

## Kim Shin-hye – Unfamiliar nature/landscape within water bottles

By Park Young-taek

Sometimes I hesitate when going to throw a bottle away. They are too pretty, too exquisite to just be trash. It is hard to accept the idea that they have to get thrown away or should disappear after just being used once. Therefore I wash them clean and put them on a book shelf. It is this same kind of moment of reflection that perhaps allows an artwork to be made from a found object or an interesting installation. These days we often tend to be impressed by a plethora of wonderfully attractive and sensual packaging, or by the design of products. A so-called 'commodity aesthetics' identifies consumer society within a system of mass production, which soaks up all the senses and sensibilities of contemporaries. Therefore some commodities carry an unparalleled force of influence, as if they were a different kind of 'art'. In modern capitalism, advertisements and product design have come about as the result of combination between avant-garde sensibilities and commercialism. It is interesting to note that industry appears to be absorbing artistic characteristics at the same time that art is becoming increasingly industrialized. Industry is a form of bourgeois art and the machine is a bourgeois artwork. In this respect, we are living in a society where capitalism itself has been turned into a type of 'art'. In other words, art has already been overwhelmed by capitalistic sensibilities, or turned into a 'design' which mimics it.

Kim Shin-hye has turned her attention to the designs found on water bottles or other beverage containers. Drinks might perhaps be one of the items that we consume most in our everyday lives – both in terms of their frequency and proliferation. The artist collected several kinds of bottles from all around the world, bottles used for water, soft drinks, Champaign and wine, and found that all of their labels incorporated images from nature. It was the images of nature that actually first caught her attention. It might be said that these images are the only way an urbanite might experience nature within their busy daily routines. In cities these ideas are in many ways managed, fixed, and consumed through products. Kim collected bottles with images such as snowcapped mountains, waterfalls, red plum blossoms and anemone flowers and then painted them on large canvases. Utilizing Korean paper and ink, *Jangji* and *Bunchae*, she exquisitely depicted bottles, labels, characters, and images using traditional techniques of coloring. They are rendered so cleanly and perfectly that they might be mistaken as a print, and have connections to the worlds of both design and painting. In actuality, they are as close to both branding and traditional landscape painting as their derivatives. However, the resulting paintings are not exactly the same as the actual bottles. Several parts are drawn identically, but there are also some important changes. For instance, the natural images situated within the labels are extended, or they spread themselves beyond the bottles. Kim brings a life to the self-contained images of nature, and develops them so that they can be felt as something akin to classical landscape paintings. Kim collected different kinds of bottle labels such as FIJI, Arizona Green Tea, Azzura, Jeju, Volvic, Evian, FUJI and Samdasu, from Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, Canada and other countries, and on her canvases depicted the images that these bottles contained spilling

over from the object itself into traditional landscape painting. We might therefore need to have specific titles for each generic landscape, such as the Evian landscape, the Volvic landscape, the Jeju pure sea landscape, and the Icefield landscape. All of these landscapes are bizarre.

Lots of painters situate themselves within the realm known as 'Eastern painting'. Many of them seem to be stuck with specific kinds of subject matter and pattern under the name of 'Eastern painting', and are limited by the relevant discourses around its significance and implication. Therefore the resulting works often habitually depict items that have been acknowledged as pre-conditions of Eastern painting, and they continue moving down this safe path. They find they can justify this dogged attachment to the repetition of these forms, by arguing that this is what Eastern painting is. In contrast to this, Kim carefully looks into 'things that make Eastern painting' rather than working on Eastern painting itself. In other words, before leaping to work with brush and paper, Kim turns her eyes towards the 'things that make art' that surround us in our daily lives, as well as to the 'things that seem to comprise the framework of traditional Eastern painting'. These unusual concerns led her to turn her attention to images of nature, of utopic and pure landscapes on PET bottles or champagne bottles, and she appropriated them. It is interesting that all the labels that have anything to do with water, whether they be for beer, wine or mineral water, have images of natural landscapes or of mountains. They already contained a form of 'landscape painting'.

Contemporary art addresses objects. When thinking about the general trends seen in contemporary art since Marcel Duchamp's readymade, as well as the Pop art of Andy Warhol, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that objects have replaced everything. Recent paintings suggest that there has been an intensification of the tendency towards the fetishized surfaces of those objects. There is nothing new about discussing the fetishism found in the paintings of Hyper-Realism or Pop art. Young artists paint the commodities and objects that they desire. And in doing this they can in some ways possess them. Eventually, the temptations found in the beautiful and sensual objects and designer brands of man-made commodities have risen to the surface of culture, as an issue within visual art. Kim's depiction of those designer objects, luxuriating in the empty space in the backgrounds surrounding them, is full of the ambience of 'commodity aesthetics'. The attempt to recreate certain objects helps reveal something of the desire of possession. Today modern people lead their lives based upon their relationships with material goods. Capitalism drives them, with increasing speed and unrelenting force, to continue desiring objects. For this reason, we don't have any problem purchasing them and showing our fondness for them. As a result, Kim's surprisingly elaborate depiction of bottles makes it hard to distinguish 'machine-made' design from images made by the human hand, creating a view which is totally skewed toward products, clinging to the desire to realize them with more sense of realism than printed images might allow. They attempt to force the viewer to confront the commodities, as if they had been connected to their own skins. They are not from the world of ideas, but from the world of the senses, where they exist as vivid and significant materials. This perspective helps explain a way of leading one's life that

embraces the consumer society of Capitalism, and of materialist affluence as one of its required conditions; this is the general worldview of modern people. For this reason, the techniques of realist painting are used as a sort of strategy to help articulate the particular physical characteristics of commodities. This explains the recent tendency in painting which takes as its subject matter, designer goods or personal routines that are full of little cherished objects that have been collected. It is like a visual response to the environment created by consumer society, in which we are surrounded by countless amounts of manmade goods and merchandise. It is like taking the hand of a product and encouraging them to speak instead. Nature is consumed accordingly, serving as a kind of fetish object. What is worth noting is that Kim has added traditional landscapes to the images found within the products. The artist overlaps multiple layers, twisting the view of common desire and preferences towards nature, the sensibilities of consumer society, and traditional landscape painting, whilst also emphasizing the rift between them. This is what Kim has suggested landscape painting might truly consist of these days.

Kim saw the natural landscapes found within beverage bottles for water, wine and soft drinks, and began to consider their significance. Representing the overlap between two different natures – our traditional concept of nature and one that is caught in a system of desire that is demanded in urban life and consumer society – Kim has added her personality to the work by mixing together a variety of signs and logos, while keeping track of ‘what defines Eastern’. Rather than working on the level of simply keeping or discarding the generic genre or styles of ‘landscape painting’, Kim attempts to stir them up a little in the realm of semantics, within the existing genre or expanding the

boundaries to an area that is somewhat disruptive and unrealistic. In other words, Kim is able to explore the reality of modern times by taking the 'unreality of traditional landscape painting' and adding a new way of imagining landscape painting.

*Park Young-taek is an art critic and professor at Gyeonggi University.*