

“You are Leaving the Town of Mujin. Good Bye.”

By Lee Daebum (Art Critic)

We arrived at the house we were going to.

Time must have avoided that house and the people there.

The owners treated me as they had in the past,

and as they did so I became the old me.

– From ‘Traveling to Mujin’ by Kim Seung-ok

“What is old” generally is forgotten in time, but there are cases in which they boast their persistent vitality and endlessly intervene in the present, unforgotten. In works based on this theme, the point on which artists easily rely on is the vague romantic nostalgia for what is disappearing, which is caused by excess empathy. Such romantic nostalgia seems sweet, but ultimately it is very dangerous. The inevitable bias that some things will disappear and others will not seems to deviate from the reckless logic of development, but ironically, brings about an awkward situation that is misused in favor of the reckless development logic. Ultimately, the sweet package of romantic nostalgia disables us from discerning the problems as a whole. This was the case with Cheonggyecheon, Hwanghak-dong, and views of the numerous “new town” construction sites. That is not all. Such contradictory viewpoints exist inevitably in the sound of power-shovels, which have ever stopped ringing in our ears as they worked under the cloak of “modernization of the homeland,”

Between Documentary and Surrealism

Under the premise that in order to overcome the vague romantic nostalgia for the “old (or the disappearing),” one must exclude empathy itself while maintaining a coldhearted position, one must first look at the object as an objective existence (not as something that leaks the frivolous reality of life), and secondly re-perceive the object a fantastic world by lifting it out from the real world. In his previous work, Jung Jae-ho has repeatedly pursued the intimate competitive relationship between the past and the present, while looking for things that cannot be forgotten. His focus is on the “odor of life,” in which humans present)

and ghosts (past) live in symbiosis, rather than on the "life" of humans, which represents the present.

Once the object is obtained, Jung builds his painterly completeness while looking at the object as an objective existence or re-perceiving it in a world of fantasy. In «Old Apartment Building»(Keumho Museum of Art, 2005), he observed and investigated citizen apartments, which were products of insane redevelopment in the 1970s, through a documentary method of approach, dealing with them as objective existences, while in «Ecstatic Architecture»(Gwanhun Gallery, 2007) he stacked up single-story houses into layers to recompose a surreal accumulative structure. But that does not mean that he pursued only single methodology in each solo exhibition. Though the centers of weight are different, the "documentary approach" and "surreal approach," which seem to contradict one another, are mutually supportive in his works.

While Jung Jae-ho works on a foundation of "reality" based on thorough examination of materials, he does not present this directly. Painting does not necessarily have to paint misery as misery, and representing the object realistically does not make the object enter the realm of "reality" either. Furthermore, just because the "reality" is not presented realistically, it does not make the context of "reality" disappear. The works where "reality" is revealed directly include Hoehyeondong Monument, Daesung Mansion, Cheonbyeon Hotel, Cheonggye Tower and Changshin Tower, as seen in the titles and realistic depiction of architectural structure.¹ But his works actually jump way out of the context of "reality." Single-story buildings are repeated or accumulated into gigantic structures of mass as in Jeoksan Tower and Hyundai Game Center, or visual worlds are compromised with nonvisual worlds, as in the Old Apartment series. Such attitude may be called "bone energy," as it does not represent the visible surface captured by the photograph, but the "odor of life" permeated in the surface.²

¹ In Jung's work the title and picture-plane seem to be repetitive. But there is a subtle difference between them. While the title indicates the structure itself, which can be approached in reality, the picture-plane seems to contain "reality" but is actually "surreal" as reality and odors of life are combined.

² Besides painting buildings, Jung Jae-ho likes to use "trifling ordinary items found in empty houses deserted by someone." But he does not simply approach them as "discarded." In the same way he deals with buildings, he documents the "odors of life (history)" indwelling in the subject matter.

Father's Day and My Day

According to Freud, whether it is a small slip of the tongue or a more severe symptom, repetition is the returning of what is oppressed. In «Old Apartment Building» and «Ecstatic Architecture» Jung Jae-ho repeatedly used subjects which became the modifier "old." But as we have discovered earlier, Jung emphasizes the "odor of life" in them, rather than the "old" objects themselves. Then what is being repeated in his works is in fact on the "old" objects, but their "odors of life" they acquired while dwelling around us. The recent «Father's Day » clearly reveals the aspect of "odor of life," which has been repeatedly used (but used as an addition while focusing on "reality").

The backbone of this exhibition is the documentary photographs from the 1950s to the 1980s. The photographs include the Japanese-style Gusan Branch building of Choseon Bank, the wall of the Labor Party Building containing the scars of the Korean War, downtown Pyongyang, small aircraft for reporting, elections for the First Republic, opening ceremony for the Seoul-Busan Expressway, Jeonnam Provincial Building in May 1980, Shilmido, Shinchon Station and Dongducheon, selected from the complex constitution of Korean modern history. They are ghost-like images, which existed in the present and are now gone, but nevertheless continue to intervene in reality. But the works completely deviated from such reality. Unlike the artist's previous works, the titles do not indicate certain subjects, and the pictureplanes are presented minus elements that indicate specific objects. In Supporters, the text is erased from election banners hanging on a railway bridge, and the building in Last Stop is the Yuhan-Yanghaeng Building, where the bus hijacked by the Shilmido soldiers inally stopped and was self-destructed, but its name has been eliminated as well. In Bird Cage, which depicts a small aircraft for the press, the newspaper company logo is erased and the airport made into ruins. In Vacation, based on a photograph of the Jeonnam Provincial Building surrounded by the soldiers under martial law in 1980, the soldiers are erased to indicate an obscure time frame. Furthermore, the painting is recombined with various elements irrelevant to the photograph (images from different time frames, images from different spaces, and the artist's imagination). In International, based on a photograph of the International Theater at Gwanghwamun, which predominated an era with a yearning for something international, the missing building is restored, and Obaltan(Stray Bullet), a film about the post-war instability in Korea, and Lion of the Desert, which was the last film shown at the theater, are combined in a single pictureplane. In California, actual buildings in

Dongducheon and images of the Korean War are placed in multiple layers in one space. Thus, the works are obscure spaces, which only have minimum information just enough to guess the specific time or space. That is to say, the timespace of the picture-plane is not a specific representation, but a device to evoke memories.

«Father's Day » presents obscure time-space as ruins. It is similar to the fog, a specialty of Mujin, in the novel Travelling to Mujin by Kim Seung-ok, in which the present and past coexisted and comfort intersected with instability. The fog in the novel was something like the "breath blown out by a woman ghost," with a grudge towards her former life. It "could not be held with the hand but clearly existed, and surrounded all the people." So the fog carries an overwhelming force, from which one cannot escape. The frustrating, monotonous, and inescapable spiritless chaos drapes over the Father's Day. The artist's words that "there is no longer any place for the fathers' language to dwell amidst the spaces that do not remember, the spaces that do not need memory, and the intention to endlessly erase memories (from artist's notes)" seem like a confession by the artist, filled with guilt for losing his own language (and not just his father's language). The lethargy and shame amidst chaos and instability from Korean society experienced by Yoon Hui-jung in the 1960s overlaps with Jung Jae-ho in 2009. Thus Father's Day says what cannot be said here and now by restoring Father's voice. "You are leaving the town of Mujin. Good bye."