe (differing from Empedocles theory of Love and Strife, where Love and Strife manage the universe in turn). It is our mind that informs the stream, constantly bearing and rearing, raising all things by flowing continuously without any special purpose, this is a symbol of benevolence and our inner side. It is our moral virtue and the four buddings (四端). For this reason Lee Kang-So has paid special attention to Heisenberg's statement, "To talk about nature, we should talk about ourselves at the same time". It is the world of the natural law (順理) where there is no disobedience.

Lee Kang-So is well-known for his drawings of birds and ducks. A poem called "Yeonbiyeocheon, Eoyakuyeon (鳶飛戾天, 魚躍于淵)" occurs in chapter Taya (大雅), Greater odes of the kingdom, of *the Shijing* (詩經), the oldest book of poetry existing to mankind. It translates as, "The hawk flies up to heaven; the fishes leap in the deep." This symbolizes the world as following the right path. It refers to the harmonious world where things follow the laws of nature and where there is no disobedience. The artist saw the same world that Confucius had seen in the stream. He felt the same pleasure that the author of that beautiful song had felt. This is because though human greed changes, human pleasure comes at the moment when one obtains self-restraint or when greed disappears. This being so Kang Huian painted Gosagwansu (高士觀水) and Gyeomjae Jeong Seon painted Gosagwanpok (高士觀瀑). It is not because they simply viewed the running water as a beautiful object. It is because they were certain about the existence of a Presider in the flow of the water. That a Presider is none other than the thing that the vigorous vitality springing from my moral virtue has created. This vitality inside us disappears immediately when disobedience and desire are born. When we lay down our self-consciousness and feel that the whole world is equal this vitality again rises. Lee's paints have taken different forms from those within western paintings, they suggest self-consciousness is a persona and that painting is the stage where the persona plays. The artist's vitality has a commonality with the paintings of Injae Kang Huian, Taneun Lee Jeong, Gyeomjae Jeong Seon, and Kwanajae Cho Yeong-Seok, which affectionately examine all men and all things. Following in the footsteps of our tradition puts emphasis on the expression of natural law and impartiality rather than upon selfish interests.

Here, artist Lee's status is also worth noticing. There are two poems which help understand this artist; Poem of Qín, a stringed instrument, and Written on the Wall of Xilin Temple (題西林壁), famous for a phrase, "the true face of Mount Lushan (廬山真面目)", by Chinese writer, Su Shi, also known as Su Dongpo. First, *Poem of Qín* goes as follows.

If the sound of qín comes from qín itself,
Why does not it sound by itself when it is in the container?
If the sound of qín comes from the player's fingers,
Why do not the fingers sound by themselves?

若言琴上有琴聲
放在匣中何不鳴
若言聲在指頭上
何不於君指上聽

This poem describes the harmony of the player's mind, fingers and stringed instrument qín a that which makes the sound of qín, not the performance of each of these elements alone. It is fair to say that Western philosophy is an epic story about searching for the essence of an entity, looking towards God as the main source of reason, one defined as an individual being. German philosopher Martin Heidegger claimed that Western metaphysics had been wrong in presuming that all beings are defined by their relationships, stating rather that human beings exist within relationships. Humans cannot exist as individual beings while alone. This is also true for the relationship amongst the canvas, paintbrushes, paints, and the artist's intent (where Monoha, the meaning "School of Things" in Japanese, originated from). This concept has also influenced many artists working in monochrome. Monochrome works are concerned with the relationships and the harmony of all the things. Artist Lee Kang-so transcends this philosophy. The works of this artist are a reminder of the phrase, "the true face of Mount Lushan", written by Su Shi, rather than the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and the concept of monochrome paintings. The following is the poem entitled *Written on the Wall of Xilin Temple* by Su Shi.

A range in panorama, peaks if viewed from the side;
Far, near, low, and high, these summits differ wide.

The true face of Mount Lushan, O 'tis so hard to tell,
Because this very mountain, has had me right inside.

橫看成嶺側成峰
遠近高低各不同
不識廬山真面目
只緣身在此山中

The true face of Mount Lushan cannot be seen by anyone, which means that the truth cannot be realized. A viewer's perspective is one inside of Mount Lushan. People live within a specific culture and era, their fate/experience blinds them to the truth. The true face or the truth, Su Shi discusses how knowledge is acquired by experience yet the truth is neither about experience nor about the relationships between beings. Truth is about looking into the inner self. Truth is not knowledge to be acquired, analyzed, proved, and expressed. When you are highly self-conscious, it is as if you are stuck inside Mount Lushan. Once you get out of this frame of mind you can be in harmony with the world. By doing this you are able to see the world of Ren Xue, the doctrine of benevolence, or, in other words, the birth of life, this is called yi (生生之謂易). Now things go well.

In the book *Xici-Zhuan* (繫辭傳), Confucius states, "Easiness makes understanding it easy. Simplification makes following it easy. Easy understanding brings closeness. Easy following brings achievements. With closeness, one persists. With achievements, one grows. (易則易知, 簡則易從. 易知則有親, 易從則有功. 有親則可久, 有功則可大.)" This signifies the philosophy of the works of Lee Kang-so. The truth should be basic so that anyone may be able to follow it easily and persistently. Confucius considers filial piety the root. This root leads to the stem, or benevolence, this then extends to the leaves, or being, given one's own nature and mission. Finally, it bears the fruit, Datong, Confucius' ideal society, one big happy and harmonious family.

According to *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (說文解字), the oldest dictionary of ancient Chinese characters, written by Xu Shen, a Chinese scholar, jiāo, means "to teach", to help younger people, to follow older people and fulfil filial piety. (教, 上所施, 下所效也, 從支, 從孝.) Filial piety is to respect and take care of parents, which is a lovable aesthetic sentiment people are born with. Filial piety is easy to practice and amounts to the root principle, which then extends to a harmonious society.

Artist Lee Kang-So has painted ordinary objects such as birds and boats. These works are not created as a mode of reproduction nor as a method of expression. Duties and obligations,

qualities people are supposed to have as a human are presented through these objects. In terms of Western discourse this does not make sense, as Western discourse discourages a harmonious and simple world. The work of Lee Kang-So encourages an independent persona, one that dominates and highlights the play, or the art circles. Contemporary art is difficult to understand since it goes against two ideas: one being that our own nature, mission and harmony leads us to be united. Another is that our persona is created and exhibited through an extreme form of ego. Today's global art world puts on a mask, a so-called 'persona', that as one of "the artist", making the artist mythic, taking advantage of this with no exception. This artist has refused to follow this trend and kept asking fundamental questions, looking for the true side of his inner self.

The truth is easy and is given to everyone. Everyone can persist knowing this truth, which allows people to grow. Lee Kang-so's artistic journey is about respect and wonder for all things in the world rather than about expressing his ego. In his works all the elements are shining upon each other, they are alive, beyond the camera lens, the transformed wood, the shaped clay (one of the oldest materials used by humans), they fulfill the charms of the world and are gained through his impartiality and splendid sentences. This is not an accidental result but rather the fruit of his life, one which he has transcended over and over again as an artist.