

Building Landscapes of Civilization Through Allegory

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Reunion After 14 Years, A Beautiful Fear

#01. Snowsters that only seem to appear in fairytales dominate the gallery. Snowsters are ceramic pieces glazed in black, white and light green, and range in size from as big as 90cm to as small as one's finger. (Although I have called them snowsters, they more closely resemble certain Asian burial mound figures.) Like a snowman, the big snowster consists of a head, an upper body and a lower body in round masses. Two small clay clods form the eyes. It also has narrow arms like a penguin. At first glance, the snowster may look unattractive, but its plump shape and humble style has a kind of cuteness to it. This snowster wanders the exhibition space like an alien or observes the smaller snowsters with a curious attitude. The small snowsters were handmade by clenching the clay, a process similar to making *songpyeon* (Korean half-moon-shaped rice cake). These groups of snowsters mimic human lives. They create a city by making large monuments or by building houses and paving roads. Some are seated in a sports arena as members of the audience, while others perform on stage. Like humans, they build, organize, observe and move around.

A vague world of dreams where reality cannot be fully grasped... What is Dong-Yeon Kim trying to express with this world of snowsters? Living in today's post-industrial society and information age, Kim metaphorically expresses the changing situation not only of the appearance of life but also of the existential condition itself – as a kind of fear. It is a scene that has strong implications for the future of mankind. The future is always uncertain, but a glimmer of hope never disappears. The magical world of snowsters created by Kim with a childlike innocence turns a scary monster into a good-hearted ghost and an unknown fear into an affirmative power.

#02. It has been 14 years. I first met artist Dong-Yeon Kim in the summer of 1995. I was working at the time as editor-in-chief of an art magazine and introduced Kim's Total Museum of Contemporary Art solo exhibition in its "Exhibition Highlights" section. In the exhibition, Kim displayed a long, tunnel-shaped structure made of plywood and the edifice of a traditional Korean-style house with only the roof present – its body, meaning the bedroom and living room, were absent. Especially in the work that floated above the exhibition floor, the roof appeared to hover on its own amidst the light gray atmosphere and submerged into an unknown space. In this way, Kim demonstrated an innovative sculpting ability by interpreting our ancestors' common view of nature, emptying what was full and clearing the obstructed, into a present-age sensibility. (Bok Young Kim's review re-summarized from *Monthly Art*, August issue, 1995). At that time, critical keys to Kim's works were coordination and amalgamation, the nature and space of Korea, and finding a modern interpretation for tradition.

The Classical Art of Korea, an Encounter with the Architecture of Germany

art After more than 14 years, for the first time since his 1995 Total Museum of Contemporary Art solo exhibition, I find myself viewing Dong-Yeon Kim's work. Or rather his new work. Between traditional Korean-style houses and snowsters lie Korea and Germany, his studies abroad and

training as an artist, and his life in his thirties and forties. Kim's solo exhibition in 1995 was an exhibition that concluded his studies in Germany. In 1994, Kim returned to Korea and briefly held a position at Kyung-Hee University as a part-time lecturer, before departing for Germany again after his solo exhibition.

Kim Beuys once said, "Do not exhibit until you reach the age of 40." I didn't understand the meaning of this when I was in my twenties. In the end, I think it was an epigram advising students that it is better to gain a breadth of intense experience working in art before reaching the age of 40. My situation was different, however. I needed to earn a living so that I could extend my studies in Germany. The Total Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition came as a stroke of luck for me. I received a five-year scholarship from the Samsung Publishing Company and was able to continue my studies in Germany.

art Why did Kim choose Germany in particular for his studies abroad? This question may be considered conventional, but I think it provides an important key to understanding the artist's work. Is it not important to consider the artist's formative experiences?

Kim The path for me to study in Germany was paved early on. The most common thing I heard while studying art was, "You know, formatively, an artist should have only one thought and must walk that one path!" Nonetheless, I had an eye-opening experience in college when I first encountered Bauhaus. The original idea behind Bauhaus was the merging of the schools of arts and crafts with the fine arts. Thus, architecture, as the link between art and technology, became the focal point of this movement. Bauhaus aimed to provide architecture, craftsmanship and design education that incorporated two- and three-dimensional structures, along with artistry and a pragmatic approach. Thus, Bauhaus enlightened me on how narrow my range of thought was on art. So, I decided to broaden my area of interest. From then on, my study room became an art museum, a museum and a gallery. I once went to see a retrospective on Jin Kyu Kwon¹ at Hoam Gallery. Looking at Kwon's terra cotta sculpture, a statue of the Buddha suddenly came to mind. I headed straight for The National Museum of Korea. Since then I have studied our classical paintings, sculptures, architectures, crafts, designs and so on. The shape and formal properties of the sculptures displayed in the museum all attested to a human touch, yet chronological change was evident. Tradition was living inside modernity, and modernity was living inside tradition. I wanted somehow to try to actively utilize tradition in a work. So I studied literary painting and calligraphy in order to gain a basis for understanding terms in design and aesthetics such as space, time, empty space and desolation. I tried drawing with an ink stick to experiment with the blurring of Chinese ink on a background applied with ash. Then I was able to freely experiment with elements such as blank space and speed, strength and weakness and light and shade, even when I was drawing with a pencil. When I was in college, I fell in love with Bauhaus and prepared to study abroad in Germany, and upon graduation, I naturally headed for Düsseldorf.

art The Düsseldorf Art Academy was a school that left a big mark in art history as the capital of avant-garde art along with Fluxus during the years when Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik were professors in 1970. Also, while continuing the tradition of conceptual art, the Academy led the way internationally with the sensational new

genre of Neo-Expressionist painting – from 1980 onwards, when A.R. Penck, Jörg Immendorff and Markus Lüpertz were appointed as professors. Dong-Yeon Kim's mentor professor was A.R. Penck, who addressed very serious subject matter in his paintings, such as the historical contradictions of the Cold War, systematic oppression and existential despair. Nonetheless, his style, with its compelling aspects of humor and symbolism, is reminiscent of prehistoric cave paintings, the symbolic sculptures of the Stone Age, and modern-day graffiti. It is a world that also has links to calligraphy.

Kim I was the fourth student to study under Professor Penck, who will probably still remember me as "Student No. 4". It was absurd if I think about it now, but at first, when I explained to Penck in my broken German about the art I wanted to study in Germany, I remember saying, "I really respect you, professor, but by no means do I want to become an artist like you." Professor Penck rented a building outside the school and created a studio there for his students. He then visited the studio once every six months or year to give guidance. He never really said much. "Hmm, good..." Hearing just these words for three years, I later started to think, "Is he mocking me?" Professor Penck respected each of his students' freedom and individuality.

Unlike Korea, most young artists in Germany attend art academies, which means there is an atmosphere created by the unbelievable artistic talent and indescribable passion of the students. The subliminal competition between the students may have been the most valuable part of my learning curve. In Düsseldorf, I was fascinated with three-dimensional art rather than painting or printing. I audited classes in architecture for two years and also worked as an assistant to famous artists in order to learn more about three-dimensional art. By helping these established artists for three to six months, I gained real-life experience while simultaneously holding down a part-time job. I was truly fortunate to be able to study three-dimensional and spatial art during my years in Germany.

To Build a Traditional Korean-Style House and to Dig a Tunnel

art The theme of architecture has an inseparable relation to Dong-Yeon Kim's art. When we look at the artbook Kim made showcasing his activities in Germany, we gain a glimpse of the evolutionary process of his work. The 1995 solo exhibition in Korea can be considered the first step in his work that achieved stylization using architectural materials. The majority of the works he created during that time were sculptures made from architectural materials. This method was adopted from Korea's traditional architecture. For example, not only are there individual and combined works of convex and concave tiles typical of a vaulted Korean-style roof, but there is also a roof-tile installation that appears to float above the floor in a gravityfree state. Even the invisible, intangible space created by the vacuum between the floor and the three-dimensional structure is incorporated into the piece as an essential element. A Western critic wrote about this space of tension: "Looking at it from the aesthetics of Far East Asia, it is an invisible component inherent in the sculpture."

Kim From around 1994, I included traditional Korean style houses into my work. I shaped structures such as a tile-roofed house, a Buddhist temple and a sanctuary. From punctured MDF plywood, I built an objet using only the three-storey roof of a Korean Buddhist temple. I placed the roof upside down on the floor and completely reversed the original aspect. I created a variety of traditional Korean-style structures in the shape of the Korean alphabet

⊂, ⊃, and ⊆. For the exhibition, I raised the structure 15cm from the floor. Critics said the piece looked like a UFO.

art Due to the gradual limitations on form afforded by the traditional Korean-style house, Kim proceeded to turn to the tunnel as his chosen form in the works that followed. Polygonal aluminum sculptures are presented in the exhibition entitled "The holy city." Depending on your perspective, it appears in the shape of either a tunnel or a minimalistic building. At first, the tunnel extends in length, and gradually several tunnels intersect; eventually everything changes, causing the work in its entirety to have the form of a labyrinth. Just as the tunnel takes the form of a house, houses gather to become a village, and villages gather to create a city. The transmutation of the traditional Korean-style house into "The holy city" signifies both the artist's personal assimilation to Germany and Europe as an international student as well as the intermingling of culture and sentiment. You could say that Korean tradition and a contemporary universal language led to an inevitable collision. I think the artist's own feeling of wanting to overcome the tunnel of the challenges he faced as a student may have permeated this piece.

Kim Some time ago I traveled to Tübingen, a medieval city home to many philosophers, and on the way, I passed through a tunnel. The tunnel was built into the mountain and therefore couldn't be seen in its entirety, yet I put my efforts into figuring out how I could present this open structure that faithfully accomplishes its role of connecting roads. At the time, I naturally devoted all my attention to the cultural conflict between Korea and Europe. Similar to the way that I had dedicated myself to nature in Korea for a long time, in the hopes that it would prove to be useful, in Germany my infatuation with traditional heritage proved to be my weakness. I needed a change of thought. Maybe this psychological situation reflected my work on tunnels. I built a medium-sized, minimalist tunnel using plywood. The tunnel developed and became a city. The city also exerted control over the architectural space such as angles among the models, width and depth, area and radius. In European cities, the harmony between a house and its surroundings is of special architectural consideration – that is to say, structural relationships in an environment are important factors. This is an approach I adopted in my work.

art Since his experience with tunnels, Kim's house underwent tremendous changes. By cutting the abandoned plywood, Kim created the reduced frame of a house the size of a baby's fist and displayed the artwork on ceilings and walls. In addition to the house, a strip of path-like formations was added. It is a natural process to build a means of transportation, such as a road, when towns and cities are established. By finely cutting thin plywood plates, Kim built a road and extended it far from the house such that the latter is secluded from passer-bys, a mode redolent of present-day life: detachment from the outside world or the isolation of human existence.

Kim I attempted to interpret the road or street, simply beyond the physical phenomenon, as a string of social conditions and relationships. Also, the road can be understood as philosophical truth.

art Since 2004, "The holy city" has shown a different side. The structure was built and installed by applying veneer and attaching gunnysacks and fabric in tatters. From one vantage point, the building looks as if it is about to be demolished, but from another view point, it looks as if it is

ready to be constructed. The buildings are very ambiguous. As exhibited, the piece uniquely conveys an image of ruins and one of foundation. It is a picture where both sides of a phenomenon can enter simultaneously. Regarding this work, U Fan Lee has written that "Dong-Yeon Kim built a miniature apartment building without the inside. But this is not a reduced apartment but rather a different metaphor derived from it. Maybe that is why it seems like an inner view of human existence in urban industrial society or a situation that, today, is in ruins." Critics often link this work with Gordon Matta-Clark's radical Anarchitecture.

Kim It helped me greatly to meet with U Fan Lee and to hear his advice on my work. The essence of his advice was that "an artist should do what is not done by others". Possibly throughout all these years I indulged in a vague fantasy of art. From that point onwards, however, I started to give a clearer focus to my work's message. Watching the Gulf War at the time, I desperately struggled with art in society, historical remarks, artistic responsibility and so forth. Also, I started to think about science and the speed of time by observing the industrial Ruhr region in central Germany where I lived at the time. Handcraftsmanship was a form of human labor that was actively supported and recognized by Bauhaus architects. Through the chimney that no longer emits smoke, I investigated the correlation between "the necessary" and "the necessary evil" diffused in human society. And, by making smoke rise from the factory chimney reminiscent of an angel that appears in myths or the body of Venus, I connect the past and present, and I start to ask myself about environmental problems to come. The power pylon, an energy transmission bridge made in the 20th century to guarantee the very basis of human life, is an amazing structure of civilization. I compared this steel pylon to the stone and wood pagoda produced in Asia's moral culture and tried to wed the two in a "symbol of duality".

art After returning home, "The holy city" once again undergoes another change. The city's buildings were shown in an aluminum plate, but upon closer inspection, the shape is very ambiguous. The plate is 3.5~5cm away from the wall, thereby creating a shadow. Consequently, a vague structure is created between the two- and threedimensional structures. In this solo exhibition, while the snowsters occupy and dominate the exhibition space as the main protagonists, the inhabited building is poorly attached to the wall, flat like a spare. The snowsters' and humans' modes of existence are reversed. When I think of humans living inside this "grotesque" building, I am truly filled with profound fear.

Kim This work (the flat building) went through a multi-stage production process. First, a model of a threedimensional building was built and pictures of it were taken from different angles. Among them, the most "ambiguous" picture of the building's structure was selected and enlarged to develop a print. Then, tracing paper was placed on top of this photographic paper and a blueprint was drawn. Iron and aluminum plates were subsequently laser cut in line with the blueprint. The building made from aluminum plate is two-dimensional, but people are caught up in a stereotype and recognize the space as three-dimensional. I wanted to focus on the act of creating, something I had been doing since I created the collection of buildings ("The holy city"). You could say I aimed for an atmosphere similar to that of a ghost town or a panopticon-like structure.

art What has changed since you arrived in Korea? Going forward, what changes are you planning?

Kim Living in Germany for 17 years, I figured out a way to deal with loneliness. Loneliness is never sweet, but it has a delicate taste like rye bread. Loneliness matured me as an artist and as a human being, and it helped me communicate with life. From the time I began my art degree, I was a person who emptied when something was full inside me and was destroyed when something was created. I admire Marcel Duchamp and constantly dream about the chameleon qualities of his art.

Allegorical Technique and Dialectic of Reason

Kim could not get enough of the word "Bauhaus"; it even found a place in his dreams in the reversed order "Hausbau", which means "building a house" in English. For 20 years, he has been building a house through art, and he continues building. Now he is building an ancient Korean tradition, a modern civilization in Europe, and a dying city in ruins. Is it not precisely houses and cities that are the symbols of human civilization? And weren't the tunnels and roads that Kim was fascinated with a device this civilization uses to communicate? Everything, even in gestalt aesthetics, is inseparably related.

Kim speaks of human civilization. His eyes are focused on the crisis of civilization. He is disseminating a broad message on global disasters such as environmental issues, the collapse of the ecosystem, war, terror and so forth. He also traverses Korea and Germany in an attempt to find the points of intersection between the notably small topic of life to topics such as the cultural tradition of Asia and Bauhaus. And through this project he seeks forever to be inspired. Here, we can find Kim's unique attempt to dialectically solve not only regional and international issues but also to get to the cause of all events.

In his new solo exhibition, he introduces two masters of ancient philosophy, Aristotle and Plato, standing on top of a peak-like structure. This structure is not a mountain but an upside-down freshwater lake made of pottery. (Kim spent his childhood in a town with a lake and a big well. This eco-friendly rural sentiment flows as his source of art). The two philosophers' poses are drawn from Raphael's The School of Athens. The philosophical concept of the existence of an idea connected to a physical entity is lent shape by this piece of work. It raises the issue of truth by the dialectical correspondence of two areas: mind and body, and reality and the ideal.

Kim's drawing technique is more indirect than direct. In short, tactics of allegory are hidden in Kim's works. The expression of allegory mobilizes conceptual duplicity, the incongruence of superficial and hidden meaning, the reversal of meaning, anthropomorphism (like snowster, a substitute for the human being), symbols of duality, hidden properties (the alchemy of the material which causes a thick aluminum plate to look like a fluttering sheet of paper), and so forth and fuses them in a creative language. And just like the proliferation of cells, one allegory produces another allegory. With this grammar of allegory, Kim develops his agenda of building a road (or a tunnel) to connect East/West, tradition/modernity, individual/society, life/history, human/nature, reason/emotion, and region/world. Then, the road is destroyed and reconstructed again. In this solo exhibition, Kim presented this through an exemplary model of a metropolitan highway interchange

made from iron and aluminum, with the individual pieces hung up like dried fish.

According to critics, the greatest strength in Kim's art is "its equivocality, its ability to embrace the wide range of perspectives of people with different experiences." As felicitously expressed by U Fan Lee, "When you stand in front of Kim's sculpture and linger for a while, not only will a bitter smile emerge but you will sense a secret pain and a sudden feeling of uneasiness about tomorrow. Wings spring up to form an imaginary vision and everyday senses slowly awaken... The allegory of the work that Kim presents possesses the attraction of a slowly murmured whisper. It is a small voice that emits a loud echo."

Drawing, Longing for Civilization

#March 2011. One spring day when the spring frost was exceptionally thick, I visited Dong-Yeon Kim's Kyung-Hee University studio where he was preparing his upcoming solo exhibition in Germany. We were checking the outline of the solo exhibition against his works and materials. On that particular day and at that particular time, it all reminded me that Kim is in fact a painter. (And it was from here that I found hints of new materials to write about with respect to Kim's works). Yes, he originally started out as a painter. Looking back, although Kim's works in Korea and Germany have focused on three-dimensional structures or installations, it seemed certain to me that his sense of sculpting always originated from painting, or in other words, from "drawing." What does that mean? An extremely generalized genre of hybrid or consilience can easily be found in contemporary art and I have no intention here of arguing about issues such as whether the genre is unique.

What interests me is to discern formative characteristics in Kim's works. When we give examples of formative characteristics in traditional sculptures, we commonly identify characteristics such as three-dimensional mass, a strong and durable volume, the nature of the response to detect materials and forms of physical character, etc. Instead, I wish to focus on the fact that Kim's three-dimensional works do not heavily rely on these formative characteristics. Kim's works carry a strong personality of "soft sculpture" or "light sculpture" that have unraveled the paintings three-dimensionally. His three-dimensions, so to speak, by no means search for the formative principle of the sculpture itself, but seek instead to formulate the reality of the topic he attempts to unravel. His works thus possess an extraordinary degree of lightness and balance, which are inherent to the characteristics of sculpture's three-dimensionality. The method of drawing formations of roads and buildings using aluminum plates and then hanging them on the wall is fundamentally based on the characteristics of painting.

I want to stride into Kim's paintings, into his world of drawing. In this exhibition, he presents about 60 drawings. The drawings are very simple in terms of size and material. He drew many of his illustrations using a pen on either graph or notebook paper. I focus more on the artist's "contemplation of the result" or "mind design" rather than the "visual impact" (physical elements such as size, color, or material) that the drawing gives us. I thus recollected all of the materials he had worked with in his earlier works and looked at them in connection with his new drawings. They can be classified in three major categories. First come products of human civilization. Starting from the dawn of civilization, especially along with the development

of scientific progress, many forms of modern mechanical systems have been produced, for example: roads, houses, towns, cities, apartment buildings, traditional Korean-style houses, Buddhist temples, sanctuaries, bamboo baskets, tents, tunnels, factories, chimneys, transmission towers, electric motors, tower cranes, cable cars and so forth.

Second is active human interest. Humans have cultivated civilization and are none other than the main agents who continue to drive it. In this category, human organs such as intestines, fingers and lines of the palm are shown. Here, a human substitute like the snowster is put forward, building structures like peep shows or panoptica through which humans may see themselves objectively.

Third is the natural state: a free, modern (or uncivilized) world prior to civilization. Lakes, wells, mountains, trees, constellations and the like come under this category. Here, you can find allegorical techniques such as the upsidedown freshwater lake, the lines of a palm that resemble pathways or mountain contours, and the fateful relationship between palm reading and astrology. Despite the fact that nature is the basis of all origins, things disappear in the shadows of civilization; therefore, precious elements of the natural world must be held onto at all costs. It leads us back in time to the past and forward in time to the future.

Naturally, the "signifier" of materials is extended in meaning through Kim's unique allegory technique to produce more diverse "signified" objects. Nevertheless, if you combine the three categories above, the materials and subjects found in Kim's work focus on the "landscape of civilization." In short, his oeuvre uses an allegorical technique to build (erect, create) and sometime to destroy (take apart, deconstruct) the reciprocal relationships in "natural-human-civilization". Assembly/disassembly can be substituted with opposing terms such as building/decay, praise/criticism, hope/despair, and so on.

Road of Civilization, Way of the Artist

Dong-Yeon Kim summarized this emblem of civilization by invoking the image of a "road". What is a road? A road is a trajectory of human history. A road is an entity drawn by precious humans who continue civilization. The drawing is a moving line. The road is open and built. Therefore, the road is a place of communication. The road itself is history that has searched for and pioneered this kind of communication. Houses, towns and cities, all along with the road, were built on mountains and the oceans, and other means of civilization may have developed in order to connect these formations. Within the manmade road of civilization, Kim longs for the old and winding road that follows the law of nature.

We recall an exhibition in which Kim took an existing New York highway interchange and transferred it to a different country, where it was reinvented by hanging it in the air in an installation that looked like a clothesline. This work severely deconstructed New York, arguably one of the most civilized cities in the world. Moving forward, Kim will span countries and regions, and he plans to display works of interchanges in Germany, Seoul and Beijing. A recent three-dimensional drawing made from stiff paper separates the road horizontally and vertically, and was put on the wall, the figure transformed into the vine-like shape of a tree. Civilization was replaced with nature. And that is not all – there was a case in which the road was used figuratively in the work. When you open a Korean bamboo

basket used to store and transport food, figures of modern roads and tents humbly await you inside like toys. It is a work that tries to turn back time and "relativize" the problems of civilization and barbarism, to paraphrase structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Today, the road in Kim's oeuvre is broadly expanding its significance, surpassing its physical meaning. Thus, his drawing of human organs is similar to "a human way of life", like high divine providence; in addition, the palm of a human hand or horoscope are equated with the drawings, with a human "path of destiny". Therefore, Kim's path passes beyond the phenomenal world and extends to the cosmic world. In the world of Eastern Asia, the word "road" contains the meaning of "Tao", as well. Tao stands for truth or origin. In religion, it is a link to the absolute, eternal world. Kim is about to cross the road of civilization, building a road of human spirit.

In Kim's criticism on civilization, the investigation of counterattacks, reversions, and inversions still continues. But that doesn't mean he favors either an optimistic or pessimistic view. He says, "How can I have fun playing with art? I'm greatly interested in this matter." Even today, he wants to play with art. His work is like the joyful laugh of a child playing a game, but this game also carries a cold cautionary message. Above all, Kim has clearly established plans and rules for the game. We can identify the plans and rules of this artistic game through Kim's drawings. The etymology of drawing, *disegno*, means "to draw a line" and "to indicate," which are derived from the Latin word *designare*. Kim's one-line drawing is indeed a solemn self-declaration marking the beginning of criticism on civilization. In English, the word "draw" also carries the meaning of "attraction". The same is true in the Korean language. The word 'drawing' equally applies to desire, memory, and emotions. What is Kim drawing? What is he longing for? Basically, this question boils down to what task every artist in this world takes on. Here's my answer: although there remain many pieces of work yet to be produced by artists in this world, it is nevertheless surely the artist who is someone who leaves behind a piece of the world's civilization?