

박서보

Park Seo Bo

Regaining Silence: The Modernism of Park Seo Bo

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Park Seo Bo is one of the truly remarkable artists living today who has embraced Modernism from both an Eastern and Western point of view. Given his firm conviction that Modernism is not an isolated phenomenon in a single hemisphere, there are few artists living today who can be compared with him. In fact, he is a remarkable artist no matter in what hemisphere, country or region his work may appear. Whether in Korea or France, Japan or China, Los Angeles or New York, his paintings seem to hold their own inscrutable presence. In his long-term *Ecriture* series, each painting is like a reversal of presence into absence - a kind of linguistic turnabout that gives his linear surfaces a quality that evokes strong emotions. Some would say that his paintings over the past fifty years have been about merging Eastern and Western attitudes about art. But somehow this generation does not suffice. More accurately, his work is about a suspension of belief that combines Eastern and Western attitudes, whether they are about art or science, but in an unimposed and highly unobtrusive way. Even so, Park is an artist whose work exceeds the limits of such generalizations. His work is far more penetrating than this, more concentrated and, at the same time, more elusive. Whether he is judged from the point of view of history or culture, or from the point of view of his own psychic energy, his *Ecriture* project manages to hold some kind of mysterious, indefatigable quality, some prelinguistic, obdurate, primordial message that buries itself in the substratum of all that is said about Modernism today.

There are no limits to his reason, and no barriers that prevent him from opening new horizons of consciousness through his accessibility to drawing and painting. He is one of the true masters in extending calligraphy to new heights of expression, even as he rejects the notion of expression in his later work. Park is neither defiant nor arrogant. Instead, he is sincere, integral, and straightforward in his manner of presentation. Now, in his mid-seventies, Park Seo Bo works regularly in his studio several hours a day - sometimes accompanied by helpers, but also working on his own, in solitude without assistance. His work is consumed by his love for materials - the pigment, the surface, the hanji (Korean mulberry paper). He is preoccupied with drawing, by the drawing of lines ('myobop'), striations that repeat their rhythmical force through their repetitive, parallel connection to one another. These lines encompass the field of a painting, and thus, give it coherence, a sense of wholeness, a unity of time and space, a fusion of idea and material. This happens through the artist's ability to sustain a clear, conscious intention as he allows his reform. In this way, he strives further toward a sense of self-realization and intimate truth. He is an artist who bathes graciously in the light of color, even if the tonalities shift or gravitate into deeper shapes of grayness. There is always color in his work, no matter how gray the surface of a painting may appear. This offers the viewer a kind of consolation, a way of seeing and feeling, and, ultimately, a way of being, as one stands in front of any one of his magical and mesmeric linear constellations.

I.

Ecriture - a French word - refers to writing, to the act of writing, to the process in which the mind engages with ideas, with the rhythms of the soul. *Ecriture* - a French title for an on-going project of more than three decades - suggests a revelatory form of modernism, not only through the lens of Westernization, but as an idea that transcends the hemispheric biases of East and West. Park's purpose is to make art that succumbs to the pleasure of non-being: the force that allows

the mind to empty itself of all unnecessary distractions. His method is supplanted by the rich legacy of Taoist thought and the meditative structure of Son (Sanskrit: Dhyana). His concept of writing/drawing is not unfamiliar to Koreans who have a long history of both writing and drawing, and a visual culture that absorbs the meaning of the infinite connections applied to related forms - painting, sculpture, ceramics, weaving, textile design - that possess human expression. Ecriture is about strength and vulnerability in the same breath. Ecriture is a matter of allowing ideas to emerge within the surface of a painting - not through imposition or sentiment, but through a gliding sensation, a spiritual exercise of the mind. Park's Ecriture is possessed by a certain lightness - a lightness that never hesitates and does not equivocate, a quixotic equilibrium of the heart and mind becoming one through the process of drawing. For Park Seo Bo, drawing is the spiritual aspect of art. It is the foundation by which art achieves its own basis in reality and by which the artist discovers his own structural understanding, his conceptual and aesthetic purpose. Yet drawing is also a force beyond comprehension.

There is another Korean term that Park Seo Bo understands as having a close affinity with the French *écriture*. The word is *myobop* (literally a synthesis of two words: *myo* as in drawing, and *bop*, which is a method). (1) Often Park will use the French and Korean words interchangeably, thereby suggesting the intercultural basis of his idea. However, the slippage between the two languages is also problematic in that it suggests a global art language or perhaps a metalanguage that goes beyond any specific cultural and linguistic differences into the realm of the universal. Much of his universality is associated with the Western idea of high Modernism that emerged in the 50s in the Anglo-American tradition, emphatically represented by such critics as Clement Greenberg and Herbert Read. In some sense the desire to give a formal reduction to all of art - regardless of which hemisphere, region, nationality, or temperate zone - was considered both a noble and humanist endeavor. It was a true aspiration. In retrospect, it was more substantial as an aspiration than what its reality became.

Park Seo Bo's *Ecriture* series, which most critics see as beginning in the early to mid-70s, corresponds, for better or for worse, to the rise of Monochrome painting in Korea, sometimes referred to as Korean Minimalism. Along with Park, the painters associated with Monochrome included Ha Chong-hyun, Choi Myoung-young, Kwon Young-Woo, and Yun Hyong Keun. The critic, Lee Il, enthusiastically championed the cause of these artists, employing a formalist language, similar to Greenberg's ideas of "flatness" and "coherence," as earlier expressed in the American critic's famous essay "Modernist Painting" (1963). For other Korean critics, the Monochrome movement in Korea exemplified a Western concept of painting more than an indigenous cultural statement. Even so, the problems with the Monochrome movement were more internal and theoretical than they were related to the actual art being produced. An example would be the confusion over the labels, Monochrome painting and Minimalism. In terms of theory and translation, neither label is correct. Ironically, the majority of painters associated with Monochrome (*Tansaekchuui*) rarely used a single color, but worked from a variety of chromatic variations that would eventually become pigmentation on the surface; therefore, the surface was less about one color - monochrome - and more related to a multiplicity of hues mixed together that, in turn, represented the surface as a unified whole. Moreover, in contrast to the critical proclamations at the time (1970s), the Monochrome group was unrelated to Minimal art. Minimalism, as it had evolved a decade earlier in New York, was not about painting. On the contrary, most of the painters in Seoul who identified themselves this label were neither working with primary forms in three-dimensional space (a major concern for the New York Minimalists) nor were they willing to relinquish their allegiance to expressionism. Whereas American Minimalism insisted on the neutrality of structure without expression, the Korean Monochrome painters were intent on investigating new forms of expression by way of reduction and unified color. Thus, for the Koreans, reductiveness in painting was not synonymous with the absence of expression, even though they were two different formal ideas. In contrast to Korean Monochrome, the New York Minimalists rejected expression(ism) entirely. Despite what some historians say, Park Seo Bo - whose early *myobop* paintings were critically connected to the Monochrome movement - recognized the contradictions in these labels early on and therefore denied that his work had anything to do with Minimalism, which he correctly saw as an inherently Western idea: People say my current work is similar to minimal art,

but I don't agree. My work is more related to the oriental tradition of space, the spiritual concept of space. I am more interested in space from the point of view of nature. Even though my paintings may represent an idea about culture, the main focus is based on nature. Anyway, I want to reduce the idea and emotion in my work to express only that. I want to reduce and reduce - to create pure emptiness. That is an oriental idea, an approach the nature. Nature and human beings can connect in this way. This tendency is evident in my work from the seventies and eighties - not just in recent years. While the terms **Seoncriture** and **myobop** share certain similarities in meaning - as suggested earlier in the specific kind of drawing of Park Seo Bo - the cultural differences that stand behind these terms are still worth noting. **Seoncriture** is a French term for writing or inscribing while **myobop** is a Korean word used specifically in relation to drawing. While some may see these terms as being synonymous, others might propose their differences based on cultural perception. Ideally, Western modernists might argue that these perceptions should complement one another. Yet, in the 80s, this ideal complementary relationship was temporally deferred, if not held in question, largely through the introduction of postmodern theory. According to this line of argument, the new world order had presented a metalanguage in which the global awareness of multiculturalism had irrevocably changed the way art was being conceived, produced, and distributed. More recently, this has become apparent as theoretical jargon is being expropriated and used for the purpose of marketing art. Yet, few observers in the global art market appear capable of making a distinction between the actual significance of contemporary works of art and their relatively distorted market value. While market speculation may prove necessary for global investors, it also prevents a general audience from seeing clearly the important, and often subtle, cultural differences in relation to works of art. By foregrounding the standardization of art according to market demand -and, concomitantly, foregoing a critical awareness of the issues - we tend to overlook the discrepancies in aesthetic content based on the cultural context in which the work was created. Just as social ideas and mores from the two hemispheres do not always merge seamlessly into one another, one may assume that the content in art varies according to specific cultures, regions, or aesthetic preferences. The overwhelming split between market value and aesthetic significance in art in recent years is one of the surest signs that globalization is in direct conflict with indigenous cultures throughout the world.

A less extreme, somewhat modest example of this complex conundrum occurred during a conversation I had with Park Seo Bo in his studio in Seoul in December 2005. With regard a recent series of paintings he was preparing for an exhibition in St. Etienne (France), in which color seems to play a more significant role than in earlier works from the **Seoncriture** series, I had inadvertently introduced the concept of optical structure into our discussion. Much to my dismay, the artist disagreed that my analysis had anything to do with these paintings:

I have no intention about how to make this change - or the transition from visual to optical that you describe - actual. There is a cultural difference between us in terms of how you analyze my work. I believe there is some minimalist line that informs your point of view whereby you deduce an optical effect in my paintings. But, ultimately, my work is about meditation, to make the mind empty. These issues are outside optical exploration.

From Park Seo Bo's perspective, the analytic discourse I was pursuing in relation to his work was read as going beyond the scope of his purpose. Whereas he was concerned with how his paintings emulated a meditative discipline, which he understood as fundamental to his painting, a Western-trained art historian, namely myself, was trying to analyze the optical effect of the surface as the close parallel lines, occasionally "drawn" against green or pink hues, saturated into the hanji, had a distinct vibratory affect. While I was not disagreeing with Park's concern "to make the mind empty," I was trying to verbalize a sensation that I had actually felt. We may have had a similar idea, but we were coming from an entirely different angle of vision. Later, I read the difference as being a cultural one. Yet, the difference was also both interesting and profound. It was a learning experience for me. While our interpretations of these paintings may have proceeded in two different directions, the paintings he and I were viewing were the same paintings. The fact that these paintings were capable of communicating something differently through diverse perceptual and cultural points of view ultimately constitutes

the ultimate value of the work, profound. It was a learning experience for me. While our interpretations of these paintings may have proceeded in two different directions, the paintings he and I were viewing were the same paintings. The fact that these paintings were capable of communicating something differently through diverse perceptual and cultural points of view ultimately constitutes the ultimate value of the work.

Without overdetermining this “conflict of interpretation” (a phrase borrowed from the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur), what emerged in the process of viewing these recent Ecriture paintings was a distinctive silence – an illimitable presence that referenced an absent image. Ultimately, it was the silence that I felt. Through the artist’s rhythmic application of pigment, these saturated striations – horizontally vibrating through time and space – offered a glimpse of a shared reality, one that existed beyond the bifurcated hemispheres and beyond all assumed cultural or social differences. The silence is what always brings us back to painting – whether it exists in Park Seo Bo, Rothko, Sesshu, or Georges de la Tour. In this sense, there is an aesthetic ground that overrides the dilemma of the new world order and the marketing metalanguage that has evolved in its wake. The silence brings us back to art itself, back to nature, where it offers a resolution of feeling through the reduction of sensuous input. If painting can achieve such a response in this highly chaotic globalized network, then art is doing its job. In such instances, the opposition between the hemispheres plays no role. In reflecting on the recent Ecriture paintings of Park Seo Bo, the possibility to open the threshold to a better understanding of ourselves, by relinquishing the illusion of ideological barriers, appears on the verge of happening.

II.

Like all important artists tied to the introduction of Modernism in East Asia, Park Seo Bo is one of the major figures who stands at the helm of contemporary abstract painting in Korea. While many consider Park as the preeminent figure associated with Art Informel, one can cite other important breakthroughs by Korean artists who lived and worked outside of Korea, in Paris, Tokyo, or New York. Such artists would include Kim Whanki, Yoo Youngkuk, Park Re-hyun, and Lee Ungno (the later recognized for his paintings of the 50s, closely resembling the work of the American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock). By 1957, abstract Modernism had moved into Korea through an organization known as the Contemporary Artists Association (Hyeondae Misulga Hyeophoe) in which Art Informel – a type of gestural abstraction associated with Post-World War II French painting – became a solemn force in artists’ community. Some of the artists associated either directly or indirectly with this organization included Choi Wuk-kyung, Kim Tschang-yeul, Nam Kwan, Park Seo Bo, Suh Se Ok and Kim Bong Tae. Park Seo Bo’s initial alignment to Art Informel was important in bringing leadership to a new Modernist attitude as it evolved as a radical element into Korean culture in the late 50s. The darkness of his palette in these early paintings proved relatively assessable to the Korean audience, given a deep reflective character to the work in combination with gestural forms that were familiar to Koreans in terms of their early calligraphy and ink painting.

While Park Seo Bo’s early history is well-known among Korean artists and art historians, it is less known in China and among Westerners. Given the initial appearance of his Ecritures in the early 70s and their evolution over the past three decades, it is not insignificant to consider this early Art Informel period as the necessary starting-point for his journey through abstraction. While his recent Ecriture paintings have come a long way since 1957, one cannot discount the courageous origin by which Park commenced to think differently than what even the more advanced artists of that early period were willing to accept. In retrospect, while there is little doubt concerning the contribution of Park Seo Bo to the origin of Modernism in Korea, the more individual pursuit of the Ecriture paintings – in many ways, equally as radical as his works on canvas and hemp cloth in the 50s – may be less assessable for some viewers, even though, as Park has stated, they are much closer to his Korean origins. By this he means that the relationship between matter and concept is much closer in the Ecritures as is the synergy between action and object. For Park, it is the combination of the process of making the painting and its reality as an object. This has deep philosophical resonances in terms of Asian thought, specifically in

relation to the Tao and to Buddhism. It is a journey towards complete unity - the kind of unity inspired in the act of painting that is synonymous with the discipline of meditation. In this sense, the action is transformed into a non-action as in Son Buddhism.

Of course, there are many ways of talking about this process. Yet, as the Tao makes clear, it is not the talk or the discourse that defines the Tao or that makes painting a reality unto itself. Rather it is the silence, the ineluctable transformation of matter into form or spirit-form or energy flow (Qi). This "energy flow" is what Park understands as a return to the most primordial state of being, and the undefined moment of consciousness. For Park, the act of painting is "an act of painting nothing." Here begins the relinquishment of desire that is so often spoken of in meditation (Sanskrit: Samadhi) whereby the mind becomes no mind, the absence of the Ego, or the "non - I" (Mu-a-jikyong), and where action become non-action. His concern while working on the Ecriture paintings of the past several years is that he moves beyond any definable concept, any statement, or any image that carries some anthropomorphic importance or symbolic value. In a public statement given at the Swiss Grand Hotel in Seoul (2002), the artist clarified his position:

From the 1970s on, I have concentrated on moving beyond the image, logic, and mere expression. In doing so, I began a process of self-questioning. Why do I paint? I paint for self-discipline. Painting has become for me, now, merely a mode or tool of self-discipline. Yet, it is not a simple tool and it can also be an outcome of such self-discipline ... Real change demands an overcoming of oneself - a certain pain felt through the bones.

Park goes on to emphasize that he should have no regret in the end and that he should not give way to trends and fashions, but maintain his own course, his own inner-directed path, as all true artists do. Since he began working on the Ecriture series in 1973, Park relinquished any need to express himself. Presumably, this was one of the parapets of Art Informel - the expression of the self was the ideal of those times. Even so, Park's manner of addressing painting in the days of Art Informel was low key, that is, far below any unnecessary extravagance - without bright colors and with any suffusion of obvious psychic intervention. Although Art Informel became the hallmark of European Modernism in the 50s, it eventually wore thin. It did not sustain Park's interest. As he witnessed in France, many of those painters who had adopted this point of view had to make a choice: either to formulate a style that would be instantly identified with Art Informal, or to move in a more advanced direction. In this sense, Park shows much commonality with the French painter (also associated with Art Informel) Pierre Soulages who understood that the expressionist gesture was limited as a method. Once the expressionist gesture moves from method to technique and, ultimately, towards a kind of stylization, the painter was finished - that is, finished in terms of making serious art. For painting to continue it must go further than expression, yet without retreating into some vague political commentary or conceptual discourse. Painting must move in the direction of the real - the action and the object, the dialogical intonation, the evocation of something that is in the process of being signified. For Park, painting would become the visual counterpart of mental discipline, an action without labels, without naming, and without recourse to images. His method of painting would depart from expression and move toward the direction of the repetitive action in such a way that it would hold fast to the surface without losing its ground. At the same moment it would question the reality of things and of painting as a thing unto itself - as something that only it could be what it was in the moment of its inception and through the action of making it real.

With regard to transition of art history into a globalized transcultural phenomenon, Park's involvement with the Ecriture series began at an interesting moment. By the mid-70s, America had entered into a post-formalist (pluralist) phase, and Europe was in the process of igniting a revival of expressionism. In either case, the direction of these tendencies was in conflict with the Ecritures. By the 80s, new narratives and allegories were being spelled-out in terms of postmodernism on both continents. With this came a bevy of theoretical literature that was aggressively vehement toward modernism and especially towards abstract painting that presumed to hold metaphysical truths. All of this was a Western concoction and had little to do with the more focused and profound concerns of Park Seo Bo. His position was not only in another hemi

sphere but it was also on the other side of the ideological fence. For the most part, Park's *Ŭcriture* paintings were removed from ideology as they were without narrative or allegory. They could not be easily swept along by any postmodernism trend. These paintings were on a different course - a course that was jumping ahead of the obvious manipulation of the global art market and shifting into a terrain where theory had, for him, little importance in terms of justifying *Ŭcriture*.

As the curator Lee Dong-Suk has posited, Park Seo Bo's paintings were not only post-image and post-expressionist - they were paintings that essentially constituted a "purposeless activity." They were paintings whose only real justification was the *Qi* or the energy-flow that incited them into being. By 1982-83, as signs of the later phase of the *Ŭcritures* became apparent, Park had started to work with *hanji* (paper pulp made from mulberry leaves). The importance of this material was related to the history and culture of Korea in a way that, at the time, few Westerners would have known - unless they had taken the time to study the history of Korean customs. For Park, the application of *hanji* (literally Korean paper) allowed for durability that other art materials, even cotton canvas, did not possess. By saturating dry pigments into paper pulp, Park developed a technique whereby the linear elements could be pushed out from the surface using a stick that could be moved across the field. To maneuver this required incredible focus and concentration and an ability to sustain a rhythmic pressure in a manner similar to using a calligraphic brush. The Japanese art critic Toshiaki Minemura referred to the technique as being similar to the "ploughing of rice fields" in which myriad projected lines were gradually integrated into the surface, thus enabling a painterly fusion or coherence to exist between the repetitions of linear intervals in the form of an "all-over" composition.

In fact, what Park is doing in his paintings appears less about making a composition than a de-composition. Instead of composing, he wants to remove the notion of "unity in variety" upon which composition depends. In the *Ŭcriture* series, diversity does not exist. Instead of variety, there is repetition and placement - two qualities also associated with minimalism, which, as we know, Park Seo Bo, rejects. The recent addition of vibrant colors soaked into the *hanji* has added something different; but, again for Park, this difference is superficial. Only the structure matters, and the structure should be consummate with the idea. In spite of the differences of color or placement, the structure is fundamentally the same. Structure - as the artist means it - is an interior reality that is not superficial and not formal according to his definition. In this search "to empty the mind," we are left with parameters that are shifted about from painting to painting; but finally whatever is conjured as meaning or experience by the viewer is all the same thing. Therefore, what is there to compose? The origin of the term "over-all" comes from the American critic Clement Greenberg who used it to describe what Pollock was doing in the early poured paintings from 1947. Greenberg's point was that Pollock had broken through the European idea of composition in which the figure was always seen in relation to the background. By creating a surface that fuses both together as an abstract phenomenon on the same picture plane, the artist achieves an "over-all" surface. But what does it mean when I read this phrase "over-all" painting in a Korean catalog essay in reference to the paintings of Park Seo Bo? I am not convinced there is a conflict in coming to terms with the work from a Western point of view. It is merely a point of clarifying the origin of the term in order to understand its further applications. Park Seo Bo may resist such a Western formalist term in discussing his work, but it may still hold some relevance in clarifying some aspect of his work. From another angle - perhaps, more familiar to Koreans -- when Professor En Young-Ahn credits the artist as being possessed by "energy flow, emotions, spiritual strength, and psychological force," I am not inclined to disagree with this statement. Rather I would like to inquire as to how these qualities are revealed within the paintings. There is little doubt that Park would like to believe that what he feels internally in the process of working is what is really there. Yet, at the same time, to doubt these qualities is also appropriate. To accept the Tao - the "watercourse way" - by which the *Qi* (energy flow) is felt, is to refuse an explanation. (27) The challenge of *Ŭcriture* is precisely at this point. Thus, the silence of these paintings may be the force that resists definition.