

solo show <Agnes and Seunghwans> 2014-11-27 ~ 2014-12-23 Salon de H

The Situation Awareness of Zombie-Modernism:

A Comprehensive Path to Cha Seungean's Weaving Practice

Chungwoo Lee a.k.a. Geun-jun Lim, Art and Design Critic

Since the financial crisis of 2008, contemporary art is undergoing fundamental transformation. There is a big transition in terms of how art is defined in society and artists approach their work. How should we explain this?

Contemporary art has quietly reached its denouement. Some may still refuse to acknowledge this, but the age of contemporary art is completely over now. Gone are the days of wild partying in the great ruins of modernism. Now we are left to face the desolate and superflat world filled with fragments of non-history/meta-epic. There are many who are still confused, but I will tell you again—the age of “contemporary art” is all over. Period.

Gone are the days of using the metaphors from the plateaus to reflect on the history of mankind—except for perhaps some esoteric exegetical studies. Modified modernism supports social and cultural foundation in establishment. However, its spirit is neither modern nor contemporary. For people living in 2015, contemporaneity does not exist any more. Each one is living their own time, that is all. As a result, primitiveness that has been suppressed in the name of contemporaneity is resurfacing in every aspects of our lives. This trend will intensify, in my view.

If you look at the reality of establishment such as art museums, universities, exhibitions, artists and art critics, you will see that the socio-cultural protocols that pervade each area are still grounded on modernism. What sustains the art world is modified modernism that has lost its identity and been reverted to convention. In terms of external appearance, it looks the same as before. Therefore, it will be very difficult for you to detect the troublesome changes and their implications unless you examine the situation very carefully.

An ideology that has lost its soul and only maintains its body—I call this a zombie ideology. Furthermore, I call the period since 2008 where postmodern problem consciousness has disappeared the age of zombie modernism or the zombified, dead age.

One of the characteristic symptoms of zombie-modern age is decline in or disappearance of in fetishism of image-object or object-image. In the past, it was possible to accumulate-reinforce fetishism via repetition of analog images. However, in today's world of the Internet connected by smart devices, repetition-exposure of images leader to undermining of fetishism. Therefore, the future is gloomy for the postmodern artist generation who has been using a mimesis strategy and worked on constructing fetishism of commodity. Their time will never come back again.

Images, both in the world of the Internet connected by smart devices and the reality remediated by this world, are only information that can be searched and manipulated. Therefore, they lose the power of overwhelming the audience and degenerate into a tamed signifiers. It does not stop at damaging the fetishism of 2D images. A wide spread of low-priced 3D printers is damaging the fetishism of 3D objects as well. It is not just because 3D printer has obviated the difficulty of labor. The reason why, unlike in the past, 3D works appear like an image is because they are 3D rendition of objects based on computer graphics. That is, they are an output of multi-angle mapping images. That 3D objects can be converted into image information makes it no longer possible to attribute the same level of fetishism to them as before.

Endowing 2D or 3D images with the new reality of "information/data" neutralizes their fetishism. Borrowing from J. David Bolter & Richard Grusin, we can say the following: As hypermediacy dimension is transformed into a combination of visibly additional information that can be touched during re-mediation of images, fetishism of object-image/image-object that used to be reinforced by transparent immediacy is deconstructed/exhausted. (Note: The fact or feeling of a particular data or information can be controled by touch means much more than just accessibility).

In the age of declining and vanishing of fetishism, a new generation modern artists and designers who handle images/non-images starts by reformulating the way they perceive reality. What is most important for them is to acknowledge that "The 20th century that refuses to die has now become an unalterable database of decision-making and freedom that governs the lives of almost all of us."

The 20th century that keeps coming back to us with high definition images and information is the template that shackles mankind of the 21st century. The present that has prematurely lost its future (probably sometime during the 1980s) confronts a

danger of losing its ground to the past that seems to possess more vibrancy. I am confident that the power that overwhelms and drives mankind in the present period of 2010s is not in “the new“ but “the old” - including the history of the 20th century contemporary art. This new “the old” is the record/database of the 20th century that refuses to fade into tradition. It is the new world that will dominate the space (and people who live in it) of the 21st century that has become superflat.

Robert Hughes explained the essence of the 20th century culture and art in terms of the “shock of the new” (cultural/artistic response of mankind). The 21st century, the age of lowered expectation, which has just begun, could be explained in terms of the “shock of the old (that refuses to fade away)” (and cultural and artistic response, or non-response, of mankind). If so, as of today, in 2015, what are some of the meaningful responses made by artists?

In 2008, a new breed of abstract artists appeared simultaneously, primarily from the United States. (Of course, many had been exploring abstract art long before but was noticed only after 2008). There are too many of them so that it is difficult to list them in categories.

Their styles vary. However, what is common among them is they all revisit certain subject matters in abstract art that were dealt with in the past and reconstruct them. One of the characteristic trends in the new abstract art is a tendency to recombine painting and sculpting by treating 2D images as 3D and vice versa.

The trend has already been summarized in the critical works of various size. It was Bob Nickas, art critic and curator, who first summarized the new trend in abstract art. His book *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting* (Phaeton Press, 2009) was well received for encompassing 80 artists of the new trend for last five years. However, the book failed to touch upon the core essence from critical perspective. The first publication that really succeeded in setting a critical direction was *Contemporary Painting in Context* (Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010) by Anne Ring Petersen, Mikkel Bogh, Hans Dam Christensen and Peter Norgaard Larsen. Although the book failed to garner raving review against the backdrop of dramatic decline in meta-theory, it did provide much inspiration and stimulus to artists who have been pursuing similar artistic endeavors: Peter Weibel’s (media theorist/curator) critical reflection on paintings of the 1990s; Barry Schwabsky’s (art journalist/art critic) philosophy on ontology of painting; and the work analysis of Katharina Grosse, a pioneer in new abstract painting.

There were many exhibitions in art museums too. The Paint Things: Beyond the Stretcher exhibition held in DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum (January 27, 2012 – April 21, 2013) was a great opportunity to see a new trend in abstract art that is expanding into space as it is interpreted as 3D object. It was the work of Dina Deutsch, the museum curator and Evan Garza, a visiting curator. (Exhibiting artists: Claire Ashley, Katie Bell, Sarah Braman, Sarah Cain, Alex Da Corte, Cheryl Donegan, Franklin Evans, Kate Gilmore, Alex Hubbard, James Hyde, Sean Kennedy, Wilson Lawrence, Steve Locke, Analia Saban, Allison Schulnik, Jessica Stockholder, Mika Tajima, Summer Wheat. Among them, the artists who were commissioned for new original works were: Katie Bell, Sarah Cain, Franklin Evans, Kate Gilmore)

On the other hand, In Transit: Between Image and Object (January 25, 2014 – January 4, 2015) exhibition held in MASS MoCA was a smaller scale exhibition with the theme of “Physical Movement vs Virtual Movement,” which contemplated a relationship between space being transformed into images and corresponding 3D images. The exhibiting artists were Dike Blair, Hugh Scott-Douglas and Guyton/Walker duo. Amazingly, the curator was a graduate students at Williams College majoring in art history, Robert Wainstein. It was an exception event because an internship program designed to give students a curator experience ended up eclipsing the museum exhibition.

However, the most talked-about exhibition was The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World held at New York MoMA (December 14, 2014 – April 5, 2015). The exhibition was planned by curator Laura Hoptman who had moved to the MoMA from the New Museum in 2010. It was an ambition exhibition consisting for 17 artists with the theme of atemporality, tracing a new trend in abstract painting in history. The new curator categorized the characteristics of the new abstract painters in terms of reanimation, reenactment and sampling. Furthermore, she tried to discover a creative archetype for their works. (Participating artists: Richard Aldrich, Joe Bradley, Kerstin Brätsch, Matt Connors, Michaela Eichwald, Nicole Eisenman, Mark Grotjahn, Charline von Heyl, Rashid Johnson, Julie Mehretu, Dianna Molzan, Oscar Murillo, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, Josh Smith, Mary Weatherford and Michael Williams).

However, the exhibition, instead of rave review, found itself at the center of severe criticism from art critics. In particular, Jerry Saltz, an art critic who had been calling

the new trend in abstract art “crapstraction following the aesthetics of Tumbler,” criticized the exhibition for having succumbed to the taste of art market based on groundless accusations. (Walter Robinson, an art critic, calls similar art works in new abstract art Zombie Formalism. It is in a negative context, of course.) Jerry Saltz is a professional art critic with a long and enduring career in the field. However, he belongs to the old school and seems to find it difficult to detect new visual style of zombie-modern generation. After all, it is not an easy thing to understand an artistic motivation to reconstruct the history of abstract art in the 20th century and capture the virtual fetishism from the point of view of “omnipotent smart phone” that encompasses the Internet world connected by smartphones as well as the virtual world remediated by such world. The essence of the 2010s is loftiness of nihilism and virtual loftiness deposited in today’s abstract art. It is not a value you can reject or underestimate just because you hate it.

When postmodernism and corresponding contemporary art emerged for the first time in the mid to late 1970s, the cronies of post-war modern art did not spare efforts to attack the contemporary art by saying that “This is not an art.” Art collectors like Giuseppe Panza even stopped collecting art works. Objects-image or image-objects that can be controlled using signs was the basic unit that moved the age of contemporary art. The fact had remained unchanged from the 1970s until 2008. However, from today’s “omnipotent smartphone perspective,” the images in the world are a moving target in time. If we capture it using the time-honored duty of art, its meta-image becomes a blank space, vanishing without an explanation and leaving only an empty signifier. (Print-photograph-artists who had been using typological methodology therefore encountered an unexpected bankruptcy. Their time will never return.)

Accordingly, the new artists of today do not expend efforts to capture/imitate today’s world of atemporality that cannot form contemporaneity but is transformed into emptiness over individual timeline using the method of the past. On the contrary, they try to redefine the ontology of their art work in terms of post-media so that it can flow in a meaningful way under optimal form rather than trying to capture it in vain. The situation is that, if you can’t redefine your work to use nihilistic media to respond to nihilism, you will end up flushing away into the olde school without even knowing. If so, how about the works of Cha Seungean?

Cha Seungean, reflecting on minimalism in a narrower sense and the overall heritage

of abstract art in a broader perspective, explores the phenomenology of painting and its essence.

An attempt at making a “painting that visualizes the condition that makes painting” by weaving a canvas is unprecedented in art history. In her recent works, she shows an ambition to “reconstruct anew hallucination and reality in painting,” from which is detected modern elegance that was felt only the masters of the past and their works. Even if they are imitations or the fruits of imitations (or side-effects), there is a strange critical aspect to the reconstruction that is “realistically vivid.”

Note: Although Cha Seungean outstands among those who use weaving painting/sculpture to challenge creative abstract art, it is not too difficult to find artists who share similar artistic approaches in their art. First, we can compare Cha Seungean to Dianna Molzan (1972-) who is distinguishing herself in abstract art by revisiting-reconstructing Supporters/Surfaces, a movement in abstract art of the past. Also, we can consider Gabriel Pionkowski (1970-) who often deconstructs the weaving structure of canvas fabric. For weaving artist who is doing works similar to the early works of Cha, we can think of Ruth Laskey (1975-). The most influential among them is Dianna Molzan, who held a personal exhibition at the Whitney Art Museum in 2011.

The characteristics of Cha Seungean is in using weaving as referential appropriation to indicate the distance between the object being quoted and the subject that is quoting and, through this, imitate-update phenomenological modernity. What is crucial in her weaving process is not the predatory attitude for exclusive possession, which was distinguished in the attitude of Pictures Generation of the past, but a spatial-temporal sense that secures and maintains appropriate distance between the “past” and “the quoted past.” The unique characteristics that distinguishes referentiality found in some artists during the 2010s from referentiality of the postmodern era or self-referentiality of the modern artists is in that sense of dual distance.

One of her well known work *Twill97cmFrame* (2013) is one of her first two works based on the four sizes of 60F, 80P, 100M and 120M with the horizontal length of 97cm among the standard canvas frames. The frame by the size of 120M, 100M, 80P and 60F was stood in a vertical direction in the upper area and the bottom line was arranged from left to right. Then, right below it, the frame in the size of 60F, 80P, 100M and 120M was arranged from left to right in the upper line. This was how the basic frame was constructed. However, the weaving canvas that enveloped each

frame was weaved in twill pattern only for 130cm x 97cm area, which corresponded to the size 60F. The rest, i.e., the area outside the size 60F grid, was emptied of vertical thread and weaved only with horizontal thread. However, since the fully weaved 60F size area realizes all 60F size frame, the work appears as if 60F size canvas repeats in 4x2 line (HxV) and, below it, a special size canvases (for contrast and rhythm on the screen) were progressively attached. On closer inspection, on the other hand, since the actual frame that supports hallucination, not hallucination itself, is seen through behind the weaved canvas that suggests hallucination, it is an object-painting that parodies anti-hallucination and therefore is a work that visualizes the ultimate basis of painting (meta-historical). (What constructs the frame's hallucination in weaving work is the apricot color dyed thread.)

In her personal exhibition Agnes and SeungHwans in 2014, the artist intensified and expanded such method. In her new work *Bright Richard on Honeysuckle 60, 80, 100, 120* (White Version, 2014), she used again the four frames with the size of 60F, 80P, 100M, 120M with the vertical length of 97cm. A light yellow color cotton canvas weaved in a honeysuckle pattern was arranged at the bottom line. Then, white color paint was used on the surface (the mix of white Gesso and acrylic paint [yellow ochre]) to quote (sampling) the work of Richard Tuttle, a post-minimalist artist. According to the artist, while using Richard Tuttle's 8th *Paper Octagonal* (1970) as a prototype, which she filmed herself in the Tate's Modern Museum in London in June, 2013, she rotated the work 90 degree, clockwise to quote the work. Since she created a paper sample during work process and arbitrarily decided on sizes and locations, the location and size of the octagonal shape painted on the weaving canvas all vary.

On the other hand, to the new black and white version work *Brighter Richard on Honeysuckle 60, 80, 100, 120* (2014), a black cotton canvas weaved in honeysuckle pattern based on the same canvas structure was applied. The weaving method is same, but the composition of threads is different. In the white color version, two 20s/4 threads were used for the plainly weaved area while two 20s/4 threads+ one 30s/3 thread was used on the honeysuckle-pattern weaved area. In the black color version, three 20s/4 threads were used for the plainly weaved area while three 20s/4 threads+ one 30s/3 thread was used on the honeysuckle-pattern weaved area. [Therefore, the density of the weaved area is different, which makes the degree of see-through of a stretcher different]. The way Richard Tuttle's octagonal shape was quoted (sampling) on the surface is also same. However, black color paint (the mix

of black Gesso and acrylic paint [carbon black]) was used.

In the two of her works above, Cha Seung Ean used her own method to revisit and reconstruct a historical object called Richard Turtle, thus creating a dynamic space for new abstract art. It could be viewed that she reconstructed the interface between the artists of the 2010s and the history of art in the 20th century and gave it a unique expression. One could go further and say that she secured her own unique dynamic space by re-weaving the interface by endowing uniqueness to the relationship between the artist of the 2010s and the history of art in the 20th century.

On the other hand, the works that referenced Agnes Martin, an artist who used line drawings to create her own artistic world in abstract art, are a little different in terms of methodology used. For example, *Crossing Herringbone 1, 2* (2014) was weaved using the herring bone pattern in a 61x46x2 cm stretcher. However, the work chose not to maintain the regularity but was changed as if applying free-drawing, thus endowing the screen with painting quality. However, weaving at the bottom part was partially left unfinished and the vertical thread in the vertical direction was moved to the right side. Due to this, the stretcher and the wall surface were partially exposed. That is, Agnes Martin was not quoted (sampling) using specific works but was referenced by her attitude and methods in her work.

In fact, the most dramatic among the recent works are *One Thing-1 (Hiking Clothes 123)* (2014) and *One Thing-2* (2014), which connected three canvas works to develop them into sculptures.

In *One Thing-1 (Hiking Clothes 123)*, the artist partially placed pink-dyed threads for vertical threads (excluding undyed cotton) and applied the pink-dyed threads on top of the vertical thread to reconstruct-reiterate the structure of a stretcher in dreamy images. Then, she inserted pink sparkling synthetic sand used for fur scrub brush in certain sections and hung unfinished vertical threads in two sections where the three faces of canvas are connected. This way, the structure of the inside can be seen from the outside. This structure, hung in the space, is interesting because it is both painting and sculpture/installation at the same time. It fused and integrated the ideal of the minimalism that sought internal/external consistency in a strange way. What does the subtitle *Hiking Clothes 123* mean? This has to do with the experience of the artist during residency at Gyeonggi Creation Center. One day, she took a number 123 bus that was going to Daebu Island. In the bus, she found three old women

wearing flash pink color hiking clothes. (*One Thing-2* is the work that has the same structure, but it is a black color version. Black and grey color-dyed threads were used for both vertical and horizontal threads to recreate-reiterate the structure of a stretcher).

Now, why did she call the title of her 2014 personal exhibition Agnes and SeungHwans?

Agnes part was explained above. However, I still don't know about SeungHwans parts. It certainly is the variation of her own name. Perhaps her name was combined with another name, Lee WooHwan? Or Kim HwanGi? My guess is that she tried to explain the corpus of her works as historical fusion-combination in "SeungHwans," the name analogous to her own.

There is one more interesting thing. In the past, women were placed in the lower hierarchy in the history of abstract art. There were Joan Mitchell, Agnes Martin, Ann Trudy and other exceptional female artists, for sure. However, they were not in the mainstream. On the other hand, it is women who have taken the mainstream position in the referential abstract art today. (Roberta Smith, a New York Times reporter and art critic and spouse of Jerry Saltz and, considered this a good sign). Among the 17 artists exhibited in *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* held in New York MoMA, 9 of them were women and everyone except one was old. She found it less exciting to find out that most young artists were male. Well, come to think again, doesn't the fact that the pioneering artists in a given field mainly consisted of women mean establishment of "female authority?" (For more details, please refer to *The Paintbrush in the Digital Era* (The New York Times, DEC. 11, 2014)) A few years ago, a sexist artist Georg Baselitz claimed that "Painting is fundamentally phallic in nature. Therefore, it is fundamentally in disfavor of women who feel psychological pressure in presenting their opinions." He proclaimed that a large-scale painting was a medium that favored men at a fundamental level. I hate to hear this, but he has a point. Then, how did men end up losing a leadership in referential abstract art trend?

After all, the essence of referential abstract art is not in the originality of (non) images and the impulsive brush strokes that represents it. What is crucial instead is refined sense of re-contextualization that connects an artist to the object of references via re-creation and re-invention of medium. This is why women led men in this field. This is why we can expect more from weaving of Cha Seung Ean in the future. We

do not know how women's ability to relate and communicate that determines one's relationship to others, the ability that women hold superiority over men, can re-weave-collect meta-level contexts through referential weaving. (My prediction is that when the artist begins to reference the achievement in abstract art in post-war Korea, she will have entered her prime as an artist.) ///