

2014

Beyond a means of communication

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Beyond a means of communication, calligraphy developed in Asia traditions as an activity of cultivating the mind, of emptying it of distraction by achieving full mastery of the brush. The perfect composition of the line imbued with living qualities such as strength and bodily proportion, is a singular gesture. That gesture, expressing the ineffable. Tao, is a feat made possible only when the calligrapher has achieved an utter stillness of inner being.

In his pursuit of this inner stillness, Korean artist Byung Soon Choi's exhibition, *In One Stroke*, transmutes the brushstroke into sculptural benches, trading ink for basalt, a volcanic rock he excavated off the coast of Indonesia. Lifting brushstrokes he had penned directly from the page, Choi traced their outlines onto the surfaces of these monumental stones. He exchanged the brush for a chisel, with additional aid from the elements. He used water to smooth down sanded surfaces, and working outdoors in the dead of winter, a blowtorch to prevent the water from freezing. Working by hand, he hewed the rough, porous blocks of gray basalt to find these sculptures embedded within: arcs of stone polished to a lustrous black sheen and balanced in various graceful gestures.

afterimage of beginning 013-400(2013) calls to mind two intersecting, curving lines, while elsewhere in the exhibition, the tubular basalt pieces appear to have been threaded through, delicately poised on top of, or cantilevering from raw, earth-colored stones of seemingly lesser nobility. They are in fact cut from the same slab; retaining flourishes of the original stone as anchors to keep the sculptures standing, they serve as reminders for the viewer of basalt's natural state.

In One Stroke marks a new stage in Choi's 30-year career. For his first solo exhibition in the United States, Choi presents work in an unprecedented commitment to a single idea. Here, he introduces calligraphy as a new theme, but rather than a new direction, it serves as a progression of the long-standing, fundamental spirituality of his craft. Like the calligrapher, Choi's approach to his art is deeply rooted in introspection, an emptying of the mind as to find one's own depths within.

The lyricism and grace of Choi's approach has in the past prompted Vitra Design Museum's founding director Alexander von Vegesack to draw comparisons to that of the late Isamu Noguchi, whose Asian heritage, in tandem with his modernist aesthetic, came to define his work. As von Vegesack wrote in 2008, "Common to both Asian artists are the reduction to simple outlined forms, the use of natural materials, the play with strong contrasts, and the great quietude their objects exude." Also like Noguchi's Choi's work falls under neither the category of art nor design but rather, in a separate category of meditative objects meant to install an inner quiet.

Perhaps Choi's most recognizable work, a chair entitled *afterimage 07-242(2007)*, positions a roughly textured round mass of gray stone at the foot of a blonde swath of laminated maple and beech veneer, sinuously sculpted to form a floating seat. The sitter faces the stone, relying on its weight to give the chair balance and function. Devoid of ornamentation, the chair demands meditative collaboration between the stone and the sitter.

Choi notes Korean heritage as his first and foremost influence on his introspection. "Koreans have a tendency to focus more on the inner world rather than the visible expressions of the outside," he said in 2010. "As an individual, to find clear identity rooted in one's cultural background is important." He turns his gaze to traditional Korean philosophies that have evolved from the historical influences of China, notably the pursuit of Zen, or Seon in Korean.

When speaking of his work, Choi also often cites the contrasting influence of the secular Jo-

seon Dynasty(1392-1897), the aesthetics of which uninterruptedly followed the restrained tenets of Neo-Confucianism- practicality, frugality, and harmony with nature — for hundreds of years. “Zen begins by immersing in one’s inner world.” Said Choi, “and Neo-Confucianism seeks to recover the proper humanity and complete human virtue through self-discipline.”

On a more personal level, Choi’s earliest series drew from his own childhood, plucking its forms directly from nature. “God knows how long this universe has been in evolution, but the providence of nature gives me lesson and inspiration,” Choi wrote in the May 1987 Monthly Review of Polytechnique Design, reflecting on his seminal 1983 Collected insects exhibition. This early series of wooden quotidian objects — a perfume dispenser, writing instruments — alluding to insects, express a reverence for the images that defined his rural childhood in Gangwondon, a heavily wooded area bordering North Korea. As he then described the impetus for the works, “A long an 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.”

These neat references, however, were short-lived. In the 90s, Choi began titling his works afterimage of the beginning of the world, a series where carved wood and stones polished into ovoids and ellipses replaced his literal representations of living things. “For me, the term ‘afterimage’ signifies an imaginary and mystical encounter with a previous world not yet experienced.” This imaginary world is the driving force that awakens my creative impulses and takes me back toward the world of the unknown.”

As further meditation on Taoist and Seon notions of balance, Choi began combining wood and stone to serve as each other’s plinths and pedestals, juxtaposing contradictory elements of pale and dark, heavy and light, smooth and rough. These balancing acts often create the illusion of near-weightlessness, as seen in afterimage 0091(2000), in which a curved expanse of blonde maple seems to float above a rectangular block of polished black granite. In the aughts, Choi expanded his sculptural furniture into tables of lager and lager expanses of wood placed delicately on upright stones, creating a strong resemblance to dolmens, the doorway-like Korean shrines of the Neolithic era.

Over the years Choi has combined meditations on the natural world with modernist adaptations of historical Korea design elements. Though his is an individual exploration, Choi’s journey towards this inner quiet is not his to travel alone. In his creation of tangible spaces of Seon in which his audience completes the object’s gesture, he pursues his desire to make introspection what he calls ‘a universal value of the world.’ In exercising a great restraint, he provides the viewer with an opportunity to explore their own inner being. “I choose introspection rather than loud shouts from the outside world.”