

Mask Mechanism for All of Us

Camouflage, Enslavement and Twisted Desire

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1.

The viewer instinctively grasps emergency in the painting by Yongjoo Ha. In his pictorial world, almost everyone wears a black gas mask. With two enormously exaggerated circular eye windows for clear view and a wriggling rubber hose connected to a respirator, the device has an unpleasing and even deformed shape. It is something that was never meant to be created without chemical warfare, gaseous suffocation terror, cruel military operation or tragic calamity with foreseen fatal air pollution. It already epitomizes as a metaphor of fear and horror.

Masks function as much the same as Soma that people take living in the "Brave New World", a novel by Aldous Huxley. Soma is a hangover-free hallucinogen that makes users perfectly euphoric and thus keeps them in the enslaved stage. As long as people consume Soma, life seems full of hopes and the society has nothing to complain about and becomes a perfectly ideal place to live in. In the world that Yongjoo Ha looks into, the masks replace the superbly effective pills by promising the hypnotic enslavement. As long as people put the masks on, they would not feel any pressure or control from the society. Unless you struggle to escape, you will be safe and may get rewarded with surprising sweet relieve.

The street artist, Banksy, once sneaked into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, surreptitiously hung his work, *You Have Beautiful Eyes* and thus twisted the inordinate conformance that spectators had toward the institutions. It was a lady wearing a black rescue mask (seeming like the one found in Yongjoo Ha's painting) that the by-then unknown mischievous artist used to dash cold water on the viewers who would not distinguish crap from the masterpiece. Through the whole process of this act, Banksy tried to point out that genteel museum goers were the same ones as the woman in his painting who wore the brazen protective gear. As long as they nod with a serious tone

of voice when facing an impossible-to-understand "work of art", and so disguise their embarrassment, they should not be afraid that someone will doubt their cultural attainments.

What people try to obtain by visiting art museums is attestation as a cultured citizen. Without such two-faced mask mechanism, none of the art operations, authoritative museums, art market buzzed with huge pile of money, and hypocritical art criticism and theories of today would not be possible. This is why Huxley's *Soma* and Banksy's and Yongjoo Ha's camouflage masks are greatly in demand in order to maintain the foundation of the present civilization and contemporary art.

2.

Most people in the Yongjoo Ha's pictorial narratives are extending the scanty existence on the gas masks. They would stop breathing momentarily without the help of the wriggling hose, seemingly like a sort of umbilical cord. It is not the only signal of misery. In his *Great Camouflage*, the great land is filled with endless patterns of the camouflage battle dress. There are no other existential conditions than disguising oneself completely in here. Everywhere in the painting we find modern dramas written around the conspiracy, enslavement, deceptive relations and ruthless disguise of communication. In this theatre of the absurd, masks are already prerequisite of the history and circumstances. None of the phenomena could be interpreted or explained without it. Even love of lovers is limited love between mask wearers, that is, love of others. At the moment of throwing out the disguise, all the promises of security and happiness will be taken away. Unmasked people are treated relentlessly as subversive outsiders. They will be either quarantined or given mere freedom to drift away.

Like this, communication is possible only under disguise. Unless the disguise is possible, there will be no communication. Disguise produces false communication, which again justifies the disguise, and thus the tragic cycle is born. In the *Ocean of Communication*, people desperately flounder in the water, being unable to escape out of the massive waves of system. No one can estimate how wide the paradox is, how deep the lies are in the swamp of this civilization. To state that the measure of the historical age is old is to say that the depth of the glass is deep. Dancing and partying are not sociality but

results of hypocritical sociality or social hypocrisy. The more they call each other, the more they become strangers. Refugees who refuse the masks will be watched more closely as they run away farther. Words fire back into where they were spoken and even love becomes mere camouflage to start on crash into absolute solitude.

Yongjoo Ha's narrative reaches the climax in his painting, *Desire of the Raw* which depicts the ontological metamorphosis. The process of wearable equipment transforming into a being itself is as terrifying as that of Kafka's Gregor turning into a monstrous vermin one sudden day. In some ways, Yongjoo Ha's figures, in the gradual process of being assimilated and won over, are far more miserable than Gregor in a sudden transformation. Even under the crusty shell and hideously segmented abdomen, Gregor was painfully identifying himself powerless against the formidable reality. The main character of Kafka's was clearly affirming the fact that reality itself is a nightmare. However, would it be said that the nightmare has evolved over a time? The figures in Yongjoo Ha's world have slowly degenerated into the beings who can feel existence only in the nightmare. They have dissolved in the system. The transformation is slyly destroying the entire foundation of awareness and reflection little by little. They are not the third being in ugly appearance, but utterly incorporated as part of the system.

In addition to masked personality and complete absence of resistance, there is another metaphor, which is the red plant grown by the dearth of existence. According to the artist, this insectivorous plant was created with the artistic imagination. The wobbly red plants imply the impulsive hidden human desire. It is impossible to discover dynamics, sparkles and charm of life from this creature of snaky desire and hypocrisy. Dignity, which William Blake said all things that are living have, can be found nowhere in the anonymous beings disguised with masks and empty jackets. All beings become lifeless and get nibbled away by the inanimate. Indeed, what the alchemy of destruction it is that the masked personality is destined to be isolated and expelled if taking life!

3.

By wearing masks, people turn down their true identities and names. We never know who they are behind the gas masks. They are nameless shielded by the mechanism of camouflage and control. Anonymity and absence are the only words for identity. Giving

up the name is renouncing everything indeed. One's past and memories become meaningless without names, the history and the future will be a mirage of concepts. There will not be any names to last or to be born. The people are couch potatoes existing in the present system of control and group programming, or they are typical contemporary men whose lack of experience is well managed and controlled by the alternative simulacra. They surrender themselves to the mechanism, such as spectacles, games, circus, entertaining industries, etc., which distracts their attentions and edifies them easily adaptable to the society. In this situation, the most powerful group is people who distribute the various recreational materials and momentary satisfiers. As the education distorts desire itself, the desire is merely the extension of death. Distorted desire desires not satisfaction but the simulacra of satisfaction.

Perilous circulating mechanism of simulacrum is contemporary arts and culture that become more and more entertaining: "A new kind of anodyne is available throughout what has recently been called high culture. ...the various cultural performances and artifacts-in the fine arts, serious music, dance and literature, the legitimate theater-operate in close concert with the popular entertainment and travel industries.... A new social configuration has emerged, affecting everyone enjoying modern diversions: the society of distraction, of amusement, of being entertained, of being lulled into insensibility." (Lee Hoinacki)

Yongjoo Ha said that the figure in the *Desire of the Raw* reflects himself, who is getting adjusted to the persistent system of disguise, of empty jackets and of insectivorous plant of flagrant desire. However, it is indeed a portrait of human being, especially of us today. Who will deny the fact that all of us are dwelling on the enormous system filled with lies and enslaving adaptation.

The painting of Yongjoo Ha is narrative. For him, the painting is like a storage room with temperature control system, to preserve the memories of time and society. Forms and colors are like olden wagon wheels of civilization to carry the loads of thoughts and feelings. There is no room in his painting, for aesthetic formalism and empty experimentalism that is based on the transfigured science.