

The Window Opened To The Earth
The meaning of the series <Discourse> by Kim Keun-tai

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I.

There was an act in the beginning of the world. It is before the language was created. What would be the most primitive behavior of humans? That is what Kim Keun-tai wants to find. Through the dirt. His desire to return to the dirt is realized through the act of pouring stone powder, which is the raw material of ceramics, into a binder and pouring it onto the canvas, which is the most primitive act and it does not need any explanation. The reason why explanation is not necessary is that the primitive behavior is before language and beyond language. That's why I said at the outset, "There was an act in the beginning of the world."

Kim Keun-tai's work, which makes the desired shape while dilutely kneading stone powder and pouring it on the canvas, tilts the canvas around and lets it flow, takes the method of allowing objects to draw on their own along with the artist's will. In other words, it can be said that the artist's intention of 'let things speak for themselves' was revealed. What is "let things speak for themselves"? Isn't that the renunciation of the subject of perception as an artist? No, isn't it the most passive form of 'active' statement that tries to let go of the artist's consciousness, not giving up?

What does this paradox say? Isn't this the so-called generosity of restraining the eruption of passion and letting things shine themselves? This is why 'physical property' is important in Kim Keun-tai's work. The physical property is the name of the nature of an object, its existence has been degraded in the world of traditional paintings. Throughout the long history of Western painting, the expression of this property has maintained its name by relying on the contrast method, but faces a crisis with the invention of the camera in the early 19th century.

According to Plato, a painting corresponding to the shadow of a shadow is merely an illusion that makes it appear as though it does not exist by recreating the object. It was considered as deviating from the truth because it was three steps away from the original idea. For example, in Johannes Vermeer's <The Milkmaid> (oil on canvas/c.1660), the depiction of the texture of the rough clothes worn by a maid is an expression of physical properties through a representational technique. However, it is just an illusion because it does not actually exist in the picture. Plato argues that this is why poets and painters spreading the lies should be expelled from the republic.

In a realism painting, the hierarchy is formed according to the angle of the observer's gaze. Looking down from a higher place creates a vertical hierarchy. In painting, the spatial perspective is a device of 'visual rationalization' that is set to express the close area large and clear, and the distant area small and blurry. On the other hand, the arts in the era of Go-gu-ryeo show that the ruling class and the dominated class are expressed according to their status. In other words, high-ranking royalty or nobles were expressed large, while commoners and slaves of low status were expressed small.



However, if you look at the object from the same eye level, a horizontal relationship is formed and no hierarchy is established. Human relationships are also expressed in the same way when grasped in terms of equality. It is like in a democratic political system in which all voters, regardless of status, exercise equal voting power. Kim Keun-tai emphasizes this view of equality. He gazes on things at a horizontal level. This point of view may have come from his deep engagement and practice of 'Ganhwaseon' for the past several decades. In one interview, he said:

Question: What does it mean to look at everything horizontally?

Answer: Let's take me and you as an example. There is a huge gap in time between us. But is it meaningful to count those gaps? What if I just kick it all off? Wouldn't I be able to be you anytime and be in your position? It is like Yeok-ji-sa-ji (a Korean idiom). That doesn't mean I can treat you poorly. Applying this idea to everyone is the first step in horizontal viewing. Developing this, I tried to find the act of 'to see' and its meaning horizontally as a painter who captures and draws images." (NOBLESS, from the January and February 2021 interview articles)

So what Kim Keun-tai devised is so-called 'horizontal drawing'. It is a way of drawing on the canvas laid down. He first tried this technique in 2000 when he was invited to the [Artist of the Year] hosted by Sungkok Museum of Art. It was a peculiar technique of pouring thin stone powder dough onto the side of the canvas and then tilting the canvas back and forth to spill the dough. It is a conscious movement that frees paints from the artist's consciousness and gives autonomy to the paints. It is evident that Kim Keun-tai's methodology is not only the minimization of artistic actions performed by the artist, but also the active attitude of objects upside down. The first precedent painted with the canvas laid down in world art history is the "Dripping" technique in Jackson Pollock's Action Painting. Following the so-called "automatism" of surrealism, Pollock poured the paint while stepping and running over a wide canvas. Pollock's famous remark, "I don't know what I did while painting," suggests that he painted unconsciously. This is the end of the so-called easel painting. Kim Keun-tai also paints with the canvas laid down, but he is not unconscious. Rather, they draw with clear consciousness. He pours a lot of thin stone powder like porridge on the canvas and finishes the work at once. It reminds of the "one stroke theory" in calligraphy. As if a stream of water flows from a high place to a low place to find its place, the material is left to nature's method. It is the manifestation of so-called 'physical property'. While painting, there is one thing Kim Keun-tai does. When the stone powder dough flows and does not get caught in something, he opens the path with a brush. This minimal intervention is a factor that can be referred to as 'painting' in his work. If there is not even this minimal act, Kim Keun-tai's work will deviate from the concept of painting and would require another name.

II.

Ceramic art is the most primitive genre of art in that it uses dirt. The potter sits in front of the wheel, shapes the bowl, and works with the soil all day. At this time, the most important is the so-called 'the sense of touch'.



Kim Keun-tai uses stone powder, a ceramic material. The floor of his studio is covered with traces of the hardened stone powder porridge. Kim Keun-tai's stone powder porridge work, which is made with only one try, requires the creation of a canvas base that is close to penance until it is achieved. It is the result of 40 years of his painting work. Only he knows the subtle know-how for his painting. The secret of the know-how around the manufacturing process for the best work based on nature, such as color and texture, the proper condition (viscosity) of the stone powder dough, weather, humidity, etc. comes from the long training and practice. It is in this area that he is hesitant to confine his work within the linguistic fence of 'Dan-saek-hwa'. Then, what does Kim Keun-tai's work ultimately aim? The general rhetoric usually overlaid on monochromatics, which aims at the color and texture of the skin of the Joseon white porcelain represented by the moon jar, is literally nothing more than an investigation. Such modifiers risk trapping monochrome in the frame of nationalism. As seen in Kim Keun-tai's work, monochrome must be pushed further for aesthetic universality that the world can relate to.

III.

Going beyond so-called geometricism and expressionism. From the perspective of Western art, you might be able to see 'the third way' which is deviated from the context of geometric abstraction and abstract expressionism (Alfred H. Jr. Barr), which was divided into the so-called post-Impressionist Paul Cezanne and Paul Gauguin. The key is to get out of sight and restore 'the sense of touch'.

Yes. Vision is a capture. This is the strategy that "Western modernity" took after the Renaissance. After the invention of perspective during the Renaissance, the West began to conquer the world on the rush of Enlightenment. Western imperialism conquered the other according to a grand project of visual capture of perspective. It was an active expression and action of a strong will for the world.

Kim Keun-tai pays attention to the sense of touch, not to the sight. Of course, the act of seeing the works has no choice but to rely on sight, but the more important factor in his work is 'the sense of touch'. This is why intersubjectivity and ecological perspective stand out in his work. In that context, Kim Keun-tai pays attention to nature. The reason he pays attention to nature is the consistency of nature. Through constant observation and approach to the elements that make up nature such as clouds, sky, rocks, mountains, waves, etc, he is asking 'ontological questions about the truth of nature'. His work is more meaningful in light of the recent corona crisis caused by human rebellion against the law of nature. Ultimately, Kim Keun-tai's <Discourse> series is a warning against human errors by the world delivered through Kim Keun-tai's body. It comes as a reminder of meaning through natural elements.

The hospitality of natural elements, including soil, practiced by Kim Keun-tai also contains disasters such as the devastation of nature and retribution of nature. It is at this point when artists including poets shine with their foreknowledge. Kim Keun-tai's work belongs to the "silent language". There is absolutely no word. It doesn't mean that it's never spoken. When recalling the proverb "Silence is gold," his silence comes more meaningful than eloquence. Especially in a world where garrulity, sophistry, and false claims are rampant like these days.



IV.

In the same interview article, Kim Keun-tai said:

“What is it like to see an image? (Omitted) Are we really seeing it right? What about seeing and judging? We think we see what we see, but that’s not necessarily true. (Omitted) When we face the work, we intuitively feel something on the screen we see, but in the end, we always have to think about the power that makes us see it and the window we can see with.” (From the interview articles in the January and February 2021 issue)

What does it mean by 'the window where you can see with'? We need to pay attention to Kim Keun-tai's “physicality”. A painter is a person who lends his body to the world to fulfill his dreams and visions. From that point of view, Leonardo da Vinci is the person who “lent” his eyes (body) to the world in order to allow people in the Renaissance to see the world from a perspective. Considering the fact that post-Renaissance paintings were compared to “windows”, what should mankind now see the world through? I want to say that it is none other than the 'hand' and ‘the sense of touch' from the hands. And I would like to invite you to look back on the “Earth,” which is reminiscent of the sense of touch, that rich motherland. If so, how fortunate is it that Kim Keun-tai's work is from the dirt, the ground and the matrix of the world?

