

Yoriko Takabatake and the Historical Challenge from Fifty Years Ago

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Precisely three years ago, Yoriko Takabatake held a solo exhibition titled “Venus” at Gana Art Hannam in Seoul. In the introduction for its catalogue, Mr. Motoaki Hori had accurately pointed out and appraised the fact that the essence of Takabatake’s work lies in the bold and activating connection between the materiality of her chosen medium and the physical characteristics of her means of production. This critical analysis also appears directly in reach with the new technique employed in the artist’s “MARS” series presented three years later in this solo exhibition. In this series, lines of paint on the surface containing iron oxide pigment are transformed by the force of a strong magnet, which the artist manipulates underneath the canvas. For this reason I will refrain from articulating on Takabatake’s unique technique again at this point in time.

Instead, as someone who has lived slightly longer than most, I would like to take it upon myself to consider this young Japanese artist that is Yoriko Takabatake, from a historical context. The reason for this is that through my brief conversation with her I had learnt that Takabatake, although born in 1982 and herself not having lived in the same era, expressed a strong affinity with artists of the so-called Korean painting movement of “Dansaekhwa” (monochrome painting) that had flourished in the 1970s, in particular, towards the artistic methods of Ha Chong-Hyun. As far as I know, there had never been a Japanese artist who had shown such a specific interest in Korean contemporary art.

As is the case with “Mono-ha” in Japan, “Dansaekhwa,” is an inappropriate term that is not necessarily welcomed by the artists themselves. Then again however, being labeled as such from the outside had led to the rapid increase of its recognition both domestically and internationally since the new millennium, also making it a subject of study and research. Nonetheless, Dansaekhwa still remains little known in Japan with the exception of experts, let alone is there any evidence of it attracting the interest of artists. This is not simply due to the negligence of artists. The reason for this is attributed to the fact that national and other public facilities in Japan such as the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo had continued to turn a blind eye to Korean contemporary art, and whether due to mere habit or some other ulterior motive, has to this day even failed to introduce Dansaekhwa, which for the first time had acquired its reputation as a unique style of expression in the 1970s. Japanese youths of today have grown up within a knowledge space where such geographical and historical gaps are present. In this respect, it is evident that Yoriko Takabatake is an individual with a highly distinctive and unparalleled sensitivity.

It might also be noted that while Dansaekhwa and Mono-ha had emerged around the same time and thus possessed a sibling-like commonality, they also demonstrated a clear and different sense of direction right from the start. In both cases, what served to motivate the movements psychologically was

the cultural self-respect that had manifested in tow with the rapid economic development of their respective nations. To be specific, they were grounded upon the skepticism and opposition of artists towards the techniques of Western painting that they had been taught, as well as the modern Western view of nature and humans that lay in the backdrop. Although one suspects that feelings towards and the evaluation of the merits of Western modernism were quite different in Korea and Japan, ironically, the education and information received by young people in both countries had at the time already been highly permeated by sense of modern homogeneity, therefore it seems that there was not much difference between what was to be learned and what was to be criticized.

On the other hand, there was a huge difference between Dansaekhwa and Mono-ha. Whereas the former in principle adhered to the formal framework of painting, and regarded the non-Westernization and self-reliance of painting as a proof of innovation, the latter, albeit temporarily, had dwelt on the anti-art trend of 1960s to the extent of invalidating painting itself and advocating the abolishment of formality. As a result, Mono-ha was only able to instantaneously shine its light for a very short period in the few years in and around 1970. The difference is significant compared to the artists of Dansaekhwa, who made meaningful developments over the next few decades and had subsequently matured in their respective styles.

For more than 10 years before Takabatake was born, Korean and Japanese art had experienced such an important historical situation. Not only in these two countries, but also in France, the idea of placing value on the minor contradictions within painting based on a unique interpretation of Mao Zedong's philosophies On Contradiction, had given birth to Support/Surface –a movement that was perhaps a little too theoretical, which served to examine the relationship between the material aspect (support) and expressiveness (surface) of painting. In any case, it was not that which attempted to liquidate painting itself, but rather, was an approach of practicing art in line with painting. Korean painters did not concern themselves with much logic chopping, yet one feels that because of this they have been blessed with more fruitful developments than their French peers.

Now, half a century later, a young Japanese artist, guided by her own disposition and talents, has come to discover these old Korean artists, feeling a sense of affinity for their experiences. What does this mean?

The issue is by no means that which is personal. At that time, I happened to be in a position as a critic to think about the fate of art while closely following the work and practices of both Dansaekhwa and Mono-ha artists. Since my observations are temporally and geographically distanced from that point, my manner of speaking may seem rather too broad and from a commanding perspective. In my eyes, what I see is one artist who disproportionately finds herself coming face to face with painting, that is, a significant challenge that Japan had lost sight of fifty years ago. Of course, there are several other remarkable individuals who engage in contemplations on painting, and there are all too many figurative and abstract artists that follow the conventional thinking. However, this issue that we were confronted

with fifty years ago –the challenge of re-examining paintings from a material level and liberating the picture plane from the human manipulation of the image in order to break away from unfamiliar Western painting techniques– still seems to be overlooked. While some might say there is no problem in disregarding this issue, if you look at the shallowness, lack of confidence, and lack of universality of Japanese painting today, it is indeed something that should not be avoided.

As far as this issue is concerned, Korea and Japan used to have a commonality that could serve as the basis for dialogue. In particular, Ha Chong-Hyun, who was greatly influenced by Japan's Mono-Ha, had engaged in methods of directly presenting matter or physical properties in his works produced between 1971 and 1972. Of course, this is prior to his endeavors in painting. Thereafter, Ha established his well-known technique of pushing paint through the back of the canvas, thus taking a step towards painting that was directed by his intentions of overcoming the contradiction between the support and the surface. However, with this method, the work (corporeality) of the artist's hand, which liberates the painting from the image and makes it a place that overcomes the conflict between the subjective and the objective, remains hidden within the shadows. At the same time, Park Seo-bo, who became a leading figure in the Dansaekhwa movement, quickly gained a foothold for his rich artistic activities in later years by acquiring a method of utilizing the three core elements of painting: canvas, matter (oil paint) and repeated brushstrokes. Similarly, Lee Ufan, a Mono-ha artist who had closely been acquainted with Park, adopted the use of mineral pigments employed in Nihonga (Japanese-style painting), and through his attempts to relativize physicality by means of systematic repetition, illustrated ways of applying the ideas of Mono-Ha, of which he was a leading artist, to the context of painting. Rather than a conversion, it was indeed a wise decision. Nevertheless, Lee's initiative was not inherited by anyone in Japan, and thus a significant challenge remained.

Perhaps it is unwarranted for Yoriko Takabatake to take on this challenge alone. Having said that, her interest in the material aspects of painting and her broad reliance on physical means in her work has inevitably transported us back to the 1970s. If she is not preoccupied with her interventions with the materials themselves, but rather, sets "painting" as her ultimate goal, it is necessary for her to earnestly consider what examples she must learn from hereon forth.

Painting is not merely the placement of matter. Neither is it a pattern nor nuance. Not to mention, it is not about the ingenuity and remarkableness of its ideas or workings. Perhaps we see (works of) painting, or even art itself as something (b) that comes at the expense of something (a). One does not know that that something (b) is, because it is not that which can be pointed out. However, everyone has a vague intuition as to what something (a) is. That something (a) is "I." "I" as the main constituent of production that is the pretense for art, and is the agent that causes the work to come into existence. Such perhaps manifests in the traces of the artist's hand within the painting, or the arrogance of those who look upon the work, and may even be synonymous with that which is cause for all that happens within the world. In other words, when all the causes and origins of art and life are (a), and the sacrifice, overcoming, and

abolition of that something (a) are felt, the world for the first time is perceived as a presence that transcends causality. In this respect, the work is perceived as the very presence that has forgotten its author that was cause for its conception, that is, something (b) that is the ultimate sign of art.

However, unless it is evident that that something (a) was first introduced by the artist (author), no sacrifice occurs, and neither destruction nor nullification transpires. It is a kind of trickery or magic to visibly set matters in motion through hidden gestures, and by no means is it true art. Paradoxically, it is the gesture that is manifested by the trace (interpretability) that nullifies the factitiousness (impertinence) of art and makes us forget that the gestures are the cause of the work. Ultimately, the world will cease to be questioned of its origins and the work loses sight of its author.

I believe that it was such frontiers that Park Seo-bo and Lee Ufan had aimed to arrive at through painting. Also by 1985, Ha Chong-Hyun, who is of particular interest to Yoriko Takabatake, in addition to the technique of pushing paint from the back of the canvas, or rather, in symbolically returning to the front of the canvas, began to smooth out the tips of the paint that pushed through with that which appeared to be a bamboo spatula of sorts, thus indicating something of a trampling gesture. This highly moving progression was introduced to Japan in July that very year at Ha's solo exhibition held at the Kamakura Gallery, which stood in Tokyo's Ginza district at the time. In the pamphlet for the exhibition, I had written as follows: "I believe that the highlight of the breakthrough made by Ha is the refreshing youthfulness of his self-discovery, that is, reclaiming paint for what it is, and awakening to the fact that the act of painting is truly the act of painting. (...) It seems that paintings have begun to gain an opportunity to fully express themselves."

Indeed, it is neither artist nor matter that has commenced self-expression, but rather, painting itself.

Translated by Kei Bengler

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