

**2016**

**AFTERIMAGE OF BEGINNING:**

**In Search of the Memory of the Primordial Inscribed in Water and Stone**

Yi-sson Kim, P.h.D.

Striking photograph hangs in Byung Hoon Choi's studio. It shows a black and white silhouette of the artist, seated in a chair he made, looking meditatively at a stone underneath his feet. The stone has been placed to physically balance the legless, cantilevered seat, and at the same time the stone is positioned so that the person seated in the chair cannot help but look at it. This moment is striking because it is a quiet but eloquent portrayal of the world the artist inhabits with his work, a world where the confrontation between nature and man, past and present, the rigid and the pliable, and the rough and the smooth exists in harmony.

For his second solo exhibition at Friedman Benda, Choi has made fountains carved from basalt stone and a selection of tables, stools, and water basins made of wood and lacquer. As a designer, Choi has never overlooked functionality but has always immersed his practice in the Zen notion of the inner world, or correspondingly, what Kandinsky referred to as "the spiritual in art." How do these seemingly incompatible aspects, that is, the functional and the spiritual, co-exist in Choi's work? The answer to this question can best be found in the materials he uses.

The use of wood has played a vital role in Choi's work, and the sophistication of his hand is apparent with his newest interpretation of the material. For this collection, Choi utilized traditional lacquer varnish, a highly specialized and celebrated practice in Asian art. The basic technique is to apply the sap from the lacquer tree many times over. Wooden furniture varnished with lacquer can last for a very long time, almost forever, because it is protected against damage from moisture and insects.

Traditional lacquer varnishing involves meticulous, hard labor in a rigorously controlled environment. For the finish to come out properly, certain levels of high temperature and moisture must be maintained while the object is repeatedly varnished and dried. Moreover, the workroom must be dust free, for even a speck would leave its trace and ruin the beauty of the finished surface.

While Choi has dedicated much of his over three decade-long career to the exploration of wood as a means to express his appreciation of his craft and cultural heritage, it is perhaps his current fascination with the material properties of stone and water that best demonstrate the breadth and depth of his discovery. East Asian cultures have long held that the energy of the universe is immanent in water and stone. The question of how one should conduct oneself in life and other general rules of ethics are often discussed in terms of the characteristics of these elements. Choi is able to channel these concepts both by working his materials and allowing them to guide his hand.

Byung Hoon Choi spends time observing his material before beginning work. He wants to make sure that the final work will reflect the original form of the rock and the ways in which nature would have shaped it. One is reminded of the well-known Taoist verse from the Chinese classic Tao Te Ching: "The highest good is like water." Water benefits everything but does not assert itself. It neither strives against nor tries to rule over anything. Rather, it flows over whatever courses are available along its path and conforms to whatever shapes it encounters. If water is flexible, then stone is what embraces its flexibility.

In the current exhibition, Choi selected monumental basalt stones as his raw materials. By highlighting their original forms and characteristics, Choi harnessed the notion of the gigantic rock or dolmen. When considering his subjects, Choi recalled the monumental, eighth century Shakyamuni Buddha at the Seokguram Grotto, a UNESCO World Heritage site famous for its intricate and life-

like carvings. Primitive carvings of rock cliff Buddhas abound in Korea and are responsible for the cultural and historical value that is placed on the traditions of stone work in East Asian cultures. These rock cliff Buddhas were carved on the rough surfaces of ancient rock formations and are not only symbolic as Buddhist monuments but those that honor primordial elements.

Scholars maintain the tradition of meditating on the nature of boulders and honoring them with poems and paintings. The Confucian belief holds that the principles of all things in the universe are condensed in the weather-beaten forms of ancient boulders. Weathered ruins—quiet, peaceful and solitary amidst the surrounding environment—are all that remain at the historic site of the Geodon Temple in Wonju City, Gangwon Province.

During a recent trip, Choi was deeply moved by the presence of a large boulder that had once served as the pedestal for the temple's statue of Buddha. After a thousand years of exposure, this afterimage, as Choi calls it, serves as an "imaginary and mystical encounter with a previous world not yet experienced...it is the driving force that awakens my creative impulses and takes me back toward the world of the unknown."

Whether it is a fountain that sends water down a roughly-formed natural rock, or a water basin with a flawless black finish made in a meticulously controlled environment, Choi's works embody the sensitivity of an artist who is keen on understanding the law of nature and capturing its subtleties. Choi is constantly in touch with nature, contemplating it and meditating upon it, because nature has that which human ingenuity cannot overpower and that which humans can never imitate. When standing in front of his work, the viewer experiences more than visual pleasure; the work puts the viewer in a mode of philosophical meditation.

This is not to say that one needs to have special knowledge of East Asian philosophy to view his work. The shape of the natural stone and the quietly flowing water alone have the power to heal, to allow the viewer to gradually let go of the tensions of everyday modern life. Mark Rothko's chapel is a meditative space for all people, regardless of their race or religion because his work has the power to touch what is primal and basic in humans. The water and stone in Choi's works do this as well. Perhaps the water and stone we see are only traces of nature, and when we encounter these traces, or afterimages they transport us outside of our time-space world, and we begin the transcendental experience of navigating a cosmic flow.