

## Baram eu ro suk ee go ddang eu ro ee eur ji go

Mingled by the wind, joined by the earth

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*There was a boy who liked drawing pictures. He went to the U.S. to see and learn more things. The life abroad wasn't that easy. While working part-time jobs for living, he realized that he was moving further and further away from the original purpose of being there. He became skeptical and agonized over the fact that he actually wasn't painting at all, but only living hard. In desperate need, he accelerated his professional development. He recognized how much time he spent in the subway to transport between work places. By using the subway as his studio, he began to paint again.*

This is a story of Ik-Joong Kang who has known as the artist of 3-Inch Painting since the late 1990s in Korean art world. If there is anyone who has actually seen his works which are completed with 3-inch canvases, it is hard to forget the grandeur fulfillment transmitted by the well balanced mix of small paintings. The small painting series started during his early and exhausted period in the U.S. A friend of his, Byron Kim who is also an artist, once mentioned that "Kang's works insist work for quantity which equals to work for quality. This consequently makes an avoidance of a burdensome question about the quality itself." Byron's perspective somehow summarizes significant points about Kang's works.

Byron's perspective may began from the recognition of his small canvases, which are the basis of Kang's work. We would see the universe even from a grain, then 3 inch squared canvas cannot be complained for the physical size. However, Kang must be hedged around with the realistic condition of the limited space, and he brought a solution out to solve the problem. Ever since, the small canvases have become the basis of his artistic style.

Assuming small units gather for a bigger construction, Kang juxtaposes every single canvas next to each other and creates a huge narrative structure altogether. On the other hand, the way he juxtaposes the rectangular frames naturally stands out for a grid structure. A grid structure, wherein a basic construction of Modernism, has been the core "gestalt" of his work until recent days. If so, the outbreak of a grid structure is specially adopted for wiping a physical existence of himself out and putting his art world away from everyday life, then Kang's grid is reversely there to reveal his ordinary existence. This

ironically concludes his status not to be concealed but only to be revealed, expressed and even emphasized, which are all originated from the small canvases.

On the other hands, this significant characteristic of Kang's work offers us to compare the infinite extension of space within a single canvas which finalized as a grid structure, just as if we did in general minimalism or Pop Art. However, they are unlike the repetition of self-reference in the neutral and mechanical styles of minimalism. Kang rather shares the Modernist "gestalt" while carrying the narrative formation of life-fragments. Also, his works are similar to the Pop Art that repeats contemporary images selected from the narrative formation of life-fragments. Unlike Warhol's superficial and cold way of delivering subject, Kang, however, rather lays open what he simply thinks, feels, realizes and adjusts.

Because Kang takes his position differently from the Pop Art with his own style of multiplication, his works are able to multiply the quantity itself as Byron Kim said. This possibility of multiplication, on the other hand, offers him to develop huge ranges of variations. The variations are viewed in varied layers; one frame works as a single piece, and multiple frames create one grand piece together. This multiplication of variations can be called as the 'Virus of Painting' in a sense of narrative work.

Kang uses, juxtaposes and assembles various materials from everyday life to represent its varied layers. Depends on the way the variations are positioned, stories can be created and concluded differently. After all, his works contain the variations of different human minds. Connected to this point, Eugenie Tsai, the chief curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art explains his art as the aesthetics of 'Bibimbop (Korean food with rice and mixed vegetables with seasoned shredded beef)'.

Besides, by the moment every single piece is positioned within the grid structure, they play as fabric weaves and sing different variations of stories. However, here we encounter with another important point of his work. Contrary to the single position, each canvas is drawn within a bigger context and show off their own reason to be within. This phenomenon, of course, is occurred by the way Kang adopts subjects of his creation.

Kang's subjects are from his ordinary life. Just like a child, he is curious about the surroundings and absorbs what he sees, just like a Pop Artist. In his early works, he observed New York, life of New Yorkers and objects in New York. What he collected was about the trivial daily things found in New York's transportation, landscapes and fragments brushing his personal memory and hope. Such subjects were represented by images, collages, objects, notes and texts. His canvases, therefore vividly transfer layers of our emotions, such as curiosity, humor, desire and joyfulness. As a result, they are fun, honest and even dynamic. New York and life of New Yorkers represented in the small

paintings are referenced from the documentation of his ordinary life; sophisticated moments and traces of remains. Based on the individual's personal experience and understanding, small paintings can be recognized stronger than others, and the whole structure is approached within its context. Thus, while sustaining the external plainness of a grid formation, the entire structure creates dynamics and rhythm orchestrated by the single powerful existence.

Kang has looked around from the immigrant's perspective during his early period in New York, then he shifted his interest toward the identity problem. His New York settlement as a Korean whom has grown up in the social and economic condition after the war directly influenced him to work on such pieces <Buddha Learning English> and <Chocolate Buddha>. He must have questioned to himself about who he is. This self-investigation has caused his choice of subjects. Also, during the period when he began to adopt an image and developed it into different variations, this way of developing variation becomes an important methodology of his own.

After having an exhibition at the Venice Biennale, Kang began to proceed the site-specific art projects. In the process of <Moon of Dream>, floating children's paintings from all around the world, he realized the obscured beauty of the Moon Jar. Regarding the Moon Jar, the gibbous circle, Kang once said as below.

*The Korean Moon Jar tells a story of the sky. There were floating clouds I saw up above in my hometown, orange moonrise which I saw from a flight landing at JFK airport after a long journey and the warm sunshine coming through my studio in Chinatown while having 3 dollars lunch.*

In addition, his Moon Jar, tinged with pale blue sky color, contains houses, people and small birds, and it becomes the sky, the nature and the universe as itself.

There is also so-called 'Kang Ik-Joong Font' which often appears with the Moon Jar that came in later period. By combining meaningless consonants and vowels, the newly developed words create resonance. The assemblage of every single meaningless words re-conducts existing texts; the beautiful essay <Chung Choon Ye Chan>, Master Kim Gu's note on the national consciousness, or the artist's personal knowledge he acquired throughout his life. Kang often compares the making process of the Hangul (Korean Alphabet) work with the production process of Moon Jar which can only be completed as one by combining the bottom half and the top half. To reach certain perfection, he began to concentrate on the beauty and joyfulness of paintings delivered by "combining" or "harmonization."

Through the works of Hangul and Moon Jar which might represent the derivation or Koreaness, Kang tried to talk about communication and harmonization. He now extends his perspective toward nature; mountain, moon, clouds, sky and waterfall which are associated with the Hangul and Moon Jar. Closer to the aesthetics of traditional landscape painting, the rhythms of the black lines become a ridgeline of mountain, a horizon and a wide plain. The line also moves as showered waterfall, water flow in mountain valley and blowing wind. The simple and compact rhythm created by the harmonization of black and white color travels around the bluish sky and mother nature within the Moon Jar. This journey continues through wild flowers, blowing wind, the earth and embraces our life after all.

The exhibition title, "Mingled by the wind, joined by the earth" was used as a title of his catalogue in 2007. This title was again used for Yeomiji Botanical Garden Project in 2009 and Shanghai Expo Korea Pavilion Project in 2010. Indeed, a series of Kang's works bely his belief that human being and mother nature to be mingled by the wind and joined by the earth.