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## **Choi's World : Where the Spirits Dare to Play**

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Choi Byung-hoon has been seamlessly bridging the divide between design and art since the early 1980s, when he began creating a body of work characterized by wit, charm, and an uncanny sense of balance. His sculptural art furniture and functional objects are at once strikingly formal and compositionally complex. Their beauty lies in the relations among opposites, both materially and conceptually.

A highly original creator with a distinctive poetic vision and a devotion to Korean tradition, Choi is also part of an international cadre of designers, which, since the advent of modernism, has sought ways to elevate design beyond the exclusive confines of functionality. His art is useful as opposed to merely attractive, and, by the same token, possesses a content it might not otherwise have. As art critic Kim Bok Young has pointed out, Choi wants to make design expressive and socially active. It should establish relationships not only with those who use it but also with its environment and nature itself. He might put a chair outdoors, for instance, allowing it to engage with its setting, connecting grass, trees, artist, and audience, encouraging communication and empathy and also “making people happy,” Kim writes. In so doing Choi emphasizes a close connection between art and “everyday life or living phenomena.”

In keeping with that esthetic, there is an inherent playfulness in Choi's designs, countering, or operating in concert with the works' formality. It can be seen in the impossible shapes, the animal and insect-evoking forms that retain their dignity and poise despite their antics and oddness—especially when they are assembled in groups and set outside like puppies on a hillside. And there is sheer silliness as in a bench that resembles a banana on a huge stone olive pit.

These are basic Korean aspirations, deriving to a large extent from Shamanism, which emphasizes the natural world and the invisible spirits that reside within it. Choi shares in the appeal to emotions and the submission to nature inherent in Shamanism and he imbues his formalistic, stripped down creations with humanity and spontaneity. At the same time, he incorporates some of the intellectualism of Confucianism and Daoism. “Naturalism,” based on Daoism (or Sun Buddhism in Korea) and is an important, and notably Korean, aspect of the work. In an essay “Korean Aesthetic Consciousness” and the Problem of Aesthetic Rationality,” Kim Kwang-Myung points out that “for Koreans, nature is a mirror of the self and a world of meditation which gives life, restoring all things to their proper state.”

Among Choi's earliest explorations was a series called Collected Insects. Useful objects made in a rich variety of woods, they included designs for such things as perfume dispensers and writing implements, which were often shaped like insects. These triggered, for Choi, memories of his youth in the countryside, where he recalls “looking for swallowtail butterflies, catching crawfish in the river.” He has spoken of the mystical aspects in the insects' coloring and in the thinness of their wings. He tries to capture these qualities in his materials, shapes, and symbolic allusions to these creatures.

Throughout his work, Choi's emphasis has been on the personality of the materials—on the poetic, on soft, rounded edges, on unembellished surfaces—a characteristic Korean minimalism. Choi brings out the gentleness of the substances, the character of stone—gruff on the exterior, nuanced in its essence—and the warmth, seductiveness, and unparalleled beauty of wood. He creates a dialogue between the rough and the smooth, the self-contained and the constructed, the natural and the composed, keeping the yin and yang in constant play.

The position Choi has long assumed against hard-edged industrial design products is held in the belief that high-tech materials detach human beings from nature. His use of stone as a signature element always at the heart of the work testifies to his beliefs. The stones have an ability to establish unity among contradictory shapes and materials.

Beginning in 1988, Choi produced a series of furnishings titled *Afterimage from the Beginning of the World*. Among his benches from this period is the all-maple *Afterimage from the beginning of the world 9978*. It is composed of a rectangular base with a large ovoid shape at one end. Evoking at once an egg and a sea mammal, the smooth rounded appendage is poised as if afloat. Both parts of the bench are embellished only by their grain, straight lines in the case of the base and curved ones for the ovoid. The minimal look is contradicted somewhat by the subtle tension between contrasting geometric forms and the unlikely balancing act of the ovoid.

*Afterimage from the beginning of the world 9866* goes much further in its play in contrasts—a smooth, elongated rounded maple seat resting on rough stones as base. At one end the stone stands vertically on its end while at the other end, a flattish rock rests on its belly with a vertically positioned one atop it. The construction is reminiscent of optical-illusion drawings that make you guess which line is longest when both are actually the same. These wood-topped stone-based pieces are disarming studies in contrast: serious yet funny, crafted yet natural.

In the mid-1990s, Choi produced his series *Winds from the Beginning of the World*, which consists of more sculptural works, with some surprising artsy flourishes, like pieces of wood bent up at the edges or curved in waves in the manner of Alvar Aalto. One table from this period resembles a toy vehicle with contrasting materials—a smooth wood top, a rough, uneven base, and impossible “wheels” with one of them an irregular stone and the other a trapezoidal block.

A rich vein of symbolism runs through all of Choi’s designs, in terms of the choice of materials, the handling of them, and their arrangements. The rocks evoke the Koreans’ stylized and simple version of the Chinese Tang lions that guarded tombs. Symbolically they also helped ward off evil spirits.

Choi’s later nature-based objects include a black lacquer tray or dish with a large egg-shaped indentation in the center and an oval stone at one end; an oval wood frame with a tilted oblong mirror; a lacquered sandalwood tray with cutout ovals and a sprinkling of gold specks. All of these objects incorporate the natural world and suggest the womb and nurturing.

In many of the designer’s pieces, the art and design dichotomy is emphasized and intentionally left unresolved, generating a kind of emotional and intellectual tension that animates the objects. The works can almost be read as haikus or riddles, forcing the audience to engage with the ideas of the works. This is exemplified in Choi’s table *Afterimage 07-247*, composed of maple wood and natural stone. It has two differently shaped stone legs, one looking almost like a prosthetic limb. Yet there is an inexplicable and satisfying balance conveyed—suggesting a magic that unites the components. Further, the rough, unpolished stones counter the sensuality of the slick, smooth wood top.

It is difficult not to look at Choi’s use of the stone—as design element, signature, and symbol—as the embodiment of the Philosopher’s Stone, an ancient symbol in alchemy. In the form of a stone or powder, the substance was believed capable of transmuting base metals into gold. Extrapolating from that notion, it became a symbol for the perfection of mankind.

The tripartite sculpture/table *Afterimage 04-214* reinforces the notion of alchemy, in the sense that the parts are both separated and joined together. The piece is a stacked agglomeration consisting of a stone base, a rough wood block, a large stone circular object with a small hole in it, resembling a Korean coin, and a polished maple top. The “coin” piece is an object fraught with associations, and

history. The shapes cohere in a language all their own—or all Choi's own.

In the wood chaise *Afterimage 07-242*, improbably and unaccountably poised in space with only a rock set at the bottom where a footrest might be, as if to anchor the chair, the user is challenged to wonder how this chair remains upright with no obvious support? In this way an immediate colloquy is established between the object, the maker, and the user.

Alexander von Vegesack, director of the Vitra Design Museum, remarks that the strength of such pieces lies not only in their organic form and “calmness,” but in their concern for “ergonomics and rationality.” One might add to that, an emotional sensitivity and even sensuousness. The designer's respect for the wood, for example, is evident in the way he tests its properties. He bends it and lets the shape cut through space and hold its own almost as if it were levitating. Polished and unembellished the material speaks for itself.

The conversation with Isamu Noguchi is apparent in Choi's organically shaped objects and dynamic interactions between stone and wood and with Alvar Aalto in the way he celebrates wood and bends it to his own expressive ends.

Choi's broad-ranging allusions and discussions with the past and other cultures extend to Stonehenge and other primitive works in the stacked stones pieces, and to British modernist artists like Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth as in Choi's slender, shapely polished-wood sculptural tables, whose main feature is an enormous hole. Choi shows how to make the past visible, giving it a second life in the present.

He is not stuck in the past and present. There is a future. Choi says he is willing to explore new materials. In the 1990s he notes that he experimented with combinations of wood, metal (aluminum), and painting, and he says, “Nowadays I am working with carbon fiber as a material to explore more.” But, he concludes, “Always wood has been in the center of materials to work with.”

Ultimately, Choi believes in a kind of creative magic, whereby objects convey their creator's aesthetic and intentions directly to their audience—visually, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Following Choi's philosophy, there is a unity in all things, natural and manmade, animal and human. The art of his designs is that what we see in their presence depends as much on the objects' physical attributes as on the context in which we experience them and on the knowledge and understanding we bring to them. While their beauty appeals to our esthetic sense, their functionality fosters a different kind of understanding through physical intimacy. The communication is subliminal, and that's as it should be.