

Wherever, Whatever

About Yeonjoo Cho's solo exhibition, 'Dream Journey'

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Yeonjoo Cho has been working on the theme of 'A Journey' for 4-5 years. In her past works, she has depicted places that she has always wanted to visit, even though they do not exist in reality. However, this solo exhibition presents journeys to places that do exist, mainly inspired by the landscape paintings of the past.

Going on a non-physical journey

Travel, or journey, is an event that takes place based on physical movement through space. It is an act wherein the "I" who is the viewer leaves a familiar environment and stays for a while in an environment with a different language and culture. Cho's journey does not involve physical travel. Perhaps she has taken the easiest and cheapest journey available. There is no hassle of packing or fatigue from moving. The physical body stays still in one place, and the imaginary body goes to some other place. This can be seen as a psychological journey. However, the burden of this trip is not easily carried, as Cho must also shed light on the substance of her experience and reveal its truth to others by displaying the journey in the context of her paintings.

What kind of journey does the artist go through in the screen?

The salient feature of this solo exhibition is its references to works of the past. The departure points of Cho's journey are to be found in landscape paintings that were created several hundred years ago: Guo Xi's "Jochun (早春)"; Gim Hondo's "Balyeon (鉢淵)", which features the image of Mt. Geumgang; Sim Sa-jeong's "Samilpo(三日浦)", "Sangeoyeolak (山居悦乐)", and "Janglimwoonsan (長林雲山)"; and An Gyeon's "Mandong (晚冬)". For the casual viewer, it is not easy to understand the original images of these old paintings unless you have a deep knowledge of art history. However, Cho's work is not a conceptual approach based on the authority of the

original works. Rather, the artist says she is fascinated by the paintings as landscape scenes in themselves.

What kind of journey does this artist go through? Immersed in the landscape, she has to reconstruct the world on her own terms. The course of her journey through the paintings goes through several stages of evolution.

First, she interposes objects and situations from her daily life into landscapes based on the original paintings. For example, the traditional tree shapes found in a quiet landscape painting are transformed in Cho's work into images of the type of landscaped trees commonly found near apartment complexes, and the white spots seen in the original work are turned into the street lights at the city center.

Secondly, the artist develops her own mythos by featuring mythic figures—like devils and angels in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings—or adding the moon or a waterfall in her works. As the imagination goes deeper and the journey becomes more active, a figure who looks like the artist appears in the painting out of nowhere. The figure in Sim Sa-jeong's "Samilpo (三日浦)", for example, is enjoying skating on a frozen river.

Moreover, while the sense of experiencing the season of the year depicted in the painting is expressed vaguely in the original landscape paintings, it is reconstructed into a distinct sensual feeling of the season under Cho's deft hands. The painting in the series that is referenced to Won Myeong-yu's "Dowonchunsaek (桃源春色)", for example, changed the original's sense of the season by adding in trees with fully bloomed cherry blossoms. The painting that refers to An Gyeon's "Mandong (晚冬)" also emphasizes the image of winter by drawing a pine tree covered with snow at its center.

Thirdly, while the paintings in the series are quite similar to the images of the original at first glance, they are reconstructed in a way that adds a mysterious psychological atmosphere. In the painting that refers to Gim Hondo's original "Balyeon (鉢淵)", the pond at its center is submerged into the ground like a huge sinkhole. The water flowing from the mountain falls down into the black hole and disappears. Our gaze becomes possessed by that black hole for a long while, and the hole gives us a suggestive feeling together with the somewhat darkened color of the surrounding trees.

Is the artist prototypically copying (倣作) the master landscape artists' works?

The artist mentioned the concept of prototypical copying (倣作) in regards to her

recent works. Prototypical copy (倣) is a method specific to oriental painting. It is a practice that helps to develop one's own methods and style of painting while copying the works of the previous era multiple times. The famous painters of the Chosun Dynasty such as An Gyeon, Jeong Seon, and Gim Hongdo, developed their own styles through this process. 'Replicating (摹)' is a learning method that copies the original by putting a piece of paper on the original painting, and 'imitating (臨)' is one that focuses on imitating the composition and brush stroke of the original at the side. 'Prototypical copying (倣)' is performed based on one's own painting style acquired through these stages of replicating and imitating, the brushstrokes or painting style of a particular master. In other words, it is a creation that builds one's own style based on the spirit of homage.

To apply such a concept to Cho Yeon Joo's work is partly appropriate and partly inappropriate. First, there is a difference in the material used: unlike in oriental painting, the medium used in Cho's work is oil paint. While the play of light and shade is an important part of oriental painting, the touch of brush and the trace of paints are characteristic of oil painting. However, it does not seem that she imitated the oriental style at all. Rather, she seems to have tried to express the image of the original landscape painting as much as possible while using oil paints.

The second point concerns the difference in the attitude toward landscape painting. To draw a landscape painting with the oriental view of nature is to have an experience in which the subject and the object become one. While the Western-style landscape paintings see the object as something to be possessed and observed, the oriental landscape painters express an attitude of pursuing truth and the Way (道) in the nature. Cho seems to want to pay homage to this spiritual aspect of oriental landscape painting as well as its attitude toward nature, while maintaining a Western feel to her paintings. She has attempted in the current series to preserve the composition and the sense of nature of the original works in her reconstructed landscapes, and suggested a way to reconstruct and revisit centuries-old paintings in a restrained manner that does not harm the power of the images or the beauty of the originals. If we consider the concept of prototypical copying (倣) to be based on the old masters' such attitudes toward nature rather than their style, it seems possible to understand Cho's works in terms of this concept.

