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Art Furniture”, A Symbol of Human Redemption

Exhibition of Byung-Hoon Choi’s Recent Works

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Would it be possible for us to overcome thru craft art the negativeness of the modern high-tech industrial society, such as loss of humanity? In concrete words, could craft art confront the distorted phase of the modern civilization? Or in extremety, could craft art fight against the modern crisis? These issues are the final questions directed to all the human activities today including craft art. Craft art could exist for art’s sake, however, under the modern crisis, it should be for the survival of humankind in the commonly mentioned apocalyptic “probational period” toward destruction. This is the most important issue among the conscientious people today. If an artist tries to understand craft art in this context, the above-mentioned questions should be quite serious ones to him or her. As far as craft art is concerned, it is a moral or humanistic declaration. It is the moral responsibility and duty on the part of craft art as well as other art genres to try to carry out the aesthetic and moral declaration. Byung-Hoon Choi is the one who makes effort to do this. He says, “My work starts from understanding the spirit of the age. The high-tech civilization is separating human beings from nature and is bringing about industrialized society, which causes loss of humanity. The basic understanding of the modern world on this point is what the modern craft art should start from and it should start from and it should be its aim.” And he goes on to say that “the modern craft artist, by way of proper understanding of the spirit of the age and thereby achieving a new artistic philosophy should create a living culture that helps recover humanity and look toward the future.” (“From the Figures of the Beginning of the World to My Own Plastic World”, The Monthly Review of Polytechnique Design, May. 1987)

In a word, to Byung-Hoon Choi who tries to understand craft art in terms of morality and humanism, what matters most is its efforts and aim to redempt the human civilization today. And for this purpose craft art should aim at creating a new living art philosophy and take part in establishing living culture for the future. Byung-Hoon Choi’s idea of “art furniture” comes from this philosophical attitude, which takes a different view from that of the traditional craft furniture or technical furniture. “Art furniture” aims at achieving human redemption rather than beautifying the household instruments following only the traditional ways. He introduced his idea by opening a course titled “Art Furniture” as soon as he was hired as a faculty at Hong-Ik University, his alma mater. The goal of his experimentation is to make art works useful as well as meaningful as an object of a plastic art. For instance, a chair in an indoor space would closely connect an artist and the customers by enhancing mutual communication and empathy closely connect an artist and the customers by enhancing mutual communication and empathy and also making them happy. It should be noted, however, that Byung-Hoon Choi tries to not only achieve the reconciliation of function and beauty in the traditional sense, but also create a new living philosophy and art philosophy. His art work is a fighting against the loss of nature, the separateness from the nature. And the final stratagy for this is his “art furniture”. His idea in developing “art furniture” was that of wrapping furniture with art. He believed that the symbolization of the usefulness of a furniture could be endured if art can convey a message of human redemption. And for this purpose, a close connection of art work with everyday life or living phenomena was tried, which required different methods. : introducing “Figures of the Beginning of the World” to plastic art, making use of different materials, metal, stone, or acryls beyond the limist of woods, and promoting humane touch by oil painting on the figures, etc. These were all to go back to the nature and recover the naturalness. And so figures like insect, mountain and cloud were dynamically utilized in experimenting the variety of materials other than wood.

From the 1970's on Byung-Hoon Choi searched for new ways for the modern craft art. And it was the 1980's when he came to develop the idea of "art furniture" as a result of his efforts to achieve artistic quality in wood craft art. During the period of the early and middle part of the 1980's Byung-Hoon Choi attention was on a series of "Collected Insect." These works were perfume dispensers and writing instruments made of ebony, rosewood, red sandalwood and silver in various figures of insect, for instance, an insect with its wings straightened, or with a long leg ready to jump. The artist explains about the series of "Collected Insect" as follows:

I started "Collected Insect" series from the year 1983. My purpose was to achieve a new configuration of aesthetic experience from nature and a new understanding of the function of craft art. I very much enjoy using ebony and rosewood and try to convey a strong visual image.

And he continues to say how his figures of "Collected Insect" came into being as follows:

My childhood in the country is full of beautiful memory; memory of wandering thru fields and rivers looking for swallowtail butterflies, getting crawfish in the river. These memories work as the most important motives in my recent works. I can read different, mystical life from different insects and so I transform these natural phenomena into my art works as they are. A long and thin leg ready to jump, an antenna endlessly moving, the mystical protective coloring of the thin wings, thinner than a sheet of paper, and the amazingly exact symmetry of the wings. When collected, the wings are fixed by sharp pins and the life stops there, but the mystical beauty remains. God knows how long this universe has been in evolution, but the providence of nature gives me lesson and inspiration.

In short, "Collected Insect" leads us to rediscover the instinctive experience in human nature and thereby closely connects us to the natural secrets. In this context, "Collected Insect" is a symbol of human redemption.

Byung-Hoon Choi's "Wind From the Beginning of the World" was awarded a grand prize in the 2nd Korean Craft Competition in 1987 and works of the same trend thru the year 1990 are made of ebony and plain wood in the figures of birds and wind, which adds another item to his search for naturalness. His "Wind from the Beginning of the World 8907" awarded by the Korean Craft Council, is a combination of ebony, red sandalwood and white stone. It emphasizes a harmony of natural colors of different woods. So this is what Byung-Hoon Choi's "Art furniture" tries to get at. He introduced the Western "art furniture" in great fashion in the 1980's to Korean scene and developed it to suit his own artistic ways. From the year 1990 on, Byung-Hoon Choi's experimental searches for "art furniture" continue to revolutionize the concept of the function of craft art. For instance, a compact disc cabinet, one of the "Wind from the Beginning of the World" series, is oil painted, or, made of ebony and rough stone, or in a combination of ebony, rough stone and polished marbles to emphasize the naturalness of the materials. And there is a chair made of zelvoka, aluminum and an antique and a natural stone connected to it. For a dresser which can be also used as an ornament on the wall, ebony, a mirror and red sandalwood are utilized. And a table is made of wood and stone, or an adjustable lighting apparatus is made of wood fabric

All these artistic efforts of Byung-Hoon Choi during the 1980's thru the 1990's have been aiming to find ideology and methodology for "art furniture" and his attention has been focussed on human redemption. In other words, people who appreciate or use his art furnitures including chairs and compact disc cabinet, that is, from "Collected Insect" of the 1980's to "Wind from the Beginning of the World" and "Voice from the Beginning of the World" of the 1990's are to experience the symbols of artist's ideas of human redemption. The symbol of human redemption works two fold ways, one is to make smooth the empathy between the artist and the customers and the other, to let them read the moral codes of these works so that they can finally recognize and appreciate the modern

art. The artist hopes that the symbolic and practical functions will bring about aesthetic quality to his works and thereby satisfy the customers as they cherish them as precious art works. He believes that this is a new way to re-create artistic culture in our living. That is to say, the traditional concept of function and beauty of craft art is expanded to come out to our living space so that the ideology of "art furniture" can be materialized in our daily life. Thus the final goal of Byung-Hoon Choi is to integrate his ideas of new living philosophy and art philosophy by searching for ways toward human redemption thru craft art.