

# Re/Birth of Light and the Shadow Image - The Art of Changwon Lee Builds a "Parallel World"

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What do a movie theater, house of mirrors, shadow play stage, show window, astronomical observatory, and various monuments and festivals all have in common? They are spaces that are removed from our tedious and trite "daily life." They are special and fun, overcoming "living", "usefulness" and "commonness," marvelous and fascinating. Moreover, they are meeting places for events, objects and situations that stimulate us in brilliant and spectacular ways by altering the given environment through various scales of technology, in small and large ways. But the most significant common characteristic is that these spaces are inhabited by images that are always temporary. In such places dwell only the specific moments, not the immortal beings. The images there can only exist as long as the duration of the screening or performance, or appear when a surface is lighted, only to disperse shortly after. When the lights go out, the images also disappear. They keep changing every instant, transforming and flickering at the speed of light by the hour or by the second.

It is easy to have such thoughts when looking at the works of Changwon Lee. Of course, these thoughts do not belong to the dimension of understanding the critical concepts in the works, or of developing a cultural-critical discourse concerning such spaces by using a critique of his artworks. Rather, they fall within the more concrete dimension of materials, subjects, forms of expression, techniques, the environments of the works created by the artist and their effects, and the perceptions to be experienced by spectators. That is, Lee's art is a world of ephemeral illusions made with light and materials of reality as in a shadow play or a magic lantern show, a moment of an event taking place in space, and an aesthetic experience for the spectator, who is captured by the artist's use of special forms and aesthetic techniques.

## Images of Other Relations

Changwon Lee graduated from the Department of Sculpture at Seoul National University in 1998, and went to the Academy of Fine Art Münster in Germany to study in 2000. He has recently returned to Korea after studying and working in Germany for 11 years. We need to note this personal history because his work is characterized by a convergence of the two-dimension and three-dimension, and has been developed in a form where the surface and 3-dimensional structure are parallel and interlocking. While it is meaningless to discuss the concept of genre in contemporary art, the question of which area the artist was initially trained in continues to serve as an important standard in understanding his work. In that sense, Lee's background in sculpture, considering his present work, seems to have helped him choose the appropriate material, transform it, and use space multi-dimensionally. Meanwhile, the time he spent studying the diverse aspects of contemporary art as an integrated entity beyond the borders of genre, has served as a crucial condition for his approach to art in a plural method, transcending the existing grammar of plastic arts. If so, what is the core of Lee's works so far, as they have been formed under such conditions?

It appears that the leitmotif leading the artist's boundaries of work and his work as a whole is the "image." But in this case, the image does not mean the visual result or the general form of the art work seen by the spectator. Rather, it is an "image as a meta-subject," characterized by deconstruction and articulation of the formativeness formed throughout the long history of experimentation and conventionalization in visual art. Suppose his art contains a silhouette of a man giving water to a plant. Here, the image does not concern the issue of whether or not we can see the silhouette, but the issue of how it is made by the artist and how it functions for the spectators. On one hand it indicates the "methodology of expression," and on the other hand it indicates the "reception of what is expressed" in the works.

Though the details are all different, the type of work executed most by Lee since 2002 is "something in the form of blinds." Here we have no choice but to use the obscure term "something," because this group of works is not painting, sculpture or installation, but rather a convergence of the characteristics of the above genres. This becomes clearer with an example of the actual works. *A Day in Namsan* is a large-scale work measuring 500x400cm, which is hung on the wall. At first glance it looks like a two-dimensional tableau painting, but in fact it consists of white rods of consistent thickness and width arranged with equal spacing like a blind, dividing the plane three-dimensionally, with ground coffee powder on the top surface of each rod.

But the coffee is not sprinkled at random. According to accurate calculations, the artist built the structure so that the traces of coffee stacked on top of the rods and the effects of the brown mass reflecting off the adjacent surfaces would resemble the statue of Kim Ku (who was a leader of Korea's independence movement during its colonization by the Japanese) and the surrounding landscapes one would encounter at Namsan in Seoul, Korea when looking from a distance. Ultimately we see a single two-dimensional landscape—with birds flying and a statue standing—expressed with a dark silhouette. But this is realized not on a flat canvas but in a relief/semi-three-dimensional structure. The bright and dark forms in the picture are not attached to the picture-plane through brushwork, but are developed temporarily through the interaction among the light of the present time and space where the work is installed, the coffee particles, and the white sticks.

This is a third result gained by intersecting or re-arranging the conventional conditions of expression of painting and sculpture at the layers of each element, and is an installation focusing on the process of formation and reception of the image, rather than the image itself as the result. The eyes of spectators will experience illusions, and will enjoy not the fixed beauty internalized in the work, but the temporary beauty which repeatedly emerges and fades in every moment. Such "temporary play of beauty," is no longer something strange in contemporary art, and is not devaluated with low appreciation compared to contemplation of or submersion in "eternal beauty." Rather, it has become a priority quality comparable to the intimacy between art and popular culture. Lee's works are no different in that sense. In his case, however, I must emphasize that he leaves the work's method of existence open in an instantaneous and in-itself way, in the same way the aesthetic experience of viewers is instantaneous and exists in itself. That is to say, his works are not frozen as aesthetic objects, but continue to be built and deconstructed in actual time and space. In the process, Lee's blind painting-sculpture-installation works talk of the creation and extinction of images in the meta layer.

### **Mirror: A Critical Projection of Light**

Since 2010, Lee has been searching for a different direction in his work with new forms and contents, under the title *Parallel World*. Operationally, this work is very similar to the overhead projector, which was widely used for educational purposes before projectors with optical lenses were available. An overhead projector is a visual device that can project images on a dark wall. This is achieved by placing transparent

film with pictures or text copied onto them on a glass surface with a light source under it, and adjusting the angle of a mirror in order to project the image. In a similar method, Lee projects photographic images on the wall so that spectators can enjoy bright visual illusions in a dark room. More specifically, the artist finds photographs belonging to the category of "disaster" or "war" in newspapers or the internet, prints them, and delicately cuts out certain parts of them. For example, he cuts out the shape of an airplane charging towards the World Trade Center during the 9.11 terror incident. By attaching the photographic image, which is transformed into a something like a stencil print, on a mirror and shining a light on it, only the part without the image (the mirror surface) reflects the light onto the wall, creating a bright image of the cut-out original. Lee creates an installation using the entire space of the dark room, which he calls Parallel World. As the title already implies, the greatest intention of the artist is to show the "parallel world." That world could be our reality, where violence and pain have become part of daily life, and the field of images where that reality is redefined and re-shaped through the mediation of various media. It is a world of images where public-actual images are processed through the media, or a world of images where the artist Lee intervenes in such images to artistically modify their structures and details. Not only the traditional theories of perception since Plato, but also the dichotomous structure or the dualistic worldview of actual vs. virtual, reality vs. illusion, which has become time-worn even within our structure of awareness, is repeated in Parallel World. That is the dichotomy that was criticized throughout the post-modern era, and was attacked for being discriminatory and irrational in both logic and reality; or it is the dichotomy that suffered a bad reputation as new positive values such as "fusion," "difference" and "between" replaced "division," "discrimination" and "border." But interestingly enough Lee does not deceptively suture this dichotomous structure, but creates two worlds by juxtaposing the actual and virtual, the reality and illusion even more clearly, thereby revealing an uncrossable gap of existence between the two.

On entering the dark exhibition room, we see tables bearing LED lights, placed on all sides of the room, with the earlier-mentioned photo image-mirrors placed on top of them. And all sorts of images are spread out across the wide spaces on the four walls as if they were flying in zero-gravity space, or like a panoramic view of the night sky. More precisely, they are being projected. The images, resembling delicate charcoal drawings, are of course formed by the reflections of the photo-mirrors on the tables. But we experience the projected image and the photographic image in completely different ways. This is because the two are in a cause and effect relationship physically

(if there is no photographic image-mirror and the LED is not shining on it, the images on the wall cannot exist); however, they are completely separate in terms of image production and actual function in time-space. The photographs on the tables are scenes of disaster and violence cut, framed and manufactured by various mass media as they focus on certain situations. And the images projected on the walls are gigantic Phantasmagoria re/born by extracting such images from reality and using mirrors and the reflection of light with them. If they are the results of rebirth in the sense that they are illusions based on images of reality, then at the same time they also represent a new birth in the sense that they are actual phenomena taking place now by excluding (cutting out) parts of the images derived from reality.

So what does Lee enable spectators to experience or obtain by presenting the two worlds as relations of tension, or relations which are mutually inclusive and coexisting at the same time? The first answer can be found in the fact that the artist has chosen images with social and political narratives, in terms of content. In other words, he could have expected an awakening of spectators through the imagery on contemporary life, where terror and war have become part of daily life. Next, the artist would have tried to present spectators with an opportunity to critically reconsider the true face of the media, which reports reality as if it were objective or neutral. This is not only carried out in the context of criticizing images of mass media appropriated from reality, but rather leads each spectator to think about the reality and action of the two parallel image worlds by embodying the mirror-reflection image with increased fantasy and spectacle in his work.

### **Possibilities of Illumination**

The crucial element in Lee's works is light. In the sense that all visual art works can only be perceived under the visibility of light, this is natural. But in the case of Lee, light serves as a fundamental condition in a more structural dimension. As we have discussed earlier, this is because his works are built through the combination of the reflective effects of light and the presence of matter, and because they are made by maximizing the physical attributes of the mirror reflecting light. Some of Lee's works involve painting a negative portrait of Buddha on a mirror with oil-based glass paint, and reflecting sunlight off of it so that a positive image is created in the shade on the other side. In a similar method, he also painted the faces of people implicated in the "East Berlin Incident," which was a politically manufactured scandal in the 1960s, on glass plates. Here too, light played a core role in realizing the negative-positive

images. Thus, we must say that the works are a world of images that is impossible without light—whether it is natural light or LED units.

But what is light? In philosophy, light is the truth of existence and the revealing of truth. When Hans Blumenberg said, “Light is a ray that indicates direction in dark, a torch guiding the way, or the exiting of the approaching darkness,”<sup>1</sup> the metaphor of light always refers to the guide to truth and the defeat of ignorance, called darkness. Without the necessity to resort to philosophy, in our usual ways of thinking, light and darkness still confront one another—the former playing a role of pushing away the negativity, deception and falsehood of the latter. That is why the English word “illumination” means “lighting” and “enlightenment” at the same time and has frequently been used as an epistemological term.

Based on such understanding, let us examine Lee’s works once more. Then his works, in which light is selected as the crucial element, could mean lighting to overcome darkness, or enlightenment as a reaction to non-truth. For example, as we interpreted earlier, his *Parallel World* is an image of art-critical “illumination (enlightenment)” of the reality where the virtual effects of the mass media are so overwhelming. Of course we cannot overlook the other side. That is, as darkness is the other side of light, and non-truth is the other side of truth, the art-critical image of enlightenment is back-to-back with the illusion/*Phantasmagoria* like two sides of a coin. Lee’s blind-shaped works are not firm and concrete forms, but images that depict actual objects or landscapes like shadows, using materials of variability (light in the exhibition space, coffee / parsley / particles from tea leaves, etc.) *Parallel World* also consists of images publicly distributed through the media—whether they are true or not—re-processed by the artist and transformed into images in a spectacular space. In this sense, the images in Lee’s works are incomplete, variable and artificial. I am not referring to levels of formative completeness or visual satisfaction, but how the images act upon the spectators’ consciousness. For instance, as we wonder at the brilliant light decorations installed around Cheonggyecheon for the end-of-the-year *Luminarie* festival and get absorbed in enjoying them, we may also admire and enjoy the light image works of Lee, unaware of the gap existing between the images mediated by the reality and the media. That is to say, even if the artist expects spectators to perceive the tension of the coexisting worlds, and the transformations

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Blumenberg, “Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation,” trans. Jung, Seong-chul & Paik Mun-im, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, Seoul: Vision & Language, 2004, pp. 54-55.

inevitably caused in the process of production and reproduction of the images in his works, the appreciation by viewers could flow in the direction mentioned above. But let us not worry too much in advance. We continue to worry about the issues of the conscious dimension, but there will be special perceptions and awareness which are activated in each moment at the various layers of senses. "Modern was an organized distrust that went against all senses. Teaching us to believe in those senses again today would be a surface without depth."<sup>2</sup> If this claim by a media aesthetician is valid, we can still keep our expectations for the art of Lee, who brings the two sides of the image into coexistence through ephemeral light—particularly the expectations for the innumerable individual possibilities of his works that act upon the perception and consciousness of each viewer in the actual time-space.

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<sup>2</sup>Norbert Bolz, *Das Kontrollierte Chaos: Vom Humanismus zur Medienwirklichkeit*, trans. Yoon, Jong-seok, *Controlled Chaos: From Humanism to a World of New Media*, Seoul: Munye Publishing Co., 2000, p. 114.