

서승원 Suh Seung-Won

Aesthetics of Soul-searching and Meditation through the Contemplation of Mother Nature

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I.

The position of Suh Seung-Won in the contemporary art of Korea is closely associated with geometric abstraction. Starting his art career through <Origin> group launched in 1963 as a student in the College of Arts in Hongik University (majoring in western painting), he became a member of <A.G> group in the early '70s.

The art historical evaluation of <Origin> group lies in the collective representation of geometric abstraction in the contemporary art history of Korea. This fact is closely linked to the Korean economic situation back then.

The political historical sense of the early '60s is interwoven with the 'April 19 Revolution' of 1960 and the 'May 16 Military Revolution' which occurred one year later. It is also deeply associated with the collapse of the ruling Liberal Party which dominated Korea for a decade after the Korean War. Corruption of the administration led by the Liberal Party - dictatorship of Syngman Rhee - confronted a demand for reforms, and one example of such eruptions is the 'April 19 Revolution' waged by citizens including students. Yet, the Chang Myon administration that was born in the aftermath of the 'April 19 Revolution' was powerless. Thus, the dominant force of the 'May 16 Military Revolution' with such causes as anti-communism, a clean sweep of the old evils and economic development waged a coup for the reason of establishing a new social order and exerted highly stringent rulership.

The military force-driven Park Jung Hee's dictatorship suppressed citizens' rights and freedom, and controlled the media, bringing about various positive results including economic revitalization along with social side effects. The transition from the pre-modern to the modern period was truly a driver for heralding the internationalization to the then conservative society of Korea. The Five-Year Economic Plan which kicked off in 1962 was the first step to sweep the evils of old institutions represented by the Liberal Party's administration, and enter into a new era as the 'Saemaul (New Village) Movement' implies. As shown in the slogan to 'achieve USD 10 billion for exports', the economic development policy of the then Third Republic was a driving engine for Korea which was then in the pre-modern stage to move into the modern one. Industrialization and commercialization policy setting in the Third Republic led to a dramatic export promotion policy, which, in turn, resulted in rapid urbanization.

The launch of <Origin> group, which pursued the aesthetics of collective geometrical abstraction for the first time in Korea, was based on the then Korean society's economic reality and urbanization. A demand for the modern design - construction of high-rise buildings, and emergence of apartments, modern hotels, coffee shops and western restaurants - was in need of a more sophisticated sense of beauty. The geometrical abstraction attempted by members of <Origin> group including Suh Seung-Won, Lee Seong Jo and Choi Myeong Yeong in the late '60s is not only closely linked to a industrialized society or the rise of urbanization. Yet, the motifs of their works have different origins. For instance, Suh Seung-Won is said to have gained a key motif from hanji (Korean traditional paper) and such objects as windows and doors, and white porcelains.

"My hometown is Seoul. I spent my childhood in a Korean traditional house that has been inherited for generations, and my children grew up here. Doors made of changhoji or hanji naturally used for Korean traditional houses, geometrical wanja-patterned lattices, the subtle beauty of the changhoji-based doors which reflects the moonlight, the leeway in white of the changhoji used for lattices of a bedroom, a side room and a guest room, and the flexibility of white found in the overlaid hanji." - From Suh Seung-Won's artist note -

Such a statement of Suh seems to reside in the boundary of personal reflections exuding from such thinking. However, given that an individual artist is not irrelevant from the social background and the economic and political foundation where artworks are born, the statement is correlated with Korea's urbanization or industrialization as external factors.

II.

That Suh is a native to Seoul implies that he has been exposed to an environment to internalize a modern sense in an early phase. Therefore, it could be fathomed that a premise of <Simultaneity> was generated amid the convergence of aesthetic experiences during his childhood which he experienced in his house - the Korean traditional house - as well as the image of modern buildings lining up in downtown Seoul in the '60s.

The premise of 'simultaneity' in Suh's works was first used in 1965. The premise of simultaneity can be found in his work where a thick band positioned at the center of the canvas is in square and a long band laid horizontally underneath. There might be different views on meanings of this simultaneity, but the artist himself stated that "'simultaneity' enables the unseen to be seen, ensuring that what is happening in the world of nirvana or 'beyond dark' could be represented through me", adding, "it is a pursuit of the identical and equivalent time and space."

What is noteworthy in Suh's statement here is "enabling the unseen to be seen." True, the unseen refer to physical phenomena, substances or spirituality beyond the awareness of human beings. To make the unseen visible, there must be the media of an artist's eyes and body. Therefore, as the artist lends his body, the unseen world reveals itself at last. Yet, the artist body itself is a subject of physical incidences which happen amid the crossover interaction of x-axis for time and y-axis for space. That is why Suh probably wishes to witness what is happening beyond that world to be represented through 'me.' In this sense, 'simultaneity', as he states, is not much different from "a pursuit of the identical and equivalent time and space."

Suh's 50-year-old picturesque orbit which was born out of the identical premise of simultaneity might look monotonous at a glimpse. Division of a canvas with sharp lines and planes which started to show from the mid-'60s and the correspondingly diverse various in forms underwent a transition in the '90s and ended up being completely disintegrated in the 2000s. How could this disintegration have been possible?

III.

The most noteworthy part about Suh's artistic career is the series of <Simultaneity> presented in [A.G exhibition] in 1971. At the exhibition, he showcased 14 object pieces in hanji in 91cm X 91 cm square. He stated that he decided to present this work because of his remembrance of hanji he used to see in his house as a body. As noted from the artist note above, he is strongly attached to the paper, and was once mesmerized by its subtle beauty when he was little.

Ideas for works do not come all of a sudden. Experiences accumulated throughout one's life would be submerged deep inside one's consciousness, and would protrude through a trigger, according to creative psychology. Given this, Suh's use of hanji as an object is not incidental. overlapping many sheets of hanji and creating the 14-panel object series is closely linked to a structure of plane works with geometrical abstraction. What is more critical is that this work is inevitably correlated to the formation of post-simultaneity after the 2000s. It is because the subtle finish generated as overlapping of hanji due to the semi-transparency and properties of light serves as the key for variation of diverse lights derived from the overlapping space and colors represented in Suh's post-simultaneity series.

IV.

In the context of the post-war modern art history of Korea, the prestige of Suh is based on the fact that he is a pioneer in experiments and avant-garde art represented by the [Exhibition of Korea Young Artist Combined]. The time and space of the mid-'60s when Suh was dynamically working was a period desperately demanding a new breakthrough since Art Informel led by the generation of artists undergoing the Korean War - <Korea Association of Modern Artists>, <Wall Art Exhibition> and <1960 Fine Artists Association> - was deemed to be incoherent. Thus, the emergence of a new generation dubbed as the 'April 19 Generation' was recognized as a leading force for breaking down the helplessness of the old generation, and bringing in a new and fresh breeze to the art circles. As a consequence, such groups as <Absence (Mu)>, <Shrin (Shinjeon)> and <Origin> comprising [Exhibition of Korea Young Artist Combined] argued for post-plane works. Being influenced by the then international art trends originated from America - Pop Art, Op Art, neo-dadaism and happening, they focused on avant-garde experiments.

One group that maintained plans among the three was <Origin> but they even resisted the style of Art Informel of their senior generation, being mesmerized by a new style of art - geometrical abstraction.

As a member of <Origin>, he joined <A.G> launched in 1969, and released experimental works. That he joined <A.G> back

then implies that he was attached to the avant-garde experimental sense. Suh presented the aforementioned hanji object work at [A.G Exhibition] held in 1978 and gained a strong spotlight. The artistic significance of the work lies in the fact that the world of subtle beauty revealed through overlapping of many sheets of hanji was shown by paying attention to the property of hanji from early on. Unlike Gwon Yeong Woo unfolded the beauty of overlapping by focusing on the property of hwaseonji (oriental painting paper) from the early '60s, Suh used hanji as an object. He showed the subtle property and differences in colors when hanji is overlaid through an installation work - the 14-piece series. This work - albeit one-time - is evaluated as a pioneering one amid the acceptance of hanji as a collective movement in the art circles in the mid-'80s. Why this work was one time only still remains as an unsolved question, but Suh's use of the hanji object in square provides an hint on his previous works. Given that the series of 'simultaneity' expressed through geometrical abstraction was an overarching theme through geometrical abstraction, it is related to two facts: a square was a basis for his works; and color gradation emerged as a key theme in the 'period of disintegration' post to the 2000s.

V.

Suh created two works which are art-historically significant in 1969. In particular, one of them has a slant black square on the upper part of the canvas was on the front page of <A.G> magazine published in 1969, which came before the emergence of monochrome paintings of the '70s. Another work is evaluated to be also a pioneering one in monochromes, except for the geometrical form using fine lines. Such monochrome works in series were presented in [salon des Indépendants] in 1972, which preceded Lee Dong Yeop's <Circumstance> and Heo Hwang's <Variable Consciousness>

Suh's art-historically significant feat, in association with monochromes, is participation in [White Korea: Five Artists, Five Hinsek]. Takashi Yamamoto, president of Tokyo Gallery in Japan, paid attention to Korean monochrome paintings, and decided to curate an exhibition on it. The exhibition inviting five Korean monochrome painting artists - Gwan Yeong Woo, Park Seo Bo, Suh Seung-Won, Lee Dong Yeop and Heo Hwang. Yusuke Nakahara, a Japanese art critic and Lee Il, a Korean art critic wrote prologues.

The [White Korea: Five Artists, Five Hinsek] exhibition is an art-historically spotlighted one in that it is the first landscape on Korean monochrome paintings seen from another's perspective, that is, Japan's. Yusuke Nakahara stated, among Korean paintings, "Some of their works clearly reveal such a rare feature compared to contemporary paintings of other countries", paying attention to "paintings delicately finished on the canvas by using secondary colors." Similarly, Lee Il, an art critic, "For us, white is more than a single 'color of light'" on monochrome paintings.

Suh's 'simultaneity' series have geometrical patterns as a key theme in the paintings, but secondary colors were used in the aspect of colors, which makes the works fall in the boundary between 'secondary colors' and 'white' as described by Nakahara and Lee Il. Except for some early works of the '60s, Suh's simultaneity series after the late-'60s are in the secondary colors in pastel tone. This is the same with Suh's remark that he was deeply impressed with white porcelains and changhoji of Joseon period. It is worthwhile to note that Koreans' sentiment has been genetically absorbed into colors in <Simultaneity>.

Suh noted that he was deeply impressed with hazy light tones of the sunset when asked about the motif for his works. It is something that can be remarked by an old artist who has carried on his 50-year art career. Imagery landscape ends up being more abstract in his recent works through contemplation of the nature: starting from the geometrical forms of the early and mid-period (1965~1980) where lines were clear and angular to the transitional period of disintegration ('90s) and the period of disintegration reaching complete disappearance (post to the 2000s).

VI.

"Ceramics placed here and there in my house, especially the shape. Lines, the color white of white porcelains, and their bland posture. Folk paintings attached on the weatherstrips of windows in the attic. Flowers of different sorts blossoming in the front yard with a pond. The scent of and dwenjang (soybean paste) and gochujang (red pepper paste) being ripened in traditional jars. The unforgettable rhythmical sounds of my mother using Dadeumi, an ancient method of ironing using two rollers. Sounds of the landscape in a mountain temple, and sounds of wind and water. All of these have been embraced and embodied in me." - From Suh Seung-Won's artist note -

Suh's reflection on the memories of his childhood help viewers understand the <Simultaneity> series. The underlying

factors for the Korean culture which he refers to as the aesthetic background of his works are components of features of Suh's works. He has undergone the early period of primary color-based geometrical abstraction, the mid-period of neutral colors in pastel tone, the transitional period of disintegration in the '90s and the disintegration period of the 2000s. Suh's imagery landscape which started to be formed as he started to listen to the voice of the nature in his mid-70s is based on the use of neutral colors in mild pastel tone, and the canvas is with overlapping of extremely subtle color planes. Monochromatic nuances represented through dozens of strokes after the repetition of base painting on canvas are the content of paintings which have been abstractly interpreted by Suh through inspiration from the nature. Suh's paintings, according to his expression, are the crystal form of aesthetic consciousness on the exclusive 'grudge smoldered in the heart' of Korea. He notes: "Colors embedded in my paintings are the ones containing bland spirits bleached by the state of colors being filtered instead of the colors per se. Through abstinent work, the aesthetic consciousness has been escalated into my spirit and my spirituality on Korea's exclusive 'grudge'".

In the aspect of primary colors, his selection of extremely limited abstinent colors including monochrome colors such as white and grey along with blue, red and yellow tends to approach closer to the color white. This might be dubbed as 'return to the nature'. It would be natural to listen to the laws of the nature vis-a-vis inherent autonomy or logic within paintings as his artistic career builds up. Suh has confronted a phase of disintegration after a transitional period, who has stuck to the stringency contained in inherent autonomy of paintings on the stance of geometrical abstraction. He has now even overcome the disintegration, listening to the voice of the nature. The whole journey took even 50 years.

According to his own expression, pursuit of aesthetics in 'contemplation and meditation' which carries not only aesthetic but also reflective lingering through sentiments of constraints, self-recovery and freedom boils down to his pursued works of recent years. Picturesque legacies built up through decades boiling down to lines, shapes and colors staying in his paintings as meditation and contemplation through reflection over the nature - it is the world introduced by Suh's recent works.