

Meekyoung Shin: A Future That Has Passed

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1. The Aura of Replicas

It was a large-scale solo exhibition. As soon as I stepped into the exhibition center, the fresh soap scent filling the space surrounded my body. Whereas the images we see are the impression of objects, the scents we smell are chemical reactions created by physical molecules. The soap sculptures of Meekyoung Shin are constantly decomposing into invisibly fine substances, which literally penetrate our body. The works are always in the process of 'disappearing' through volatilization and weathering, while being appreciated physically. Since they are mad of unstable soap, the rate of their extinction is much faster than that of other materials, like marble sculptures.

It was not my first time seeing works by Meekyoung Shin, but I'd never experienced such as intense scent before. This is because the soap sculptures were installed densely together in such a large space for the first time. Ever since then, I feel a tremendous deficiency and a sense of loss whenever I look at the beautiful reproductions of her works. Reproductions, of course, do not have a scent, and it is not easy to remember the scent, and it is not easy to remember the scent I smelled at that site. The soap sculptures of Meekyoung Shin are replicas of numerous historical masterpieces, but they paradoxically have the non-replicable 'aura' and 'authenticity' that only exist in a specific place and time.

2. Ruins: Remembrance of the Future

<Ruinscape> is an architectural installation made of 12 tones of soap. In the middle of brick walls sparsely constructed, like the remains of a half-wrecked building, a wooden screen, fallen columns, windows with cross-shaped arrow holes and an arched lintel leaning against a wooden beam have settled down. After visiting many historical sites around the world, the artist gathered together some noticeable architectural motifs in one place by reproducing them using soap, regardless of their region and time period. Therefore, being a Medieval European Fortress, an Indian mosque and a Chinese citadel at the same time, this building is a ruin testifying to the universal past of humankind, which exists nowhere, but which can be found anywhere.

In *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*, Alois Riegla, an art historian of the late 19th century, defined the primary meaning of monuments as 'intentional' in the sense that they are created by human beings for the purpose of commemorating historical events or individual's achievements to future generations. However, the new modern monuments to which he paid attention are 'unintentional.' 'Unintentional' monuments are created and used according to the actual needs of the time, without the intent to hand down their cultural significance to posterity, but they end up being preserved by future generations in remembrance of the past. Assuring us that "Any artifacts can be regarded as monuments if they show significant traces of time, regardless of their original

meaning and purpose,” Riegl defined the value of such monuments as the ‘age value,’ which differs from the artistic and historic values of conventional monuments.¹

On the one hand, Meekyoung Shin explained that <Ruinscape> is an outcome of “Focusing on the fact that relics are what things ‘become,’ and are not created purposely by someone.”² In other words, the artist tried to reproduce the ‘age value’ of monuments, the ‘unintentional’ monuments in the words of Riegl, that lost their original functions and ended up “showing the traces of human life.” Soap perfectly reproduces the surface of the “originals,” including the firm stone buildings, the marble sculptures from ancient Greece, and the dazzling colors and smooth texture of Chinese ceramics. This weak and changeable material quickly demonstrates its ‘age value’ before our eyes. Starting with <Ruinscape>, the artist expressed her desire to engrave the flow of time on the surface of the works through <Petrified Time Series: Bronze> and <Written in Soap>.

<Petrified Time> from 2006 is especially ‘monumental’ and ‘unintentional’ in that sense. This is one of the early ceramics works of the artist that used iron powder to reproduce the patterns of the original iron-decorated white porcelains. The iron powder started to corrode and became blackish red in less than a year. For this reason, this work that was once sold was returned to the artist. The buyer exchanged this work for a new ‘ceramic work’ of the artist. In fact, the artist does not know when the iron powder started to change, but the large porcelain, with beautiful red flower patterns, has turned black and become distorted so that the original shape cannot be recognized now.³ <Petrified Time>, exhibited alone on the second-floor corridor, is actively disappearing while ‘unintentionally’ revealing traces of time.

All varnishing things cause intense emotions. In relation to this, Riegl explained that the ‘age value’ is simply recalled by our sensory perceptions and directly linked to emotional effects. Therefore, it does not require any academic knowledge or historical education,⁴ and it impresses people who are distant from a liberal arts education. The admiration for the ‘age value’ is close to an unconditional religious inspiration and is also close to an admiration for the relics of the past.

In the 18th century, the ruins, which would evoke emotional unrest solely by their traces of time, already swept through Europe. As a representative example, the French artist Hubert Robert (1733-1808) became the star of the Paris Salons in 1767, when he presented the paintings that restructured the glorious relics of the ancient Roman Empire into a bleak Ruinscape. Robert was called ‘Robert of the Ruins’ by the philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot. Robert was able to witness the vestiges of the ancient Roman Empire and the excavation of Pompeii, a city that was covered in volcanic ash, when he stayed in Italy for long time.

In the Salon of that particular year, Diderot described the charms of ruins in this way: These ruins arouse grand ideas inside me. All things turn to nothing, all things cease to exist, and all things pass. Only the world remains, and time lasts permanently. How long has this world continued? I walk between two eternities. In every place I look, the objects surrounding me speak of death and make me submit to what is waiting for me. How momentary is my

¹ Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its character and its origin,” trans. Kurt W. Foster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), 21. Original German text in 1903

² [Meekyoung Shin: The Abyss of Time] Exhibition leaflet (ArkoArt Center, 2018), 18

³ Interview with the artist

⁴ Riegl, *Op.cit*, 24, 28

existence compared to the existence of the weathering rock, the diminishing valley, the dying forest and all things declining above my head?⁵ The ‘fall of the empire’ was a topic that evoked the melancholy of the Europeans at the time. The rise and fall of a nation are the natural order of history, but the futility intensifies if it is a glorious empire that once ruled over the entire world like the radiant sun. Looking at the fragments of the one brilliant civilization, Diderot not only felt the finiteness of human beings, but also realized that France, his mother country, was destined to follow such path in the distant future.

Our eyes dither over the fragments of the Triumphal Arch, peristyles, pyramids, mosques and palaces, and we step back to ourselves. We contemplate the violation of time and scatter a pile of stones from the building in which we live on the floor in our imagination. Loneliness and silence surround us at that moment, and we are the sole survivors of a nation that no longer exists.⁶

Looking at the ruins from the past, Diderot referred to the absolute solitude that strikes us when we imagine the present turning into ruins in the future as ‘sweet melancholy.’ Such a future occurred much sooner than expected. The French Revolution in 1789 destroyed the palaces of the Bourbon Dynasty. The ancient city of Paris was repeatedly demolished and restored by the strong wave of modernization. Ruins are more attractive because they testify to the fact that all the beautiful things that exist now are destined to vanish one day. Desire grows with the threat of unavoidable loss.

To Meekyoung Shin, who graduated from a Korean art college in the 1980s, the classical arts of ancient Greece and Rome were surprisingly familiar despite the tremendous differences of time and distance. Plaster drawings that boil down the Giuliano, Venus and Agrippa were regarded as the absolute standards of the art college entrance examinations in Korea ever since Western art education started in the Japanese colonial period. For example, students who attended art colleges in the 20th century were trained to draw the heavy volume of the head of Agrippa on paper by drawing the head in the order of the eyes, nose, lips and haed. After finding the bones inside the muscles and curves on the surface by following the subtle shades created differently according to the angle of the view, they were constantly trained to recreate that drawing into clay art.

As an outstanding student among them, Meekyoung Shin left to study abroad in the United Kingdom in the mid-1990s. Around this time, Damian Hirst received the Turner Prize. The prize-winning work was. <Mother and Child: Divided>, which applied an antiseptic treatment to a mother and her calf, dividing them in half and putting them into glass boxes. In the art world of Meekyoung Shin, the plasters of ancient Greece and Rome that were similar to strong fortresses probably collapsed, like the palaces of a dynasty that had faced a grand revolution. After the experience in which the present suddenly turns into ruins and is pushed away to a distant past, where meaningful things become meaningless or at least turn into completely different meaningless or at least turn into completely different meaning and return as unfamiliar things in a different space and time, the artist decided to work with ‘soap.’ Soap was the material that she first started to carve at an early instead of hard stones. Perhaps soap was the ‘ruins’ of the artist from the very beginning.

⁵ Denis Diderot, “The Salon of 1767,” Brian Dillon ed., *Ruins* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 22

⁶ *Ibid.*

Ruins are dim traces of the past that disappeared but still exists in the same place. The original human intent in creating them was neutralized and removed. There only remain the accidents occurred by nature and time. Ruins endlessly summon us to the past, but they would no longer be ruins if we could entirely find and understand their roots. We try to preserve ruins, but the ruins will disappear once the preservation comes to completion. Ruins are ambiguous beings that stay in the middle of the confrontation between existence and absence, remembrance and oblivion, human beings and nature, will and coincidence, and preservation and destruction.⁷

The <Translation Series> that perfectly reproduce Chinese ceramics were displayed on top of wooden crates that looks as if they have just been delivered. Since these wooden crates were actually used to package and transport the works, there are various cautionary stamps on the surface of the crates, and stickers indicating the places of departure and the destination. The installations, which thus highlight the ‘mobility’ of the works, emphasize that these ceramics did not ‘originally’ belong to this place. It symbolizes the destiny of the ‘original’ ceramics imitated by the works of Meekyoung Shin.

Museums of varying sizes scattered around the Western world have such Chinese ceramics. When we face the blue and white porcelains, Wu Tsai are and mixed glaze in a display case of a museum, we are first overwhelmed by the enormous quantity before noticing the fancy colors, delicate patterns and delivers shapes. The Chinese ceramics introduced into the Western world have a long history, so ‘China’ became the name for these luxurious ceramics. However, they were exported in vast quantities starting during the reign of the Wanli Emperor of the Ming Dynasty in the late 16th century. The importation of ceramics accelerated as the Chinese taste came into vogue among the elite society of Europe. The products exported to Europe were mostly produced in Jingdezhen, the old hometown of ceramics. Accordingly, ‘Wanli’ and ‘Jingdezhen’ were used as common terms describing a type of ‘China’ among the ceramic lovers of Europe, along with the word ‘Kraak,’ that is derived from the Portuguese language.⁸

The word ‘Kraak’ is derived from the Portuguese ships (carracks) used for long-distance trading, but the term was used to refer to the blue and white porcelains produced in Jingdezhen, primarily during the reign of the Wanli Emperor in the late 16th century. As for their shape, many of them are wide plates or large and deep bowls for serving stew. In general, Kraak ware is decorated with flower, animal or plant patterns inside small circles, which are arranged radially in a wide area divided into sections. As such, a ‘Kraak’ is a special bowl with a shape and pattern designed to suit the dietary life of Europe and has a somewhat poor quality compared to the ceramics made for the royal family of China, but it was sold at an expensive price in different places in Europe, revealing the wealth and preference of the buyers. The reason why the Dutch East India Company was founded in 1602 was to take part in ceramic trading, then dominated by Portugal.

In the end, ‘ceramics for Europe’, or ‘European China ware’ are replicas without originals. They came from China, but they do not actually exist in China. They have arrived, but there

⁷ Michael S.Roch, “Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed,” Michael S. Roth with Claire Lyons and Charles Merewether, *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History or Art and Humanities, 1997), 8-9

⁸ Refer to the ‘Kraak ware’ page on Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kraak_ware.

is no starting point. To the eyes of Meekyoung Shin, much of the 'China ware' exhibited in museum display cases are incomplete begins that no longer pursue their original purpose, as intended by their original producers. In some ways, they are similar to the ruins that constantly come and go between the past and present, birth and extinction, and remembrance and oblivion, just like the ancient sculptures that turned into the 'plasters' of heads cut from their bodies.

3. The Abyss of Time

In [Authentic Ruins], Andreas Huyssen claimed that the collective nostalgia for aura and authenticity that appeared in the modern era, which was overflowing with replicas, translation and reproductions, is a symptom of modern society. Ruins are fascinating to modern people because they give the ontologically comforting idea that there used to be a 'better and simpler past' and a 'truly original being', though these things cannot be reached in this unstable world.⁹ As images are being reproduced meaninglessly and artworks have lost their aura, the works of Meekyoung Shin are disappearing while releasing an existence that penetrates our body in that place and at that time. When we perceive the active and extremely 'real' process of extinction with our olfactory sense instead of through the retina, we can feel the comfort that can only be created by the one and only absolute and unchanging being. Though I may not remember it, the work undoubtedly entered my body and existed in it.

⁹ Andreas Huyssen, "Authentic Ruins," Brian Dillon ed., *Ruins* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 52-54