

A Narrative of Paintings within a Painting

How Are Different Levels of Paintings' Subject Matters Combined?

Kang Sumi

1. A Short Review

Some may recall my critique that Song Myung-Jin was faithful to Greenbergian Formalism, but in the middle of attempting some new things as an emerging artist in the 2005 solo exhibit titled as "Surface of Landscape," which was on view at the Geumho Art Museum. Briefly, though addressing flatness as an inherent characteristic of painting governed by Modernism, she suggested, as a sort of solution to the condition of painting, a reinforcement or intervention of a monotone surface through ambiguous forms that stir up the viewer's thoughts instead of employing a high level of abstraction or an exploration into materiality. In *Some Trace IV*, there are surfaces that seem to be turned over toward the backside on the entirely green ('opaque oxide of chromium') canvas. Here, despite figurative depictions, her pictures were still conceptually conscious of flatness as an identity of painting. While flatness of painting played a primary role, figurative depiction served as a secondary motif and contributed to the entire composition by encompassing both levels of intellect and sensation. It is noticeable, however, that Song's painting has taken a somewhat different direction since then.

This may be simplifying things too much, but Song's paintings between 2006 and 2007 apparently put first the depictions of forms or the delineation of events with images, while placing the conceptual level dealing with flatness on the back burner. This analysis of Song's work is not intended to evaluate which is better or worse. Rather, it is necessary to distinguish what is the main component of an artist's painting through each period of their career while considering that painting is composed of various elements. I assume that Song's recent work emphasizes illustrations within painting, whereas the meta-concept of composing a painting has loosened its control. Ironically, it is intriguing that the lessened

control of the latter is caused by the detailed description of events. In other words, the paintings from this period are full of attractions that can be amusing to viewers on a visual level, thus leading them to imagine a further narrative. From this point on, the virtual character serving as an agent in a visionary world must have played a role. 'Finger humans' as named by the artist, who seem to have the lower parts of a human body with only butts and legs, reveal various levels of living scenes, like a kaleidoscopic sphere full of allegory in a virtual world. From my point of view, this virtual world comes to gain much more detailed attractions with the help of these finger humans and yet some meta-issues and conceptual thinking have become less prevalent.

2. Structure of the Double Screen, Details of the Meta-Narrative

This doesn't necessarily mean that Song's consistent embrace of the structural conditions of painting is indispensable in order to establish her own art world. The primary reason why I mention this is related to my interest in her early stages, concerning a possible solution on the conceptual level along with representational aspects. On a secondary level, the newest work that will be on view at the Sungkok Art Museum addresses whether flatness and illustrational images can be combined. This shows that Song still sees this issue as a crucial one and therefore we need to give our attention to this agenda, with a new approach that is appropriate to her varying endeavors.

For the critical assessment, we need to call our attention to 'What role does the detailed illustration play? Is it for a simple visual attraction or for an allegorical message encompassing the conceptual level of her work that is hardly understandable?' To make it short, flatness, as a physical condition of painting is involved with both internal narrative and external meta-concepts at the same time. That is to say, Song's work seems to be an allegory in which finger humans appear, but in actuality the meaning signified by the allegory serves as an indicator of the 'general condition of painting' or in a narrower context, 'painting governed by Modernism.' As is known, painting refers to an act of drawing pictures with pigments and brushes (and other materials or tools) on a two-dimensional surface or the subsequent result. Here, auditory or tactile senses are taken as less important as the visual. In other words, painting has no sound, cannot be touched, and only exists as an image on a flat surface. How is it possible to think of a painting from the outside, while

still maintaining these general conditions, without abandoning 'representational form evoking illusions' and 'narratives' that once were considered taboo in Greenbergian Modernism? To put it otherwise, is it possible to try a meta-criticism?

Song's answer to this is the 'double screen,' referring to paintings within a painting. In the structure of double screen, allegorical stories illustrated in pictures serve as a criticism to painting and the criticism is not done with words, but with images. Therefore, what I mean by the structure of double screen does not literally refer to paintings within a painting, but needs to be understood in terms of the content in relation to the theme of painting. This structure of work is a divisive line distinguishing her paintings done between 2006 and 2007 and her recent work. Furthermore, unlike the visual satisfaction offered by the earlier works, it operates as a factor to supply some possible intellectual entertainment through allegorical images. Now, it is time to take an investigative look at each work.

3. Details of Allegory and Principles of Flat Painting

When taking a first glimpse at *A Foolish Step 1*, most people's attention is probably riveted to the daringly painted greenish colors that occupy almost 80 percent of the entire canvas. The surface looks both two dimensional and three dimensional where green pieces of paper hang in the air like some type of nets. This is because the upper part, as in color field painting, is turning into a roughly netted green paper wall as a represented object. This means that with no specific divisive line, the actual physical space is turning into a virtual one with images. *A Foolish Step 1* self-references a two dimensional space as a given condition and simultaneously shows a three dimensionally represented space. Besides, it is noticeable that several criticisms toward generic painting sporadically appear as allegory in the painting. For instance, among them is the insertion of traces of 'drawing lines' in the white zones of the canvas scattered among the pieces of green papers. In addition to this, allegorical figures in the lower part of the painting parody brushstrokes that were once revered by Modernistic artists as the presence of themselves as well as the self-referentiality of painting. Seemingly struggling to take card-sized papers off the net wall, the short brushstrokes project Song's intention to reveal the naked canvas after removing the shallow skin of images. The structure of double screen implies how to combine images and concepts in which details of depicted forms serve as an act of creation revealing 'identity of

painting' on a meta-level. This is the case as well in *Two Persons, A Foolish Step 2*, and *Passing Through*. The differences, if any, lie in the ratio of her emphasis on each part between allegorical narrative with the detailed depiction of objects and the intensity of modernistic painting rules.

Among paintings that address conditions of painting from a bit of a different perspective are the series of *Soft Monument 1 to 5*. What matters here is concerned not so much with the space in a painting, but the tactile sense that is usually unattended and considered less important in painting. Inspired by monuments displayed at a stone carving yard in ByeokJe in the middle of her commute from work to home, its main motif consists of varied weird shapes of stone sculptures. Although seemingly acting as sculptures due to their bases, they are far from any specific representational form and even exude a soft and cushiony feeling that the observer can notice. Resembling the crinkles of a brain or a crooked tongue tightly tied, the multiple heads and butts are linked directly as if they are unknown creepy creatures. Thus, these illustrations are involved with tactile senses in addition to their visual effects. As if suggesting that viewers can grope through each canvas with their eyes, or that it is waiting for their touch, the soft monuments challenge the fixed concept that art should be centered to only visual perceptions.

On the other hand, we can find the same structure of double screen in the work previously mentioned. As just mentioned, the condition of painting in which vision is associated with touch allows us to 'think.' The acts by the allegorical figures are expressed along with the tactile experience of vision. In other words, touches are metaphorically converted into visions. In particular, *Soft Monument 3* shows finger humans unusually tying the monuments on pedestals with white thin threads, thus leading the beholder to perceive how soft and cushiony the represented monuments are.

When looking at her recent paintings, we find that Song takes a bit of a different path from her earlier methodology in relation to meta-narrative and anecdotal images. Seemingly, Song's work can look too obvious, but in actuality she tries quite a complicated attempt of associating these two different levels and constructs her own artistry. In the process, it sometimes gets too bland by being tilted toward allegorical expressions and detailed images. Besides, some of them provide too much visual attraction and enjoyment allowing the viewer to be engrossed with the visual and auditory experiences. I admit that

successful details definitely lead the viewer be amused with their eyes visually and can even move their minds. On that level, the statement from *Sollers écrivain* by Roland Barthes, 'Wonders are a shy beginning of fantasy,' is valid in visual art as well as literature. As seen in her recent work, however, the fantasy felt while appreciating painting will be fulfilled when the viewer willingly reads the multiple layers under the surface, understands the hidden significances, and recomposes them into a new structure. It is not unlike the experience of a new world enabled by imagination beyond the temporal and spatial limits of reading a literary work.