

Living in a Parallel World

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Questioning what it means to 'see'

I first encountered Lee Changwon's work in the summer of 2009 at City_net Asia 2009¹, of which I was one of the curators. The work was *Minerva with Flying Doves—There Is No Myth* (p.59), and I initially thought it was a painting featuring the hazy silhouettes of a spear-wielding figure and birds flying around it. On closer inspection, however, I realized that this wasn't a canvas, but narrow slats fixed to the wall like a Venetian blind. Dried tea leaves were placed on each white slat, filling the exhibition space with the aroma of tea. The images in the work were created by using the tea leaves to produce light and shade, so that the result resembled a painting. It combined unexpected material, a fragile installation that could potentially be destroyed with a single breath of air, and vague, illusory images. This magnificent trick created by Lee is not only visually entertaining to visitors, but is also a comment on the potential danger which lies in the act of 'seeing'. What is it that we normally see, and how do we recognize things? This fundamental question, combined with the aroma of the tea leaves which had fallen onto the floor, gave Lee's bold work an incredibly strong presence.

In the gap that lies between two cultures

After majoring in sculpture at Seoul National University, Lee went on to study at the Academy of Fine Arts Münster in Germany, where he lived from 1998 to 2011. Soon after his arrival in Germany, Lee became interested in the differences between the food cultures of Germany and Korea, and strongly relating to the adage 'You are what you eat', embarked on creating a series of prototypical work using a variety of products such as sausages, bread, and corn. These evolved into installations in which Lee created images that at first glance look like paintings, using coffee, safflower, or tea leaves on shallow white wall-mounted shelves.

Lee, who studied traditional sculpture in Korea, was stimulated by the new wave of German sculpture that departed from sculpture as monument and aimed for a freer form of expression. The environment in which Lee was studying, which gave him access to the advice and tutorship of an impressive group of teachers such as Jannis Kounellis, Tony Cragg, Katharina Fritsch, and Rosemarie Trockel, must have

¹City_net Asia is an exhibition held at the Seoul Museum of Art every two years as an initiative using contacts made through a network of Asian cities to introduce the contemporary art of those cities. For City_net Asia 2009, curators from Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, and Istanbul produced an exhibition that brought together work by artists from each of their countries.

had an enormous influence on Lee in terms of the materials and techniques used in his work, as well as the development of concepts. As a fan of Andy Goldsworthy [fig.1] who uses stones and leaves found in natural environments, Lee was also drawn to transient materials that change form and eventually disappear. In particular, the use of food—a highly culture-specific element—reflects the artist's personal cross-cultural experiences.

In Korea, as in Japan, many wedding ceremonies are Western in style and held in Christian churches. On seeing a photograph of Lee's friend's wedding, a German friend laughed and said that the Western outfits looked peculiar. In *Seokho's Wedding* (p.44), based on this experience, Lee has used coffee powder to depict a Korean man dressed in a tuxedo. The choice of coffee hints at the colonialist past, when colonial subjects labored to produce coffee for consumption by the European powers, and it can also be interpreted as a symbol of the capitalist exploitation that still continues in coffee-producing areas today. Referencing customs in Lee's homeland of South Korea, which is under Western influence, this work emanates a mysterious darkness that contrasts with the smile on the man's face.

Meanwhile, in *5 Portraits* (pp.38-39), finely cut paper printed with a color inkjet printer is mounted on the horizontal surfaces of slats, so that the reflections of the colored pieces of paper depict a series of hazy portraits. Lee's head and shoulders are located squarely in the middle of this long, horizontal work, with friends that he made in Germany on either side. However, Lee's height is taken as the standard in this work, and anyone taller than Lee has had the excess portion of his/her head trimmed. One of the friends is so tall that his head is cut off altogether. At first glance, this seems cruel, but what Lee is attempting to convey in this work is the concept of cultural control, in which the focus is on establishing a standard, with anything or anyone falling outside that standard being eliminated. This work clearly shows Lee's exploration of, and attempt to reconfirm, his place in a culture by consciously depicting himself as representing the standard despite being in a foreign land.

Heroes adrift

One of the traditional forms of sculpture is the outdoor sculpture, and *A day in Namsam* (p.57) is an example from a series of works that it has inspired. The images featured in this work are bronze statues of Kim Gu and Ahn Jung-geun, symbols of the Korean independence movement that have been installed in Namsam Park in Seoul. A large number of bronze statues representing independence loyalists were created after the Second World War. In recent years, however, there has been criticism that the sculptors who created these works were pro-Japanese at a time when Korea was under Japanese rule, and there has been much debate over whether the sculptures should be removed. Lee has used these bronze sculptures with a loaded past as the motif in the 5 meter high *A day in Namsam*, which was displayed next to *Hurrah!* (pp.56-57) to give the impression that the figures in *Hurrah!* are worshipping the sculptures.² As a material, the coffee powder used in these works is the polar opposite to the bronze used in the robust sculptures, which were created to be permanent. The fragility and mutability that characterize this material also represent the attitudes and values of the public, which also change rapidly. Countless

²Emerging Korean Artists in the World 2009 U.S.B, Hangaram Art Museum, Seoul Arts Center, 2009

bronze sculptures have come to an unhappy end as a result of attitudes and views changing with the passing of time. We have surely all witnessed situations in which someone who was once a hero was later branded a dictator.

Meanwhile, the flying birds that Lee has inserted into this scene are reminiscent of the frequent sight of birds gathering around a bronze statues. As intimated by the title *Minerva with Flying Doves—There Is No Myth*, these birds are desecrating the authority of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. To what extent can power be sustained? Are these monuments, created to last forever, nothing more than objects that end up being soiled by pigeons and buried in, everyday life? Lee's hazy images appear to be directing such questions to us, the irresponsible worshippers.

Incidentally, 'Minerva' is also the username of a Korean man who, from 2008 to 2009, discussed on the Internet the economic crisis in South Korea and predicted events such as the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the sharp drop in the Korean Won. As a result, Minerva achieved sudden fame. Together with the passion which Koreans felt towards him and the drama surrounding his consequent arrest, this brings out issues faced by South Korean society today, including the excessive influence of the Internet and the draconian approach adopted by the government in its attempt to restrict freedom of speech. Lee frequently conceals these familiar social issues into his work, skillfully depicting the uncertainty of politics and the nature of public opinion.

What illuminates our world today

As a child, Lee was mesmerized by the stained glass windows in the church that he attended. Stained glass combines light, color, and reflection to create a unique world and have a psychological effect on worshippers, and it may underpin the concepts that Lee incorporates into his work. *Holy Light* (p.47) represents Lee's attempt to create a contemporary version of stained glass. The colorful shapes mystically appear when illuminated, and at first glance the result looks like stained glass. However, moving to the other side, we see plastic products such as detergent bottles, dustpans, and basins attached to the panel. Consumer society and material worship, symbolized by low-cost, mass produced products, arguably form a new religion for people living in today's world.

Meanwhile, in *Luxaflex* (pp.40-41), Lee has used newspaper ad inserts and leaflets distributed on the street as his material. These ads have been cut up and mounted on slats, resulting in the garish colors unique to this type of advertising material being transformed into hazy and subdued colors by reflection on the white back-panel. *Luxaflex* is a hint at the way the symbols of ideal life represented in these ads—the house, the car, being slim—are slowly entering our subconscious. Today's holy light is steadily influencing people's value judgments.

An uncertain existence

Lee has an ongoing series of works in which images based on photographs are painted on pieces of glass or mirrors. When light is directed at them, the shadow images are projected. In *People of the Trial* (p.66), this method is used to project images of people's faces onto a wall using glass and mirrors, so that the

faces appear to float like apparitions³. The subjects of these portraits are people arrested during the East Berlin Incident of 1967. At that time, large numbers of Koreans in Europe were detained by the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency on suspicion of being North Korean spies. Many of those arrested were students and artists living in West Germany. Lee, who has lived in Germany for more than 10 years, feels a direct connection with the victims of this shocking incident. People of the Trial was shown at Lee's solo show in Berlin⁴, at which the artist also showed Family (p.62), created using tea leaves, emphasizing the contrast between the peace of family life and the fear of being suddenly robbed of that peaceful existence.

Reversal (p.65), a work in which Lee used a square mirror, depicts the face of a man who was wrongfully arrested as a terrorist after the 9.11 attack on America. When the work is taken outdoors, its appearance is totally changed by the reflection of sunlight, making the portrait appear as either a positive or negative image. This instantaneous, dramatic transformation of one person conveys the violent and aggressive nature of a trial in suddenly depriving someone of his/her identity. Lee holds the photograph as though he were holding a portrait of a deceased person, conveying to the viewer what it must be like to be eliminated by external forces. The reflection suggests that we each have another face, and are always in danger of being subject to manipulation that forces a different face upon us.

Parallel World

The images of the people who appear in Lee's work are based on images in newspapers, magazines, and in photographs that Lee took himself. When these images are placed in a totally different context, the people are reborn, becoming someone completely different. Lee, whose attention was directed to the relationship between the original world and the new world, continues to create work that shows these in parallel.

In Release (p.70), silhouettes of people and animals projected onto the wall like shadow pictures convey a sense of liveliness and vibrancy. These shadows, however, are based on images from press photos in newspapers and magazines, and include many tragic scenes from regions in conflict, and also scenes of accidents. The photographs are mounted on mirrors, but some of the humans appearing in the scenes are cut out so that silhouettes are projected by reflection of light where the mirror is exposed. The contrast between the happily dancing silhouettes and the gravity of what is happening in our world seems to betray the apparently happy images, confusing to the viewer. Meanwhile, the silhouettes, released from their original environment, begin to weave a new story.

Parallel World (pp.9-16, pp.72-73) is a further development on Release, and in which the entire wall has been used to project the silhouettes to produce an even greater dynamic effect. The work features people in various poses, flying birds, an airplane, and hands. It is surprisingly hard to conceive of the subjects of these fantastical silhouettes as people collapsing after being shot, birds covered in oil from an oil spill, the passenger plane crashing into the World Trade Center, or the hands of President Obama and Colonel Gaddafi. However, we have to ask which the 'real' image is. Can one categorically claim that the

³Versions of this work use either glass or mirrors. The version presented at the artist's first solo exhibition used glass.

⁴Disappear, Aando Fine Art, Berlin, 2009

scenes captured in press photographs are real? Moreover, these images are simply one element in a world captured through the photographer's filtered view. Indeed, an invisible and limitless world spreads out behind the limited phenomena that we see in front of us.

Parallel World represents both lightness and gravity, with its silhouettes emanating not only a sense of death, but also possibilities for a new life. This is similar to the juxtaposition of life and death in the worldview of Christian Boltanski [fig.2], for whom Lee has great respect. In the theater created by light and darkness, we can simultaneously hear a song celebrating life and a requiem marking death.

Towards freedom

Lee's icons are created with tea leaves, plastic stained glass, inverted portraits, and shadows which instantly disappear with light. These extremely delicate materials magnificently communicate the fragile nature of values and the transience of life itself. However, the unique weakness conveyed in his work also represents the possibilities of delivering boundless freedom. Released from the solidity of metal and the tragedy of drama, silhouettes undergo a resplendent transformation in a totally new world.

We often find ourselves trapped and restricted by the cultural, political and everyday rules that surround us, and feel as though we are unable to extricate ourselves from this world. However, questioning our perspective and the way we recognize things, and considering the existence of innumerable other worlds arguably enables us to at least slightly loosen these heavy shackles. To release the oppressed part of ourselves into a parallel world, while respecting the world that others live in, and to live flexibly in multiple and changeable worlds rather than in a single and absolute world—these represent important issues both for the individual and for the world to come.

By revealing issues faced by our world today in conjunction with his freely moving silhouettes, Lee Changwon suggests ways for us to live in this floating world.