

The Adventures of Lee Dongi & Atomaus

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The Legend of Atomaus

When we first see Atomaus, with his cape fluttering as he flies off into the sky, we might feel a sense of déjà vu. The superhero, with the edges of his cape flapping as he wings his way off into a cloudless blue sky is already one the world is familiar with via popular media like comic books, animation, and films. However one should shake off that familiar thought and pay close attention to the name Atomaus, for then it becomes apparent that it is composed of elements that do not fit comfortably together. Atomaus was born in 1993, the creation of Lee Dongi who combined Atom and Mickey Mouse to come up with the name. There were originally two names, Atomaus (Atom + Mickey Mouse) and Mictom (Mickey Mouse + Atom) but because the latter appeared a bit cowardly, Atomaus won over Mictom. Since that time, he has evolved slightly and undergone some small changes until he attained the appearance we see today.

Atomaus combines the round eyes found in Disneyland's most famous character and the spiky black hair that the father of Japanese comic books, Tezuka Osamu, created for Atom who appears in his representative work, Astro Boy. One irrefutable aspect of these characters is that both Mickey Mouse and Atom are symbols of foreign (Japanese and American) culture. Atomaus can be interpreted as being a metaphor for Korea, which lies under the complex influence of these two major culture exporters; an association that comes quite naturally when we consider the impact of both these countries on the culture of modern Korea. However, if we follow this interpretation to its logical conclusion we come to a tougher revelation about our country's contemporary culture. Focusing on the ethical function that art has, then Atomaus becomes a critique of it.

On the other hand, we could explain Atomaus in terms of surrealism, Pop art, or conceptual art - all forms of art Lee Dongi was interested in as a student. As he has emphasized, the fact that Atomaus was born as a result of unconscious choice can be explained as surrealism, or his use of an icon from popular culture as Pop art, or even as conceptual art as Atomaus is linked to earlier works like Program and Examination yet revealing a far profounder inner

world. Yet before we look at any of these interpretations (and they could go on almost indefinitely), could perhaps the artist's own statements solve this riddle? If he was inclined to do so, the answer would be clearer, but in general the artist has avoided giving a detailed and sincere explanation about his work even though in this instance he was more forthcoming: One could say that there is no picture I was intending to convey. The work exists as symbol. It's just a game. So, there's no correct answer. I don't know what they are feeling.

Form and Mutual Understanding in Lee Dongi's Work

Rather than this answer, we can find better hints in the title of a thesis by the artist, "Research on Form and Mutual Understanding in Non-Subjective Work." Lee Dongi rejects the classic notion that the artist decides everything and from that position of enlightenment conveys this directly to audiences. Instead, he defines his art as non-subjective work, which is interpreted by individuals who view the work, based on his experience. Of course it is impossible to separate the artist from his work, but it is important to remember that it is the artist's intent to have each viewer, from his own perspective, grasp the meaning of the work and participate in reading of it.

One critic has divided Lee Dongi's work into first, enlarging and then copying existing images from comic books; second, as drawing his own comic book characters (as typified by Atomaus); and third, enlarging and processing the popular image (not comic). In fact, they are not borrowed images, but something that could most likely be in existence somewhere, and in the second instance, are all like something which has been dragged in from outside. To encourage the enthusiastic reaction of audiences and their psychological participation, the artist creates ambiguous works that are nurtured from all sides, rather than original and absolute pieces. Just as blockbuster movies do, Lee Dongi borrows elements from various genres of popular culture and uses them to his own advantage. The internal images of the resulting work are all easily recognizable or create the illusion that they have been seen somewhere else.

Not only does the artist use popular culture as material, he also does the opposite by sending out his characters into the popular arena and making them easily accessible.

Atomaus has appeared on an album cover for an indie band and in a music video. He's also lent his image to a clothing brand and is found as public art in a mural in the subway. He even appeared on a banner for an exhibition and the artist has registered him as Atomaus.com for his own site so that he can engage in dialogue with the public.

For those who enjoy his work, the process is not passive. However no matter how strongly the artist maintains the non-subjective work notion, one cannot brush off the suspicion that the artist gives us the opportunity for our own imagination to flourish.

Expanding on the Meaning of Atomaus

If Lee Dongji's fans (active, as he wishes them to be) ignore his intentions then it is impossible not to have memories of the Atom or Mickey Mouse of their childhood. Atomaus, who combines both of these characters, is a hero like Atom and Mickey Mouse, and like us is caught up in many different adventures, family crises, and love affairs.

In many pictures Atomaus acts mythological heroes do. Wearing his initial A (also the first letter of the alphabet), cape streaming out behind him, he is a superman with wings; he is the hero of Journey to the West, a.k.a. Monkey, who can make countless alter egos with a handful of hair; he travels with mad scientist Dr. Froid (definitely not that Dr. Freud) and his evil servant Box Robot as the hero of robot comics. In these glorious travels, Atomaus becomes one of our modern idols; a guitar-playing rock star. Or he even becomes a religious icon with Korea's greatest number of followers. His adventures allow him to become anything and can be explained endlessly.

In this way, depending on the personal experience of his fans and their imagination, the possibilities of Lee Dongji's work expand. The critic mentioned above wrote in an essay for Lee Dongji's solo exhibition under the title of "The Images of Lee Dongji in Our Popular Culture" that Lee's work is the significant of the game cast by the one who 'takes and plays' with the plain meanings of the world. She went on to note that this game was not as easy as it appeared to be.

Relying on intuition, instinct and a casual attitude Lee Dongji is able to explore a variety of possibilities in his art. After many adventures, we await happy homecoming and

reconciliation for Lee Donggi & Atomaus' endless stories in the flood of modern popular culture.