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Choi Byung Hoon: Message of Silence

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It seems pointless to determine whether Choi Byung Hoon's work is craft, sculpture or furniture. It is a coexistence of the work of art and the role of the item that can be used in daily life. The attempt to categorize crafts and fine art as conflicting disciplines is actually a trend that appeared after the 20th century. Prior to that there were no such clearcut borders. In Joseon Dynasty folk craft, for example, there is a happy encounter between practicality and aesthetics, as formative beauty and functionality are exquisitely melted into all the objects made primarily for practical use. They are already objects d'art and excellent pieces in their own right. Though they are tools placed in the spaces of daily life for people to use, they also provide realms of infinite space for contemplation and appreciation. This is true for wooden furniture and wooden vessels, ceramics, viewing stones, and even architecture. The roles of tool and formative beauty do not function separately, but are combined together solidly as one. In Korean folk products we can often observe first hand this striking health and soundness.

Choi is a wood craftsman, art furniture producer and sculptor. His work is aimed at all of these genres. He makes consoles, bookcases, side tables and art benches. All these projects are carried out as simple structures that maximize the materiality of the substance itself. The artist minimizes expression by using only natural materials such as wood and stone. While doing his best to erase any modifiers or decorations from the simple materials, and greatly thickening their materiality, color and surface effects, he creates works in which masses of different material properties are conjoined vertically or horizontally, and tend to occupy space just through their simple relations or arrangements.

Thus, at first glance, his work impresses us as a mixture of Joseon Dynasty wooden furniture, Bauhaus, and influence from Minimalism. Traces of Joseon furniture, with its nature-like purity and simplicity, healthy formative beauty, and the avoidance of an artificial look, and Bauhaus design and 20th-century design, with their overall proportional beauty, use of optimal materials, obsession with details and innovative spirit, glimmer together. Moreover, there is also an exterior similarity to the transparent, simple works of Minimal Art that reveal their objecthood. But unlike the Minimalists, who have denied any implication of a psychological state, and eliminated from their works everything that traditionally made art what it is, Choi sees his works as objects of contemplation. The difference is that Choi wants his work to act as a medium enabling one to enter the path of contemplation and meditation. Moreover, unlike the Minimalists, who overturn the idea that transforming the raw materials into works of art relies on the skilled labor of the artist, in Choi's work, arduous manual labor and investment of time are essential, in order to partially grind off the surfaces of stone and wood, and to apply lacquer. This methodology and intention belong to the same logic often encountered in the world of Korean monochrome painting and abstract sculpture of the 1970s. But in addition, there is naturally a certain admiration for the world of Joseon Dynasty intellectuals, a kind of affinity with the artist's predecessors. Calligraphy, viewing stones and the spirit of moderation also function as a foundation for Choi's works. He often mentions the relevance between his work and the single stroke in calligraphy, the track of the black ink line, the love for viewing stones, and the aesthetics of lost connections and old age.

The artist compares the heaviness of stones and the lightness of wood, the roughness of stone and the softness of wood, and brings the different materiality and colors into stark contrast. Different colors and textures give off powerful sensations on each surface. This gleam is achieved through accumulated labor over infinite time, and artificial intervention. The human manipulation, interfering with the surface of the material made by time and nature, ignites the time of the present and presentness.

The artist seems to be placing this moment of now upon the work, joining it with the primitiveness of the stone. The lump made by rough, distant, primitive time collides with the glossy, smooth skin formed by present time. It is a heterogeneous time-space encounter in a single place. The artist calls this “creation of new value.”

A stone is a strange form, a mystery made by nature and carved by time. Through the stone, which was the first work of art, people must have begun to imagine and think of images, thus becoming the “thinking person” or “one that does art.” The stone is a fragment of a split mountain, a final face formed by the traces of distant time, showing its endurance of suffering and hardship during countless years, wearing as its skin a collection of scars that demonstrate its history of survival. This accumulation of distant time, unfathomable by finite human time, is an enchanting beauty created by the power of nature that is difficult to put into words. The traces, made not by human hands but by nature, are a result of non-doing. The stone I am looking at now is the last face of that stone, a miraculous face that survived and made it here.

Commenting on the “simple yet tasteful beauty of stones, which have suffered the wind and frost since ancient times but never say ‘bitter’ or ‘sweet,’” Choi Sun-woo has observed that “the attitude of humans trying to quietly ruminate on elegant beauty is indeed the beauty of old age in the East,” and “a stage of maturity in which one has gone as far as he should.” This resembles the “stage of the aged” mentioned by Kinbara Seigo as a characteristic of Eastern aesthetics. Hence, stone is a material that has given infinite inspiration to artists of the East and stimulated their imaginations. It is a medium that gave them fantasy, stimulated illusions, and urged them to find a different being within that stone. Paintings of strange rocks and viewing stone hobbies are its outcome.

Choi Byung Hoon has connected stones and wood to produce usable furniture. However, this furniture/objet can also be reduced to natural matter itself, and remains in a hesitant state somewhere between artificial and natural. His bookcases particularly reflect the strong influence of Joseon Dynasty wooden furniture. His consoles and benches maintain minimal functionality as furniture, while maximizing the properties of the material itself. This intentional sustaining of the original nature of the materials is also a characteristic of Korean traditional wooden furniture. Thus, in his works there is a coexistence of Western Modernist aesthetics and the aesthetics of Korean traditional furniture.

Furniture is the humblest kind of object, grounded at the bottom of daily life, and consisting of items intimately linked to the human body. The charm of Joseon era furniture is that it is based on pragmatism, yet carries a dignified formative level of completion, and traverses the border between an elevated state transcending the secular world, and everyday life. Joseon wooden furniture represents a kind of rustic taste rather than perfection, a pure, natural charm rather than decoration. It is said to imply a very Korean sense of beauty, which tries to reduce the artificial aspects in pursuit of nature-like purity and simplicity, and healthy formative beauty. Such an aesthetic sense of course reflects the worldviews and formative senses of the scholars who ordered that furniture. Those intellectuals disregarded the complexity and glamour of the world, and considered the pursuit of wealth or ostentation as vulgar. They concentrated on reading books, studying the principles of the world, and contemplating. What directly represents and embodies the mind and spiritual world of these scholars is the shapes, textures and colors of the various items of wooden furniture placed in the sarangbang (reception room). The wooden furniture brings out the natural beauty of the material to its full extent, through the use of wood with good grain, soft and simple texture, yet without gloss, and the finishing of it in simple, refined form with no superfluous lines. These items are not only tools befitting the place where the frugal scholarly spirit is practiced, but are also excellent artworks, objets of art, and installation art in their own right. Moreover, the more they age, the deeper and more matured their surface textures become. The aging gives them a rustic elegance. And “the internal power that created this aged texture was a collaboration between the aesthetic sense of the subjects in demand, based on Confucian ideology, and the fully ripened skill of the Joseon master, who built these structures embodying forms of usage” (Choi Gong-ho). The aesthetic sense and formative beauty of Joseon wood-

en furniture has been further refined, implied and embedded in Choi Byung Hoon's works, which emanate a modern yet classical charm.

Meanwhile, there are always contrasting materials combined and merged together in this artist's works. The texture, materiality, surface colors, and tastes of the heterogeneous materials clash with one another, yet exist in peculiar harmony. Some resemble Isamu Noguchi's coffee table, in which three sculpted wooden legs support a cloud-shaped glass cover. Such combining of heterogeneous materials, a harmony of incompatibility, may be seen as the "jungyong (middle way)." The character "jung (中, middle)" can be interpreted as "being in an adequate state in relation to others, while not leaning to one side" (Seolmunhaeja). To be unbiased represents the appearance of jung itself, and to be placed in an adequate state in relation to others means to be in a harmonious state with others or other things without leaning to one side. Thus, the middle way means "not excessive or lacking, and not biased toward either direction." I believe the artist is attempting to pursue this harmony with the virtue of jungyong as his formative basis.

Choi primarily uses stone and wood as his basic materials. These are typical materials that humans obtain from nature. I think that in this world, only wood and stone become more beautiful over time. Most things eventually become extinct, break down and become ugly, but wood and stone embrace the power of time, becoming solidified as even more captivating existences. These hard crystals become the essence of all tools made by humans. The act of polishing wood and stone--mysterious existences of unknown origin, materials that maintain solid durability and store distant time within them--is very shamanistic. Finite humans borrow the powers of these eternal materials to transform them into tools of hope for something. This human history is also the history of culture and art. Choi's tools are all related to the human body. They are for storing objects used by humans, or for the physical body, with its soft flesh and certain weight, to rely on. The tools made of stone and wood, which are related to the body, are firm yet soft, heavy yet floating. Each lump, in standing or lying form, simultaneously emits pitch-darkness and brilliant light. It feels as if this lump has been uplifted from a distant lot that has always been there, and is emerging like a living creature, approaching us on its own, to intimately share a certain place with us. Perhaps this is the nature of all furniture/tools.