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The Ongoing Flow of Suki Seokyong Kang



Crossing Plane, 2015 (installation view). Imin Museum of Art, Seoul. Photo by Nothing Studio

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The experimental nature of Suki Seokyeong Kang's art practice embraces many different media such as painting, video, installation, and, more recently, larger scale ambiances. It all started with painting and imaginative investigation of this traditional medium in which Kang has studied, while simultaneously developing interests in historical Korean art disciplines, particularly court dances and music notations. As a foundation for conceptual and structural aspect of her art making, the artist appropriates the system of Jeongganbo.^[1] The traditional Korean musical notation structure, Jeongganbo consists of a grid of rectangular cells (Jeongs), each of them containing the inscribed rules about tone and length of sound and the particular body movements and lyrics to accompany it. Each Jeong therefore might be seen as an individual entity that, through coexistence with all the other separate Jeongs, creates harmony. Kang translates historical, structural and metaphorical properties of Jeongganbo into contemporary artistic vocabulary to reflect on today's humanity and the everlasting flow of its tensions and amities.

Through her multifarious interests, the artist pursues the investigation of basic properties of various artistic mediums – surfaces, bodies, frames and edges. She studies the possibility of a movement in the designated two-dimensional or three-dimensional spaces (sometimes the painting's surface, other times the exhibition space area) and its restrictions and possibilities. The abstract compositions in Kang's two-dimensional works consist of sequential rectangular elements with slightly distinct features that form a foundation for organizing colors and layers. These paintings might seem as a platform for reflecting on the Jeongganbo notations, which get enacted in abstracted way, in subtle earthy colors and in soft technique of gouache on paper, and later mounted on canvas. While painting on paper which is laid on the floor, and accordingly moving around it, the artist, through her own choreographies and agile brushstrokes, seems to underline the dimensions of space and time, also inscribed in the original structure of Jeongganbo. Drippings and accumulation of layers of paint on the bottom edges reveal the artist's process even after the work is finished.

While sometimes traditionally hung on gallery walls as singular entities, the artist's paintings frequently get emancipated from this role and treated as accumulated units of a larger whole. The older works are routinely reused and combined in new unpredictable ways; they are merged or piled on top of each other in strict geometric configurations, however with rumpled appearance. This tension between order and disorder, rigidity and enfranchisement is continuously present in Kang's work. It is also visible in her treatment of the frames, seemingly having a life of their own; sometimes they are simply left in their traditional role of framing the painted composition, but more often their dimensions and shapes dramatically expand to seem too large and unfit for the painting, or develop into completely autonomous entities that frame segments of walls, or into rhythmical three-dimensional assemblages (groups of frames attached to each other by screws) fringing portions of the exhibition space, seemingly expanding through it and sometimes completely occupying it.

The basic construction principle of Kang's paintings and compositions of frames also started to spread to sculpture and corresponding ambiances, which could all be seen as spatial extensions of the artist's initial working surface. The rectangular elements of Kang's paintings became translated into sequences of individual objects integrated into various, predominantly vertical sculptural entities. In her earlier body of work including Grandmother Tower series, the artist started with common steel or wooden objects found at flea markets or on the streets, feckless and often defective, which were initially chosen because of their geometrical, abstract shapes. However, often they get distorted and become unrecognizable through their fusions and the artist's subtle interventions. In these as well as in more recent works, Kang's action is also inscribed in the form of tight weaving of yarns around the edges of objects. This is not only a practical invention for gaining basic stability on the junctions, as objects are simply but carefully piled on top of each other stunningly defying gravity, but also a visible inscription of the artist's labor - continual activity corresponding to the meditative recurrent movements of the artist's hand and body while painting. Also, there is a characteristic softness of the thread contrasting the objects' sharp industrial properties, equally present through the colors of the strings that often resemble subtle tones of her paintings.

The sculptures, made through tense vertical accumulation of individual elements (abstract in nature though echoing anthropomorphic features through their shapes and verticality), and then ambiances, made through arrangements of individual sculptures in a way that brings to mind gatherings of various personalities possibly engaged in conversation, create immersive and playful situations on the crossroad of weight and lightness that loosely navigate bodily actions and movements of a viewer and stimulate his/her curiosity and participation. Thus the importance of relationship between the artist's body and the process of art making here resonates through attention to ligature of the spectator and his/ her surroundings. In that vain, and also because of the artist's seamless interlacing of diverse art disciplines and visual arts strategies, Kang's oeuvre rethinks Minimalism's concern with merging of different media and engaging the space and movement by arrangement of sculptural volumes, cross-disciplinary efforts in stage building of Bauhaus Theater, or more recent Relational Aesthetics of the 1990s – testing and expanding the ideas of these predecessors even further.

Kang's video *Black under Colored Moon* (2015) presents another mode of reactivating her artistic objects – by giving them prominent role in a performance. For this work, the artist captures a twenty-six minute long performance of two characters – the elderly man and woman. They are shot with static camera on a pitch black stage, wearing dark clothes and lit by sporadic spotlights, which allows for accentuating the performers' faces and limbs as they sequentially manipulate the props (Kang's sculptures, including her frame structures) through smooth movements and gestures that contain a trace of dancing elegance, accompanied by music.

The performance is inspired by a Korean secret love story and refers to meetings and partings of the lovers, in four chapters that together cover twenty-four hours of a day. Each chapter contains a sequence of movements and music tones – revealing a reference to Jeongganbo.

Throughout the duration of the video, done with minimal editing, the sculptures get moved left and right to different locations on the stage and balanced on top of each other, with the couple occasionally taking a break from these physical activities. Towards the middle of the video, the stage gets emptied while the two characters become central focus of the composition, holding wooden frames in front of their heads. Afterwards the piling and making of the sculptures continues. The underflow of the interchange, creation and destruction, building and demolishing reenact the eternal story of a relationship between sexes but also people in general- the intertwined harmony and discord. The space of the stage becomes the location of this ongoing negotiation that aims towards reconciliation, i.e. fusion of respective rules through the duration of the performance.

Equally tight, multilayered connection between Kang's three dimensional pieces and performance is present in the artist's most recent series *Black Mat* (2016). Various constellations of rectangular platforms made of steel were featured at different exhibition venues (including the 2016 Gwangju Biennial, where the artist presented her largest installation up to date); sometimes they are positioned on top of each other, while in some cases they are just laid out next to each other. The inspiration for this body of work stems from a traditional Korean court solo dance – the mats signify a restriction of the movements and possible transgression of this restriction by imagination or action. Here, Kang invites a viewer to become a performer him/herself and test the possibilities of movement within a designated area.[2]

Although she works in accordance with properties of the particular given exhibition space, its general appearance as much as minute details within it, Kang frequently recycles old sculptural elements, adjusts them to new situations, and uses them in new juxtapositions. At the bottom of the objects the artist sporadically adds wheels, implying the possibility of their movement and provoking the common codes of the spectator's behavior in the exhibition space and the rule of no touching or moving of the art works. One peculiar accent that contributes to this reading is Kang's quite humorous replica of a rope barrier – a signature artwork protection device widely used by art institutions. In Kang's version, instead of being situated in front of art, the rope barrier is put aside and very low, thus made completely useless. The juxtaposition created through shapes and positions of Kang's works can be metaphorically read as a concurrence of the industrial and the man-made, societal rules and an individual, and the ongoing negotiation between alleviation and uneasiness, tension and harmony, symmetry and distortion, that our existence is made of.

[1] As the artist explains in her artist's statement, "Jeongganbo (井間譜), the earliest known Asian mensural system incorporating pitch and duration has been instrumental in my practice. The Jeongganbo system was invented during the early Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) and was used for recording historical musical manuscripts such as the *Sejongsilrokakbo* (The Score of the Royal Annals of Sejong). The Jeongganbo is composed of a series of the grids based on the Chinese character Jeong (井), representing a 'well'. Each Jeong indicates a complex combination of durations and tones, lyrics and movements."

[2] As the artist explains, "the work draws on the spatial narrative from 'Chunaengmu' (春鶯舞), a form of solo Korean Court dance developed in 1828 by King Hyomyung. 'Chunaengmu' requires its performance to move with restraint on a squared shape traditional rush-weaving mat."