

최종태

Belife in Form and the Form Belife

CHOI, Jong-Tae

Gana Art(92, 6, -14)

YOU. Hong-Jun/Art Critic

As artists have innumerable methods of facing creation, critics have innumerable ways of confronting works of art; and it is impossible for the critic to use the same method to approach one artist and another. Because of this, the critic has to develop his own internal logic toward innumerable art works made by innumerable creative methods.

For me as a critic, Choi Jong Tae as a sculptor has a very special character. Until now, my critical activity and objectives have involved artists who are my living contemporaries and who share with me an awareness of similar problems, or my efforts have been directed towards historical artists of the past. I have concentrated especially on interpreting historically the works of artists who have passed on. To state this in another way, I have avoided discussing or have had reservations about criticizing artists who are one generation older than myself, who are nowadays active, prominent figures or praising people active in our current art milieu. During this time, I have only once written an article about such an artist and such works.

That artist is Choi Jong Tae; and that article was in the catalogue for Seoul's Gana Art Gallery for his works which were sent to the 1986 Paris Grand Palais International Gallery Exhibition (FIAC).

"Until now I have not even shared a cup of tea with Choi Jong Tae and I always looked at his work from afar; but I felt confident that I knew Choi Jong Tae better than other people did and also that I could speak about him accurately. Besides that, I had a strong image within my mind of the world of Choi Jong Tae; and I find that this was not at all a mistaken impression through the expressive and elegant prose of the artist's notes."

Thus, to me as a critic, Choi Jong Tae's art has attained an objective distance, and I stood in the position of an appreciative viewer before considering criticism of the works. Therefore, my article about Choi Jong Tae is not critical from the standpoint of the making of our period's art; but it cannot help but consist of an analysis of the content of the artistic results he has accomplished.

There have been some famous critics in Korea who have dealt with Choi Jong Tae's art; Lee Kyung Sung, Lee Il, Kim Yun Soo, Jung Byung Kwan. One by one, each of them has written about Choi Jong Tae and all agree that his art pursues of the embodiment of the plasticity religious feeling, a simpli-



Wood. 29×25×106cm. 1992

fied beauty of form.

However, I think that when we analyze Choi Jong Tae's art world, we have to look at his work from, at a minimum, three directions and it then clearly expresses its own form.

First, presents a search into form and respect that is close to his belief in form. Second, his creative attitude is that sculptural work is in itself a search for truth. Third, thus, his plastic objective accomplished though this attitude, is the encounter of the sacred and the profane, reason and emotion, the natural and the manmade.

If we first look at his plastic approach to form, we can find that he already has used *Search for Form* for the title of the volume for his collected writings and that its subtitle is *Discovery of Beauty and Record of Creation*.

However, if I state the above, then someone probably can ask me in return, "Is there true sculpture without form?" I would then have to answer, "I think there could be." There are cases of work without shape but with meaningful form, and there are cases of style but no form or shape.

To Choi Jong Tae, the form carries an understanding almost as a living body. He establishes a content in his works and he does not search for a matching style; but, also, he does not want to create some form or image from an established shape. He seeks out form, that is, the life of the form. He stated that, "Form is the realization of idea."

Within that definition, Choi Jong Tae's stance within modern art's various movements is within purism or absolutism. This is different from absolute work and different from objective materialist thought that endows a thing itself with a meaning. If we firmly search out an example from the past, Jean Arp's sculpture certainly shows meaning within the form. However, Choi Jong Tae does not push form to one side in a simple search for beauty. Rather he states positivity that there must be idea and life. He said the following metaphorically ;

"My form thinks that it is like a tree trunk that stands in a pasture yearning or that it wants to be a lofty mass of rock."

These ideas and beliefs of the artist naturally make the artist's sculptural attitude more than a simple process and they elevate the work.

"Creative work is first of all a destructive act toward the immediate past. If I cling to the things of the past, my stone dies. Life is born out of pain. If we give material tension, it becomes spirit. If the spirit is loosened, material results. If we endow the material with order, it becomes active in itself. If we give the material freedom to act itself, life results."

Accordingly, to Choi Jong Tae, the working of sculpture is a process of life and birth, for that life's birth, the sculptural consciousness must result in the work of seeking out truth and also it is the glory of receiving a calling. The artist says about such a sculptural attitude ;

"I treat form as I would treat a child. I hit the stone with a hammer and cut the clay with a knife, but a sculptor's mind is the same as a mother's mind....."

I think that the role of sculptor is to help the form to come to life itself....."

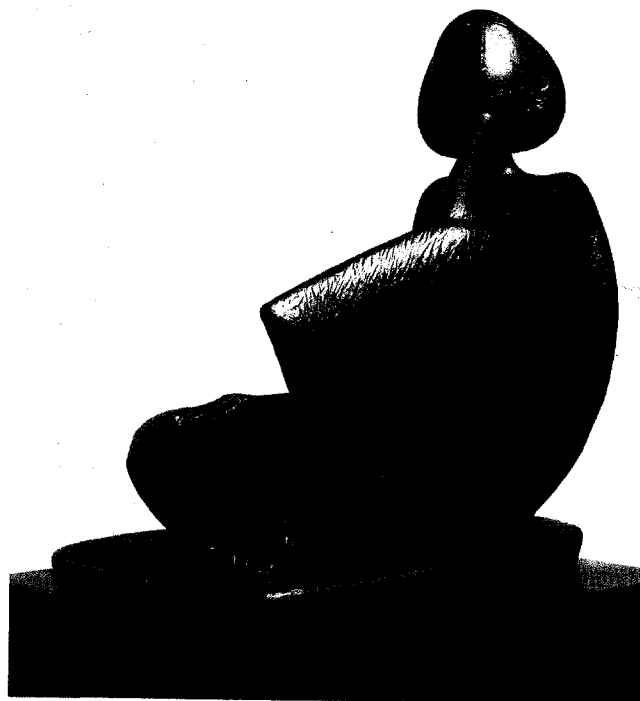
Choi Jong-Tae from the very beginning doesn't give respect or reverence to sculpture that has meaning only in the making of it. On the other hand, he understands that he has to reject the sculpture of the art historical past.

"We can see that Greek sculpture is realized with a plastic logic and that when the Romans arose, they thought too much of just building the sculpture. We can feel that they did not treat the stone lovingly but they had only the desire to make it into sculpture. We can feel sad that in the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods' sculpture, those men treated the material too cruelly. When I look at their stones, I can hear the sound of pain in stone abused by man's will to conquer."

Then, in what kind of works did he see the truth seeking mind Those were Egyptian murals, Medieval icons, Korea's Buddhist sculpture and the Chosun age's stone figure sculpture and wood dolls ect. Those sculptures described objects realistically and their form aesthetics were based on empathy. Besides, they did not introduce the artist's emotion. While they contain life and thought in themselves though only the material that is left when the unnecessary material is removed and only the condensed simple form is left behind as sculp-



Bronze. 11×16×37cm. 1992



Bronze. 60×55×65cm. 1990



Stone. 37×32×57cm 1992

ture, they want to be read that way.

Choi Jong Tae begins work on the sculpture with a truth seeking mind and a belief in form. That is, his ultimate goal of reaching plasticity is representative of the absolute. Many people think that the ultimate essence of his art is a religious quality as a part of the absolute thing. For example, Choi Jong Tae likes to sculpture figures of young girls and this cannot be interpreted in religious terms.

"I make figures of young girls ; and because the thing I want make does not appear, I make more and more. To accomplish the form like a clear full dream of a hometown mountain stream without flaw, I boldly reject the flawed thing, and the original appearance of reality. I wipe my eyes and open my heart again."

Choi Jong Tae searches for flawless clarity, simplicity, basic appearance, nature's absolute undistorted by man's hand or manmade. However, Choi Jong Tae is not a escapist naturalist. He also was not a believer in uncontaminated emotion. On the other hand, he is close to being a complete intellectual. In his simple figure sculpture, the sparkling feeling is very intellectual. To make you agree to this point, I must again quote him ;

"Art needs intellectualism. Art is direct intelligence. Usually one says that art is a product of emotion. Of course emotion is absolute in art ; however, lack of intellect make emotion weak. Strictly said, intellect and emotion may be indivisible."

On the basis of this artist's statements, I think that what he is pursuing is a infinite wish for the absolute and that is the essence of his art. As he gropes for something in the oneness of emotion and intellect, he seeks for not the holy itself but a union of the holy and mundane worlds even as he represents the world of religious emotion. And he wants to encounter simplicity and humanity happily in a young girl's face.

There is a very great difference between pursuit of the absolute itself and, on basis of human endeavor, human scent, human thought, human life, attempting confront the absolute.

Choi Jong Tae is very deeply moved by the Three Nations' gilt-bronz seated Buddha Maitreya and the wood seated Buddha Maitreya of Japanesse among the cultural inheritances from the past, and then he attempts a similar formal appearance in his works. According to the artist's statement, after the work was completed and had the feeling of the old masterworks, he became afraid that perhaps his work might seem to be copied from the old masterpieces ; so he went to the Central National Museum. He said that he saw that they were different and he felt easier in his heart.

The moment I heard that, I thought that from the first they could not help being different from each other because as Karl Jaspers stated the seated Buddha Maitreya is expressed in "tranquility of the mind of the Absolute" where "the personality of the human being is completely eliminated" and we reach "the unique appearance of the Absolute." This is very

different from the direction of Choi Jong Tae's plastic goal, and this point has to be noted as a special idiosyncrasy of his characteristics.

It is appropriate now to return again to the problem of form in Choi Jong Tae's work. I mean to say that he arrives at a sort of conclusion of created form in the resultant object though his mind's compositional search for the Absolute.

With some exceptions, the primary motif of his work is the human body. They appear as full length figures, half-length figures, or a part of the figure; but all indicate a living existence. We can compress Choi Jong Tae's approaches for this purpose into 3 plastic principles: first, simplicity; second, frontality; third, quiescence.

Simplicity in Choi Jong Tae's sculptural works may start from retaining what is minimally needed and removing all extraneous details. When he is carving the stone, he is not building something but rather he is removing unnecessary material in the process.

There is an intimate relationship between the simplicity of his sculpture and the planar feeling of bas relief. His sculpture clearly has three dimensional space at the same time it has a feeling of two dimensionality. There is a striking feeling of planar two dimensionality. The faces that he makes are in the form of ovals round and also rabbitlike or in the shape of the letter "T" and in all circumstances he rejects cubic three dimensionality for simplicity. In addition his sculptural simplicity has a deep relationship with the flavor of his pastels and woodcuts especially in regard to line carving and surface treatment.

However, if we speak of simplicity in itself, the feeling of simplicity varies significantly. We can easily believe in the expression of naivete through simplicity. On the one hand, the simplicity reveals keen intellect and sometimes a dignified reverent and even glorious quality. In this, Choi Jong Tae's preference for simplicity is change.

If we see his sculpture, he is an artist of the straight line and always maintains severity that eliminates details and central point of view; but devoutness and an intellectuality.

Second; frontality. Choi Jong Tae's works have the characteristic of a sublimely conspicuous frontality present in his figures, faces, and all his works. That is to say, the basis of frontality is in his deep belief. The basis of this frontality, as in the aesthetic concepts of ancient Egyptian murals and sculpture, is a form of religious desire of the Egyptian artist who tried to express eternity, unchangeability, and dignity. Choi Jong Tae discovered this concept in traditional sculpture and as a quotation he acquires the tension and reverent quality of form that he himself tries to express.

Third; quiescence. His sculpture, his figures, do not move at all. Also, if we see his faces, their expressions have no motion. They have stillness, an all embracing effect of dormant immanence in their unmoving faces. It is the same as a Buddhist saying that "having nothing makes one unlimited".

In this way, while searching for the form's life based on the plastic principle of modeling and he himself works in a state of unawareness, he has to know there is operating another essential fundamental law, that of on the one hand he has escaped from the danger of excessive simplicity through the curved line and suitable modeling. If we look at his sculptures of faces, curved surfaces and also straight lines are almost nonexistent in his handling of the lateral surfaces. In this way, he always allows the change of a moderate carved line.

When we see shape, we can say that there is a change of feeling but in the works' content it acts as if it is not an absolute thing itself but rather a mark of a human sort of thing, a worldly thing. Although this point seems to be very minor, in fact it is concrete evidence that shows how elaborate are his natural gifts as an artist and how fine his reckoning of modeling.

My views about Choi Jong Tae began as a viewer of his work as above said; however, his work's firm goal in modeling and its unshaking form makes my critical analysis and approach to his art possible.

Now, while I am finishing this small article on Choi Jong Tae, I think that I should present my prior knowledge of him and his goals for the future in making sculpture, but I have no thoughts on that subject. We go back to a merely theoretical discussion, ordinarily if we overcome a stage where we search for unknown form, there appears tension and strength in the modeling. Then there is some slackening by achieving the form itself. I would like to substitute for a conclusion of the article that there remains a problem of anxiety as to how the artist will overcome this release of tension.

When a creative artist's age approaches 60 like Choi Jong Tae, ordinarily he will search not for tension of form but rather for sophisticated beauty. In the case of Choi Jong Tae what results will appear? That is my anticipation and concern.

Early, he said, "My works are the evidence of my everyday search for my life" and "If I can work continually, I am happy."; besides "I only try to live day by day, sincerely." Therefore, this writer hopes to wait and then speak to Choi Jong Tae's art again later.