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Naturalism and Minimalism / Choi, Byung hoon's Art furniture

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"I've never seen such a woodcraft artist who created a works of lyricism where coexist the avant-garde and the traditional, the heavy and the light, the smooth and tough."

Michel Nuridsany, from the review of Choi Byung-hoon's solo exhibition, paris, 1997

Since mid-1990s, Choi, Byung-hoon's craft work, the art furniture has been remarkably paid attention not only in the domestic field but also in France and Switzerland, and it has exercised a great influence on the direction where Korean woodcraft art should go. The craftsman and artist Choi, Byung hoon, whose works have been highly evaluated more as the artistic value than as practical one, is recognized as a forerunner of Korean art furniture and an explorer of a new genre. The very high evaluation that Choi's works have enlarged the boundary of woodcraft, is not an exaggerated comment on him Choi deserves receiving that sort of review because he imbued a new kind of aesthetic concept and the sense of fine arts into the wood furniture which used to be merely an everyday convenience. Finally Choi, far from being absorbed in emphasizing the functional and technical quality in his creative procedure, has produced the works, which have radiated artistic quality and begun to be applauded.

Choi, Byung hoon's works presented in this individual exhibition are located in the same context as those exhibition in 1997's shows of Paris and Switzerland. These furniture works are the wood compositions made of simple elliptic spheres and oval shapes on the plinth of natural stone or on the horizontal wood pedestal. We can also see outdoor stone works which are similar to minimalistic sculpture, and the novel ones such as the simply shaped elliptical mirror hung on the wall and the quadrilateral chair. Among these works, our attention is attracted to the minimalistic art furniture, such as a table or a chair, whose appearances look as if the cross sections of egg-like shapes cut in half were unfolded to take a seat.

Choi's creative objects have been discussed rather from the point of artistic merit than from that of function one. However, in his works the functional utility is not ignored, the examples of which are chairs, indoor or outdoor benches, dining room tables, toilet tables, or CD cabinets. Here, the artist does not maintain them just in the realm of function, but imparts on them aesthetic value, producing them as the original object'. Choi's 'object' is turned into 'work' owning individuality as the status of the original art work. The contemporary artist have enormously manufactured 'three dimensional objects which are not practical', and some of them are recognized as the creative ones which overcame the illusionism. Choi, Byung hoon's art furniture, on the other hand, stems from the different starting point. As a 'three dimensional object which is practical' it makes an effort to hold an aesthetic quality together with a functional one from the beginning.

Another factor immersing the viewers or the users in Choi's works is the artist's method of presenting space. Choi's art furniture doesn't show the decorative space of other furnitures, and demands a new environment and the variable spatial compositions. This artist creates the space pertinent to the real space, and at the same time in harmony with nature. Long and oval chairs, put on the lawn of the garden or in the forest or in front of the ancient royal tombs of Shin-la Dynasty, are the works intended to stage a 'metaphorical space in nature.' This is construed as the same meaning as the

'metaphorical space' of fine art. Choi's diverse ways of presenting space lead us to interpret his art furniture as naturalism

Choi. Byung hoon analyzes his own works as 'Naturalism' and 'Minimalism'. Naturalism, here, is based on the Oriental ideas of Taoism or zen. Choi makes a delicate effort to harmonize the environment with the place where works are situated as well as with the working process, and expresses in his works the sense of unity and intimacy with nature. The mutually contradictory elements and the metaphorical pairs of concepts in them, such as weightiness and lightness, ruggedness and smoothness, hardness and softness, play a major role to make us argue about Oriental naturalism. Choi avoids the decorativeness and materialism, and seeks a harmony of sentiments in the artistic environment. That's the reason that his works give a perfect spatial structure, and emit lyricism simultaneously.

Likewise it is minimalism that has been frequently mentioned for Choi, Byung hoon's recent works. This term is chosen because his works' appearance is related to the simple shapes of circle, sphere, quadrangle. Choi's wooden works, in particular, are composed of simple forms of ovals, squares, and spheres without any additional parts. In most of his works is excluded a complex decorative effect. Ultimately Choi's minimalistic forms unexpectedly register the aesthetic effect of 'theatricalism' together with 'functionality'. Above being seen and giving the decorative effect, and exerting the power of functional quality, Choi's works are completed with the active participation of the audience or appreciator. Thus the psychological relation of artworks with the audience or users is considered to be essentially important.

The consequence is that Choi, Byung hoon and his recent art furniture are able to receive the contrary review. On one hand, Choi as a predecessor of art furniture has delved into a specific genre and enlarged its scope. On the other hand, as a rash adventurer he has broken down the established styles. In fact it would not be easy at all to express contemporary aesthetics and artistic quality in the frame of deeplyrooted traditional craft art. Pondering over Michel Nuridsany's review that there lie plenty of Oriental sentiments and lyricism in Choi, Byung hoon's art furniture, and looking at his avant-garde spirit, naturalism and minimalistic art products, we should discover the world of material abundance and spiritual beauty, and further expect much of his works which will be created in the near future.

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