

The Smudge that is Contemporary Painting, a Black Comedy

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Seungean Cha weaves her own canvas fabric. She mounts the fabric on the canvas frame and hangs it on the wall, making it naturally seem like a traditional painting. (She would also sometimes suspend or stand the paintings, but this is how it basically goes.) Standing in front of the artwork, various traits associated with the materials thread and fabric first meet the eyes. The tender and malleable materiality, and the warm texture. However, a closer look into the patterns on the fabric would yield a slightly different appreciation. There is a vast array of mixtures, from images of famous Minimalist paintings to various fabric patterns handed down in the realm of crafts, and from symbolic patterns of high-end fashion labels to the so-called “vernacular” patterns frequented by common Korean ladies.

For such reasons, Cha's art is understood referential representations of the modern and contemporary history of visual culture by traditional craftsmanship. As explained earlier, the artist excerpts various forms from diverse types of images that “were already there” and inscribes them onto the fabric. However, it is hard to find in it any gesture that indicates having inherited the past aesthetics, nor any attempt at a modern reinterpretation. In sum, her act of referencing is to restructure the objects selected just for “having been there” by using a skilled process of craftsmanship. In other words, the artist dons the manner of a librarian, quietly walks around the already established art archives, and reconstructs the selected objects through the process of weaving. She selects the masters of historicized Minimalist painting such as Agnes Martin and Richard Tuttle, and faintly copies their skin on the canvas as if printing with an old copy machine.

Cha employs the form of wooden frames commonly used for canvases, mimicking the traditional painting of applying paint on canvas. Here, canvas and paint are the most

fundamental materials of traditional painting. To start from the vastness and ephemerality of an empty canvas and gradually compose a form by applying paint had long been the duty of paintings. However, although Cha's canvas may seem to be the stanchion for painting, it is complete in itself. It is closer to being a craftwork that is complete in itself with no space left for paint. It is through the process of spraying paint on the warp and weaving weft on top of it that the artist divides and compartmentalizes the plane, not piling up planes of paint through brush strokes.

Let us picture the image of engraving a pattern by weaving each ply of yarn, one by one. Cha's art is the suddenly endowed with the nature of traditional crafts. The skill acquired through repeated training serves as the foundation of her work, and it is because of this that her art inevitably takes on the form of practicing asceticism. However, to state the conclusion first, the artist's asceticism heads toward a rather trivial and curt result. Whereas other arts of such ascetic performance would commonly employ the repeated bodily actions for structuralizing the artist's desire to mirror his or her image, it seems that Cha's performance seeks to control her own emotional intrusion into her work.

Due to such traits, the process of appreciating Cha's art is a series of continued misunderstandings and betrayals. The audience repeatedly falls into the perfect booby trap woven in between the warps and wefts. The smudge may seem to be a form that conveys a certain meaning the artist seeks to express, but is in fact the borrowed skin of a form that was produced by someone in the past, or a coincidental outcome bereft of any meaning. The smudge seems as if it is placed on top of the empty plane, but at a closer look, is also the plane itself. The smudge seems to have been produced through a simple process, as was the case with minimalist paintings, but is actually a delicate production of skilled techniques and intense labor.

Charlie Chaplin had said "(life is) a tragedy when seen in close-up, but comedy in long shot." The further the distance from the object, the more the skin's ridiculousness will stand out instead of the subject's emotional connection with the object. Such technique of securing a certain distance is characteristic of the way Cha treats the object of her

reference. As explained above, she seeks to scan the history of images through the perspective of librarian, who is required to treat all books equally and objectively. She can secure the atmosphere and air to objectively observe only when she designates an appropriate distance between herself and the image that she makes reference to, and it is with such distance that she can be free from the aesthetic principles of the time period when the image of reference was originally produced.

If Cha's work, at one point, seems to be rather forlorn and nihilistic as if there had never been an object of representation to fill its space, and at another point suddenly seems to be a cold image, it is because her art is a black comedy with past images as its characters. Stepping upon a silly humor and a curiously industrious methodology of representation, looking down at the history of two-dimensional art and casting certain moments of it for her production of comedy. This is a quiet, yet bold and radical referential painting.