

Dongi Lee: The Father of Atomaus

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Without us even realizing, Atomaus has reached his adult years. Born in 1993 through the marriage of cartoon characters Atom and Mickey Mouse, Atomaus has now reached star status, even holding a spot in Korea's Naver Dictionary as artist Dongi Lee's representative character. But, what does this mean? Is there more behind the meeting of Japan's quintessential manga character, and America's beloved Mickey Mouse?

Atomaus and Dongi Lee: One and the Same

Dongi Lee's artworks are occasionally misinterpreted as nothing but lighthearted reproductions of famous US and Japanese cartoon stars. However, when looking more deeply at his artworks through the lens of Korea in the 1990s, there is a clear message calling, 'let us resist the authoritarian establishment.' Considering this message, it is particularly interesting that Lee's Atomaus is also closely connected to the iconic comic book character of the 1970s, Atom, and a cartoon that defined childhood for so many, Mickey Mouse.

One day last year, Lee observed himself paint a curious piece that was neither abstract nor realistic. The shape he produced looked similar to the main character in the popular Korean animation 'Dooly', but when looked upon as a whole, seemed closer to an abstract painting. This style of work was the focus of the artist's college years. One might say his inquiry into comic book characters began there. Or, one might go further back.

As an elementary school student, Dongi Lee not only diligently watched cartoons on TV, he created his own comic books. Thus, it is more accurate to say Dongi Lee and his fascination with cartoon characters have a history stretching back to his childhood years.

The artist's childhood (1970s-80s) spanned a time when American and Japanese culture dominated the Korean landscape. Everyone knew Mickey Mouse and Atom. As an elementary school student, Dongi Lee watched the 'Mighty Atom' and 'Disneyland' programs on TV. That was a time before computer games and Nintendos proliferate as they do today. The only option for children was to watch these cartoon programs made especially for their viewing pleasure. Lee's head became filled with characters such as Atom, Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy.

Comic books even began to spill over into Lee's time at school. During recess, Lee would doodle cartoon characters and pass his drawings out amongst his friends. There were even times when his classmates would line up to receive one of his famous sketches. In 5th grade, Lee became so popular through his drawings that he and his friends decided to publish a class newspaper. Lee's paper was separate from school and published solely through he and his friends' ingenuity and drive; it was truly an Independent Newspaper. Using a process similar to early silkscreen, Lee and his friends were able to mass produce their paper, making hundreds of copies. Lee carefully calculated the cost of materials and set a fair price for his goods. His efforts were warmly received, and he always put his profits back into creating the next issue.

Different but the Same, the same but different

By the end of elementary school, Lee had already mastered the ideas behind distribution and creative production, but he was neither a pure comic book writer nor just a newspaper publisher; it was then that he decided to become an artist. Later, while studying art, Lee closely observed the differences between 'fine art' and 'mass art.' When he was ready to create his own work, he threw himself into producing art in both domains. He painted manga characters in the most basic painting style. Ultimately, the process of getting these pieces into gallery shows was incredibly important.

It is from this point that Donggi Lee's work began. Not just simple images borrowed for mass culture, like Andy Warhol's work in the 1960s, Donggi Lee asks us to question the border between 'fine art' and 'mass art,' and to challenge this type of dichotomic thinking. In 1993 from this dilemma, two canvases under the title of Atomaus were born. From there came Atomaus in a flower garden, Atomaus eating noodle, psychopathic Atomaus, Atomaus nailed to a cross, Atomaus melting, smoking, and looking like a soap bubble. A seemingly endless string of Atomauses came into being. Lee's creations did not stop at simple variations on the expression and location of Atomaus. Atomaus changed with the artist's life experience and the changing times.

In the 80s with the introduction of color TV in Korea, cultural icons such as singer Yong-Phil Cho, the TV shows Most Wanted and Worst Disasters, various magazine covers, and the 100,000 won note exploded onto the scene. From this came Lee's *Most Wanted Man* (In 1999 this piece was installed in a touring museum bus, but because of illegal hanging, it was removed), and *Vogue-Madonna*. Like contour drawings, they were composed of squiggly lines and were dubbed, 'fake digital line drawings' by Lee.

Lee's digital line drawing pieces begin from realistic subject matter and describe them in abstract ways. In *Check*, Lee drew a 100,000 won note directly from a photograph, but

abstracted it. Thus, Lee has two distinct series: his works with Atomaus can be classified as fantasy, while his pieces such as *Check* and *Vogue-Madonna* are realism.

Although today Atomaus is a familiar image in Korean art (between 2000-2002 there was even an Atomaus wall painting in the Euljiro-3ga subway station, unfortunately, it was damaged due to vandalism in 2002), in 1990 Dongi Lee was virtually unknown to the art world. "At that time I was classified as simply a comic book illustrator. It was incredibly important to me that Atomaus, which I had painted on a canvas, was shown at a gallery or a museum. Sometimes I was called 'the artist who draws drawings for children,' but the most embarrassing experience for me was how the major Korean galleries would come rushing to my doorstep requesting shows only around Children's Day." At the time, viewers and critics did not know how to deal with a painting that 'just' moved a cartoon character from paper to canvas.

The origin of K-POP and the start of fusion culture

Today, the term K-Pop is incredibly common, but in 2003 it was the subject of controversy when proposed as the title of Dongi Lee's solo show at the Ilmin Museum: "It was only a few years ago, but at the time the show's sponsor's expressed disapproval over my suggestion to use K-Pop as the title. In the end, they decided – in opposition to my original suggestion – to use a more metaphorical title, 'Classy.' Although most people think of lighthearted and kitschy American art when they heard the word, 'pop,' at the time I thought that there was a lack of 'pop' in Korean contemporary art so I wanted to use the idea of K-Pop."

Contrary to the resistance to this idea in Korea, in Japan the same idea of J-pop was sweeping the world. Murakami Takashi's show 'Super Flat' went on tour in the US from 2001 to 2003, and a worldwide shift towards animation was captured in the well-received show, 'Animations' at PS1 in New York and Berlin.

Japan-Pop was already a genre that was having a huge effect. Despite the fact that Dongi Lee first started creating works using Atomaus in the first part of the 1990s, before J-POP was even a word, it was not until after J-Pop's explosion did Dongi Lee receive recognition for being more than an artist who drew drawings for children. Atomaus existed before Murakami Takashi made works featuring the characters he is famous for today, and before Yoshitomo Nara settled into his style. Perhaps because of the popularity of J-Pop, Dongi Lee's paintings are very well known in Japan. Not too long ago, Dongi Lee was even introduced as Korea's top pop artist.

At the time of his solo show at Ilmin Art Museum, a forum titled, "The hidden potential of K-Pop" one art critic said Lee's Atomaus marked the 'launch of fusion culture.' According to

that critic, Dongi Lee's art neither attempts to control nor resist its two sides – one representing American, and one Japanese, dominance of Korean culture. Instead, Lee only plays with these images. Dongi Lee's *Atomaus* jabs sharply at society. He gathers various parodies and image fragments, full of social and cultural meaning, and presents them quietly, refraining from comment.

In this manner, like Dooly or Mashimaro, Dongi Lee's *Atomaus* is its own character. Today, we have come through the late 1990s and early 2000s and are approaching 2010; *Atomaus*, too, is changing with the times.

Not a main character from a manga, *Atomaus* is purely an artistic image, and as such has the possibility of losing its life force as time passes. But Lee is not worried: "Now everyone knows the Beatles or Eric Clapton, or other musicians of the 1960s. When they first entered the stage their music was edgy and innovative, but now when we hear their music it's comfortable. The new expressions they used when they began creating music have become commonplace. It's exactly the same with artists like Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, or Gerhard Richter."

ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, BUBBLE, BUBBLE

In Lee's 2008 solo show at Gallery 2, he introduced the series 'Bubble' and 'Double Vision,' which showed more clearly his thoughts on society and the art world.

When asked at the time of the show, "why bubble?" the artist simply said, the image of a bubble appeared and that was it.

'Bubble' describes the arc of the artist's past work. Each time you blow a bubble it is the same, yet different. If repeated and accumulated subtle differences become clear. The artist skillfully addresses this question of 'originality' in his work. The logical connection to the word bubble is not a simple one. At the time of show in 2008, Warhol was sweeping Korea by storm and an art bubble threatened. The artist expressed his anxiousness over the sudden and senseless excess of pop art through his series. Whether it was chance or an inevitable economic progression, now in 2009, we are in the aftermath of a worldwide financial crisis, the result of a bursting bubble.

The more one thinks about the other series exhibited at the same show, 'double vision,' the more and more detached they seem. Through this series, Dongi Lee once again deals with the misunderstandings of mass art that often stood against during the early years of his career. Namely, that his method of expression was too easily interpreted. If the artist is read in an oversimplified way, we cannot know whether or not there was intention behind the creation of the works.

In order to destroy the canvas, Lee divided it in half. The bottom half contained an image

of Atomaus, while the top half displayed shapeless colors and brushstrokes. However, this was not simply a futile omission of references to previous artists' dichotomic borders. On the contrary, Lee tries to find a balance between the two opposite sides of the spectrum – abstraction and realism. Could this be an answer to the question art critic Geun-jun Lim put forth even before these paintings were begun: "Will he be able to reach the synthesis Warhol and Richter dreamed of?" The artist responds:

"In 2008 I had no interest in this thing called 'pop art' that was taking over not only the art world but the cultural sphere as well. I never tried to become a pop artist. Never! What I was interested in was only, 'my own work.' I could only be interested in the cost that went into the materials I was working with. In other words, things like paints, canvas, and brushes. In the 2008 show I didn't try to simply show pop art. My intention was to show a somewhat more complicated process. I was interested in things like balance and anxiety. Everyone needs balance. In a generation of overload – excess images, information, and language-people fight and struggle in to throw off uncertainty and anxiety."

With lighthearted images, you don't think about 'deepness.' This is exactly the secret of Atomaus' longevity. As Atomaus proliferates on his own without any relationship to Mickey Mouse and Atom, he becomes purely the meaning of 'emptiness.' Just as Lee's true thoughts can be hidden behind a seemingly blank expression, Atomaus's bright and lighthearted exterior hides a much deeper social commentary.