

The Layers of Memory

On the paintings by Oh Se-yeol

The image is either monochrome, the entire frame filled with one color, or is sometimes split into two. It is extremely monotonous, and yet covered with figures of abundant implication. Exuding a tranquil energy engaged in the constant act of creation, the image has the power to comfort. Figures flicker along the filaments, aligned and spaced regularly like a rice seedbed in early summer. The dense rows of seedlings await the coming summer heat, followed by the autumn cool when the paddies are full of rice ready for harvest. A sparrow sweeps through like the wind, swirling the filaments here and there into a whirlwind. Of course, this is no ordinary seedbed, as a wild flower, a window frame, an automobile often rises to the surface as if playing hide-and-seek. None of these figures could have been painted for a specific purpose. It is difficult to identify any sense of inevitability in the figures chosen or any sense of context between the figures. And yet, they are sure to arouse within us a faint sense of longing.

The traces of figures erased or lightly sketched look as if they could disappear at any moment, making it hard not to feel pity or sympathy. The figures are so ordinary, but together they look precious as if they should be treasured for a long time. A small flower, an unfinished sketch of a bird—such figures remain afloat in our memories, constantly paddling near the surface, their traces impossible to erase.

Like this, the images by Oh Se-yeol carefully unfold in front of us the pages of a memory that had been skimmed or skipped through. They are bundles of memory that could belong to anyone. Those pages of memory drift back and forth between existence and absence, keeping us from ignoring the fact that they, as Go Chung-hwan put it, “enrich our lives with meaning.” Where does this alchemy of the mind originate? Memories exist in even layers, accumulated like rows of rice in the passing of time. Just like an underground spring that supplies water, the source of our memories exists deep down at an invisible depth and from there enriches and refreshes our lives.

The paintings by Oh Se-yeol are dominated by one color, and the more it is, the more accentuated is their two-dimensionality. The figures or their traces that surface to visibility obey such orders of a two-dimensional world, barely managing to keep their balance. While the images are conspicuously flat, each image consists not of a single plane but of multiple layers of matter, adding a sense of dignity to the notion of flatness. They are not merely flat images with a wide surface, but beneath the surface they also become structures with depth. This characteristic is what distinguishes them from what is commonly referred to as a monochrome painting, as well as from other monochromatic paintings in Korea that emerged as a trend.

Another notable feature of Oh's art is that he paints on a solid wooden panel more often than on a cloth canvas. As would a child when scribbling on the sidewalk or on the wall, Oh draws lines on a solid drawing board, erases them, and sometimes suddenly stops, leaving the painting looking unfinished. To some extent, his paintings are still works in the making. The thought that lingers after seeing his art is of how they appeared unfinished, or perhaps it is of the moment he chose to stop painting.

More often than not, his paintings remind us of the blackboard. It reminds us of our childhood when we would all rush up to the blackboard, take a piece of chalk, and imitate the teacher as soon as she left the classroom with letters and numbers still waiting to be erased. The faint memory of that harmless tension from boasting to decide who did the best impersonation of the teacher comes back in a series of gentle waves.

The letters or figures depicted on the panels are not symbols of anything in particular, but are rather simply visual manifestations of a fragmented memory. There is no story to tell, only glimpses of different memories that come and go as they please. For this reason they are often repetitive for no apparent reason. One example is the serial of numbers from 1 to 10 repeated line after line as though it formed a very long sentence. They are less numbers with meaning than traces of rote memorization.

Above all, the saturation of matter in his paintings evokes a feeling associated with the distinct features found in Korean modern art that refuses the Western tradition of oil painting. The grease is drained from the rich texture of oil painting, leaving the painting thin with a sense of softness, as though it had survived through years of wear and tear. Such feature common to the paintings of several Korean artists is a unique approach that first accepts the Western tradition of oil painting, but then adapts it to their own sentiment. Although each region in East Asia has accepted and interpreted Western painting differently, only in Korea has a technique developed based on a sentiment that refuses the Western tradition. This technique seems to be common, regardless of the subject of the painting. That is, whether the painting has a specific subject or is a pure abstraction is irrelevant. Therefore, Oh's paintings have something in common with the works by Park Soo-keun, a representative artist who portrays specific images, in their sentiment against Western oil-painting tradition, as well as with the monochromatic paintings of a well-known group of artists for their use of a nearly achromatic texture. In this respect, not only are Oh's paintings unrivaled when it comes to the incorporation of the most Korean of aesthetic sentiment, but he is a truly original artist whose work can be categorized under neither realist nor abstract art.

In short, the distinguished features of Oh's artwork include the use of limited colors close to a monochromatic rendering of the background, which is sometimes covered with a serial of symbols in repetition, and the sentiment against the Western tradition of oil painting. These elements serve as a shortcut for understanding his approach to art, but they can also pave the way toward the formation of a uniquely Korean sentiment. Although his is not confined to any type of art, I truly hope that he prides in belonging to a community of that shares the mentality of the Korean people.

Here is a child. Standing bashfully against a monochrome background, she somehow makes us pity her, but also feel proud. She does not shout for attention, but rather manifests herself as a figure of monumental status. Quiet but dignified. This is how the world of Oh Se-yeol unfolds before us.

Oh Gwang-su (art critic)