

Lines in Passage*

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I first encountered Sekyung Lee's works at the exhibition Detail, at Gallery Simon in 2013. My usual routine is to quickly skim through the gallery when I go to an exhibition in the Sagan-dong area. But in the case of the Detail exhibition, I remember slowing down and trying to look closely at the works, paying attention to the details. The exhibition consisted of a mixture of works—some that required concentration on the details, as indicated by the title, and those that seemed to be visually less concerned with detail. It was easy to see that Sekyung Lee's "details" were hairs. Instead of pigment, it was hair that decorated the plates. Since (if it not were for the hair) the decorative designs did not seem to carry any special meaning, the plates appeared to be part of a collection by someone with elegant taste; and in that the work simultaneously conveyed the contrasting emotions of disgust and charm by transforming objects from daily life, it seemed akin to a surrealist objet. The works were placed on pedestals and shelves, and were strictly separated from viewers by solid-looking glass cases, apparently following the display method of museums. This exhibition method, presenting the "plate" as an object of fetishism, as if it were a relic, reminded me of the institutional critique strategy, which questions the status of works of art and art institutions; but it also seemed to have a feminist view, in that it used the forms of kitchenware and craft. Years later, I had the opportunity to participate in an artist-in-residence program together with Lee, where I came to understand the artist and her work more deeply, and learned that her works had begun from private and autobiographical stories, rather than some strategical motive.

The first word that comes to mind when one thinks of artist Sekyung Lee is “hair.” This is natural, considering that since the time of her studies in Germany, hair has always been present on the ceramic tableware she has consistently used as the support for her work, and even on other supports such as carpets or tiles. Because the hair is attached to tableware, which is supposed to be kept in a clean state, the reaction of disgust that follows—like a “conflict clause”—also seems natural. But such binary opposition alone is not enough to explain the path through which the hair evokes this emotion of disgust. The artist appropriates traditional patterns to decorate the vessels, and fills the designs with hairs instead of pigments. The elaborately attached hairs are transformed into lines on the plates, and these lines gather to form figures. Here the thin lines are almost perfectly replaceable by the hair; however, the shapes that take up relatively larger areas, including those with tones and shadows, must be achieved through collective lines of hair, thus causing some discord with the original images. (This of course is not because of the artist’s lack of skill in dealing with the material, but due to the characteristics of hair, which cannot be reduced into solid areas or soft gradations of tone.) If the artist’s works cause disgust, it is something that occurs in this discord. If we say that the hair itself causes disgust, according to the opposition clause, then the bundle of hairs the artist has deliberately left hanging down should be a primer of disgust, but on the contrary, the long lines extending out from the figures actually achieve soft visual tactility and captivate the viewers. Therefore, to be precise, the disgust occurs not from the material—hair—itsself, but from the betrayal of the viewers, who expected to see carefully painted ink wash tones. The gaze of spectators, naturally following the thin lines, is disrupted due to the severance of the lines, and due to such division of the gaze, they come face to face with the materiality of the hair.

Compared to Lee’s well-known ceramic works, the lesser-known Recollection project seems like an attempt to narrow the distance from spectators by removing the “disgust” tag. This project asks participants to provide intimate personal stories and related images, which are repre-

sented on tiles using the participants' hair. By erasing the opposing clauses of clean tableware vs. dirty hair through the use of tiles (which feel like paper due to their particular texture), and filling them with the personal stories and DNA of the participants instead of traditional icons, the Recollection project seems to have been invented to trigger intimate emotions, as if one is looking at the portrait of an individual. The most impressive work in this project was Recollection Piano Score, a collaboration with a participant who sent the image of a music score, a piece she had played together with her mother in childhood. The score, consisting of regular lines rather than the previous organic curves and tones of traditional patterns, was an optimal image to embody through hair. The score was represented perfectly without "disconnection," so that the materiality of the hair was unnoticeable, and the slight sense of thickness even made it look clearer than the printed version. Considering that the average thickness of a hair is 100 micrometers, and is impossible to draw by hand, the thickness, consistency and clarity of the lines embodied in this work gave it a sensuous merit difficult to find in other traditional media. The irreplaceable lines seemed to prove that the hair could go beyond the role of subverting people's expectations, and serve as a medium that functioned as a formative element called the line. It became an opportunity for the artist, who had assumed a peculiar status through her use of peculiar material, to be seen as a master of this particular material.

Sekyung Lee's 7th solo exhibition, *The Nature of Line*, her first show after a gap of nine years, reduces the hair into the formative element called the line, as signified by the title, and searches for possibilities to go beyond specific materiality, extending to an aesthetic realm. Lee, after graduating from university and receiving a master's degree with a major in ceramics, changed her major to contemporary art when she went to Germany to study. Repeatedly agonizing over her work, and feeling the limitations of the material called clay, she came to notice her own hair, and discovered its possibility as an art medium. She began exploring its possibility of expression as a line, by placing hairs on a paper in various ways; and based on her personal stories, eventually

thought of the impure combination of plate and hair. (This choice was no doubt related to the influence of her mother, who was a cuisine researcher, and the artist's personal history of long hair since childhood, in addition to her career as a ceramics major.) In this exhibition, Lee returns to her early drawings, which were the matrix of her later works attaching hairs to ceramics, tiles and carpets. (Though these drawings were the matrix of the methodology that brought fame to the artist, they had seldom been shown to the public.) Here, the tableware is no longer visible, and tiles with the texture of paper appear as the main support (paper is also used as support), thus emphasizing the form of drawing.

Compared to its important, decisive role in the outcome of painting, drawing has often been perceived as a mere preliminary stage for painting, and treated as an incomplete state of art. In contemporary times, this hierarchy has been broken down, and the importance of drawing has been newly brought into relief, with the process of art now considered as important as the result. While the background of painting is passive, waiting to be filled, the empty margins of drawing carry an active force that enables the line to thrive. While the solid self-completeness of painting is an issue limited to visual sense, drawing transcends its limitations as a medium, establishing free relations with all practices that pursue a state of undecidedness, from prehistoric cave murals to children's scribbles, process art, and even land art. Therefore, if painting is comparable to a journey toward a set path, drawing can be compared to an adventure, in which one wanders about without destination and encounters unexpected worlds. When we place Lee's works against this classification of painting and drawing, the changes seen in her recent new works feel welcome. In this exhibition, the artist discards her objective of trying to fill in pre-set shapes or figures, and creates new forms by stacking hairs one by one. The first hair, placed according to the artist's human nature, decides the position of the next hair. The small differences that occur as the following hairs are regularly piled up bring change to the movement of the line, and as this aspect of change creates a wave, certain figures are derived, resembling a sandstone valley formed over a long period of time, or a depiction of

the process of cells multiplying. These lines, resembling nature, settle naturally on the support according to their properties, such as thickness and resilience, and in the moment the hair is reduced into a line against the background, we finally perceive the difference between drawing a line and placing one. Unlike a mark made by applying physical power, the hair is placed gently on the picture-plane without causing any damage to the surface. If we imagine the scene of the artist picking up the hair with a pair of tweezers and carefully placing it, the softness of the line settled on the picture-plane seems to visually convey to us the weight and resilience of the hair.

While the hair in the artist's previous works was devoted to the role of challenging authority and subverting spectators' expectations, deliberately creating discord, in this exhibition the artist stops filling in particular patterns, and elicits diverse effects by not going against the natural properties of the hair. Looking at the diversity of these lines, I thought perhaps the artist is now attempting to reconcile with the world of material. The energy drawn by the soft curves and waves, the forms resembling nature, seem to enable the material called hair to reveal itself as a reality, and to recover the life force of a body part that has been left in fragments. If you felt both tension and stability in the artist's "drawings," that was probably because the sense of movement traversing hair, line, material and figure was functioning rightly.

참고 문헌

- [1] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art Since 1900*, trans. by Soo-hee Bae, Junghoon Shin, et. al., Seoul: Semicolon, 2016, p. 146.