

Time Lock: The Silence of Byung Hoon Choi

by Glenn Adamson

It is a weighty matter, to design in time: deeper than fleeting fashion, beyond even individual subjectivity. The task demands an acceptance of infinite duration – which is what the cosmos mostly offers us – but also a decisive sense of the now, the constant blaze into and out of existence that defines the human condition.

Choi Byung Hoon's work sits between these two opposed and equally imponderable temporalities. The duality is expressed, most obviously, in the contrast between raw and carved basalt, which is to say between materiality and intention, between geological and handcrafted form, one process that took millions of years in the earth, and another a mere course of months in the workshop. The unworked surfaces are obdurate, coarse, apparently unremarkable. Yet they become powerfully expressive in juxtaposition with the polished passages, which expose what lies within: shapes of deepest black, almost liquid in appearance, seeming to capture the volcanic action that made the igneous stone in the first place. Or, alternatively, our own momentary eruption into reality; for we can see ourselves reflected in them, as if in a glass darkly.

These extraordinary works have been a defining feature of Choi's oeuvre, with recent examples including major commissions for the National Museum of Qatar and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In a sense they form one continuous work. All bear variants of the title *afterimage of beginning*, a phrase that could describe all that we know. "My basalt works are a silent message that resonates to a chaotic world," Choi says, "offering the user the opportunity to travel and meditate in the vastness of time and space." He invites us on a journey into the infinite, one conducted entirely with the mind and spirit.



An installation view of *afterimage of beginning*, 2023, by Byung Hoon Choi at the National Museum of Qatar. (Courtesy of Julian Velasquez, Qatar Museums, Design Doha, 2024)

This ambitious mode of artmaking arrived very late into the West – finding its first stirrings in the sublime landscapes of the Romantics, and its ultimate apotheosis in 20th century abstraction – but has a long history in Korea. There, the impulse is associated primarily with *yangban*, usually translated "literati" – scholar-officials who tried to balance their worldly affairs with the calling of philosophical contemplation.

It is no coincidence that Choi's black abstract forms resemble the poetic calligraphy and landscape paintings of the *yangban*. What they expressed in ink, he renders in monumental stone. His first exhibition of basalt works was called "In One Stroke," while the Houston installation is titled *Scholar's Way*. (Serendipitously, it shares a city with the Rothko Chapel.)



Scholar's Way, 2018. Commissioned by The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Choi's new exhibition, *Voice of Silence*, brings new depth to this ongoing exploration, a search for meaning that transcends language and materiality. Accompanying his monolithic carvings in stone are newly conceived works that assume the form of cabinets. They are executed in wood and natural stone – two mediums he has explored previously – and make evident acknowledgement to historic Korean furniture.

The designs may again call poetry to mind, as their vertical format and graduated masses evoke the visual phrasing of a hanging scroll. Found stones seem to be lodged into the compositions. Of course, that is the reverse of what happened: the rectilinear timber structure had to be constructed around the stones. They serve both as obstacles and armature, much as we build our own lives around and atop that which is given to us.

Black, which Choi views as a visual correlate of silence, also features in these new works. The color is achieved with a coating of urethane, so thinly applied that the underlying grain of the ash wood is still visible. The doors slide, lending the compositions a dynamism that an abstract painting can never have; their shallow paneled construction and surrounding half-round moldings serve to define the volumes and deflect light subtly across the surfaces.

As in the basalt works, there is a dramatic opposition between the natural and the made, an overall effect of extreme stillness shot through with a current of possibility. The formal repertoire is new, but Choi has arrived at the same place where we can always find him: where the momentary meets the eternal, as if a pebble of presence had been dropped into the well of time. In a world of disquiet, he gives us the reverberating sound of silence.