

Lee Yeoung-sup, What He Buried and Unburied:

Toward an Impersonal Realism

He calls himself an archaeologist. He names his work the "excavation." Unlike an archaeologist, however, Lee Yeoung-sup buries before he unburies. Then he excavates what he buried. Yet, it is different from what he buried, hence, not what he initially buried. Time comes off from it like the debris would. This is how he digs out the time past. No, rather, he creates time in a manner of digging it out. Then, is he trying to say that the past is something that is created by being invoked to the present? Being summoned to the place where it does not belong, the time past becomes the time approaching, the time "yet to come." Salvador Dali, who had an affinity for unusual, complex shapes painted the surrealistic image of pocket watches melting down, and believed that this would unsettle the assumption that time is linear. Yet, this attempt still lied within the Euclidean form of time. However, Lee Yeoung-sup who likes simple, uncomplicated figures creates an uncanny sense of time that reverses and erases the temporal or spatial order, by slipping in the present into the time, thereby creating the past, and calling it the past that comes after the present.

What is more important is that he excavates life that is encapsulated in time. That led me to put my trust in him. If his works were just another typically beautiful sculpted work; or if he presented a new concept of time that rejected the commonly accepted ideas, to me, he would have been no more than one of the extremely talented sculptors. I may have enjoyed his ingenuity and admired his talent, but that, in and of itself, would not have made me trust him. When we say we trust someone, isn't it when we have faith in his actions and his life? Isn't it when we have a trust that he is a person who faces his life with sincerity, loves and affirms his life no matter how it may turn out to be?

In this sense, I find, in Lee Yeoung-sup's works, some kind of "realism." One that can hardly be labelled realism, for there is no startling depiction of reality; no inhuman rage against the social injustice; no defiant spirit to break through the reality; no optimistic vision of the coming future. Realism with no *Baekdu* Mountain, no flags of strike, no clenched fist, and no plow.

In reality, his realism penetrated the classical sense of realism. For instance, "May" in its style and depiction, in its tightly closed lips, in its intense gaze looking slightly downward with its head dropped, is good enough to touch us with the deep sensation that we once felt from the classical realism. But the abstract and modified lines he chose, turned his realism into something completely different. It is realism not imbued with tension, but one that gives comfort and warmth with a hint of humor. The shape he created is not one of the enormous negative power fighting the injustice, but of the humble, modest, and optimistic life; the shape of the masses he created is not one with the clenched fist, but with hugs and embraces; the shape is not of a "distinguished" figure who resisted to oppression, but of an ordinary person whom we run into on the street corners that, nonetheless, embraces his or her life as it is. These constitute his realism. And this is probably why the shape of a Buddhist statue he created is much closer to that of *Unju* Temple than that of *Seokguram* Grotto.

It is work of an "impersonal realism." There is no exotic narrative, no glamorous subject, no stirring event in it, but just a life that we can easily call one of our own, because it is that humble and modest. We only discover a face that can take on as many forms as there are people living on this earth, for there is no symbolic figure, or typical action implemented in it. Impersonal masses,

impersonal Buddha, impersonal tiger, impersonal faces — these are the things he molded and excavated. His realism encompasses from the homely figure of the country mother who reminds us of the masses immediately, to the sweet, affectionate siblings, and even the refined, sophisticated lady in the city.

Thus, his realism is abstract and deep. The depth does not come from a specific person or action, but from the extremity of going deep down to the life that pertains to everyone, due to its impersonal nature. His works are abstract not because he is dying to bring out a certain shape, but because he erased, smoothed out and abstracted all the sharp edges into soft curves. At times, he abstracted things to the point where the face is left with the minimal features of eyes and nose. In so doing, he brought out the natural lines of the rock, that still remain after being erased, smoothed over and softened by the touch of time. Natural and round flow of life that embraces everything which passed through it — this is probably the source of comfort we find in his work. Sometimes his work is so smoothed over that any formal elements are vanished and comes close to be shaped like an egg. Is it moving toward something that Deleuze might call, "the body without organs"? My answer is yes. It is not returning to an archetype, but moving toward "the body without organs," that is, toward every body. For the sake of abstraction, Francis Bacon disfigured human forms to look like the meat in a butcher shop, which makes any one of us unsettling; Lee Yeoung-sup, however, without the deliberate intention to shape an egg, or anything for that matter, comforts us with the warm affect resonating with each life that he touches upon and molds into shapes slightly different from one another, yet, the most becoming to the life itself.

Though his abstraction is moving toward "the body without organ," every man, woman and animal he created are strikingly "Korean." Should I follow the common discussion and repeat that there is an "archtype" of Korean figure embedded in every piece of his work? But his abstraction is not that of extracting a common form from things, but that of breaking away from any. It erases any form as it moves along; it erases any archetype as it moves along. Then where is this affect of undeniably Korean shape coming from?

I would explain it with the flow of lines that abstracts and moves along. His sense of abstraction is not about erasing everything that exists. He follows the shapes and erases them, thereby, proceeding with the natural and smooth course. He does not just pick out a rock in wilderness and carves eyes and nose to make it look like the Buddha; instead, he chooses to erase the shapes to turn it into a natural rock, barely leaving the outlines of eyes and nose. The lines are naturally flowing, but inarticulate and shy. They do not carry themselves with confidence, pride or arrogance. Perhaps these inarticulate, shy lines, that seem somewhat reserved, are creating the Korean people, not the noblemen or heroes, but the affect of the impersonal masses. The texture unique to his work is then added to this. The texture that we do not look with our eyes, but feel with them, is connected to the affect of stone and rock we commonly see in the mountains and streams. It will probably live on after all the shapes are vanished and evoke the affect characteristic of Korean.

One more thing that I would like to address is the way formal elements are arranged to find their places in Yi's work. They are not carefully distributed after looking at the whole as one, but created by adding something onto the egg-like shape or scraping out here and there. It may be attributed to the fact that the first material he used in the beginning of his career was the earth, and that he treats the rock as if it is the earth. Hence, his work, even after it is completed, is not a tightly constructed whole that would

immediately collapse, if anything was added or removed. It leaves us room to play with the idea of adding something onto it or putting one completed work next to another. Yi strives for the completion of his own, but it is not a closed completion "that becomes incomplete by adding or removing something" to or from it; on the contrary, it is an open-ended completion that allows us the desire to add something, or to put something else next to it. If one never felt that the work was either suffocating or too rigid, one probably owes it to the open-ended nature of his work. Some empty spaces are more than just the space that has not been filled.

Yi's aesthetics of "open-endedness" seems to take the rhythm as its "principle" in opposition to the proportion. While the proportion is an aesthetic principle by which the whole is divided and distributed, rhythm allows to add and variate in order to construct a whole. Some works have "unproportionately" large head, long arms or show variations of similar round shapes. Perhaps, it is the rhythm that produces the open-endedness that leaves a room to add more things. Rhythm is created by variation, hence, allowing new things and different elements to come in, something that would not have been granted under the principle of proportion.

It is not so hard to leave one's failure behind; almost everyone does that. It is, however, rare to leave one's success behind; not everyone can do that. If a person is content with one success, s/he will most likely settle down and stick with it. On the contrary, one who can leave behind his or her success can start afresh, although there is no guarantee of another success. If we called nomadism a form of life that renders one to set out to the new life with a passionate exclamation, "Alright, one more time," nomadism can be defined in terms of one's ability to put down his or her success and leave. Then, Lee Yeoung-sup is a nomad in true sense of the word. He had given up the easy path when he threw away the success he earned from terra cotta work. Without any definite plans, he went up the hill at the back of *Godal* Temple and started the new work of "excavation." Scoring another success in that area, he is now leaving it behind and setting out again. This time, he left the familiar land of seclusion and moved to the city. It seems meaningless to ask "where" he was headed, because he will definitely be heading somewhere. I am convinced that he shall, once again, leave his success behind.

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Lee Jinkyung

(Member of Research Machine "Suyu+Trans"/

Professor at Seoul National University of Technology)