

Encounter, Confrontation and Relationship

- The Formation and Evolution of Sangbin IM's Art –

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1.

In 1995, Sangbin IM entered College of Fine Arts, Seoul National University to continue the study of Western painting that he had been practicing since his junior high school years. This coincided with the rise of Information Technology (IT) in the latter portion of 1990s in Korea. For Korea, which lacked significant natural resources, IT was particularly a growth engine for the future of its economy. The Korean IT and digital trend of that era was similar to the Dot Com fever of the U.S.

While military dictatorship, the democratization movement, human rights and other domestic issues had dominated Korean society in the 1980s, social issues changed drastically as Korea entered the era of globalization and mass consumption. The Olympics (1988), Liberalization of Overseas Travel (1989), achievement of \$10,000 GDP per capita (1995), distribution of the personal computer and the Internet brought about many changes. Moreover, post-structuralism, represented by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, was introduced to Korea in the 1990s, and social interest in the fictional reality and hyper-realism had increased with movies such as *The Matrix*, *eXistenZ* and *The Thirteenth Floor*.

Meanwhile, IM was still drawing in 1996. However, the opportunity for change had come to him by chance. After two years of university life, he left for his compulsory military service in December 1996. IM was posted at the Defense Security Command and the top national military information organization was equipped with sophisticated digital infrastructure such as close range communication networks and security systems. While in the army, IM gained completely different experiences, which would profoundly affect his art.

"As I worked as an operation soldier, I witnessed how the military forces drew the operation routes using the computer and how troops moved according to the set route. I was shocked at seeing the digital language coming before the analogue. This spurred me to start thinking about how to combine digital language to the analogue one." (From an interview, Feb. 2010)

IM returned to university in February 1999 after finishing his military service. He was a different person adept in a new digital language.¹ Upon his return, he attended photography and video related classes. Although he did not abandon painting completely and choose to be a photographer, he began to take more interest in arranging, deforming and structuring photographic images using the computer. He conducted experiments where a variety of forms and structures were manipulated by distorting and combining different images.

¹ During the military service, IM independently studied various computer programs.

Then in 2000, an accident with the scanner happened.² While scanning a photograph, IM removed the image as soon as the scanner began to operate. The image on the monitor was distorted as the time given was not sufficient for a proper scan, and the result was unexpected. With this incident, he realized that the scanner can act as an "eye". Besides human eyes and camera lenses, many different objects can also be "eyes" to capture images. From that time, the "eye" took on an important role in his art practice.

IM entered graduate school in February 2001, and he opened his first solo exhibition, titled "Analogital," in autumn of the same year.

"I wished to illustrate the relationship between the analogue environment and the digital world through a new approach towards digital media and its variations and replacements. Furthermore, I wanted to think and talk about the power of the terminology "digital," its potential, as well as its harmful effect." (Artist's note in the brochure of his solo show, Oct. 2001)

IM may have explored the combination, conversion and relation of analogue and digital, but he was not a follower of the digital. He was rather alert to the limitations presented by the digital world. The works included in this exhibition reflected the characteristics of the scanner.³ First, he explored the relationship between two and three-dimensional spaces as well as the analogue and digital exemplified in the work, *Wrap 1* (2001). He saw through the surface texture of an object subtly changing as it transformed into digital signals.⁴ He also highlighted "the incompleteness of digital signals."⁵ In *Sunflower* (2001), the images of sunflower are repeated or stretched as if some errors were made. Later, this concept continued in transformation, exaggeration and distortion of structures in his artworks. Lastly, he questioned "the sense of time". *Seed* (2001) makes guesses of a certain event that had happened.

During this time, he concentrated on the "narrative" within visual art. This naturally led him to work in film. He shot short films including *Holiday*⁶ and *Sapjil (All in Vain)*⁷. The value

² IM used F4 analogue camera at the time, as digital cameras did not provide a high enough resolution, which required him to print and scan images to work on a computer.

³ Scanners transfer real substance as numeric data. Continuous analogue matter is interpreted as segmented digital data. Scanners cannot receive the essential character of the material. Three-dimensional objects cannot be perfectly converted into digital. Sometimes, the object is squeezed or deformed during scanning to be converted into digital signal.

⁴ Even when a two-dimensional image is scanned, its own texture slightly changes. These subtle changes were mainly illustrated in the projects *Still Life* and *Insect* (2006). This also relates to *Making Unfamiliar*.

⁵ When using the Internet, IM often saw images fragmentally stretched when scrolling down. This is an error in digital signals as the data transfer rate is low when using a modem.

⁶ *Holiday* shows the happenings in a day of one person, who divides into three different people.

of these very experimental films and their level of completion are hard to clearly define, but IM learned about directing and how to deal with narrative from these opportunities. Such experiences affected much of his later art work.

While directing these three short films in 2001, his interest in producing led to the project called *KISEBY*, which lasted from the winter of 2001 to spring of 2003. Just as the combination of Sangbin IM and his co-producer Eun-Young Kang's initials named it, the project chose the virtual subject and the body to transform and combine. Although the project period was relatively short, these two young artists explored the new meaning and role of the image in the digital era, while transforming their "existence" and "personal names" into signs.

2.

IM was selected as a recipient of the Fulbright Scholarship in the fall of 2002, and went to America the following summer.⁸ He spent three weeks at the Fulbright pre-academic program in Columbia, South Carolina before moving on to Yale University in New Haven in August 2003. Soon after, upon his professor's request for a meeting, IM travelled to New York. The date was August 14, 2003, when a massive black-out hit the northeast part of the U.S. Around 4:00 p.m., just as he got off the subway, this big city was paralyzed in an instant. This was his first impression of Manhattan.

Even after returning to New Haven as the term began in September, IM went to Manhattan whenever the opportunity arrived. He walked around the city capturing various aspects of it. It was not surprising that he became interested in this city because he had grown up in urban areas. These visits repeated almost every weekend until he graduated from Yale University in May 2005.

While staying in New Haven, he envisioned a new path in his work of art. His past from Korea and the new experiences in Manhattan must have led to such activities. In this period, he conducted bold experiments unbound by common notions and stereotypes, producing a large number of artworks. This was a challenge and contributed much to expanding the boundaries of his art work.

His art of this time can be categorized into five concepts. First, he focused on 'exaggeration,' vertically stretching structures, or making façades larger and more magnificent.

The person lives these three lives, which gather together on a bench at the end. Approx. 16 mins.

⁷ *Sapjil (All in Vain)* is a sort of post-modern parody film. A princess from the planet 'A' lands on earth as her planet is attacked. A prince from planet 'B' and a killer out to get the princess also follow her to earth. Approx. 35 mins.

⁸ He applied to several different universities in America, and it was his choice to select either film or painting as his major. He enjoyed film-making, but he eventually selected painting as the latter holds only the artist responsible for the result while film-making is a cooperative art.

This was a metaphor of the desire in the capitalist society that pursues appearances while ignoring substance.

The second concept was his insight into 'structure'. This was highlighted by the work that compared the Colosseum in Rome to Yankee Stadium in New York. These two venues are similar in the way that the public gathers to witness a spectacle with great enthusiasm, even though they do not exist in the same era, in the same location or for the same purpose. When people go inside structures used as venues for public spectacle, the energy formed collectively from the crowd is a powerful force.

Thirdly, he researched on 'Infinite Expansion (Repetition)'. When looked at from above, many cities in the U.S. look like microchips because of road grids. IM copied and repeated such microchip-like images to make a large virtual city. The intention was to show the desire inherent within the city to expand its boundaries while showing the city itself as a certain pattern or a wall paper.

Next is 'Rephotographed'. IM would print photographed images and re-photograph the prints. However, before re-photographing, IM would bend or crumple the paper, blurring areas already out of focus. When these digital images are printed, they become objects.

Lastly, he created 'peculiar situations'. He unnaturally twisted parts of the human body, made a car stand vertically, or put a chicken or human face on a tree. This reflected his emotional state while adapting to an unfamiliar, foreign environment. Such whimsical imagination, however, offered free artistic expression, and eventually evolved into a wit that eased the tension in the hard urban structures of his later works.

In his MFA thesis show held in May 2005, IM showcased the series *Historyscape*,⁹ the first series exhibited after his move to the U.S. *Times Square 1905* (2005) from this series is a manipulated scene of the area from 1905. Those who know the history of Manhattan would find something strange with the photograph. There are some buildings and sign boards that date later than 1905.

"History is restructured from the perspective of the present. It is formed by the desire to see the past from the present, not by the past itself. People think Times Square was a busy area just because it is these days. They would find it strange if it was not bustling in the past." (From an interview, July 2011).

⁹ *Historyscape* is a series based on photographs from the past. *Relicscape* is about palaces in cities. *Dreamscape* illustrates Manhattan from a distance. He titled all the artworks of Seoul and New York as *Cityscape* in his solo exhibitions in 2008 and 2010. As *Relicscape*, *Historyscape* and *Dreamscape* all deal with city elements, these series all fit into the larger category of *Cityscape*. Meanwhile, "Newscape," the title of the 2006 solo exhibition at Gana Art Center does not refer to a certain work series. This title indicates that his works from before and after his foreign education are different in nature, and emphasizes how reality and the fictional are blended.

Similarly illogical scenes are also found in *Central Park 1857* (2005) and *Coney Island 1914* (2005).¹⁰

3.

After he finished graduate school in 2005, IM moved to Queens, New York and stayed from June until March. He then spent time in Seoul from March to August in 2006 for his solo exhibition, "Newscap," before moving to Manhattan in the summer of 2007. The exhibition showcased the works he made in Korea and the U.S. including the series *Historyscape*. The significant body of work in this exhibition was the *Relicscape* series.

While staying in Korea, IM traveled the country widely and captured a variety of images ranging from high-rise buildings in Seoul to heritage sites in Kyeong-ju. After living in Manhattan, the city of skyscrapers, he felt that old Korean palaces and historic sites were significantly smaller. These structures would have had grandeur when they were first built, but in the eyes of the present or the Western world, they seemed slight and humble. Spectacle is relative. Thus, he vertically stretched these structures to compensate for the difference in physical grandeur. This was the idea behind the series *Relicscape*.¹¹

Gyeonghoeru Pavilion is featured in *Kyungbok Palace 2* (2006). The structure is located at the center of the image, and its foundation is stretched, creating a new, more massive structure. Its size is relatively small when compared to tall buildings of the modern era, but it would have represented the royal authority that oversaw the entire city when it was first built.

Upon further inspection of the image, the viewer notices an embankment around the lake at the bottom of the photograph. The observer is seemingly looking at the Gyeonghoeru from the corner where the embankment turns at 90 degrees, but this is a linear view. The closer object is distorted because he focused on the subject located far away. Because of such distortion, it can be presumed that he took the photograph of Gyeonghoeru from the area around the embankment. In the same manner, IM subtly revealed his location in other works. In *Flatiron* (2007), the artist can be seen inside the car through the small rearview mirror, and in *1251* (2007), the location of the photographer can be assumed through the distorted road and sidewalk.

Through this practice, IM reveals the relationship between the observer and the captured image. The revelation lies in the recognition of the object/structure, and, at the same time, recognition of himself who is recognizing that object/structure. It is interesting to note that IM often locates himself at a certain distance from selected objects. This is frequently witnessed in his

¹⁰ Central Park was built in 1857. Coney Island was fire damaged in 1914.

¹¹ The technique at *Relicscape* is related to the use of scanner and the Internet. IM saw how images become stretched with the scanner and the Internet.

later works.

"I reside inside the city. But my viewpoint is located outside the city, rather than inside. I wanted to objectively observe myself or the city, keeping distance from them. More often, you can gain clarity when observing in an introspective and reflective way. (From an interview, March 2011).

In late August 2006, IM returned to New York to pursue a doctorate at Columbia University. Once again, Manhattan became a material of his artwork. He confessed that it was hard to mingle with people as a non-American even though he had lived there for three years. The American society may appear to be flexible and embracing, but there are underlying tendencies that alienate foreigners based on political, economical and cultural differences. Sometimes foreigners alienate themselves because of inferiority complexes. The relationship between Manhattanites and non-Manhattan people is similar with that of Americans and non-Americans. Manhattan is the center of the world economy and culture. It has everything in it. Why would people, who were born and lead privileged lives in Manhattan, and those who are successful enough to settle in the city, go out to other areas of New York like Brooklyn, Queens or the Bronx? Yet outside the city, there are plenty of parks and viewpoints where people can observe beautiful scenery of Manhattan. The spectacular image of Manhattan cannot be seen if one stays inside the city. In *Queens View 1* (2007), Manhattan appears to be floating on water. The East River reflects the glamorous night lights of Manhattan, making it more surreal and fantastical. At the same time, it seems to divide the area into two: Manhattan and its surroundings.

While he looked at the city from inside with *Historyscape* and *Reliecscape*, IM observed the city from the outside in the *Dreamscape* series. The artist did not add or distort structures in this series but diversified the viewpoints. He selected certain sceneries of Manhattan and captured many shots from different locations. While the skyline of Manhattan took a fixed form, the river and the sky dynamically changed its form.

"While traditional photography tries to capture the subject as a whole, my photography is rather about creating the whole by collecting small and similar viewpoints. I am interested in the painting language, which structures the whole through parts. I tried to illustrate moving things as more like painting, and static ones as photography." (From an interview, Sept. 2007)

While a building is rigid with geometrical features, nature is more fluid and organic. IM adopted 'painterly texture'¹² to depict such characteristics of nature. For instance, he takes

¹² *Times Square 2005* (2005) is the first photograph to which IM applied painterly texture. In order to depict snow more realistically, he painted snow with a brush or overlapped images. He

photographs of the real sky and the painted sky. Then, he combines two sets of images using the computer to re-create a unique image of the sky. In expressing the outline of the object, a soft edge from the painterly texture makes the object soft, while hard edge from photographs makes it cold and rigid. He plays around with these two different elements in multiple ways to create delicate and subtle nuances. In that sense, the photographs are unique in that they encompass various aspects of painting.

If his interest in Manhattan was highlighted in the 2007 solo exhibition, IM's focus moved to Seoul afterward. He did not stop using Manhattan as a subject, but started to compare Seoul and Manhattan. His intention was well reflected in the solo exhibition held in 2008 and 2010.¹³

Seoul is a unique city. Tradition and modernity co-exist, and nature and artificiality mingle together. There are many regal palaces in Seoul with a dense forest behind them, and a modern building in the front. By comparison, there are few heritage sites in Manhattan due to its short history, and even Central Park is an artificially built green area. In like manner, to comprehensively observe the structure, not details, IM zoomed out of the city in his series, *Dreamscape*.

"Through various city elements, I wanted to help people re-visit the city they live in by visualizing encounters, relationships and confrontations of diverse aspects of the city." (From an interview, Feb. 2010)

As seen in *Doeksu Palace-Seoul* (2009), there are palaces in between high rises in Seoul city. While modern buildings are showing off their grandeur besides these historic palaces, the nature that surrounds them stops time. From high up on Mt. Namsan, high and low mountains intersect with buildings and urban area as seen in *Seoul-North* (2009). Originally, Seoul was part of nature. As the city grew, more buildings and infrastructure came to dictate its growth and development. Seoul, which once was a part of nature, has evolved to become a modern, industrialized city fueled by people's desires.

IM takes large number of photographs from many different spots to capture different characteristics inherent in the city. Then he creates painterly texture, re-arranges and modifies images using the computer to complete the artwork. A unique spectacle is presented as the real and the fictional, photography and painting, city and nature are delicately merged. As Seoul is formed through disparate elements encountering, relating and confronting each other, IM's artwork is also structured as various methods meet, relate and confront.

realized that softer and deeper feelings are given as the number of layers increased. Later, he developed this technique and created distinctive textures, impossible to obtain from photography (cold/warm, wet/dry, soft/hard, light/heavy, dark/bright, etc). He used this technique throughout natural elements like sky and river to artificial features like roads and stairways.

¹³ As mentioned above, he named the artworks of this time as *Cityscape*.

4.

Describing the series, *People*, somewhat different in kind from the earlier series, IM said he was inspired by *Central Park 2* (2007). While buildings stood out against the urban area in his past series, now they are expressed subtly. Only the shapes of the massive Manhattan skyscrapers are slightly revealed after being hidden by nature (forest). Artificial nature (Central Park) dominates the frame, and accordingly, people enjoying the park are captured by the camera. IM makes sure to capture the incidental presence of the crowd.

"I exaggerated energy by stretching buildings. I also created massive energy by shooting small units many times over when making urban sceneries. When people gather, however, that energy also seems to be a cultural spectacle as well." (From an interview, March 2011).

By chance, IM visited the football stadium of the Ohio State University, Columbus in May 2008, where the graduation ceremony was being held. This scene was captured in *People 1* (2008) and *People 2* (2008), the first of this series. IM was intrigued by the unfamiliar seriousness and the calm energy inside the stadium, contrary to the crazy atmosphere usually associated with the football games.

"People move into a growing city full of events and positions which attract even more people. Likewise, if one's path is known and an event is installed en route, it will gradually draw people into the event. This can be interpreted from the perspective of an urban planner, but I would like to view our social system from different angles while also maintaining a reflective distance." (From an interview, March 2011).

Both *People 1* and *People 2* are images looking down from the top of the stadium. The viewer cannot recognize this perspective without looking carefully. IM only revealed part of the structure and put people at the front. The hidden role of the facility is metaphorically expressed via the collective force of people.

People-Met Museum (2010) is a representative image of the series. Many people are on the entrance stairway of the museum, and seemingly there are too many steps. IM took photographs everyday for two weeks to create this photograph. Then he extended the stairs using the computer and arranged the people he photographed densely over the stairs. When observed closely, the texture of the stairs seems to be a brush-painted surface. Moreover, edges of the stairs are left blunt. The photographer intentionally added these painterly effects.

In *People-Tate Modern* (2010) and *People-Rockefeller* (2010), the images are divided into

two.¹⁴ The structure is pictured in the top frame and people are placed on the bottom. The manmade, located at the top, seems to be watching or controlling the crowd, and it is as if the people are being locked within the realm of the structure.

When arranging people inside the frame, IM depicts people larger when they are located closer in perspective. As a result, people at the bottom are quite detailed. IM's decision to not portray the people in his photographs as anonymous subjects speaks to the idea that although people adapt to a way of life conditioned by a city, they are not passive beings residing in a metropolis, but active individuals who influence and change the city. Furthermore, they have productive kinetic force, great enough to cause such change, in themselves.

The *Museum* series is similar in concept with *People*. While people fill up the frame in *People*, artworks fill up the space in *Museum*.¹⁵ IM stretched the walls of the museums up and down, and densely arranged artworks as if in a salon exhibition. All the artworks are ones that were being exhibited in that particular museum at the time of IM's visit. He revealed the energy of the museum through not only visitors, but also through exhibited artworks.

Lastly, in the *People* and *Museum* series, the selected space is always full of people or artworks. Interestingly the artist only uses images of people and artworks that were present. He never uses obtained images from magazines or the Internet. They are people who actually visited the space for their own individual reasons.

IM arranges images within his artwork. Depending on who is placed next to whom, or how they pose, their relationship can be redefined. Their locations and postures can lead to the creation of new narratives. They are situated somewhere within the museum selected by IM, and the provided space is a stage the artist set. People become actors playing on his stage, where they unfold their own stories. Their stories may be one of yours.

(Spring, 2012)

¹⁴ Division of frame into two or three segments began with the *Dreamscape* series.

¹⁵ The *Museum* and *People* series may relate to the project *Interior*, begun in 2008, because they expand and exaggerate people and objects. In *Westside Market 1*, IM exaggerated displayed products at a small supermarket, re-creating a massive space overflowing with products. This is a metaphor for abundant desire of capitalism.