

Gazing without Eyes

In the pitch-black night, a sudden gleam of light discloses everything in the darkness that weighs on one's mind and body. After the intense light fades away, eyes in the dark thirst for what is essential following the dimness, retaining a flickering afterimage. Now, eyes disappear and only the gaze remains.

This period of time, when the light fades away and the continuing darkness is open to approach from other phenomena, allows a meditation into that space of darkness. Not coincidentally, Yun-hee Toh has frequently entitled her meditative and contemplative paintings with such phrases relate to nighttime. Through this exhibition at Mongin Art Center, Toh intensively articulates her ideas about night and darkness, and conveys with even greater clarity the truth that is revealed due to this vision in darkness. According to the artist, only through the transcendence of the external surface and form can we finally see the true essence of the subject. Thus, she suggests a unique approach of "gazing without eyes" in order to represent the other side of what the eye can physically see. The actual eye is only able to recognize the external surface of things by the help of light and is unable to see anything in the dark. Yet, as this optical gaze declines the spectator comes closer to some kind of essence. The works in this exhibition give shape to Toh's way of seeing the world and her uncompromising journey of seeking the hidden behind the other side of phenomena. By gazing "without eyes," Toh aspires to the essence of things, to human beings and the world, as well as to a feeling of relief in confirming her longstanding belief that "what is not changing doesn't change."

As a result, Toh's paintings are extremely abstract and sensual, and speculation that her work is metaphysical and incorporeal is not untrue. However, in an alternative view, the other face of Toh, so to speak, there is a belief in the connection to people and the world around her, a keenness to communicate with others. This attitude in her work, seemingly more akin to writing rather than painting, recalls a seeker who is after truth, somebody who almost literally takes dictation of the will of the Absolute. In fact, Toh's attitude towards working on a painting is inextricably linked to a longstanding habit of shaping her thoughts at an old worn-out desk in a corner of her studio. The space, reconstructed in a corner of the gallery in the form of a small reading room, is a womb-like matrix where Toh's ideas arise in her mind, and also as a space occupied by a kind of alter-ego of the artist. Here, Toh's responses to issue related to people and society at large are embodied in written phrases that take the character of poems or diaries, or sometimes statements. Her speculations that are articulated in a form of language are interiorized into liquefied agonies, not inflamed anger, pent up, and finally given expression in paintings of pure emotions. Within this process, Toh's interior gazing of phenomena renders the physical eye useless or unnecessary. In order to defy and overcome the limitations of the human eye, Toh would rather have the eyes closed as an active choice stemming from conviction, not as an escape from reality.

Is it possible to draw the same or similar response, even for a short while, from people who have lived their own lives in their own time, have gone through different experiences and possess their own history? Toh's works, written at the behest of an essence, gazed upon without eyes, may even elicit a universal response in that they were created without the predetermination of speculation and language, and so may in fact exist somewhere in between. If it is, thus, possible, the result of her singular journey can then be interiorized by the viewer to flow within each and every one of them.