Minjung Kim catalogue introduction by Boon Hui Tan

Ink As Contemporary Practice: The Art of Minjung Kim

The current debates over the rise of a global contemporary art have opened the doors to embracing specific practices and styles that originate from places far beyond the Euro-American sphere, as well as marginalized practices from the Western metropoles for example, the recent interest in craft practices such as weaving. Yet the claims for a genuine participation in the global contemporary often still remains trapped in a local or regional context. From East Asia (namely China, Japan and Korea) contemporary ink practice has been touted as the current manifestation of a long millennial tradition of ink practice originating in literati aesthetic traditions. Transhistorical exhibitions such as the *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013 have been broadly positioned from this perspective. While acknowledging that the range of artistic practice in China is much broader, the curator Mike Hearn states that the show focuses on 'the portion that seems to be meaningfully informed by China's history of artistic traditions'[1]. Although the arguments are sound and rightly position contemporary ink practice as a deserved inheritor of this millennial East Asian aesthetic style, it also opens up the possibility that artists whose work draws upon this tradition are only seen as recent reinterpreters or transcribers of this historical tradition. In this sense, the stress on historical continuity traps commentary on a particular artist within a regional or geographic contemporary.

For Minjung Kim, whose practice is often seen as a distillation of ink traditions and European painting practice, this subtle shift in seeing her work as not merely a transcriber of East Asian tradition can be illuminating. The artist apprenticed under an ink master and a watercolorist from when she was six years old. Her family's origins are in Gwangju, Korea, where the old literati traditions were continued but at the same time, the birthplace of the struggle for a new contemporary artistic language and ethos. The Minjung Art movement in the 1980s was aligned to the new emergent democratic Korea. Yet if we look closely at her artistic production over time, her early works in Korea were dominated by representational work in landscapes, and calligraphy. It was only after she moved to Italy and attended the Brera Academy of Fine Art in Milan, that we begin to see the forms and styles that we are familiar

[1] See interview in https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2013/mike-hearn-interview

with today. The suggestion here is that it may be productive to see Kim's work also in terms of abstract art forms and practice. From the outset, we should view abstraction as a global practice which manifests itself in multiple localities and more importantly derives its specific characteristics through its interaction with other local and regional practices and philosophies.

Minjung Kim's artistic practice can thus be seen as a process of extending the possibilities of contemporary abstraction by a distillation or absorption of East Asian literati traditions. These encounters transform the basis of her distinctive abstract forms in ways far beyond that of the Western ideal. While post war conceptualism in the West prioritized artistic concept rather than form as the defining feature of an artwork, Kim's practice gives space and weight to the interaction of the materials of her art practice as an equal 'creator' of her works. Her practice uses a very limited range of materials- ink, water, paper, glue and fire to create an astonishing range of work of varying tonal ranges, shapes, textures and emotional pitches.

An appreciation of Minjung's sensitivity and deep knowledge of how wet ink interacts in complex ways with the traditional mulberry *hanji* paper that she uses is illuminating in this instance. As an artist she sets up an encounter between ink and paper, anticipating but not completely controlling the way her various grades of paper absorb the ink washes that she applies. Each work, therefore, is a product of a level of unpredictability, producing the nuanced and sophisticated ink forms that we see in her work. Her practice can be seen almost like a fractal, where a limited group of materials work together in a staged encounter to produce an extraordinary range of visual forms and shades.
Kim's practice is not about losing control over materials and processes but how within a controlled situation, giving up control by choice to allow a level of variation into the process can be a basis for creative production. This is very clearly seen in her most accessible work, the *Mountain* series, made using only ink and water. None of the individual works in the series, with their overlapping and gently curving forms layered upon each other, are rooted in a specific mountain location. In *Mountain*, 2018, more layers of ink are progressively added towards the bottom edge of the paper. The change from light at the top to dark at the bottom edge of this painting gives it movement and suggests perspective. Each work, dependent as it is on the interaction of wet ink on *hanji* paper, is unique and can never be exactly replicated. The most obvious demonstration of the range of variation that can be obtained using only a limited group of materials and techniques is in the artist's *Phasing* series. The work *Phasing* 2018 begins as a series of broad vertical ink lines executed using a broad tipped ink brush,

other works in the same series sees Kim laying down ink strokes using ink 'thrown' from a brush resulting in more uneven and curvilinear strokes. The artist then lays another thin layer of paper onto this first 'painted' layer and then proceeds to burn through this first layer of paper using a incense stick. The astounding control displayed by the artist allows her to burn only through the first layer to reveal the ink strokes beneath. On closer inspection, the works in the *Phasing* series leaves a kind of visual dissonance in the viewer does one focus on the very controlled form of the burnt-out shapes which follow but do not *precisely* align with the ink forms below or does one focus on the underlying freer ink forms. This tension between control and freedom is also found in other artists whose work finds variation and subjectivity within a very limited and controlled set of variables. Lee U-Fan speaks of how:

'(t)here is this constant duality between a feeling of tension and liberation. When people feel that tension about my work, it is not my idea or the image that triggers that tension. It is the image of the world and the universe. We may call that spirituality, a much higher and larger dimension.'[3]

If Lee U-Fan is right, that feeling of sublimity and emotion that the viewers feel upon encountering the works of artists such as Minjung Kim is present not despite the limited and minimal means of her artistic process but rather because of it. It is the way she creates freedom within constraint, tension and liberation simultaneously in her process that generates the strong emotional resonances in her work. With this, we intersect with recent commentary on minimal art that acknowledges its subjectivity. Commenting on the Indian artist Nasreen Mohamedi's work, Zoë Lescaze writes:

'The tendency to identify minimalism with an almost Platonic neutrality is deeply ingrained in art historical thought, but we must reexamine this paradigm, especially as our understanding of the movement expands to encompass a wide range of practices from Latin America, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.'[4]

This multi-nodal character and mobility of seemingly localized art practices are not only confined to practice commonly thought to have originated within the Western art metropoles. The well known Guggenheim exhibition *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989* argued for a transmission of Asian art and philosophy within American aesthetic currents, opening up space to admit Asia as one of the creative lineages of American art movements. Within India, the Bengal school of painting is regarded as one of the founding

attempts in the early 20th century to construct a case for an authentic Indian modern that was united in its opposition to the British academic style of painting. Yet its inspiration was East Asian ink wash tradition, especially the *sumi-e* ink works from Japan. Leading artists such Nandalal Bose, in particular, produced in the latter parts of his career a body of ink on paper works that show a canny ability to manipulate the techniques of the *sumi-e* to make them compatible with the new nationalist aspirations of late British colonial India.

And thus we move closer to the dream with which this essay began, that of a global contemporary art that embraces plurality, that while a style or practice may originate in specific localities or in multiple ones, it can appear in places or scenes far away. That to comprehend a plural global contemporary also implies that artists such as Minjung Kim should be seen as not *solely* the prerogative of Korean or even East Asian contemporary art but also simultaneously as an authentic and innovative creator extending the horizons of a global minimal art practice.

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[3] Interview with Lee Ufan in Contemporary Voices from the Asian and Islamic Art Worlds, Sand, Olivia, (2018), Skira & Asian Art Newspaper, London, p380

[4] Lescaze, Zoë (2018) *Alone Together*, in *Out of Practice: Ten Issues of Even, 2015-18*, edited by Jason Farrago & Rebecca Anne Segel, p113-119, 1st published Even No. 4, 2016, Even: New York