

INTUITION AND SIGNIFICANCE

IN THE ART OF LEE YOUNG RIM

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COHESION IN CREATIVE VARIETY

Lee Young Rim creates artworks in a broad range of artistic expressions, from painting on rectangular and differently shaped canvases, from wall-constructions using wooden elements, wooden boxes or mixed media to large sculptural installations. Her main focus is to examine and perceive space by applying optical emphasis or visual illusion to actual spatial elements. Imperfection, natural materials and saturated colors are her preferred 'tools'.

She explores the rational and biological, fused with the psychological, combining the logic of how our eyes work with our innate and mostly unconscious desire for recognizing structure in everything we see. Her use of geometry, sometimes rational while other times playful, is a logical choice. Her coloring is a natural consequence of how our perception of space happens in the natural world. Her color palette is clearly based on nature itself and not on a constructed color system.

Lee Young Rim's works testify an intelligent combination of the intuitive understanding of biology, rationality and psychology, that all play their role in the visual appeal in art. Her choice of materials, subjects and colors led her to explore a broad variety of artistic executions, more often than not combining features of optical attraction with features of the rational mind, leading to her various series. It would be a mistake to assert Lee Young Rim should focus on just one of her various series.

CREATIVITY EMBRACES RISK

We all admire persons who take risks and have the courage to accept and address the possibility of failure. This shapes our interest in sport, in business and certainly in art. Artists that merely repeat themselves avoid risks and failure, circling around in their personal comfort zone. After a while their works become boring. In general, viewers prefer artistic development (hence taking risks) rather than repetition of small variations of the same artwork. Artists initially create works for themselves, but when they wish these works to become part of the world, in the end the other person as viewer is the actual purpose and a decisive factor.

It is underestimated that in many art viewers an artist's creative risk-taking causes excitement for that art. Art professionals believe that, to position an artist, the audience would need to be able to recognize a specific artist from a mile distance and at a glance. To this simple 'branding' artists are under demand who reduce their creativity to endless repetition. On the art market this may have worked for a while, but in recent times one can observe that in art such simplification of creativity merely led to a loss of excitement. Lee Young Rim has to be admired for achieving the opposite.

In her various series of works Lee Young Rim sometimes more seriously focuses on the logic and almost rationality of certain work, while in other works she freely allows herself to experimentally play, like with found objects and a free handling of materials and paint. The artistic control required for getting the compositions of her paintings, the wooden reliefs and shadow boxes just right, can only evolve because she allows herself to play around with surprising combinations of materials and spontaneously found and chosen things, playing on

the knives' edge, between success and failure.¹

In a certain way comparable to Lee Young Rim, famous Spanish artist Joan Miró searched for inspiration and continuous renewal of his abstract form language by using shapes he cut out of magazines. These shapes, ranging from portrait pictures of movie stars to fashion mannequins or abstract structures, seem random, but to the artist they explicitly caught his attention. He played around with such 'found objects', gluing them on a sheet of paper in combination with pencil lines and some paint, searching rational compositions that became studies for painting. Such collages often led to surprising organic shapes and unexpected compositions. Also Picasso's creative side-paths into sculpture and ceramics led him to change and improve his painting and vice versa. Lee Young Rim's approach is very comparable.

THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF LEE YOUNG RIM

Lee Young Rim's visual language might as a whole be defined as *spatial geometrical abstract*. Her appealing sense for application of color and her handling of material are far removed from any dogmatic method and are plainly based on her appreciation and understanding of nature's phenomena. A liberal but thoughtful approach, combining mind-body-matter with nature we much need in art of our time. The tactility and tangibility of her works trigger the impulse for a viewer to touch the work, which adds to the general pleasure of experiencing the materials, shapes and colors.

In the Western modernist tradition, people may associate Lee Young Rim's artworks with certain abstract art earlier created by Western artists, going back to Western pioneers of abstraction, the Russian constructivists, American Minimalism, European nihilistic movements like Zero, Systems Art or Fluxus. Associating Lee Young Rim with these artists works only to a small degree. One is reminded that abstraction and geometric forms were in use since millennia in most cultures in the East and in the West. Obviously, such artistic inspirations flowed back and forth through time between such different parts of the world, not necessarily copying but transforming such inspirations into something of one's own. As such, all cultures and national identities are partially unique, but for a much larger part hybrid, making it hardly feasible to reduce any artist to one national culture alone.²

Thus, Lee Young Rim's visual language indeed refers for a part to international modern art and for some part to specific Korean culture. For instance, the particular shapes of Lee Young Rim's *Shaped Canvas Series* coincide with geometrical patterns that have always been a part of traditional Korean ornamental patterns, but also features in other cultures. Her *Boxes Series* and *White Lines Series* involve lines of perspective and reference a particular Korean artistic expression of 19th century known as *Ch'aekkori* paintings, using perspective,

¹ Where failure is a serious problem for an astronaut or surgeon, it still is of basic importance for an artist to kick and push her or his courage trusting to follow her/his own bumpy road of open creativity. Because failure in art is a natural given, it is a wrong concept to imagine everything an artist touches would have to be an ultimate work of art. Artists like Monet, for instance, destroyed large amounts of works when at some point he decided these paintings not to be good enough.

² A topic that is quite complex, because most Western abstraction evolved by Europeans being inspired by seeing features of Asian cultures. Simultaneously, this is a study that has become highly topical in our current geopolitical situation. Merely as mind-teaser: most Western abstract artists, especially in the 1920s until the 1980s, aimed for perfect 'scientific' neutrality and objectivity (theoretically imagined as nature's processes at a deeper level). Asian abstraction is different as it is much more linked to nature's processes in everyday reality.

illusionistic surfaces and all kinds of everyday objects.³

The playfulness of such compositions, the inclusion of everyday objects (books, vases) finds its analogy in Lee Young Rim's free assemblages with found objects. A series she calls *Drawing*, as in 'drawing from, extracting from, choosing'. Creating her boxes is a logical consequence of her exploration of space itself. A box, after all, is a space like a small room. The free but rational compositions of her boxes on a wall, show how Lee Young Rim explores compositions extensively and will inspire and be inspired by her more liberal approach to space in all of her other works. This is not much different from how Miró benefitted from his free collages mentioned earlier.

Important is to appreciate the working of focus of attention, particularly in a creative artist. An artist develops a preference for certain shapes, subjects and materials that become her or his focus of attention. This makes it inevitable that this artist's attention will naturally and automatically be drawn by anything that offers a visual link or association to that focus. Lee Young Rim's diversity of works revolves around her focus of attention on space and elements evoking space, like lines, perspective, light (color) and tactile materials. She addresses the experience of space in an analytic way and studies how such experiences through an artwork relate to the space itself. In her own words: "... *how does fictional and pictorial space - in a painterly gesture - and actual space - as an object - interplay within real space?*"

Because the perception of space has much to do with light, her very effective and idiosyncratic *White Lines* paintings with the sharp white lines (associative of lines of perspective) may well have originated from her observations of light and shadows thrown by sunlight shining through windows on a wall. Lee Young Rim also painted some of such works without the white lines, offering a new version of impressionist space. The courage to create the mysterious depth in these works, recurring in her *Shaped Canvas Series*, will have been motivated by playing with actual space in her series of boxes, wall constructions and free assemblages. Her choice of handling paint, often allowing the paint to be totally absorbed by the rough wood in her *Red Cedar Series*, or to visually stand out as a kind of added calligraphy in her *Cluster Series* and *Dipped Series*, results in a very pleasant and natural visual experience.

It is not much help to use labels like the traditional contrasting notions of abstraction versus figuration. Is abstract space actually abstract? When space is perceivable because of natural light and natural colors, can it actually be abstract? Lee Young Rim's works appeal as they do, because they openly address the pleasure of seeing the tactility of both natural and virtual space, of imperfection and the charm of nature and materiality itself.

PERCEPTION AND VISUAL APPEAL

From neuroscience we can learn much about perception and how an artworks' visual appeal may trigger natural attention in a viewer.⁴ While it is beyond the scope of this essay to

³ Though art history mentions this style to be initiated by Koreans seeing illusionistic paintings at the Chinese court, then in general known as *Jesuit perspective*, in fact not European central perspective but Chinese multi-levels perspective was used. Strong indications exist, that European central perspective was developed in Florence (Alberti) upon learning about Chinese perspective in early 15th century. Another example of art historical (con)fusions and mixtures. In her Boxes series, Lee Young Rim uses central perspective, no Chinese perspective.

⁴ See Fré Ilgen, *The Viewer? The Actual Purpose of Art*, Salon Studio Ilgen, Germany, 2022, ISBN 978 3 00 072728 3.

describe all features involved in visual perception, for understanding the elegant sensibility of Lee Young Rim's artworks, the following may be helpful.

Neuroscience appreciates the eyes not as portal to the brain, but as essential part of the brain. Our eyes swivel all the time, scanning our immediate environment, some of which we are aware of (saccadic movements), others are too quick for our conscious perception (*micro saccadic* movements, about 5 per second). For a large variety of reasons our eyes may move by our own decision, but also move by reflex (not conditioned by the mind). Eyes scan and look at things within our focus in very quick and repetitive ways.

These eye movements are processed in parts of our brain, but only start to play a role within our main awareness at the moment the repetition of the same eye movements becomes strong enough to distract from other perceptions (like thinking about problems). In art this natural urge of our eyes to look longer and repeatedly is for a large part caused by visual imperfections in the execution of the artwork. Imperfections that are naturally caused by the tactile materials Lee Young Rim chooses, like unpolished wood and sensitive combinations of machine-cut with hand-cut or naturally shaped wood. The other important artistic ingredient for causing a person to look longer at the artwork is a sensitive application of large and subtle contrasts in materials and colors.

All such elements are basic ingredients in Korean *Dansaekwha* painting, known for combining pure universal expressions with the personal touch of the artist, in contrast to Western art where artists painstakingly attempted to get rid of the subjective. Lee Young Rim is different from *Danseakwha* as in her work she incorporates a conscious study of space, while *Dansaekwha* artists apply artistic means based on various ways of calligraphic notations, intending to make spontaneous immediate notes on a surface, calligraphic notations that are intended to be only surface related (what the American critic Greenberg branded as flat painting, avoiding the 'illusion' of space), which in principle is impossible, as any artistic note on a surface suggests some sense of space. In that sense, Lee Young Rim's work is purposefully addressing and not denying a sense of space. An analogy of her work with *Dansaekwha* is her conscious and precise compositional application of touches of paint, like in her *Cluster Series*. In her related though different *Dipped Series*, Lee Young Rim's application of paint seems spontaneous, and by intuition.

Simultaneously, psychology teaches us how all persons have an innate preference to look for the comfort of a logical structure. When looking at art, this may be found in the shape and composition, or in the interplay between pictorial elements within an art work. When you look at Lee Young Rim's various works you may observe how she uses strict and precise lines, elegantly differing in width (therefore, in visual tension), as well as references to perspective and indications of geometrical patterns, offering hints at a structure. A structure that is not too obvious but more or less sensed. Simultaneously, you may find in many details how Lee Young Rim applies a sensitive imperfection. For instance, some of the outlines of her shaped canvasses are precisely (machine) cut, while others are free hand-cut and slightly wobbly. A combination that will cause our eyes to repeatedly look. In her *Open Canvas Series*, she applies precisely cut pieces of wood of rationally decided formats (or painted squares) with a kind of natural free-hand geometry. The stacking of wooden elements, like in her *Red Cedar Series*, *Cluster Series* or *Dipped Series* shows a related though different combination of rationally decided, with intuitively decided shapes and compositions.

ARTISTIC ORIGINALITY

The great artists of the European Renaissance have built on the creative abilities of the late

Hellenistic time, transforming these through newly developed techniques in painting, like using oil paint, and in sculpture through a further development of casting in bronze. In the European Baroque the big leap towards more visual dynamics evolved based on new knowledge of the movements in the universe, and on seeing the dynamics of artistic expressions in various Asian cultures (including Persian, Indian, Chinese and Arab). In Italy there was more access to Asian scroll paintings of landscapes, figures, ornaments and calligraphy than openly has been acknowledged by art historians. The leading art developments of 19th century France could not exist without building on the Renaissance and on new inspirations from Asia.

In the end, the exaggerated emphasis on artistic innovation, so long dogmatized by the Western art market, is mere wordplay. Artists openly referencing and building on artistic expressions done by others before, has always been natural and justified. After all, music or food or sunshine (all that is perceivable by our senses) have not changed that much in millennia nor did our human preference for such features. Therefore, personal artistic transformation automatically makes such existing artistic expressions appealing and relevant to our own time. A form language and choice of materials one may associate with earlier artistic expressions in fine art, but transformed in her own unique way, make Lee Young Rim's works idiosyncratic and significantly contemporary.

SIGNATURE STYLE OVER BRAND PRODUCT

We know how through all times artistic *development* was always admired and appreciated by viewers, rather than endless repetition or mere variation of the same artwork. Repetition of the same led to identifying certain works with the name of a specific artist and vice versa. In 20th century, likely since the upcoming of art criticism in the late 1950s in the USA, to acknowledge and admire an artist's signature style became indicative. The signature style being the topics and materials the artist chooses, and the painterly or sculptural style employed by that artist.

Since the later 1960s the art market gradually professionalized, developing concepts for marketing that originate from consumer markets. At the same time, talking about the *art-scene* shifted to talking about the *art-market*. Professional marketing methods focused less and less on artistic development, hence less on a signature style, and progressively on the repetition of a 'product' (the artwork). For various decades the main focus of art intermediaries, including galleries, museums and art press, has thus been on what they call *branding* an artist. This concept of branding led to restriction of artistic freedom. Many galleries and curators would only look for artists that are known for one specific kind of artwork (as singular product).

This worked for a while, in a time when there was a hunger for art, driven by a general excitement of art, partially by the promise of art as financial investment. In the meantime, this approach has run its course. The interest in and excitement for art continues, but at a very different level, more within the perimeters of the interest of *the viewer* of art.

In the past decades, one can observe how there was a shift from art lovers and collectors desiring to own branded artworks, to art lovers and collectors looking at an artwork for reasons closer to perceptual well-being and enjoyment. In contrast, many art professionals still hold on to the dogma of the brand-product. Lee Young Rim has the courage to follow her own drive. Though it has been logical that for so long professional art intermediaries set the tone for the art presented on the market, first art critics then art dealers, or a handful of main collectors, a changed appreciation of the audience shifts this power to the other side, to the

general, but also to the individual viewer. Artists are well advised to have an understanding of how this excitement can be met. Artist and viewer may meet on a mutual level of art appreciation, not through 'ten golden rules' for success, but on basis of shared natural perimeters that include the multiple facts of the biological component of art, but also the psychology of risk taking. Here lies the significance of Lee Young Rim's art.