

Narrative of Growth Woven with Personal History and Mythical Fact

Chunghwan Kho(Art Critic)

In myths of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, and in the ancient Chinese "book of the mountains and seas"—Shanhaijing—all shapes of half-human half-animals or half-gods appear. These gods, who ruled the world before humans emerged as the subjects of history, are not absurd beings that lack sense of reality, but rather significant beings on which people's confusion, fear, desires and unconsciousness are projected. These mythical beings, supported by the belief that there are spirits in nature, such as pantheism, animism, shamanism and totemism, from their own lineage and symbolic systems to make humans' significance and language more abundant. Such language is generally pointed in the direction of suppressed inner ontological scars, prototypical darkness, and non-visible and non-material states of mind and emotion, such as memories of one's childhood. It is from this that allegories, metaphors, symbolism and analogies originate. South American magical realist writer Borges once composed a certain monster dictionary compiling all such symbolic beings. Though it was not realized, if it were, it would have become a mirror of the inner side of the human. One of the characteristics of the monsters, or gods reflected in that mirror is of course their capability of free transformation. Such transformations are good spirits, evil spirits, white magic and black magic, light and darkness pushed up by people's unconsciousness—subconsciousness provided with form. Thus, mythology is so to say, a mirror of the unconscious, and symbolism reflected in that mirror.

Kim Hyun-Su produces hyper-realistic human-figure life-size sculptures. The reality and energy provided by the sculptures, which are made through a direct clay-modelling process, and not casting of the actual figure, is truly amazing. To take a look at the general production process, first the artist sculpts a life-size human figure with clay. Then this figure is used as a cast for a polyester resin sculpture. The facial parts, which require more delicate depiction, is cast with silicone, instead of resin. The cast human figure includes every detail from the small goose bumps on the skin to the soft texture. After the figure is made, it is

painted with oils to represent the color of flesh. Elaborately produced artificial eyeballs are placed in the eye sockets to give more vitality to the sculpture. Moreover, the artist uses real hair to add to the realistic work. Instead of using a wig or merely attaching hair to the head, each strand of hair is planted to represent the hair, beard and eyebrows. The planted hair adds to the realistic characteristics, but it is a difficult and tedious process, so the artist is not able to mass-produce. In any event, the process resembles the way god shaped clay to create the first human. The completed sculpture is realistic and lifelike, as if it would get up and move about if a breath of life were blown into it.

Through this process, the artist sometimes represents realistic beings like children and women, and sometimes adds imagination to the sculptures to transform them into mythological beings. For example, there are dreaming boys or men with giant dragonfly wings, a boy with deer antlers on his head, rabbit boy and mermaid, deer women—a combination of deer and human(resembling satyr), etc. These sculptures resemble mythical beings, but we cannot conclude that they are simply unrealistic beings. That is because they are certain alter egos in which the artist's suppressed desires or subconsciousness is projected, and therefore, serve as a medium through which the artist's inner self can be analogized.

If we attempt to reconstitute the artist's unconsciousness based on the beings proposed by the artist, first we can look at the boy with a small pouch in his hand. The boy here symbolizes the artist's childhood, and in the pouch is most likely the dreams of childhood. There are the things the boy had to lose, the things he had to suppress, and the things that cannot be turned back. This reminds us of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory. In other words, the first oppression takes place in the stage that an infant enters the world of symbolism from the world of imagination, and this experience is stored away as the unconscious. As it crosses from the self-sufficient world of non-differentiation to the world of differentiation, which is structuralized with language and symbolic systems, it is forced to give up its nature(wild nature). Thus, the infant was able to become an adult by giving up its inborn nature, but that does not mean that such nature disappears. That nature remains within the subconsciousness looking for an opportunity to realize itself, which is called the

return of is suppressed by Freud. after one becomes an adult, the oppressed things come back to cause unexpected sudden behavior and situations.

Thus, the oppressed dreams(desires) in the boy's pouch are played as a variation of a boy who lost one of his wings. Here, wings symbolize dreams, and the loss of a wing suggests a certain castration complex, or Oedipus complex(comparable to Electra complex of women). Oedipus of the ancient tragedy loses his eyes, but the cause of this is destiny, nothing to do with his own will. In the same way, for a boy to become an adult is destiny. In the process he loses his dreams(wings), but such lost dreams never disappear. They remain as unconsciousness, creating an ontological scar. As to become an adult is to suppress and lose one's own nature, if only possible the artist wants to remain as a boy forever. This appears as a boy who is trying to remove the horns growing on top of his head. By rejecting the horns, which are proof of growth and a symbol of adulthood, he can remain as a certain adult-child or kidult. Only then can the rabbit boy continue to dream about traveling to the moon(In childhood, people often believe that there are rabbits living on the moon, or dream about traveling to the moon).

But in spite of such wishes, no one can avoid becoming an adult. In that process the boy gradually becomes an adult as he experiences the death of his pet, and gets to think about death, despair and loss. Thus the artist gives wings to his grown-up self, so that he can continue to dream, even if it is an incomplete form. At this point, the wings on his back are those of a black dragonfly (strictly speaking, a water dragonfly), which give a fantastic feeling of dark blue-green light. Those fantastic and brilliant colors suggest the colors of his dreams, and thanks to those wings he can fly and escape into his dreams whenever he wants.

So the artist's works show a certain narrative of growth using the subject matter of the process from childhood to adulthood. In that process, he dreamed about traveling to the moon, experienced death, and dreamed about love with a mermaid, which symbolizes a woman, but there is no way he can give up dreaming. That is because dreaming will be the power to bring the world to life. As an adult, his dreams will be those of an individual artist,

but empathy is easily evoked as all of us have such oppressed and lost dreams. Only the types and degrees of the dreams are different.

Meanwhile, in the same way the human figure sculptures by the artist represent reality hyper-realistically to the extent of suggesting surrealistic visions, the works evoke a non-realistic feeling that extends reality. Perhaps we may call it an unexpected vision opened as a result of extreme pursuit after reality, the real, and the truth. Thus, the sculptures remind us dolls that look real and mannequins rather than the real thing. The sculptures of Kim are far from traditional concepts of the body, which has often been considered as the metaphor for human existence. His sculptures are too delicate and too beautiful to remind us of classical human figures. And most of all, they are light as if they were dreaming. In spite of their realistic depiction, the delicate, beautiful and light sculptures do not seem to be rooted in reality. Rather, they are connected to mannequins, which is the contemporary version of the idealized body, and to dolls, which sometimes stimulate our sensibility with persuasive abilities even more powerful than those of actual people. They are closer to virtual images that transcend reality, and closer to ideal models projected with desires. In short, the artist's sculptures, which are positioned at the summit of reality, testify that extreme reality in fact connects with the false image, and by doing so provides an example for a new possibility of human-figure sculpture.