

Flâneur in the Uncharted Territory

Just like the snow falls all through the night and puts footprints down on the white field that no one has yet stepped on, the thin and fine lines deftly go across the white paper and then black shapes fill the screen soon. Through the nib of pen, this reveals itself on the plain surface of the paper. It repeats itself as an infinite chain of unknown symbols and then disappears—sometimes in the shape of man, then as goblin, bird, sea, sometimes forest, then goblin again, and sometimes book, monster, monkey, and the self-portrait of the painter. The innumerable drawings that fill the whole floor of the exhibition hall convey the meaning of each one through the loose link of a book.

The third solo exhibition of Jeongsu Woo titled 'Flâneur Note' is an opportunity to meet about 170 drawings and a book of 8 small themes that compiled the drawings—all of which records the inside of the world that he has observed so far with interest and concern, human nature and its limitations he witnessed there, and the traces of psychological distresses about his role as an individual and painter. Jeongsu Woo boldly skips the usual sketching process for full-scale painting and directly draws shapes on the paper with a brush. At first glance this may seem easy, but if you understand that paper and ink are sensitive materials in their nature that do not tolerate even a single mistake, the meaning of the pen drawings we see in this exhibition becomes clearer. He has repeatedly introduced various icons in his drawings, and has created his own unique style by putting them again in various situations to create diversified narrative structures. Perhaps because he has thought a lot and gone through the process of expressing his thought several times by drawing repeatedly, the brushwork itself without hesitation gives strength to the figure in his picture.

More fundamentally, the proficiency of this technique comes from the artist's gaze and attitude toward the object. Just like the meaning of the word 'Flâneur', he belongs to the group called society of today and yet tries not to lose his independent gaze and attitude as an individual. While completing the book that compiled the drawings displayed in the exhibition, he quietly watched the society that had changed over the past decade, with the eyes of an observer. And he put what he saw into the caricatured figures of humans, animals and grotesque landscapes: big and small events and accidents in society, actions and movements that conform to or oppose the solid and strong social systems, as well as the moments when human beliefs and distrust operate. While using black ink to draw this with a fast stroke, he does not miss the delicate representation. At the heart of this is the long training in thinking he has gone through with book reading. He read books of diverse genres ranging from stories about myths and folk tales, to biographies of heroes and great men, to philosophical books of thinkers, and began to observe the ways in which the system of the real world is constructed and operated and the human life and nature that interact within the system. In the process, the 'belief' that a large amount of knowledge and information produced and consumed toward the truth will move people's minds and change the reality exist side by side with the 'doubt' that it is difficult to change the reality because of the unpredictability of the system caused by human avarice and

the various variables in society. In the meantime, the artist naturally took great pains over what kind of attitude he would take as an individual and a painter in a society. The results were the first solo exhibition titled 'The Paintings of Villain' in 2015 and the second solo in 2016, titled 'The Grave of Books.'

The artist has doubted the situations in which absurd things in reality are justified and construct a society in a plausible way, and has projected himself onto the figure of the artist who endlessly produces the images of man against the absurd reality ('The Paintings of Villain'); sometimes has expressed the skeptical view that the endless desire of man for knowledge and civilized way of life may not save this world ('The Grave of Books).'¹ Looking at his work over the years, we find that he starts from expressing in a scathing and outright language his anger he feels when he witnesses the reality armed with overwhelmingly powerful systems, and observes how human beings live without seeing the limitations as finite beings, overburdened by desires and emotions; and he finally scoffs at this by projecting it onto a wild society or a wrecked civilization. What is important throughout this process is that he never forgets that it is a major challenge for his painting to always reflect on his life as a painter. Not only the chapter entitled 'Lousy Painter' in the book displayed, but other chapters also have self-portraits of the artist. They always have metaphoric representation of the painter's attitude toward the world as well as his contemplation of the existence of an artist in society. Through the act of 'painting', the painter is forced to perform his role, but he also satisfies his personal desires through the act. When 'flâneur' is defined as a two-faceted being that dwells in the crowd or a group in society, but at the same time maintains his own perspective at an objective distance from it, it seems that in Jeongsu Woo's painting, the ambivalent gaze of such a flâneur is effective both for the world and for the painter himself.

This self-critical and self-reflective attitude as a painter not only appears directly in the subject matter of the painting but also sometimes makes small changes to the way he organizes the canvas that he has adhered to in his work so far. In <Uroboros # 1> (2017), the painter has presented the uroboros, an ancient mythical symbol depicting a serpent eating its own tail, in its complete form as an archetype. Moving a step further from there, he begins to boldly bring in the conditions of completely different contexts while deconstructing and denying the wholeness and totality of the circular structure of the archetype. <Uroboros # 2> (2017), which constitutes another aspect of the exhibition, is out of the perfect circular structure, and its body is cut off as if it were a lost puzzle piece, and its surroundings are filled with religious icons representing unpredictable natural energy and the transcendental world, and the symbols of human desires to go against nature and of the cynical look at all of this. The graceful smile of the Virgin Mary spreads beneath the fierce force of the uroboros threatening to devour, and flowers bloom beautifully even in the ravages of nature. This is the point that reminds us of the huge circular structure in contrasting terms, which has been preserved/kept while the paintings born out of the artist's fingertips in the paintings of 'The Paintings of Villain' turned into masks for the painter, or <Task of Narrative'> (2016), a work representing the 'The Grave of Books' series, put together the symbols of civilization drifting in the whole space

as if revolving there.

In addition, the technique made possible by changing the medium from paper to wood panel becomes an element to underscore this cycle. The technique, by which images were drawn on the paper and one layer was horizontally expanded, provides the possibility of a new interpretation in the recent works that make use of wood panels and the shading of Chinese ink. The method of erasing or moving the first drawn images and stacking up the layers of images thinly to reveal the relationship between the images forms a more complex multi-layered structure. The composition segmented by several wooden panels does not focus on the connectivity between images; rather, it creates a situation in which the meanings of the individual picture planes meet by chance and collide with each other horizontally and vertically, which allows the intervention for an active appreciation and interpretation. If previous works like 'Task of Narrative' clearly presented the artist's view of the object through a complete circular structure and solid composition created by symbolic images, <Uroboros # 2> brings in the viewer's interpretation and experience of the object in the appreciation of the work due to the versatile quality of the technique and composition.

To be sure, this feature has something to do with the loose connection between the eight different compositions in the book on display. Each of the chapters, entitled 'The Heavy Tree', 'The Crown of Fools', 'Strange Tales', 'The Grave of Books', 'To Be the Oriental', 'The Face of Ghost', 'Lousy Painter', and 'Strolling', is a kind of confession in image, which metaphorically captures the traces of existential concerns he was grappling with not to lose the role of an individual, painter, and flâneur in the chaotic social reality. Hence, the drawings that make up each chapter have long been archetypes of thoughts and expressions of objects, and have also played their role as a pivot around which the overall narrative revolves when they come out for exhibition.

The artist continues to draw paintings as a flâneur living in in a society where the brutality of violence and madness and at the same time the sacredness of salvation and sacrifice exist side by side. Through 'The Grave of Books', he has already dealt with the endless desires and emotions of human beings toward the reality, but the traces of the time and agonies he had are ready to talk to the audience in the form of a book full of pictures. As we can perceive through his gaze at the world, humans are probably living for a fleeting moment that is just a small dot in the flow of eternal time. But to the flâneur, who is not afraid of getting lost in the middle of his stroll, the world must be an uncharted territory where there are plenty of things that are yet to be discovered, as well as innumerable choices waiting for him to make his way.

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