

Tradition and Modernity; Pursuit and struggles in the gaps and borders

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As well known, Korean painting is a figurative experience achieved through a long historical development process. While people share cultural values of Chinese character cultural sphere, the substance of Korean painting has been formed by their re-interpretation and creation via Korean people's mindset and tastes. Rich figurative experiences accumulated through this developmental process and manifestation of aesthetic views are set to become the tradition of Korean painting. This tradition may not refer to specific forms or contents but consistently-existing specific spirits and sentiments as well as aesthetic demands. Thus, tradition is due to reveal and manifest itself always with a new form in accordance with the change of the times and maintain until now its long-sustaining life force through transfusion of fresh vitality from a new era.

And here we face the problem of how to establish the relations between tradition and the Western figurative world confronted in a new time and space of modernity. So-called modernity is a quite different cultural aspect from that of traditional era in which Korean painting was born, grew and enriched its content. Under the circumstances, sticking to tradition will surely deteriorate Korean painting into what is old and stereotyped. On the other hand, blind transformation towards the West is open to the harsh criticism as 'groundless following of the formality'. As such, Korean painting is faced with proposition of enriching tradition ever more by embracing new tastes in a new era through changes amid conflicts of contradictory values of tradition and modernity. It's also faced with the issue of how to maintain its own identity as well as its speciality.

Work of artist Kim Jeong Ran also starts from the realistic problem as such. It is the problem of how to express time and space called modernity to which the artist belongs, on the premise of verifying the identity of Korean painting and understanding of its value. The artist's work showing off its merits in traditional figure painting absolutely stands out by its objective and realistic description of figures done via fluent drawing. Her work might be characterized by her persistence to the alleged 'spiritual transmission' dedicated to expressing not only facial expressions of the figure but the spirit behind them. As a matter of fact, spiritual transmission is the essence of very old theories on Oriental painting. Demand of spiritual transmission to capture the internal spirit prior to expression of figures by the naked eye actually highlights the importance of subjective

interpretation of the artist over the objective value of the figures. That's why a figure painting is sometimes called Sajin (realistic drawing), Jinyeong (true figure), or portrait. Afterwards, spiritual transmission has evolved into 'expression of vital spiritual energy', establishing its position as the highest value in creation and criticism of traditional Oriental painting.

Her attention to spiritual transmission and dedication to figure painting may be the most basic attitude approaching towards tradition. Her dedication to objective expression of things using the method of very fine drawing to express detailed muscular structure of the figure or using the shades might be equal to the specific practice of expressing spirit through spiritual transmission. Her smart figure expression based on rigid physical beauty eloquently tells us that her work has already arrived at a certain level and stage. Her bold use of flowing brushwork and delicate coloring stand out above all. They must surely be originated from tradition and at the same time have modern values intrinsically. The employment of objectiveness in the form of anatomy and three-dimensional effect secures the rationality of the figures, while bold use of flowing brushwork reveals delicate aesthetics of traditional figure painting. Of special note is her active use of space. This serves as a figurative means to highlight the target figures and also as a kind of alluring device to draw sympathy and participation of the viewers through implications and reservations. Her blank space, which is sort of a site of resonance in support of her figural expression, makes her own delicate and subtle expression stand out by means of tight tension amid quietness.

The problem we confront despite our sufficient learning and understanding of tradition and re-interpretation and confidence in subjectification is the old discourse of tradition and modernity. This seems not an exception to this artist. Paying attention to symbolism of images of traditional Korean painting and bringing about changes by borrowing it or introducing elements from folk painting to the canvas is considered to be her sincere approach to the identity of Korean painting - the area of her consistent interest. Apart from this, her new work done by adopting photographs as in recent work might be the artist's experiment and exploration related with to how to embrace and express the value of modernity. While same figures continue to appear, the background is expressed as a fantastic canvas transcending time and space borrowing diverse spaces across the globe. These work pieces that reorganize the spaces of her own experience and crush tradition and modernity add to the three-dimensionality of the photographs based on the planar figures or portraits. These can also be interpreted as an attempt to embrace the value of time and space of modernity by integrating digital technology to the most analogic behavior. These works must surely be foreign and new attempts and yet the reason they don't look so foreign and strange to us may be because they are built on the good understanding of her previous work by the viewers.

The introduction of Chinese 12 Animal System as a new work may be understood in this contextual change. Figures of the System, which have already established their position as an example of the tradition, were juxtaposed with her unique delicate and subtle figural expressions. By doing so, the artist was able to maintain her consistent identity of work under the banner of respect of tradition and embracing the value of modernity, and at the same time sought to secure modernity by generating novel visual images. Change & exploration, experiment & pursuit as such, all have a certain orientation. They are none other than her consistent concern to the borderline of tradition and modernity as well as her creative act. The artist must be well aware that this cannot be removed at once. It's because the depth and weight of tradition are huge, and time and space called modernity is also extremely complex and complicated. I look forward to the future work of the artist trusting her ceaseless struggles to be faithful to the proposition for change. I'm also confident of her effort to embrace the value of modernity and her persistent commitment to the identity of Korean painting that 'it should not change'. Given the level and orientation she already made sure via her work to date, we may naturally look ahead to that.