

IN THE MAKING: YOUNG RIM AND EXTENDED PAINTING

written by Charles Merewether

Born in South Korea, Young Rim Lee was trained in Singapore at LASALLE College of the Arts. Prior to then, she had not been able to dedicate her time to being an artist but, nevertheless, had grown up in an artistically-oriented family. ⁽¹⁾ Over the past four years, she has produced a substantial and distinguished body of work.

The point of departure in appreciating the work of Young Rim lies in the relation to the physical presence of space in which she places her work. From her early paintings, while still a student, she began to explore the point of intersection between her work and the physical space surrounding it. One of the earliest works of this time was Untitled (2011).

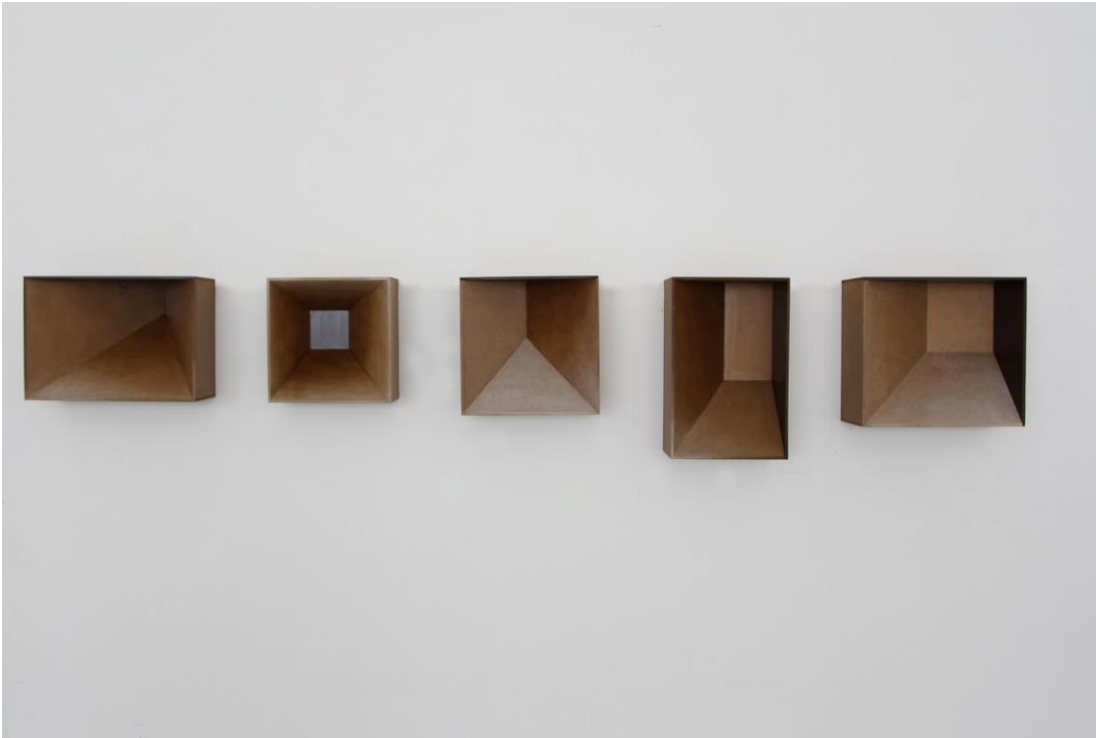


Untitled, 2011, Wall paint on MDF, 140 cm x 140 cm

While essential a monochrome in white, there is also an overlaying part, in the shape of a flat wedge, that appears as a thicker overlay. This doubling of surface disturbed the undramatic evenness of the monochromatic surface, giving it a sculptural presence. This became in turn a group of six such canvases from 2011, composed of white surfaces, each of which are subdivided into smaller sections.

¹ "Young Rim's father was the first director of Ho-Am Art Museum in Seoul. All his friends were critics or journalists, artists ..." Email correspondence, 7 January 2015.

There were other experiments, at this time, such as two series entitled of Grey Boxes and Brown Boxes (2011). Composed of pieces of MDF (Medium-density fiberboard and common household paint, they are hung on the wall. The components of each works are small open-ended boxes of different sizes placed next to one another. They each have different vanishing points and lines of perspective creating the illusion of a spatial depth.



Five brown boxes, 2013, wood stain on MDF, 185 cm X 35 cm overall

By 2012, Rim's work began to find greater resolution by virtue of experimenting further with the physical construction and form of the work. In particular, five works can be individually distinguished. Yellow Painting is composed of a roughly cut piece of waxed paper material secured to the wall by an off-cut piece of wood and block of MDF; A Cubicle with Painting, Part One is an irregular shaped piece of painted wood, against which rests a piece of long orange-colored wooden stick



A Cubicle with Painting - Part 1, 2012, Acrylic on wood, 122 cm x 118 cm

; L Painting is composed of two pieces painted with the same bright ochre, extending down from the ceiling and out onto the floor from the wall; NonStructural - Leaned Blue is made of seven short planks of various hues of blue painted wood leaning against the wall and Bundle Painted is a bundle of ten or so painted strips of wood, wrapped together by two aluminum strips and then installed against the wall. All of them either introduce a three dimensional component or extend out into the space or on the floor.



Nonstructural – Leaned Blue, 2013, Wood stain, acrylic on wood, 68 cm x 64 cm

Extended painting it may be called, which is neither strictly sculpture nor installation so much as a departure from painting as self-sufficient.

Culture of Materials:

The historical precedents to Young Rim's her work are various, stretching back to French cubism and the construction reliefs of 1912-14 by Picasso and Braque. Using wood, paper, sheet metal, as well as newsprint and canvas, these works enter the real space. They create what Picasso and Braque would call a 'tableau-objet.' During this time the work of both Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksander Rodchenko in Russia began to explore the concept of Faktura in Moscow. Moreover, we may trace back Tatlin's visit to Picasso's studio on 1913, a period prior to the Revolution when the links between Russia and Paris were strong. ⁽²⁾ Following Tatlin's return to Moscow, he produced his first 'Counter-Reliefs.'

Margit Rowell writing of Tatlin during these years, makes a critical distinction between Tatlin and Picasso. She notes the Russian development of a 'culture of materials' in which art was not illusionistic, nor about a spatial organization. For Picasso, the work remains the embodiment of a pictorial idea, the result of a painter's vision rather than a sculptor's. As a result, the medium was subordinated to the image, stripped of its specificity and autonomy. As distinct from this, Tatlin and Russian artists, architects and poets as well as both photographers and filmmakers believed in a "truth to materials," the focus of which was the medium and technique as the true constituents of the work of art. To speak of 'Faktura' was to imply the specific substance or texture and "the constructivist object exists in the viewer's real space." It was a self-contained reality and entailed both an object of physical materials and its "social context within which it served a need or function." ⁽³⁾ Tatlin's fellow artist Varvara Stepanova wrote later of his work, and that of other artists of this period:

Technique and Industry have confronted art with the problem of construction as an active process and not reflective. The 'sanctity' of a work as a single entity is destroyed. The museum which was the treasury of art is now transformed into an archive. ⁽⁴⁾

We can find a correspondence to this Russian line of thought in Young Rim, certainly the emphasis given to materiality as distinct from the pictorial. ⁽⁵⁾ In Asia, Robert Chabet in the Philippines and Kishio Suga in Japan should be distinguished. Here, we may note Chabet's

² See Margit Rowell, "Vladimir Tatlin: Form/Faktura, The Factory of Facts" in October No. 7, (Winter, 1978), pp.83-108.

³ See discussion by M. Rowell, op.cit. pp. 85ff.

⁴ Varvara Stepanova, text from 5x5=25 exhibition, 1921, Moscow.

⁵ In regard to the North American minimalist tradition, particular artists such as Robert Mangold also made shaped canvases with brightly colored surfaces. (Thanks to Ian Woo for this reference). Young Rim has herself mentioned the importance of Robert Ryman's work but, I would note also the work of his son, Cordy Ryman. Grain Glow (2013) is made of four slabs of wood placed one above another. His work shows a similar interest to Young Rim in the relations between abstraction and the use of pieces or scraps of wood as well as salvaged industrial and construction materials.

ground-breaking 'Russian paintings' from his 'Plywood' series, produced from 1984 onwards. This group of four paintings drew on his own experimentations with abstraction and collage from the Sixties onwards, as well as art he may have seen in his trips to Europe and North America. But, unlike his contemporaries, Chabet went further, abandoning paper and canvas for plywood and extending his constructions out into real space. Further, in a manner that recalls the ambition of the Russian artists; Chabet's viewed his work as figuring the desire for a new social order. ⁽⁶⁾ While perhaps more formal in her aesthetic pursuit, Young Rim's shows in her challenge of traditional boundaries of the pictorial space and use household or industrial materials, a corresponding impulse to that of Chabet.

Kishio Suga was a member of the Mono-Ha group in Japan at the end of the Sixties and, as with his fellow artists, explored the relations between material and matter. They championed the co-existence of natural and organic materials. For Suga, place and context or situation, as distinct from the Western modernist tenets of form and autonomy, were of the utmost importance. Writing of the necessary form of openness towards the world as-it-is, Suga emphasized how things and spaces can be made evident through exploring their interrelationships and the situation in which they are found. One such work would be Rising (2006) in which a series of short cut wooden pieces lean against one another on a surface jutting out from the wall.

In regard to South Korean art, the closest corresponding artist to Young Rim is that of Yoo Youngkuk, an artist of the pre World War Two War generation. In a work entitled Work 1 (1939), first shown at the Third exhibition of the Free Artists' Association in Tokyo, Youngkuk composed a work of a number of cut boards in close relation to one another. ⁽⁷⁾ For the time, it was a radical work, distinguished by use of commonplace materials its both construction and presentation. Again, we see a correspondence with Young Rim's work, in particular Red Cedar - Charcoal Blue (2013) composed of three cut planks of wood placed one above another. ⁽⁸⁾ But Young Rim, unaware of this historical precedent, has gone further. She

⁶ These were first shown in a solo exhibition of Chabet 'To Be Continued' at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Singapore - LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore in January 2012. Young Rim was studying at the College at that time. The exhibition was then shown at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in Manila.

⁷ *ibid.*, p.4.

⁸ There seems little that corresponds in the substantial history of abstraction in South Korea, a history that stretches back to the pre and post-War period at the time of the Korean war and relations with Japan and Japanese culture. Subsequent to this period saw the rise of 'tansaekhwa' (monochrome) painting in the Sixties. See Joan Kee, Contemporary Korean Art, (University of Minnesota Press), 2013. Originally her doctoral thesis, it was entitled Points, Lines, Encounters, Worlds: Tansaekhwa and the formation of contemporary Korean Art. (New York: Institute of Fine Arts), 2008. In her book, Kee maps out the different ways through which abstraction has been explored, focusing on such artists as Lee Ufan, Park Seobo, Kwon Young-woo, Yun Hyongkeun, and Ha Chonghyun.

brings the the wooden components into direct dialogue with one another, pushing the pictorial into the sculptural and real space.

Recent work:

In 2013, Young Rim paintings take on new challenges that culminate in 2014 with her invitation to participate in Poetics of Materiality at Osage Gallery in Hong Kong in January 2014 and then her first solo exhibition Cutting into Space, held at Cottonseed Gallery in Singapore.



Installation view of 2014 exhibition ***Cutting into Space*** at Space Cottonseed Gallery, Singapore

The first work we might focus on is a composite series named 56 Sketches of small works that appear to be experiments. While working within the frame, many of them incorporate an extraneous element onto a painted surface. Then, over the course of the year, Young Rim produced a series of important works, again restlessly testing the ontological limits of painting itself. The result was that her work could justifiably no longer be referred to as simply painting. There were very few painters around her engaged in such an enterprise. In Singapore Jeremy Sharma was and is one exception. Others were delving into or eradicating all marks of intervention on the surface but painting it remained and Issues of abstraction was uppermost for these artists.

For Young Rim, a diptych such as Folding Yellow (2013) extends out from the flat picture surface to create a three dimensional 'sculptural' object. It was an oddly shaped, almost

awkward painting morphing into an object. Alteration (2013) is composed of three large non-rectangular painted boards. They are positioned adjacent to one another as if in dialogue. Seen together, our eyes shifts back and forth, as we become acutely aware of the empty space between. This space appears as positive not negative, a space running vertically up between the adjacent canvases and then veering to the left and out into nowhere, the broad plane of the wall.

Constructions - Adjacent plum (2013) is composed of two rectangular shaped pieces of wood, each painted different colors with a short thin wedge, painted burgundy of wood, held between the upper half of the two pieces. Or Plum Stick, a pink wooden rectangle leaning against the wall with plum red plank leaning against it. And then Rectangle - Dark Burgundy that first appears as a roughly cut, approximate square, with two layers of paint, a dark burgundy square partially covering a burgundy surface. And both Red Cedar - Charcoal Blue (2013) and Red cedar - Decolonized Green (2013), each composed of a number of different sized, untreated, short wooden planks, layered horizontally one above another and then each painted over with acrylic paint.



Red Cedar – Charcoal Blue II, 2014, Acrylic on wood. 118 cm x 124 cm x 4 cm overall.

Young Rim's recent 'extended paintings' push beyond the two-dimensional painted surface. The work takes on a physical quality almost sculptural dimension, negating its two dimensionality and sheer flatness. Flatness is no longer important. These works are not about a debate with pictorialism. Her engagement with everyday materials and the

dimension of space are co-extensive. In such works, the painted surface itself is no more important than the material itself or its shape and location.

The work of Young Rim carries painting into being installational sculpture. They are not only about the limits of painting but, more so, they recover a hidden history within modernism from the time of Tatlin to now. This history is one in which the materiality of modernization is not subject to a purely aesthetic impulse but rather, to the contrary, whereby aesthetics become the subject of everyday materiality.

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