

The Pregnant Silence of Choi Byung-hoon

Harry C. H. Choi

For the past thirty years, Choi Byung-hoon has developed a singular practice that straddles many boundaries. The notion of “art furniture” that is central to his work, which rejects the high modernist division between art and craft, offers one key example of such a sensibility. The idea made its first appearance in Oh Gwang-su’s essay that accompanied Choi’s solo exhibition at Sun Gallery in 1993. In it, Oh differentiates “art furniture” from other areas in which art and craft converge, like sculptures in fiber and ceramic, by identifying the necessary coexistence of “plasticity” and “functionalism”—as the absence of either would disqualify its status as an object that simultaneously retains its “plastic form” and fulfills “functional needs.”¹

Choi’s early projects, many of which belong to the series *Afterimage from the Beginning of the World* (1993–) or *Voice from the Beginning of the World* (1993–), read as earnest endeavors to materialize these discrete, and yet interconnected, objectives. In *Afterimage from the Beginning of the World 9421* (1994), a thin sheet of plywood shaped following the sedentary human form is lodged directly onto a slab of granite, producing a chair that is at once reminiscent of the turn to biomorphic shapes at the turn of the 20th century, as well as the Daoist philosophy of living in harmony with nature. The apparent simplicity of Choi’s material intervention provides formal grounds for Chung Yeon-shim to place the work in the vein of “Korean Minimalism”—a reading that she advances through the language of Lee Yil, who identified within the movement’s “nature-intuitive” tendencies “an expression of the Korean taste for artlessness and randomness,” which importantly distinguishes it from the American kind that developed in tandem with the gridded, hard-edged standardization of industrial modes of production.² Choi’s language, more specifically, is one that has been refined through an exploration of how “minimal” forms were integrated and formulated in the varying works of his predecessors across the globe, as in the examples of Wendell Castle and Shiro Kuramata.

The case for Choi’s practice is compelling, nevertheless, not only because it could address a set of timely questions about certain historically marginalized artistic genealogies that have only recently gained sustained scholarly traction. The stakes for Choi’s oeuvre are substantial because his trajectory offers a model of working with, around, and through tradition over the course of South Korea’s rapid onset of modernity—an aspect that reverberates with many other Korean artists irrespective of their generational differences. The notion of art furniture, in fact, emerged as a reaction against what he perceived as a “stagnant” tradition of woodworking, which nevertheless informed the backbone of his training at Hongik University in the early 1970s. As Oh claims, woodcraft in postwar Korea was largely marked by the schism between “the excellent craftsmanship of traditional furniture” and “the so-called modern style,” the former of which dominated the university classroom when Choi was a student. Choi’s decision to establish the Society of Contemporary Craft Creation in 1977 following his studies, as noted by Ahn Kui-sook,

¹ Oh Gwang-su, “Byung-hoon Choi’s ‘Art Furniture’: A Harmony of Craft and Poetry,”

² Chung Yeon-shim, “Byung Hoon Choi’s Art Furniture: Art Furniture Constructing Korean Vernacular Aesthetics,”

could thus be construed as an impetus to overcome the impasse in woodcraft in the nation, which was merely regurgitating the frameworks from the colonial era.³

But while such a sharp formal and conceptual break from the past is hardly unprecedented in the history of global modernisms, what is particular about Choi is that he later returned to his heritage to carve out his own aesthetics in an increasingly porous world. Having had the rare chance to gain firsthand exposure to European and American design as a visiting professor at the Aalto University and the Rhode Island School of Design in the late 1980s to early 1990s—especially given that international travel was largely limited for South Korean citizens before 1989—Choi started to explore the vestiges of Korean aesthetics in ancient ruins and temples to identify a language that is unique to his own culture.⁴ And it is from these observations on Korean aesthetic sensibilities, along with his own upbringing in the mountainous scenery of Gangwon province, that the crux of Choi’s art furniture started to take shape.⁵ Borne out of a tug of war with tradition—though, admittedly, it may be too grand and overarching of a term whose specificities cannot be teased out so finely—the parameters of art furniture thus enunciate the disruptive and tumultuous conditions of Choi’s native country in the postwar era. Articulated within Choi’s work is a consciousness that is seeking to find his place in an increasingly dilemmatic landscape: one in which an unconditional acceptance of traditional craft constitutes a mere continuation of a lineage that is too slow to keep up with international dialogues, whereas an uncontrolled espousal of the flooding “International Style” could easily risk a homogenization that lacks regional and cultural specificity.

Such a stance on tradition still actively informs Choi’s practice to this day. Two works from the ongoing series *Afterimage of Beginning* presented in his solo exhibition at Friedman Benda Gallery, New York, in 2025 are telling examples. In both, he draws from the cabinets—referred to as *jang* in Korean—that were used throughout Joseon Dynasty as essential household items. His contemporary version, however, in no ways resembles the examples of *jang* that one would encounter in museums and historical sites across Korea, as he only appropriates the bare cubic forms made in wood that render it functional. The strikingly simple structure is then reworked entirely: it is painted in pitch-black, rather than the customary earthy, red veneer whose color results from *otchil*, the longstanding practice of lacquer painting in decorative arts, and it is carved in parts to accommodate chunks of natural stone that are embedded across the units. Despite their overt references to the heritage of Korean craft, the objects thus arrive at a state that cannot be necessarily tied down to their cultural origins. Though the mixture of wood and stone does recall a certain East Asian sensibility, it is not so much a seamless continuation of Korean craft as it is Choi’s own reconfiguration of his homeland’s aesthetics in the present.

But the dialectics that Choi develops on tradition is not solely restricted to issues of form. This is because in the artistic lineage that he is grappling with, Choi finds accumulations of philosophical, sociological, and anthropological concerns that shape formal particularities. In the placement of furniture in the drawing rooms of *Hanok* referred to as *Sarangchae*, for instance, Choi identifies a Daoist perspective that emphasizes coexistence with nature that contrasts with a

³ Ahn Gui-sook, “A Sense of Eternity in the Work of Choi Byung-hoon: Feeling Eternity at the Moment of a Passing Instant,”

⁴ Interview with the artist, January 14, 2025.

⁵ Ahn Gui-sook, “A Sense of Eternity in the Work of Choi Byung-hoon: Feeling Eternity at the Moment of a Passing Instant,”

Western worldview that has formed the crux of his practice.⁶ He perceives the individual items as quasi-sentient objects that can “feel” and “experience” nature along with the humans nearby, which altogether form a symphonic vista—one that is as compositionally fulfilling as the landscapes depicted within traditional Korean paintings.⁷ This process of abstraction, or even sublimation, allows Choi to dislodge his work from legibly Korean forms and instead experiment with how such undergirding ideas could be conveyed in varying visual terms. Such an observation also permits him to enunciate a phenomenological dimension of “art furniture,” which, unlike traditional works of art, are to be “felt” and “used” rather than merely “seen,” creating an interactive, experiential relationship with the surrounding human entities.

This is an especially germane tendency in his recent projects, such as the suite of works from 2024 that were made from Indonesian basalt. Indeed, at first, the stone sculptures do not necessarily read as an articulation of Korean aesthetic forms—especially so when compared to his earlier works that employ material combinations that evoke traditional architecture of the country. That Choi only made the smallest possible cuts to the original slab of rock to grant it the function of a chair, nevertheless, reveals a perspective on nature that is distinctly Korean, one that aligns with the structuring logic of Korean gardens that were built with only minor alterations to the landscape as is unlike those of China and Japan. By moving beyond the dimension of form, Choi allows his work to attain universal resonance, which, in this instance, revolves around the notion of time: the basalt represents a literal accumulation of countless years of volcanic processes that gave birth to its materiality, shape, and most importantly, existence.

The multiple registers that could be teased out within Choi’s oeuvre are potent, as such, for they bring into relief the key topical threads that help elucidate a broader narrative of the intersection of fine art and design in South Korea. This is a history that has remained largely unknown despite the many layers that could be unpacked within—the country’s expedient urbanization shifted ways of living rapidly, which must have concomitantly affected the course of furniture design, and countless Korean artists, ranging from Lee Seung-taek to Lee Bul, have actively cited their homeland’s craft in their practices. The relative reticence of this history, in a way, resembles the notion of silence that Choi evokes in his latest explorations. For him, silence as a virtue inherited from the Chosun Dynasty is not an absence of speech; rather, it signifies a withdrawal of speech, a decision to look inwards to rethink what it is that should be conveyed, and a subtle, implicit method of communication.⁸ If, as Choi believes, learning from this silence could help the humanity overcome its many crises, the taciturn history of Korean design could also do much to enrich the account of Korean art as we know it. In both, we find a form of pregnant silence that is so rare in the present, though one might need a voice far more pronounced than the other who wishes to remain still, reserved, and yet profound.

⁶ Ji-un Han, “Choi Byung-Hoon,” *Apartmento* no. 29 (May 2022): 244–259.

⁷ Interview with the artist, January 14, 2025.

⁸ Ibid.