

Bang Myungjoo's Photographic World

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There is something uncommon about photographer Bang Myungjoo's way of seeing. There is a difference in each gaze. The field of her vision is remarkably broad and surprisingly diverse. As seen in the *Marionette* exhibition (Keumsan Gallery, 2004), her vision, capturing the repetition of shopping carts at a large discount retailer from a distance, the endlessly lined chairs of an open-air performance facility, and the cooling tower of an enormous building, is macroscopic in nature. This work visually represents the organizational forces of contemporary society that controls individuals. It features modern humans regulated under the order of an enormous discourse.

In contrast, Bang's microscopic vision, where she captures objects from an extremely close range, is apparent in her work *Rice in Blossom* (2005), which captures thinly spread boiled rice. In this work, each grain is no longer a piece of food, but becomes an aesthetic particle in a photograph. Everyday objects are often out of the field of our daily vision. In this work, such ordinary objects become extremely unfamiliar and unrecognizable. Bang's work eloquently exploits the effects of de-familiarization by capturing objects from extremely close or far away.

Bang Myungjoo mainly uses light for this effect. As the light is like life for most photographers, we can talk about it when discussing almost every photographic work. The light Bang employs, however, is not simple. Bang's work is highly regarded because it maintains consistency despite its various aspects. Jacques Lacan's structure of vision is a proper tool to analyze Bang's approach. Her frequent use of backlighting brings about an effect that makes daily objects look like they are in a vacuum state. In her work, the natural flow of time seems to pause through X-ray plates and glass implements for experiments and it remains at a standstill through the photographs.

In *Marionette*, hulls, tampons, and condoms mysteriously expose vivid hues and delicate forms as if suspended from an invisible screen between the artist's eye and the light. A static moment captured by her microscopic vision evokes a tense atmosphere like in a scientific laboratory. It recalls the lighting of a laboratory and the minute observation of a chemistry major at a university. In the center of her work is the light that makes her objects appear different.

Since *Trick* (2003), Bang's first solo exhibition, she has aesthetically intervened in the vision of seeing everyday objects. As suggested by the exhibition title, the artist explores unexpected vision and is surely aware of the importance of the various ways of seeing. The artist was quoted as saying, "What's significant is that there are some secret methods that allow me to see something meaningfully or meaninglessly. That is none other than a trick." Like other great photographers, the crucial element of Bang's work is the strategy of 'looking'. The feelings that Bang's daily objects provoke, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are uncannily dualistic. Considering her interest in psychoanalysis, Bang's work recalls the concept of the 'uncanny' that paradoxically refers to a 'strange familiarity'. The dual attributes of the objects are represented through the depiction of grains of rice like petals and a condom like the nipple of a milk bottle. The artist extracts the confrontational, heterogeneous attributes of the objects by looking at them differently.

As one of her ways of looking differently, Bang successfully grafts painting's two-dimensional quality onto photography. Her photographs are imbued with an 'innocent indifference' particular to the Modernist. Bang's work particularly stands out when transforming everyday realities to abstract painting. Although moving beyond the distinctions between photography and painting, she never misses the attributes of photography as a medium. This visual structure of two-dimensionality is represented in *Rice in Bloom* (2005). The entire canvas, composed of grains of rice, appears almost as perfect as an abstract painting. We see a marvelous transformation of the grains into exquisite petals. At that same time, we also experience the process of transference from nature (reality) to life and from a single moment to eternity. Bang's pictures featuring boiled rice offer us a chance to change our horizontal attitude to a vertical one.

What's interesting is the fact that the planar structure of boiled rice, which gives her photographs the look of a Modernist painting, is in no way a representation of Modernism. This is mainly due to the texture of her picture conveying the feeling of the stickiness of boiled rice, the cultural response to boiled rice of the Korean people, and its site-specificity. The resilient surface feel of the grains of rice and barley form the surface of our vision. It means the sense of touch has been changed to the sense of sight, which is separate from the pure vision of Modernism. The colors of the grains – ivory, black, and red bean color – representing the planar quality of painting encapsulate a certain finitude. The photographs suggest an ephemeral life capturing each moment of rotting, boiled rice.

The theme of *Memento Mori* ("Remember that you are mortal," "Remember you will die," "Remember that you must die," or "Remember your death.") continues in *Storage* (2006). This work shows food contained in refrigerators in a mechanical frame arranged in succession like a folding screen with traditional folk paintings. Each compartment of the refrigerator reveals something about one's daily life, as each folk painting does in a folding screen. Nothing is more private than this type of exposure. "One feels terribly awkward like when exposing secret flesh," the artist commented about this work. These refrigerators show the lives of the people who opened them as they are. Especially in Korea, refrigerators are a standard for evaluating a woman's way of life. The artist also emphasizes these type of experiences as the subject of her life.

Is there any other object that draws more attention from the whole family than the refrigerator? The refrigerator is in the center of life and an appliance linking all family members disregarding any distinction of generation and sex. When seeing it from an artistic perspective beyond its social function, the visual angle toward it is quite interesting. The fundamental desire for life sensitively operates in the space of a refrigerator that keeps fruit, vegetables, and meat. From this point of view, looking is closely associated with living. In this work, our essential physical desire is transferred to our sense of sight. The artist persistently observes the surface texture of food under bright light and then acutely judges whether it is rotten or not.

In *Storage*, the artist mimics our vision focusing on the surface. Through this series, we can again view our desires from a certain distance. The photographic surface of *Storage* congeals frozen objects with the function of distancing the object medium of photography. Therefore, we fundamentally consider refrigerators along with photography. A refrigerator presents "congealed time" (the artist's expression) and a delayed death as it keeps food that is going to be rotten at a low temperature, which is identical with some of the fundamental attributes of photography.

As a refrigerator delays decay and extends the life of food for a short period of time, a camera continuously copies and records ongoing, everyday affairs. At the moment of opening the door of a refrigerator, a view presenting the process from the apex of a life form to its extinction, we take photographs of food with our eyes. As Susan Sontag commented in *On Photography*, all photographic objects provoke pathos only by the fact that they are photographed. It means that all photos convey the message of *Memento Mori*. "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." Sontag says.

As Bang's work is reminiscent of the point that a photographic structure conveys the meaning of death, its splendid colors and explosive freshness might appear more realistic. Her work looks simple, but not easy to understand because of the chain of various thoughts that is involved in each moment of the scene. Especially in her recent work, her eyes toward the world have become deepened and her format has become larger. Her decisiveness and self-confidence to focus on her theme has become quite apparent in her work. Recently, she is interested in urban light.

In her recent exhibition, *Heliopolis* (2007), Bang Myungjoo expanded her peculiar, distinctive way of expression she had developed in her earlier stages. Her method became a painterly vision embraced in photography. This process does not lessen the individuality of the medium of photography or enhance a painterly effect, but is in reality extremely

photographic and associated with the crucial content of painting. My first impression of this work is similar to the abstract vision of the Impressionists. Reflected on the surface of water, light blends into color. Its colors recall Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* series and its shaking surface is reminiscent of David Hockney's work. The difference, however, is apparent. Unlike Monet's, this series addresses urban, artificial neon signs, not flowers in nature, and unlike Hockney's blue swimming pool in monochrome, this work's waving surface causes the vibration of our vision using varying hues.

This series shows the colors of light reflected on the surface of water. The images are not real, but immaterial, urban light. Its surface is a mirror of nature, reflecting a dizzying city life. These images generated by the harmony of complex and sometimes messy neon signs are unexpectedly exquisite and fantastic. In this series, Bang's aesthetic vision merges together the crude, untidy images of a metropolis, bewildering our gaze and vision. The urban desire we pursue is perhaps a beautiful emptiness like the flamboyant images in *Heliopolis*.

This can be referred to as the aesthetics of paradox and the simulacra effect. The luscious light of neon signs is symbolic of consumption culture and urban vanity. This kind of urban desire is an objectless entity and an unoriginal illusion like images on the surface of water that appear vague and unspecific. Like Bang's work that features no specific object, the dream of such a city has no original. The luscious waving light of neon signs and its reflections remain separated from the cityscape itself, perhaps generating more visionary images of desire.

In *Heliopolis*, the photographic surface is not exactly identical to the surface of water. Note the camera angle needed to capture this water surface. The water surface has to be taken from a slightly raised angle to get the effect of light and color the artist wants to capture. This inclined angle reveals a structure in which the artist is here and an urban nightscape is there in the medium of the closely captured water surface. A sense of elation as well as a sense of serenity and silence are scattered throughout her work. Brightness and darkness are present, but the brightness appears vacant.

The position of this angle is similar to Monet's *Water Lilies* series. As seen especially in the later pieces of Claude Monet's series, his eyes had to get close to the water surface to capture such an angle. This results in an abstract vision through which the sky and clouds reflected on the water surface are incorporated with water lilies. Bang's *Heliopolis* bears a similarity with Monet's *Water Lilies* in that it creates an abstract scene with the combination of color and light. Bang's photographic work is linked to Impressionist painting by its experimentation with light and colors operating on the surface of water. The fundamentals of Impressionism are color, light, and urban scenes. An inappropriate comparison between French Impressionist Claude Monet and young Korean photographer, Bang Myungjoo, is not a clumsy reference, but an interesting linkage between the attributes of photography and painting.

Monet isolated the painterly surface of thick *matière* from a visual structure, underlining its own existence. It is a matter of course that photography could not have the physical properties of paints on a surface. In the case of photography, its surface's non-materiality reinforces the function of the reflective screen. Unlike painting's opaque surface, the surface of a photograph more directly addresses a visual link between the subject and the object, much like a translucent mirror.

In this linkage of vision, messy signboards turn to beautiful color abstractions. We can see a metropolis in an aesthetic manner: to see it not too closely but from a distance. The kitschy neon sign scenes of a city, reflected on the surface of water and taken photographed, present an aesthetic vision. In this respect, conspicuous neon light has its own beauty. The photographer takes a view of urban scenes with a quiet attitude, instead of rejecting or embracing them.

In *Heliopolis*, Bang sheds new lights on the key concept of modernism that has maintained almost one century, bringing it to the sphere of photography. In these days when no proper term is ready whether modernism or postmodernism, how has our visual experience of a metropolis changed? The concepts of Baudelaire's 'saunter' (*flâneur*) in the mid-19th century

and Walter Benjamin's intersecting vision between the inside and outside after almost one century are still effective. A modern visual experience in a metropolis has still continued.

One additional point in Bang's work is she sees the first object, a metropolis through a medium of the surface of water. Her vision is thus secondary and the surface between the object and the subject remains separated from original urban scenes and has its own individuality.

I am obliged to comment on the concept of the three-phased structure of vision by a theoretician. The artist unavoidably or properly exploits the concept of Jacques Lacan's gaze theory. The water surface image in her *Heliopolis* is identical with the skull in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*. As if the skewed skull in Holbein's painting is not easily detected, we cannot immediately capture any metropolis images in her water surface. Like that, we are unable to grasp the nature of our desire.

Life in a city surrounded by the neon lights symbolic of crude commercialism and the culture of consumption is filtered and luscious desires thus appear empty. Abstract images reveal the truth of vision. Even though in truth it may be absent, we can get solace from her work's aesthetic vision. This artist will never stop her work of 'photographic seeing' distancing light with her acute eye.