

A Study of Korean Aesthetic Consciousness in New-Media Art

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Korean Naturalism focuses on inner discipline by taking nature as a criterion. In this context, at the core of Korean aesthetic consciousness are inner virtues beyond superficial beauty. It may be too radical to apply Korean Naturalism to the current practice of new-media art. Nevertheless, some contemporary artists who attempt to bring back Korean tradition from a new perspective experiment with Korean Naturalism. In this study, I consider the method and concept those artists pursue as evolved Naturalism with new media and a new zeitgeist. When a classic Korean painting transforms into a moving image, it is possible to experience an inward immersion and contemplation through the calm instilled in dynamism. In addition, through the installation art that intentionally composes a blank space, visitors can viscerally experience the space and unconsciously fill it with their narratives. The present-day artist's task is to correctly interpret the message contained in the tradition, rather than imitate the appearance of traditional art without the spirit. The artist should inculcate this attitude to accomplish historical continuity, which is an essential element for experimenting with conventional Korean artworks and aesthetic consciousness. | *Keywords: Evolved Korean Naturalism, New-Media Art, Calmness in Dynamism (動中靜), Historical Continuity, Natural Immersion*

1. Introduction

This study focuses on Korean new-media art. The mid-20th-century saw the rise of some pioneering Korean media artists, but the masses grew familiar with this kind of artwork only after the advent of globalisation. As IT has played a pivotal role in globalisation that expands from multicultural trends, it is not easy to classify and assert genuine Korean identity by applying IT. Similar to the emergence of localisation as a reaction to globalisation, several new Korean media artists seek to find clues in the image text in traditional Korean artworks. This study discusses the aesthetic consciousness of Korea by investigating such new media artworks.

2. Evolved Naturalism

Generally, a nation's aesthetic consciousness evolves in several ways depending on the times. Regarding Korean aesthetic consciousness, Naturalism is a principle that constitutes the uniqueness of Korean beauty

in the arts and leaves a lasting impact. It has appeared as a form of expression of the vitality of nature through music, literature, and performance. Further, Naturalism is a philosophy that presupposes a deep understanding of nature and the essence of being human. As a principle of aesthetic consciousness, it aims for something greater than what constitutes human achievement.

Joosik Min argues that the character of Eastern art is fundamentally dominated by Naturalism. However, 'Naturalism' has a distinguishing trait from Western Naturalism, which is regarded as an intentional artistic attitude. As Herbert Goddard suggests, Naturalism, in Western art history, is an artistic principle that intends to capture fealty to nature by modelling artworks on nature (Goddard, 1969, p. 416 in Min, 1992, p. 168). In Western aesthetics, nature is nothing more than the source of inspiration for intentional art. It refers to the lower-order beauty of fine art and stays within the realm of potential intentionality (Min, 1992, p. 172).

'Intentionality' should be wholly ingrained into the artwork, so that it is unnoticeable before the artwork. Well-planned artwork leads people before it to contemplate its underlying intentionality. Naturalism may imply an apparent unintentionality. It does not focus on natural appearance but solely on the nature of objects. The Korean art historian, Whee-Jun Ahn considers Naturalism to be an attachment to nature and a complete acceptance of natural phenomena. The property of nature that Ahn discusses is a soft harmony that does not collide with nature, and the artistic will pursuing it is called Naturalism. Rather than implying a lack of technique, he considers Naturalism as the simplicity that reflects Korean aesthetic consciousness that transcends beyond technique (Ahn, p. 147, 1984).

Here, transcendence cannot be the amateur attitude of an artist but an invisible technique that allows artworks to open toward spectators for individual interpretation. Applying Naturalism to new-media art can be a rough approach. But we must think about a kind of Naturalism that evolves based on technology. Once, while explaining the objective of designing for IT, which hides immense complexity behind a simple, seamless experience, the former Apple executive and BeOS founder, Jean-Louis Gassée, said, "Simple is hard. Easy is harder. Invisible is the hardest" (Farber, 2008). Simply put, the experience of cutting-edge should be natural and without the noticeable involvement of technology.

In terms of experiencing New-media Art, Naturalism has the potential to be the invisible technology that allows for a quick and natural immersion into artworks. Although Korean new-media art applies this evolving Naturalism, the idea cannot be restricted to Korean artists. There certainly exist art pieces, other than Korean, that exhibit similar characteristics. This similarity has made it difficult for us to distinguish Korean aesthetic consciousness from other artworks. I think historical continuity may give us the clue to figure it out among the similarities.

As contemporary art exists at the juncture of hybridization and fragmentation, it is difficult to appraise the eligibility of Korean aesthetic consciousness

through traditional images only. By now, when it comes to Korean aesthetic consciousness, it is indisputable that an artist must be qualified for historical continuity with Korean tradition. In other words, if an artist follows or brings ideas from one's traditional realm, he or she should clearly recognise what the ideas connote.

Furthermore, the artist of the piece should be conscious of historical continuity at a certain level in their creative process. The artist practices historical continuity with the pursuit to interpret the intentions of the original artists' by correctly grasping the underlying meaning rather than simply transferring the images. When Korean artists attempt to apply some Korean traditional paintings, they should be aware of the concept the paintings were produced with and what meanings they imply. It is historical continuity that can distinguish Korean aesthetic consciousness from the homogeneity of several new-media artworks.

However, there remain the questions that how we can measure historical continuity and its appropriate levels. It is superficial but easy to estimate with iconographic symbols and images repeatedly found in Korean traditional artworks to judge that the Korean aesthetic consciousness permeates a work of art. Still, it is challenging to evaluate the decent level of historical continuity to approve that an artist properly follows it. This problem can be somewhat solved by relying on the artist's intention and claim that how profoundly the artist recognises historical continuity.

3. Experience of Calmness in Dynamism (動中靜)

A distinguishing trait of new-media art is the vividness and movement of technology. New-media artist Lee-Nam Lee reproduces the images contained in traditional paintings into modern Korean illustrations by editing the images of classical Korean paintings, inserting, erasing, and combining others. His works are transformed into dynamic and energetic artworks, using modern technology on classic Korean art pieces.

Given his combination and technique, the image transcends time and space flexibly and naturally. "Rather than parodying traditional works or implying a critical attitude toward the cultural reality of the time, Lee-Nam Lee creates a new story with a positive attitude. The core of his transformed vision lies on the power of technology and movement" (Kim, 2013). The artist breathes life into the potential movement of the images in classical Korean paintings through his imagination which acts as the driving force. "Lee does not pursue exaggerated changes and additions to the screen, but subtly reveals the impression in a way that emphasizes his converted images or expands the original artist's intentions" (Kim, 2013). When he applies computer technology to make the Korean traditional painting moving images, he continues new story-telling as the images consecutively unfolded. Lee extends the narrative from the original linear image.

The work New-Pak-Yeon Falls (Fig. 1) is a LED TV installation that runs for 3 minutes and 50seconds. In the painting of Pak-Yeon Falls (Fig. 2) by Seon

Jung (1676-1759), a master of landscape painting, he exaggerated and transformed the fall greater as 100metre high and 4metre wide compared to a human figure. Jung added and changed to create a different view from actual falls, revealing the majestic nature that humans cannot help but be in awe of.



(Fig. 1) New- Pak-Yeon Falls by Lee- Nam Lee, 2011



(Fig. 2) Pak-Yeon Falls by Seon Jung, 1750

He also attempted to express the sensation of the roaring sound of a waterfall that hits the rocks and leads to an echo (Kim, 2020). Pak-Yeon Falls seems not a painting for viewing but for listening as he visualized the sound of the waterfall. Lee-Nam Lee reminds us of this idea when we stand in front of his New-Pak-Yeon Falls with its roar of splashing water over the giant waterfall.

Lee improves classical texts with a modern perspective while at the same time revealing poetic depictions and romantic brushstrokes through the insertion of subtle image texts Lee composes an image of nature that does not exist anywhere else. It is an attempt to approach the essence of the space full of thoughts beyond the representation of reality.

Nature is a metaphor for the inexpressible and is ultimately encompassed by the broader realm of 'nothingness 無.' However, in the East, 'nothingness' does not mean there is nothing but symbolizes something infinitely large. The 'ego' trapped within one's limits disappears, and something greater comes in and fills it up (Kim, 2020, pp. 163-164).

When the fixed image gains movement, the viewer has an intuitive experience through repetition. Entering the realm of the static mind from this dynamic image is akin to the paradox of entering the flow of the active mind from a static image. Dynamism 動 connects the mental transition and calmness 靜 to inward reflection.

To explain 'Self-forgetting nature experience', Min claims unintentional technique and thinking of an artwork as natural relates to natural experience with which we forget ourselves (Min, 1992, p. 171). When humans are overwhelmed by the magnificent nature, they forget themselves and immerse themselves in the sight. An artificial environment that makes spectators uneasy and awkward cannot lead people to immerse or self-forgetting.



(Fig. 3) 靜中動 動中靜 (Calmness in Dynamism, Dynamism in Calmness) by Ye-Seung Lee, 2020

Media-art Jung-joong-dong(靜中動), Dong-joong-jung(動中靜) (Fig. 3), by Ye-Seung Lee is the audience participation media facade. Lee composes the 'objects' that can be found in the traditional Korean coloured ink still-life paintings on the screen. The stuffy, static, flat objects gradually change colour and move three-dimensionally and vividly. By applying augmented reality (AR) technology, people can interact with them without the fixed frame called outer wall media. Lee tries to include the spirit of the East beyond simply borrowing Korean patterns under the garb of 'modern reinterpretation of tradition'.

Various objects within the 3D image fill the screen and float. As the screen transitions from being three-dimensional and vivid to showing black-and-white drawings, it is flattened again and flows down like a thin sheet of paper, and is blacked out. This continuous scene appears to be an organic whole, and the viewer is immersed in the changing image. Lee expects people to experience the unity of the ego and the external world (物我一體) as viewers turn into participants (Lee, 2021). This experience, in my opinion, is comparable to the 'Self-forgetting nature experience'. Although, here, Lee constructs nature using technology, spectators interact the same way as they would with actual nature. This is the ultimate objective of modern technology in terms of applying to media-art pursuing Korean Naturalism.

When applying innovative technology to art, in most cases, the producer plans to evoke an arousing effect. This is because the physiological stimulus is what sophisticated technology immediately delivers to human beings. Technology has the characteristic of a rarity in nature. Since it is the first impression the viewer registers, the process of appreciation may hover over the artwork's surface. Compared to artworks that use colourful and complex image texts for

stimulus, media using traditional Korean paintings guide the viewer into an emotional calmness beyond arousal. Traditional Korean ink painting is a process involving discipline that nurtures the inner-self and impacts one's consciousness. Some media artworks remind us of this disciplined purpose and provide time to think of the inner sphere beyond the works of art.

4. Blankness (空) as Fullness (滿)

One of the differences between the composition of traditional Western and Eastern paintings must be, obviously, blankness versus fullness. Previously, blankness made the Western viewer view an art piece as unfinished or insufficient. Fortunately, due to worldwide communication systems, today, most people perceive it as being intentional. The blankness in Eastern art plays the role of completing the whole by expressing difficult or even impossible parts as nothingness. According to German art historian, Wilhelm Worringer (1964), decoration-abstraction is mechanical, based on Raumscheu or the horror of space. That is, intentional decorative patterns stem from the horror of or hostility against the naturalness of plain ground. Western audiences often pointed out that unfilled space occupies more expansive areas than the images in Chinese paintings. In Chinese painting, there is a peculiar artistic will opposite the 'horror of space'. It is the artistic will that trends toward harmonious recurrence of the earth. We can name it naturalizing abstraction (Min, 1992, p. 173).

Joosik Min must have brought the property of Chinese painting to explain Korean Naturalism because of the similarity of the composition, brush strokes, the technics, and concepts. Under the Chinese effects on almost every area, the nobles of the Jo-Sun Dynasty from the 17th to early 20th century were willing to implement Chinese thinkers, Confucius and Mencius, etc. Despite this, some scholars and nobles with pioneering spirits tried to establish Korean aesthetic consciousness and its independent culture. So, there were two main streams, one that accepted Chinese culture and the other that sought to pave the way for the styles of the Jo-Sun Dynasty. In terms of using blankness in Korean traditional paintings, the way of Chinese and Korean painting compositions has considerable affinity but a slight difference exists.



(Fig. 4) There is No Place by Ki-bong Rhee, 2012

The new media installation that effectively embodies the blank space is *There is No Place* (Fig. 4) by Ki-Bong Rhee. He composed it to occupy an entire wall of the exhibition hall. The silhouette of a giant weeping willow stands in a vague and constant fog. The artist effectively visualized the sublime impression of the morning mist, using lights and water vapour to create the dreamy image of the early morning. The installation tries to narrow the gap between pictorial representation and the three-dimensional experience by connecting them and realizing the atmosphere of traditional ink painting.

Compared to the picture, Rhee emphasized the sense of the depth of the installation space through the material property of water, which changes the image by obscuring the original appearance of an object or existence and approaches the transcendent realm. In the installation comprising a black silhouette of a willow tree within a space enclosed by glass, Rhee set the tree in a way that gradually changes direction. 'Ki-Bong Rhee is concerned with the fundamentally delicate balance between an eternal moment and a fleeting moment, while his poetic installation evokes a rare balance of sensuality and contemplative distance' (Kim, 2014). Although it is composed of materials, the subtlety of the blank space created by the fog appears to be a dream-like reproduction. The unfamiliar slowness and picturesque space lead the viewers to reach their inner realm through contemplation.

In front of the artwork, we experience blank space as being full of insight and empathy. We can see that the expression of blankness in contemporary art is used as an imaginary space that allows for audience participation. The fictional space of audience participation is not to interpret and understand the work as the artist intended but to interpret and understand the space of the work using their individual imagination. Therefore, the blank space is freely interpreted and understood from the standpoint of the viewer.

The viewer, therefore, becomes an active participant in the artistic process who interprets the work by adding various information to the blank space by means of imagination, rather than passively appreciating the information appearing in the artwork (Oh, 2004, p. 20).

Active appreciation does not end with simply perceiving what we see but involves returning it to the cognitive system. In other words, the primary purpose of active appreciation is to expand a given image, and this is the infinite power of imagination as implied by the blank space.

The Seoul Media Art Project selected *Pivotal Tree*, a media artwork (Fig. 5) by Pivotal Lab, to express the beauty of Korean tradition in media art. The Seoul Foundation for Arts and Culture held a public contest under the goal of 'modern reinterpretation of tradition', where *Pivotal Tree* was awarded. The members of Pivotal Lab reinterpreted it as a symbol of a wish for well-being and peace in a modern society that is chaotic and unstable.

The video represents a virtual object but adds a sense of reality by reflecting the building and the environment around its exhibition place as the ground for the artwork. Its charming trait is the vivid change of image in the *Pivotal tree*,

with the seasons and the weather, and its overwhelming size on the exterior wall. In addition, as the media facade is real-time online art, the citizens can hang their wishes on the pivotal tree on the screen. One of the Korean folk cultures is hanging wishes on the Pivotal Tree, which was regarded as a square in the past. The artist group brought it to the Koreans living in a technology-oriented society. With this, viewers turn into participants and produce image texts together. In this video, the participants keep filling the blanks with their stories, and the images change perpetually; it is never completed but only progresses. The tree stands in the middle of the majestic screen, and as its background changes to black, messages from all over Korea keep expanding, much like growing leaves. As ideas from the public fill the blank with Hangul, Korean, the black-coloured blank extends.



(Fig. 5) Pivotal Tree by Pivotal Lab, 2020

The magic of the blank space lies in its capacity to enlarge the screen through the viewer's imagination, and this space is what artists need to free their imagination and play in the infinite space of the universe. In other words, the blank space is not simply a space of emptiness but a space that accommodates the perception of the viewer. In this way, the audience journey from the surface to the depths of thinking, thereby completing the blank with each one's thoughts and deepening the topic so that the so-called 'emptiness (空)' can transcend the 'fullness (滿)'.

It surpasses representation and reaches the essence. The blank in Eastern ink painting is now established in real space as installation art and new media, so the audience is not fixed in one frame but freely wanders in the space (Zang, Lee, 2017, p. 125). The blank space stimulates our imagination by transcending the layers of thought, and the audience can reach the stage of thinking that raises the level of life while quietly meditating on it (Park, 2019, p. 235). It seems possible for us to experience

the contemplation and insight while being immersed in new-media works. It cannot be claimed that such contemporary media arts stem from the concept of Eastern Naturalism. Though, if the media artists attempt to bring back Korean tradition from a new perspective of experiment with Korean Naturalism, I consider the method and concept those artists pursue as evolved Naturalism with new media and a new zeitgeist.

5. Conclusion

What appreciation of art provides is not only a sensory and intuitive experience but an insight for a deeper level of awareness. By obtaining a balanced one, people can encounter harmonious practice, and it offers the audience a vivid combination of experiences. For the analysis of organic experiences, under the possibility of Eastern Naturalism, this study examined the expansion of the original meaning and the appreciation when the artist constructs the images of traditional Korean paintings in a physical environment and when fixed images are imbued with movement.

In the past, the blank used as an essential factor in spatial construction in Eastern paintings has played a significant role in organizing the entire screen into one general nature by combining individual tendencies to establish relationships between objects. When this traditional blank adds vitality to the current technology, the blank conveys a three-dimensional and vital depth. The space in contemporary art is not a single point in time. The blank proposed from various points of view is a substantial but unrealistic spatial experience. The blanks in Eastern classical works also allow the audience to experience the process of imagination and meditation. Still, an environment presented explicitly in the physical environment can allow for a more vivid experience.

In the combination of constant repetition, emptying, and slowness, the viewer experiences the beauty of Dong-Joong-Jung, calmness in dynamism. Rather than being fixed and silent, the blank space of silence in reverse vitality helps direct our attention back to the external world. Moreover, it allows us to taste a moment of encountering ourselves during deep silence. Thus, we will enter a 'self-forgotten state' between meditation and imagination through the familiarity of the context of our tradition, not a vague encounter with the unfamiliar spectacle poured out by innovative technology. There should be thorough understanding and precedent research if the artist highlights the lesson contained within superficial images to restore vitality to traditional Korean images.

In respect of New-media Art, technology lets an artist imitate and produce the awe, calmness, and dynamism of nature. Thus, it is possible to regard that evolved Naturalism is to employ contemporary technologies that lead the artworks to balance and blend with nature without any seams between artworks and the technology. In front of the effect of the blank space composed high-tech, the viewer may be able to read the artist's message and use imagination to fill the blank beyond the stimulus of the technology.

Another nature constructed by current technology will be naturalism as an alternative to keep pace with the changing times.

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