

Bae, Joon Sung's Museum Series

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Audience

You see an exhibition hall of The state Hermitage Museum in Russia. It is one of the top three museums in the world. There is nothing particular for an exhibition hall in the room crowded with visitors. Among the people, one lady is looking at the ceiling on which there is a painting of Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), <The Women of Amphissa>(1887). The painting is based on one of Plutarch's stories. There are some women sleeping on the market street after enjoying the Bacchus festival. Amphissa, at that time, was at war with Phosis. It was a very dangerous town and the security was bad. The women of Amphissa are guarding the sleeping ladies protecting them from attack by soldiers. Plutarch's story tells us a moral; however, the painting doesn't seem to be instructive. The attractive poses of women in ancient clothing prove that the artist's interest is not based on the history but on the romantic imagination of the 19th century. However, if we look at the picture more closely, we can find that the painting is not Alma-Tadema's work. It is Bae, Joon Sung's lenticular in the series of <The Costume of Painter> The bodies in light Greek clothes swayed by the wind are those of Asian women. The lady who is looking at the painting on the ceiling is also an Asian woman. Is that the ancient Greek atmosphere or the Asian body in it which catches her eyes?

Compared with other works of Museum Series, the viewer is given a great weight in this painting. The woman is looking at the ceiling unlike other visitors who is looking around the hall. The ones who are watching this painting naturally pay attention to this lady's eyes as well as a lenticular on the ceiling. We are watching her 'act of watching.' Then, all of a sudden, we become the woman in the painting and look at Bae's lenticular in her eyes. Of course, she is not actually in Hermitage nor is Bae's lenticular. The artist, as always, created a new context, a composition of different images. As the layer of images gets thicker, the

woman becomes an important clue. As a tongueslip can show one's real intention, the sight of this woman points out that the artist's interest now moves to the relation between art and its audiences. The painting is about the relationship between an artwork and viewers, and the space of exhibition where they meet.

Bae, Joon Sung has steadily showed his interest in audiences. He, as an artist and a passionate audience of western classic paintings, always cares about the pleasure of 'seeing' Painters of neo-classicism like Jacques-Louis David and Dominique Ingres, John Singer Sargent, an American portrait painter of high classes, and Alma-Tadema who liked to paint the ancient world in romantic style: Bae is familiar with such western painters even more than old and famous Korean painters like Kim, Hong Do and Shin, Yun Book. Of course, I don't have to talk about the nationalism here stating his taste. While 'Korean things' represented by Kim, Hong Do and Shin, Yun Book stay in the space and time of the 'past,' the collections of western paintings are lying by the side of the artist, at this moment. Born in 1967, Bae belongs to so-called the 386 generation. It was not Bodhisattva images in the meditation pose but the busts of Agrippa and Venus that he came into in the mid 80s when he studied art hoping to enter the western art department in the college. It was the collections of western masters that Bae read studying oil painting. During the time, Bae had interest in the process of the masters' works rather than in their detailed expressions and vivid colors.

The way of watching a painting for Bae is to try to paint it by himself. The vinyl series of <The Costume of Painter> show this. In <The Costume of Painter>, the process of appreciation always comes before that of painting. To digest a painting, borrowing his words, the "honey coating" enhancing the taste of delicious part of the work should be done first. The delicious part for Bae was the clothes that the artist had described. While expression of the face of a portrait is limited by the real model, that of garments and accessories can be decided by the artist. Unlike the head's smooth surface, the clothes become the space where the artist can enjoy the pleasure of painting through the use of bold brush strokes, expressive material description, and shiny accessories hung on them. Bae copies this part, his favorite, putting a vinyl cover on the nude picture which shows the same poses as those

in the original work. Then, he appreciates the taste of honey turning the watering tongue here and there in the mouth. As the hidden skin is revealed, paintings of Van Dyck, Vermeer, and Waterhouse are uncovered. The process from the sketch to the coloring is exposed, deconstructed, and then recovered through Bae's tongues or brushes. The process of production is again excavated by audiences because of the nature of the material, vinyl. When we take off the clothes in the well-known classic works, the Asian bodies appear. This unexpectedness and unfamiliarity we find from the familiar things confuse our sight and change the context of painting.

Painting as a Still-life

In the end, Bae's paintings are born from the interaction between the animate and the inanimate. In front of his camera lens, the bodies of models whose names are Dongsook and Mia become inanimate objects, so do the images from collections of Ingres, Vermeer, Alma-Tadema. There is a chain in the process: the inanimate objects made by the artist are reborn as a still life of painting, based on which another lenticular painting is created. During the process and inside the chain, the artist is an 'animal' mediating the inanimate with another inanimate and changes the context where the new inanimate sits. This context of the painting, of course, is deconstructed again and reproduced by the hands of other 'animals,' the audiences. Taking off the vinyl, audiences witness the process of production which was ingeniously hidden in the 'complete' work. That the process was made from the composition of different types of images betraying the prejudices of the viewers, ironically, bestows the justification on their trials to 'look inside'. The positiveness in the act of looking frees the audience from the passive existence. Beyond the existing idea of 'fixed and invariable' objects (works) and passive viewers, the new context created by the ones who appreciate the works shows the interaction between the two. Here, the painting is no more a fixed still life but a process, existing as an ever changeable function.

The working process of lenticular was not much different. With the simple action of moving their bodies instead of looking inside, the viewers could enjoy the painting of which the

surface changes according as from where they are watching it. At this moment of watching, the physical aspect of the viewers' bodies is clearly revealed. The audiences imagined by the perspective system of classical representation paintings were one-eyed people standing at the vanishing point representing the order of power and rank. In art of the late 20th century such as minimalism and performances, this eye of conception which had been separated from the body came back to the body. Bae, Joon Sung's lenticular is a response from the painting to the physical eye. It was from the recent work of Museum Series that Bae's surfaces which had been transformed from painting to photography, from photography to vinyl, from vinyl to lenticular, came back to the conventional medium of painting, canvas. Coming back to the canvas, he is proudly making his own brush strokes. It seems like that the canvas contains every layer of his earlier expression. The artist's clothes over-layered on the original and photo images are now positioned in another frame called museum.

Inside the centers of European culture where the works of classical masters are collected like the Louvre and Gustave Moreau Museum in Paris, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten), The state Hermitage Museum in Russia, The British Museum in London, Museo del Prado in Spain, Bae inserts his lenticular. The works of <The Costume of Painter> series now claim their spaces in chorus in the museums where the original works from which they borrowed their clothes are displayed. The audiences are watching the paintings with somewhat vacant looks or serious eyes. Of course, this is not a real situation. Like the paintings, the inside scene of the museum hall is just a still life used for Bae's work. It is easy to explain and define Bae's works with special terms of postmodernism such as original, appropriation, intertextuality, and pastiche. Still, there is a more complicated system in Museum Series which is beyond these features.

in an exhibition hall of Hermitage, a woman is looking at Bae's lenticular, a composite photography with a work of Sargent. The painting of Sargent is called <Madame X>. It is a portrait of Madame Gautreau, the woman of the scandal in the high class society at that time. Sargent sent this work to the Paris Salon of 1884 where its decadent aspect became the subject of blame. The repulsive reaction to this work was so severe that it threatened the reputation of the sitter, Madame Gautreau, and even of the painter, Sargent himself. This

was because one her dress strings went down from her shoulders and her skin was so pale that it reminded people with a patient of lead poisoning. Sargent made a quick move to correct the dress string, but the situation was already out of his hands. Here, the personal reputation of Madame Gautreau played a part in this scandal. The marriage for the fortune was not something new in the high class circle, but her family especially her mother made her do the boisterous marriage of convenience advertising her beauty. When some high class people did think badly of it, this decadent portrait was a good subject of criticism. Bae's model is standing inside the work as a mirror image of the sitter in Sargent painting which has this kind of story. How does the audience in Hermitage interpret the relation between the two? 19th century and 21st century, east and west, painting and photography, this strange encounter is not directly presented to the viewers. The inside scene of the exhibition hall including the viewers is a still life that Bae presents in front of us. The layers provided by <The Costume of Painter> get even thicker. The following is how our layer of watching flows:

Gallery Hyundai> The state Hermitage Museum> Clothes in Sargent's painting >

Mia(model)'s Photography>Photography of a Sargent and Bae's work

The scene of Hermitage Museum is a painting copying the photo (another still life) that he took. The scene also turns the relation between the audience watching lenticular in the hall and the work into a still life. We are watching this still life in a space called gallery.

It is clear that the western viewers who grew up watching Sargent painting and the ones who are watching Bae's works in Seoul are situated in different contexts. However, Bae's Museum Series are unfamiliar to both of them. In an interview, the artist said, "The feelings deviated from experiences lead the appreciation of an object to the space of more attractive tension." The tension is the power which invites audiences' absorption to the painting. The layers stacked up by the artist are the spices which helps the tension to last longer. It lets us watch closely the gap between west and east, classic and contemporary, artist and audience.

The unfamiliarity and deviation that the gap creates enter our culture of the 21st century with no difficulties as a fragment with the mask of 'still life.' The painting is a still life. And the still life changes the audiences, animals. Therefore, the relationship between the audiences and Bae's paintings exists always inside the tension of pulling and pushing.