

From walls to after Ollejit

YOUN, Meyung-Ro One Man Show

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OH, Kwang-Soo/Art critic

1.

Wiping out specific images and figures, and manifesting intense gestures covering the surface, the Informel style started developing throughout the late 1940s to the early 1950s, the post-war era in Europe. This mode of painting was first employed in 1958 in Korea. It is undeniable that the young Korean artists were exposed to the Western wave of new trends and thoughts that they found considerably shocking and stirring. However, I cannot agree that the Informel movement in Korea is simply a mode of expression borrowed from the West. This new way of expression did prevail in Europe around the second World War and transmitted as far as Korean Peninsula in the Far East. Korea's political and historical setting(the division of the country and the tragic civil war) ironically paralleled the spiritual crisis in post-war Europe.

With this mutual attraction of two emotional environments, Koreans and Europeans were able to share a similar mode of thinking. The Informel style was not an unconditional importation of the Western style. Already impregnated in the existing ambience of the 1950s, Korea may well have experienced a methodology similar to the Informel.

Though the mode of action taken by our young generation, who have experienced the tragedy of the 6-25 civil war, inevitably took the course of a strong anti-war sentiment, it fundamentally could not escape being existentialist; and this aspect attached quickly on to the Informel style as a formal procedure. Most Korean artists who had attempted pseudo-Informel work were not aware of their relationship to the Informel style of the West. Youn, Myeung-ro who belonged to the second generation of the reform is not an exception in this case. Youn himself has made it clear that the pseudo-Informel work is a spontaneous binding of youthful power and resistant mentality. As shared perspectives of the revolutionary generation spontaneously formed a common ground for solidarity, the mode of expression was also spontaneously shaped by a shared situation. Lee, Il described Youn's early paintings as "existential"; this in turn meant that existential situations spontaneously bore into existential art works. Verifying one's own existence by challenging the canvas surface was indeed what made an existential painting possible. The titles of this works such as the "Wall", "Original Sin" and "Tattoo" reflect Youn's particularly obstinate existential consciousness.

It is evident that most of the Korean Informel works from the late 1950s to the early 1960s are somewhat similar. One of the characteristics in the Korean Informel Movement is its collectivism, a movement practiced collectively as a whole, rather than being based on individualism; this point of view does not enable the viewer to distinguish each artist's work according to each individual style. The surfaces expressed in such collectivism normally appear dark, dismal and depressing. Youn does not escape from this collective environment. His works are distressing and serious. A concentrated anguish overwhelms the entire canvas. However, as discovered in his Biennale works from "Painting M, 10" to "Tattoo", what is not commonly evident in other painters is the powerful compositional element shaped by the impressive texture of the material itself. That his unique method in the early period was not just another coincidence or a free-ride on the fad of the time is confirmed in his later works from the "Cracks" series to "Ollejit" in the late 1980s and today's "After Ollejit". Not every methodological development that he explored was equally outstanding. However, he carried himself solidly compared to many other artists of his age who fell into an empty longing for a mirage or who survived through an excessive series of adaptations and transformations. Youn's strength as an artist lies in his consistency. The seemingly unoriginal expression "strength as an artist" might be most fitting in describing the development of his world.

2.

Youn's increasing interest in print making shown since 1963, as Lee, Il has already remarked, was not a result of a diversion from painting, but quite the contrary. Unlike most painters who produce prints of their paintings to avail for the masses, Youn chose print making as another experimental phase of painting, and not as a process of copying what he had already done. It started as an experimental ritual in Youn's art. As mentioned above, the "strength as an artist" can be applied here as well. It is common knowledge that the popular Abstract Expressionism faced fatal crisis when the seemingly ever-lasting movement was rapidly saturated and could no longer move forward. Many artists felt trapped in the frame of mannerism they established and some quickly returned to their respective styles of the past. It is fortunate that a few artists from the second reform generation attempted to search for another mode of creating through a new



Anonymous Land 91720 227X181cm oil, acrylic. 1991.

medium such as prints which was an unfamiliar territory in the Korean art circle at the time. They did not leave canvases to escape into print making, but selected print making as a solution to surmount the unknown nature of the medium. Artists wanted to discover unique potentials in print making. Kim, Chong-hak, Kim, Bong-tae, and Youn, Myeung-ro are three of the major artists who intensively searched for new ways of painting through prints. Youn was more active with prints than painting after 1965, and his biography from 1965 to 1970 lists frequent participations in various print exhibitions. Contrast to his growing commitment to prints, his canvas paintings during the period appear to have withered.

Before studying at the Pratt institute in New York on a one year invitation by the Rockefeller Foundation, the subjects of his prints were not more than an extension of his canvas paintings. The presence of pseudo-Informel language is only too evident in his prints. The particular materialistic property in prints and its corresponding formative quality appeared after his training in New York. To my knowledge, his most productive print making period started with the "Ruler" series. The "Ruler" in one sense represents a rigid instrument with precise measurement lines and figures, and yet it is shown in a melting and distorted manner—suggestive of a very situational and metaphorical inner world. Attempting to counter justice, often represented by a ruler, is accelerated by the disintegrated image which metaphorically symbolizes the antinomic reality apparent in matter and phenomenon. This dramatic dual structure is attributed to the incessant recurrence for the norm, order, an insurrection to escape from all, and a thirst for freedom. The artist explains this duality in terms of modern situations.

"Before painting the 'Cracks' series, I made prints with the ruler as a subject. 'Ruler' symbolizes an agreement, as well as the norm and order among people. I chose the ruler as a theme because modern people have lost a sense of commitment to the norm, and order is being destroyed. We stand there bewildered in front of the melting ruler that is about to disappear".

The duality contained in the ruler—the norm and order versus distortion and disappearance—may interestingly reflect, in addition to its obvious symbolic meaning, the dualism of the print and tableaux media. The internal confrontation between the logical technicality of print making and the expressive method belonging to the canvas is curiously represented in the form of a precise scale on the ruler on the one part and its melting disintegration on the other. This is an interesting evidence that his artistic methodology is completed through repeated attempts rather than a search within a specific territory. Instead of treating prints and canvases as two independent territories, he applies print making ideas to his works on canvas and vice versa, thereby combining the two different media into an identical material.

The "Cracks" series, following the "Ruler" series, started

in the mid 1970s continuing until the end of the decade; by then, he had imposed equal footing for both painting and print making. Aiming at the accidental and technical effects at the same time, the cracking phenomenon is in fact a very natural methodological variation in the print making procedure. A strong intent and an accidental happening are true attributes of printing. Nevertheless, "Cracks" invites a painterly description. This is because it most clearly displays strong material characteristics and also suggests visual effects identical to painting. Lumps of pigment that recall clay walls with cracks throughout produce a textural sensation. This is reminiscent of material and pictorial effects of the early 1960s. Though different in structure and techniques, "Cracks" echoes the ambience related to the early works of the 1960s. It may have been due to the "home-coming" instinct. Or perhaps, it may have been the result of endless self-observations. His works have changed without really changing. And inversely, his works have not changed while they are changing at the same time.

"Cracks" does not represent anything but simply the phenomenon of cracking itself in its most direct way. It is pointless to bestow other symbols or meanings on the work. It is no more than the sticky textural nature of pigment pastes, and the traces of the cracking phenomenon caused by the external impacts combined with chemical reactions. This process certainly implies both artist's intent and pure chance. The specific acts of the artist and dynamic movements on the surface independent of the artist coexist.

Pigment pastes seem to be arbitrarily applied; its compositional intent is however a natural product of the artist's internal artistic experiences. Though the inconsistent cracking phenomenon produces a consistent shock, the final product is accidental.

The "Cracks" series which continued until the late 1970s, were mostly in white monotone. Works in monotone, especially in white, reminds one of the White Movement preeminent in the late 1970s. It was in the late 1970s when the voice of the so-called collective unconsciousness or collective individuality was raised to its highest pitch. Everyone was painting the White monotone under the pretext of the collective individualism. Thus, in a wide perspective, Youn's white monotone works cannot be separated from the zeitgeist. It might be odd for an artist who considers himself at the center of the modern art scene not to be among the top strata of the time. However, one should distinguish the white syndrome, which was an indiscriminate reception of a trend in passing, from the artist's sincere agreement with the ideology of the time as he began developing his own style of expression. Instead of evaluating Youn's white monotones in terms of the collective individuality, it would be more meaningful to determine what is more important—to watch oneself in the collective, or to progress toward the collective as an individual. I believe that Youn's attitude as an artist coincides with the latter for he could continuously unfold himself without being



Anonymous Land 91310 230×184cm oil, acrylic. 1991

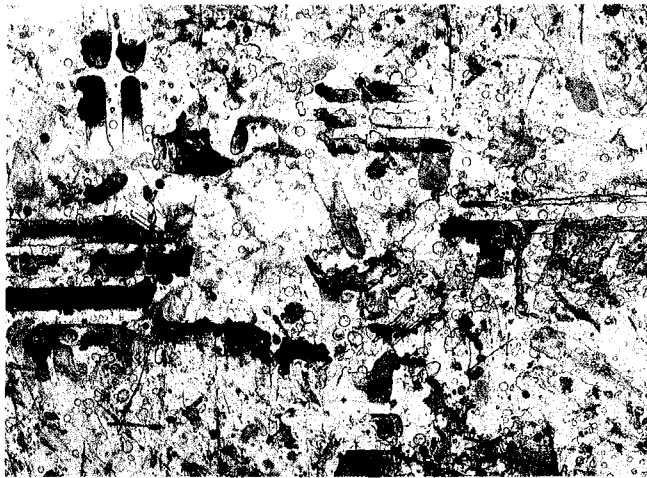
buried with the time. Though the “Cracks” series strongly reflect the style of the time, Youn’s monotone is distinctly different from any others in methodology. His methodology is a kind of expressionistic tone supported by crystallization of material and the nature of pigment. If monotone could be considered the linear logic in art which expresses nothingness and desire for emptiness, it is fair to say that Youn’s monotonic “Cracks” more intensely contains an emotional state and a naive materialism, rather than a sophisticated spirituality. It is not spirituality but a specific material and a lucid expression of oneself that not only exists but intends to exist. This is an attitude that clearly demonstrates that a painting is nothing but a paste of a specific pigment and its order.

This does not indicate that he is an artist of instinct. It is not common to see an artist who utilizes more intellectual reasoning in the process of creating. This is evident in the course of his comprehensive art which is confirmed by his determined composition. Thus the compositions in his early experimental prints, the “Cracks” and “Ollejit” series are natural extensions of his inherently logical intellect.

3.

With the opening of the 1980s, Youn underwent yet another transformation from the “Cracks” to the “Ollejit” series. In “Ollejit”, Youn encroaches the entire surface by repeatedly painting with a coarse brush with deliberate and specific short strokes. There is a special quality of an “all over painting”. At the same time, the movement of the staccato brush strokes makes the composition delightful. The crevices between the sparsely painted brush traces relate back to the natural crackings of the pigment in “Cracks”. However, because the act of repetition evenly covers the surface, an additional tension and elasticity of his gestures can be detected in “Ollejit”.

“Ollejit” sounds unfamiliar to most at first. The reel used to fly a kite is called a spool, and the act of winding and unwinding the reel is called Ollejit. The coarse wooden comb that women in the olden days used is also called spool. Neither of the words are in our everyday vocabulary. Why, then, would one choose such an obsolete word as a theme? It was probably a product of a memory from afar. Childhood



After Ollejit 9101. 76X57cm. lithograph. 1991

memorises of flying a kite high in the sky and retrieving it with the spool to fly it even higher must have precipitated as a natural theme for him. He must have also recalled his mother and sister tending their long, beautiful black hair with their wooden comb. "Ollejit" came from these two daily activities extracted from his childhood. Why then did the artist want to bring the scenes from the forgotten days into his work? Some suggest that this has to do with his artistic consciousness dealing with subjects derived from "our(Korea's) very own things", while others disagree. It is difficult to fully accept one claim or the other. It is quite irrelevant whether he was or was not conscious of "our own things" in his work. It seems possible that he wishes to refresh the wholesome past sentiments by identifying his actions of today with certain activities planted in his past memory. Search for "our own things" can be sometimes overly sentimental or excessively intentional. Someone who is obsessed with finding his own roots rarely succeeds in his search. Claiming that one's root is totally irrelevant in one's art work is also an evidence of forced consciousness. In any case, "Our own things" are not easy to talk about nor are they easy to find.

Nevertheless, "Ollejit" and "After Ollejit" clearly contain a different development compared to the existential understanding shown earlier in his "Cracks" and "Tattoo" series. It seems undeniable that his works in the 1980s are founded upon a solid cultural determination. What is a cultural determination? If existential understanding is a confrontation with reality, a battle with the surface, cultural determination is a return to tradition and a spiritual inclination for a collective individuality. Works since "Ollejit" are considerably spiritual. Kim, Bok-young discussed Youn's post "Ollejit" works in terms of "observation" and "contemplation" and continued, "if one deciphers freedom, comfort and emptiness void of formality in Youn's paintings, one realizes that his works have entered into the naturalistic art tradition of our ancestors". (Exhibition catalogue, 1988) This inter-

pretation of Kim's rightfully expresses Youn's spiritual nature. The "Ollejit" series can be divided into two periods. Works of the first period show dense compositions with consistent breadth, while the latter period after 1985 displays a loose composition with much freer brush strokes. The early "Ollejit" series is covered with long, sharp brush strokes reminiscent of bamboo leaves in Chinese ink paintings. It is like an attire of a liberated spirit rather than simple and hollow deeds of repetition. The artist thus expresses the emptiness of this unconditionally liberated existence. This reminds of the classical world of our predecessors who tried to convey limitless freedom on a single leaf of an iris.

4.

Recently, Youn selected a subject called "After Ollejit", "After" partly indicates his intention of departing from all works tied to "Ollejit". Furthermore, it suggests a nuance for overcoming the "Ollejit" subject rather than succeeding it. Thus, the artist this time metaphorically expresses his attempt for yet another self-transformation.

Discovered in "After Ollejit" is an unexpected, dramatic quality created by the spontaneity of violent impulses and extremely unstable expressions.

Consistent acts, and compositions reflecting these acts have disappeared. The transformation from the intellectual compositions of restrained emotions shown in his previous works to the whirl of overwhelming expressions is profoundly shocking. If the works from "Cracks" to "Ollejit" are to be read, the recent works "After Ollejit" are to be wallowed in the pouring emotions. Painting with entire body and soul is the most appropriate description for it.

The artist is now contemplating on "Anonymous Land", "Anonymous Mountains and Rivers" and "Anonymous Sea" for the titles of his works. Hidden in the unknown land and sea are the metaphors for primitive nature and emotions as well as mysterious colors. Why the naturalism again? Is it another form of utopia to escape from reality? It is certain that there is a spirit toward an idealism of going back to the prototype, just as he wished to return to the source of origin in his memory through Ollejit and the wooden comb.

It is premature to categorize these works as contemporary landscape painting or modern oriental paintings. What is depicted are not specific valleys, cliffs or mountains. They are rather the shadows of mountains and rocks, the sound of winds in the forest, and the clear water overflowing in the valley. Instead of admiring nature from far, one is put into nature. Succeeding his ancestors who understood origin through nature, he found a breadth of continuing tradition hidden behind a specific phenomenon. The undeniable fact that he is creating oriental paintings indicates his pursuit for our spiritual heritage that remains alive in oriental paintings.

The land and sea that Youn named "Anonymous" are not unvisited territories. Instead, they are the land and sea that have long existed. Youn exposes the ancient Korean



Anonymous Land 91825. 146×85cm celamic. 1991

landscape painting revived. The manifestation and depth of the oriental painting are recreated through contemporary media, acrylic and canvas. Youn's latest paintings breathe the same air as the works of the late Chosun masters such as Kyum, Jae, Chung, Sun and Lee, Yun-moon. Hence, it is undoubtable that Youn's art is fundamentally and profoundly tied to the traditional paintings of the Orient.

In an interview with the magazine "Space", Youn, Myeung-ro discussed the momentums for transitions in his work. "Momentums take place in one's life. In my case, a definite stroke in life seems to be drawn every time I finish an exhibition". Accordingly, another momentum or another stroke in his life as well. As observed earlier, post "After Ollejit" works such as "Anonymous Land" and "Anonymous Sea" out wardly display contrasting characteristics from his previous paintings. It is possible to say that this transformation is more remarkable than any other earlier ones. Considering the common practice among the accomplished artists who solidify what they have already established instead of breaking down their walls, the adjective "remarkable" is not an exaggeration. The comfortable freedom, not a blind adventure, shown in his latest work attests that his new transformation reflects maturity, not an imprudent experimentation.