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interview by Ji-Un Nah

## CHOI BYUNG HOON

There are so many stones in Choi Byung Hoon's home that you might find one bouncing off your foot. He has stones holding up his table, stones holding up the books on his bookshelf, stones weighing down ultra-thin sheets of traditional Korean paper. There are stones in front of his door, stones in his yard, and stones in the bathroom. There are big stones and tiny stones, shiny stones and odd stones, stones from Korea's Gangwon Province and stones from Indonesia. In his car, Choi has a "map of stones around the country." So it's not unusual that he would be referred to as an "artist of stones and wood." At his direction, I entered his factory-like studio on the first floor, where I saw the work from his series *afterimage of beginning*—sealed up tightly in bubble wrap, with serial numbers reading like code: "019-520," "017-405," "011-369," or "021-583."

"Can you tell what work it is from looking at the number?"

"Oh no, I have no idea."

He laughs heartily, as it is no matter. Choi uses stone and wood to make "art furniture" that is at once practical and aesthetic. He applies the same approach with his art: including only the important things while leaving everything else blank. His influences include the culture of Korea's Confucian scholars (known as *seonbi*), who saw restraint as a virtue, and the *wuwei* (non-action) ideas of Lao Tzu, who sought to accept nature exactly as it was. Seeing his work *Scholar's Way*—placed outside of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston—or his series *Meditation Chair*, which he has continued producing in different materials, one imagines a lofty mountain or the fresh stream of a river. There is a famous saying by Lao Tzu, which Choi posted by his desk as one of his favorite quotes: "Outstanding skill seems clumsy; great wisdom seems foolish." Combining Senegalese wood sculpture and a Wendell Castle chair with the tools used by breweries for making unfiltered rice wine, his space seems like it belongs at once to a sculptor, a calligrapher, a scholar, and a carpenter. He offers us some bread and coffee. "You've come a long way to get here," he says. The place is the South Korean city of Paju, which you encounter along the Jayu Road motorway from Seoul—just after an awkward encounter with a road sign that also lists the North Korean cities of Pyongyang and Kaesong.

### **I noticed the toad sculpture by your door.**

I went to buy stones, and they threw that in. It's long been said that if you place a stone toad in front of your house, riches will follow.

### **And have you found lots of riches since the stone toad arrived?**

They're coming in even now. I spend it all on the stones.

### **Whenever you travel from Seoul and Paju, you see the sign pointing the way to Pyongyang and Kaesong. Paju gives off an unfamiliar sense, perhaps because it's the closest city to North Korea in the South. What led you to move here?**

I arrived 20 years ago. At the time, this was all forest. I was working as a professor at Hongik University, and I chose the location because it was the middle of the forest, and it was a 30-minute commute to Seoul—and now it looks like this. When I first came here, there were only three houses, and now there are so many apartment complexes. To foreigners, Seoul might seem like an unsafe city, but we who live there don't feel that way. The same is true for Paju. When I first arrived, I wondered how the other people could live here, with the Armistice Line right there and the North

Korean propaganda loudspeaker broadcasts in earshot. But when you actually live here, you don't sense the same kind of desolation that outsiders do. I see it as fate that brought me to this city. Choi Chang Jo, the former geography professor at Seoul National University, is the one who combined traditional feng shui with modern geography. In a contribution to one monthly, he said that Paju would be "the location of the capital of a reunified Korea." Paju borders on the Han and Imjin Rivers. Mount Simhak is located in back of the publishing town. According to him, this neighborhood is an auspicious site. I saw his column after I moved here and thought, "Hmm, I guess I picked the right place."

**You do get the sense that the location itself is kind of remote within the city. It's tranquil, like an island unto itself.**

That's because it used to be the middle of a forest. You could see the Han River too. And it faces southwest. It's also the place where my artistic work has grown over the past 20 years.

**Do you believe in feng shui (the view of nature that home and cemetery sites should be chosen to reflect the influences of geography and direction on human lives)?**

I don't make a point of seeking places out based on feng shui. For me, place is about a personal sense—the feeling of "this is a good location." I do think I understand why people prefer a southern orientation. In the winter, the sun hangs low in the sky, and the light reaches the deepest parts of your home. The thermal efficiency is excellent. I spent six months looking around the neighborhood before I decided to live here. For artists, "sense" is something absolute.

**I've heard you were born in the city of Taebaek in Gangwon Province. Do you have any memories you associate with your early childhood?**

My family belongs to the Gyeongju clan of Chois, and my parents were based in Hapcheon in South Gyeongsang Province. That's where the family burial ground is. During the Japanese occupation of Korea, my parents fled the Pacific War and ended up at the foot of Mount Taebaek in Gangwon Province. My father was a doctor of Korean medicine. I'm the youngest of nine siblings—I have three older brothers and five older sisters. I lived at the foot of Mount Taebaek until elementary school, and then we moved to Seoul. I would eat wild berries there, go around with friends digging for arrowroot, hit the ice by the stream and go sledding on the mountain slope. On the other side of the mountain was the neighborhood where the trains came. On rainy days, you could hear the whistle from over the mountain. My brothers were in Seoul. The sound of the whistle seemed to connect the countryside with the outside world. So I ended up developing a longing for the world beyond the mountains. That may be why I've traveled so much. I went on my own to India and Nepal, and I hiked Annapurna up to 4,000 meters. I've traveled to the ends of the fjords and the highlands at the edge of Scotland.

**You use some of the furniture you've made yourself, including the table, hat rack, and meditation chair. The table has three stones holding up a wood slab, but it's more stable than you would think.**

A triangle is quite stable. If you want tension, you need an inverted triangle. The triangle doesn't require any kind of touch on my part. It's just a matter of me finding elements I can include in my world. When I built the structure, this table was the first thing I put in it. It's quite old. It's the work of mine that's gotten the most use.

**Where are the stones from?**

From Hongcheon in Gangwon Province, I think. I like the natural feel of stones. Stones are something created by the eons—the kind of time scale that's unimaginable to us. That time has continued until today, where it's come together with me to create new value. People ask me how long it usually takes me to produce something, and I'll tell them, "It takes eons."

**Can you tell from looking at a stone where it came from?**

The character of a stone varies a lot with the terrain. A patterned stone like this one comes from Yeongwol in Gangwon Province. We call them *munyangseok*, which means “patterned stones.” That rounded one is from Mount Seorak; we call it a *hobakdol*, or a “pumpkin stone.”

**Why do Yeongwol stones have patterns?**

You’ll have to ask God that.

**You have so many stones all around your house. Stones in the bathroom, stones between the bookshelves...**

I always keep stones beside me so I can make their materiality my own. If you only listen to trot music by Lee Mi Ja, you can’t really hear Mozart’s music when you listen to it. I placed stones along my shelves to shore them up. Then I put the models of people holding up the stones there so that I could sense the stones’ scale.

**I’m sure you have reasons for all the items in your home. Are there any of them that you keep in order to draw inspiration from?**

That piece of wood that I use as a flower pot stand was originally an Indonesian farming tool. I use it based on its shape: it has a hollowed-out center, where is where I put the flower pot. I put it there so I could sense the flavor of the wood. The reason I put the flower pot on that wide pottery piece is to create the effect of a Korean garden—I wanted to sense the Korean garden. If you look at a Korean garden, there’s usually a pond, which has its own island with a pine tree on it. You’re supposed to put water on the bowl, but it was too much of a hassle. The Thonet Chair No. 14 is one I bought at an antique shop in Paris in 1997, which I keep because it’s a pioneering example of modern furniture. That Ladder Back Chair by Charles Rennie Mackintosh is actually quite uncomfortable to sit on. I brought it here because it’s a chair that is all about the role that furniture plays as an aesthetic object, as art in an interior setting.

**You have Wendell Castle’s *Nirvana* chair placed right next to Shiro Kuramata’s chair *How High the Moon*. Is there any particular reason you collected those two works?**

I put the two of them next to my own work—the idea being that it’s the same level. Wendell Castle is significant as part of the first generation of American art furniture. Shiro Kuramata’s chair is an expression of Japanese identity. It has a similar sense to a Japanese blind, which sort of obscures and sort of doesn’t. It’s an example of Japanese identity being modernized. That emerged naturally in the artwork because that culture and those architectural structures are part of life. It connects with identity as I conceive it, too. I bought both of them at the Friedman Benda gallery.

**I’ve heard that the chair you actually spend the most time in is the Eames Lounge Chair by Herman Miller—that it’s where you usually read books.**

Yes, that’s my favorite space. I’ll open up the windows and usually sit in that chair and read in the evenings. Next to it is a Gangwon Province cabinet, which I bid for on K Auction. That cabinet introduces a sense of Korean leisure to the space. The rock on top of it is one I bought at Mokgye in Chungju. It’s not the traditional Scholar’s rock—it’s a very contemporary kind. The calligraphy on it is by Lee Kyoung Hee, and it says *wu wei zi ran* (“non-action and nature as it is” in Chinese). I asked him to write it especially for me, since the Daoist idea of “accepting nature as it is” is my artistic philosophy.

**The Confucian scholars of old would keep rocks like that to admire. What sort of thoughts come to mind for you when you look at that one?**

I think of nature, which is tremendously tenacious and powerful. Whenever I look at it, I think,

"I'm really glad I bought that." There are other Scholar's rocks I've paid far more for that I just keep on my shelf without looking at them very often.

**With the Gangwon cabinet and rock and the "wu wei zi ran" calligraphy, could you call this a space where your soul is present?**

I think so. In my artistic work, I attempt to be contemporary, experimental, and adventurous, but underneath that, I have this kind of an identity. How am I different? What I've learned is that I'm different from others. And because I'm different from others, I have value. That's my life force, my reason for being. The questions I ask myself are how to find that identity and how to sustain it. That's why I try to stay in touch with Korean sentiments. As that breath builds up within, it matures at some point and emerges as something all my own.

**How do you interpret and internalize the idea of "non-action" and "nature as it is"?**

Nature is something great. Humans cannot hope to conquer it. *Wu wei zi ran* is about acknowledging and accepting nature as it is. In Westerners, you see this approach and spirit of trying to conquer nature. Korean sentiments are about recognizing the greatness of nature and adapting to nature. It's important to have that attitude in life of achieving harmony with nature. That doesn't mean we don't experiment with new values. *Wu wei zi ran* is about finding your own life amid that harmony with nature. In Buddhism, they talk about the "middle way." According to the monk Seongcheol, the middle way isn't just a place "in between"—it's a matter of blending values at completely opposite poles and making them one.

**What are the opposing values that you're attempting to blend?**

Wood has always been the foundation of my work. The reason stones became part of my work was because of their materiality, which is something that wood doesn't possess. Stone is much heavier than wood. I needed stones to resolve structural issues. So I'm uniting the values of different material qualities, like those of wood and stone. Wood is mild and soft, whereas stone is cold and rough. When I'm finishing my work, I make one side coarse and one side glossy. I suppose that represents my own "middle way," achieving that harmony through the values of different material qualities. Some of my items are things I've collected unconsciously—namely the scales and rulers.

**What books have you read recently in your Eames Lounge Chair?**

It's thick, so I haven't made much headway. I'm reading *A Walk with Eastern Art and Aesthetics* by Cho Min Hwan, a professor at Sungkyunkwan University. A while back, I read *Chinese and Western Aesthetics and Cultural Spirit* by Zhang Fa, and it made a real impression on me; this is like a Korean version of that book. Zhang presented a side-by-side comparison of China and the West in terms of areas such as music, literature, art, and philosophy in different eras—for example, comparing Confucius and Socrates. I was curious how he was able to discuss it in such depth. That book helped me a lot in finding my own identity: questions like how China and Korea are different, how Japan and Korea are different, what Korean identity is. Recently, I've been learning about Japanese gardens—since Japanese gardens represent Japan's spirit.

**All of your books have the purchase date and a signature on the first page. You also put your name on the spine of the book.**

That means "it's mine—don't touch." I write the dates to remember when I bought the book.

**So what do you see as the aesthetic differences between China, Japan, and Korea?**

Chinese people have a philosophy that views themselves as being at the center of the world, and that's also reflected in their aesthetics. Their scales are different. Their ideas are big and broad. They talk about the cosmos. Look at China's three major stone grottoes, like the Yungang Grottoes. They have a truly enormous Buddha statue. It's overwhelming because of the sheer scale. That

was three centuries before Silla's Seokguram Grotto. If you look at it in terms of scale, Seokguram is no competition with China. But the central Buddha image at Seokguram is sophisticated and exquisitely detailed. The smile, the shape, the proportions are all impeccable. With its eyes gently closed, the central Buddha appears humble and mild. It has a quiet elegance and internal depth to it. In Japan's case, you sense the greatness in small things. They express the sea and waves through tiny pebbles; they place a small suiseki rock there, and you can sense the greatness of nature. The kind of identity that I talk about isn't some kind of conservative attitude. It's assertive. It's a question of how to transform Korean identity into the spirit of these times. You can't remain bound to old values; you have to tackle the demands of the times. That's why I have to keep studying. Age is a constraint in a physical sense. When you get older, you start to decline both mentally and physically. An artist has to reject that. That's why I travel so often in search of stirring things.

**I saw you had a map of Korean Buddhist temples next to the door of your studio.**

Whenever I've had the time, I've gone to the temples on the map that I haven't visited before. I've been pretty much everywhere there is to go. Hwaeom Temple in Gurye, Tongdo Temple in Yangsan—they're all stunning. In addition to the surviving temples, I've also visited some temple ruins. At those ruined sites, the wooden structure is all gone, leaving only the stones. Those stones have been lying around for millennia. It's something that often gets recreated in my work. At the former Gameun Temple site in Gyeongju, they have a long stone embankment that served as a support, which was a source of inspiration for me. If you look at *Afterimage 2020*, a work of mine that's on display at the Seoul Museum of Craft Art, the masses of stone are placed as if at a temple ruin. The stones have been heaved into place.

**Do you find yourself drawn more and more over time toward things that are in a state of collapse and disrepair?**

It's because of the thousands of years that are lying there. That's where historical perceptions arise from. The history of our era is something that we assume ownership for and write ourselves.

**Comparing your early work with your more recent work, one gets the definite sense that you've shifted from more elaborate and polished forms toward forms that are cruder. How did this change in your artistic approach come about? Do you sense more beauty in crude shapes?**

Yes. I'm trying to get closer to nature.

**I've heard you left Indonesian basalt in place for two years and kept observing it.**

It's deep black inside, with a coarse exterior and a fascinating materiality to it. I've been pondering how I can incorporate that material into my work. I kept looking at the mass and painting it this way and that, and it ended up taking two years. I would go back and forth looking at the rock, and then at some point I would paint it all in one stroke. So it ended up proceeding very simply.

**In front of the Four Seasons Hotel in Seoul, there's another work that's called *in one stroke*. Is that idea of "one stroke" also related to your attitude or approach to producing your work?**

If you look at my work *in one stroke*, there's rough basalt underneath and a polished stone on top. It consists of two pieces, one of them oriented toward the earth and the other toward heaven. It's a reference to *innaecheon*, or the concept that "human beings are heaven." I wanted a single work that contained the values of yin and yang.

**Is there a reason you've continued working with the series of artwork with the title *afterimage of beginning*?**

If you consider the process of the Earth's evolution since the Big Bang, stone is like a lingering afterimage of the beginning, you know? I'm drawing upon that material created by the eons and

making it part of my own work, so we're sharing that immense time. I plan to keep using that title for the time being. My approach to working hasn't changed either, with the use of wood and stone. There isn't much point in constantly changing the title of the work and worrying about all that. It's kind of a pain.

**You also apply black paint to ash wood, and you usually wear black clothes. Is there a reason black is so important to you?**

The exhibition I held at Gana Art Center last year was called *A Silent Message*. I also had an exhibition at Johyun Gallery in Busan, which was called *Seat of Silence*. The world is such a noisy place that's bursting with messages. Everyone just goes on and on with what they have to say. Being silent doesn't mean you don't know things; it doesn't mean you don't know how to speak. Silence itself can be a message. If you look at the small dining tables and cabinets of the Joseon Dynasty, they aren't decorated. The *sabang takja* [a type of display chest] has just the framework. When something is decorated from top to bottom, there's nothing left to wonder about. Think of the noisiest person you know—is there anything more you want to know about them? The *sabang takja* is unembellished, but it has an aesthetic sensibility and sentiment within it. It's restraint. Restraint doesn't mean there's nothing there—you're controlling it for the sake of the other person. You have to think about whether that person wants your message or not. Conversely, I'm stacking up stones within myself. That doesn't mean there isn't a message. It becomes a more valuable message, with a greater sense of weight. Black encompasses all things. Black is what you get when you mix all colors together. I don't always wear black, but I have found myself unwittingly dressing to suit the colors of my work.

**You do ink drawings. Do you also do calligraphy?**

I don't do calligraphy. I don't have the talent for it.

**The artistic vision you're pursuing is focused on things that are natural rather than artificial—on inner depth rather than dazzling exteriors. Do you also meditate? Another of your works is called *Scholar's Way*—how close do you see yourself as being to that "way"?**

Whenever I'm reading a book in my Eames Chair, there's a period around that where I'm sitting quietly—I think that's a form of meditation. I exercise for an hour and a half in the morning, and I go on walks for about an hour in the evening two or three times a week. That's also a time of meditation for me. I just do what I can now. You can't fight fate. My motto is "Man proposes, God disposes." You do everything that's in your power, and you leave the result up to heaven and accept that. Things in this world don't always go the way you want them to. If you do your best, you won't be disappointed in yourself, however things turn out. I think that's enough. I'm preserving my dignity through my own effort. So I get up early in the morning to work out, I go around looking for stones, and I read books without making much progress.

**Why do you have a photograph of yourself sitting in one of your *Meditation Chair* works next to another photograph of Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha*, which shows the Buddha watching TV?**

Lim Young Kyun, who's a professor of photography at Chung-Ang University, took a lot of pictures at Nam June Paik's studio when he was studying at NYU. He's also the one who took the picture of Paik pushing his face through a TV frame. One day, Lim came by my studio and took a photograph of me here. He said it was a similar concept to the photograph he'd taken of Paik's *TV Buddha*, and he developed a copy and framed it and sent it to me. The reason I call this my "meditation chair" is because you're focusing your gaze on the stone. It's a chair for meditating while looking at a natural stone.

**At the very top of your bookshelf, you have a sculpture of a face and three portraits. Who are those people?**

They're all me. The sculpture at the very left was made by the sculptor Lee Young Hak. The portrait

next to it was painted in 1986 by the painter Byun Jong Ha, and the one after that was done by the painter Lee Doo Shik. Both of them have since passed away. The last drawing was done by a student from China.

**Which of the four do you like the most?**

I like the portrait by Byun Jong Ha. He did a really excellent job. He was a tremendous painter, who unfortunately passed away some time ago. He painted it instantaneously, without trying to polish it. He captured that moment in my life. That's why I like it.

**It makes you look the crankiest of the four.**

That's OK. I like it.