

Probst Carsten, "More deeply suggestive than others - Experiments with memory and presence in the work of Hyun-Sook Song". December 2019.

## "More deeply suggestive than others"

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Experiments with memory and presence in the work of Hyun-Sook Song

*Preliminary remark: while working on the following text, I was privileged to be allowed access to the as yet unpublished artistic biography of Hyun-Sook Song by Jochen Hiltmann. The source references follow the printer's proofs. I would like to thank Hyun-Sook Song and Jochen Hiltmann for their kind permission to use this material in advance of publication.*

Hyun-Sook Song's letters mark the beginning of her artistic development. After coming to West Germany as a young migrant worker in the early 1970s, she described what was, in many respects, an oppressive situation in a foreign culture, about which she knew very little and for which she was inwardly unprepared. In the writing of these letters, something astonishing happened: the calligraphic signs suddenly turned into a proliferating medium in their own right, an expressive, pictogram-like language in which "the inked signs pressed closer and closer together on the pages until they almost overlapped". As Jochen Hiltmann describes it in his biography of the artist, "The ink brushstrokes no longer adhered strictly to syntax and semantics and began to dance chaotically in the cramped space until established semantics finally fell away from some strokes."<sup>1</sup> Song sometimes added ink drawings to her letters in which she also appears, "in various metaphors – for example, in the form of a rabbit (the Chinese year in which she was born) or a donkey", until "finally the letters themselves became ink drawings."<sup>2</sup>

The emotions that repeatedly break new ground in these autonomous signs initially surprised and overwhelmed Hyun-Sook. But the wild writing and drawing soon turned into a conscious and indispensable inner survival strategy that helped her process and reflect on her first years in West Germany, where she experienced far-reaching social isolation. As in diary entries, her letters reflect fearful dreams, curious or touching everyday observations, as well as memories of the very different world of her origins in a rice-farming village in the Cholla province of South Korea where her parents still drove ox carts and where life was aligned with the rhythms of nature, with forces bound up in mythical tales, with shamanistic mysteries. She feared that the memory of her childhood and youth would fade under the impression of her life as a migrant worker. In their replies, her siblings describe how modernisation was slowly catching up with the village of her youth. When Song returned to South Korea for the first time in the early 1980s, she hardly recognised it. In the intervening years agriculture had been electrified; the traditional hand tools on which they once relied lay unused behind her parents' farmhouse – life in Europe had inevitably changed her views too.

During this time, she had finished her art studies in Hamburg, which represented a complete change of plan compared to her previous intention of returning to South Korea after several years of paid work in Germany. Looking back, she sums up by observing that studying and working with Western modern and contemporary art helped her to:

<sup>1</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all citations follow the German edition of Hiltmann, Jochen, *Wo Zu Haus – Malerisch oder Mörderisch: Eine Erzählung zu Leben und Werk der Malerin Song, Hyun-Sook und zum kulturellen Hintergrund ihrer Emigration*, Hamburg 2019, 114ff.

<sup>2</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 98ff.

...see my own culture more clearly. I recognise creations in it that are not interchangeable and that have become indispensable to me. But I also needed the foreign, the other, in order to become attentive at the highest level. How could I have ever dreamed of discovering the values I would like to know and see preserved in the useless things behind our house?<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, however, her image of European modernism, whose developments she could not have understood “without the experiences that European artists had with non-European cultures”, is also distinct.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to many artists in South Korea who let themselves be “buried” under the influence of Western culture, Song states that for her work, “the influence of modernity can only be a temporary one”. For her, it already followed during her studies that “the not-yet-painted work” was potentially more significant than the painted work.<sup>5</sup>

Hyun-Sook Song’s painting, which began with the sudden unleashing of signs, has to this day remained an exploration of the space of memory, in which two highly different, not necessarily commensurable modes of perception mingle with one another. Song has repeatedly described the dominant influence of Western culture and lifestyles on South Korea over the last forty years which has almost wiped out traditional cultures. By contrast, she describes her artistic approach as an encounter with legacies from the time before her emigration, which can no longer be reconstructed:

All the stuff behind my family’s house has its place only in stories. Not in the stories of the individual objects themselves, but in the stories of how they were used. All the little stories of how they were used merge into a story of life in the pre-industrial agricultural society of Cholla Korea.<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, the few, recurring objects that emerge in Song’s paintings from monochrome, luminous or deep-black backgrounds seem to be little more than things representing the everyday life of Korea’s vanished economy of rice cultivation: storage pots, supporting pillars, poles, roof shingles, silk fabrics, shoes. In her painting technique, however, the artist transforms the object on the canvas, which is placed on the floor during execution, into an act of physical and mental concentration, an action fixed to that one moment when the stroke is about to be initiated. Each painting represents such an action, precisely defined by Song in preliminary studies, which in turn refers to the context of memory, with its mixture of spontaneity and repetition. By indicating the number of brushstrokes executed in the title, Song clarifies the immediate, intuitive connection between object and sign and the common ground of calligraphy and painting in the East Asian tradition.

Song sometimes titles her paintings – titles which often do not describe the object seemingly depicted – as “brushstroke diagram”, a term reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze’s examination of the artistic practice of Francis Bacon, whose painting he once referred to as a “diagram” in reference to an

<sup>3</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 131.

<sup>4</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 116, 131.

<sup>6</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 130.

utterance made by Bacon himself.<sup>7</sup> Bacon's pronouncements can be situated in the context of his critique of the "figurative", which he regarded as both illustrative and narrative.<sup>8</sup> Much like Bacon, Hiltmann also characterises every "primarily narrative" interpretation of Song's images as a "simple way of looking past the essence of her painting. For this reason, too, the painter titles her paintings with the number of brushstrokes drawn on the field of representation."<sup>9</sup>

Song's conceptual borrowing from Deleuze/Bacon for the titles of her own paintings is revealing because it exposes an obvious bridging, an appropriation of European painting tradition, through which the painter has opened up a way to confront her own cultural imprint. Bacon, as a painter in a supposedly figurative tradition, always resisted the categorisation of figurative painting "as" figuration (and with pertinent references to Picasso, Cézanne and Velázquez). His descriptions of the central significance of random operations in his painting can certainly be compared with Hyun-Sook Song's descriptions of the energies she collects in the act of painting and the direct connection between the act of painting, signs, and their opposition to the appearance of the figurative. Bacon's idea of the painterly "graph/diagram" corresponds to a fundamentally modern conception according to which there is an impersonal, non-subjective form of painterly action that lies outside the painter's control and that nevertheless, as if it were taking place according to the higher laws of the unconscious, produces marks on the picture plane that are.<sup>10</sup> Bacon also suggested that he strove to achieve such moments of productive loss of control, without actually being able to conjure them up independently.

The twist that Hyun-Sook Song gives this handling of the pictorially uncontrollable seems no less interesting. On the one hand, the single stroke of the brush requires the utmost concentration and calculation, and on the other, it means letting go at exactly the right moment:

If I used the brush hesitantly, the energetic power of the stroke would dry up on the canvas. If I hurried, the brush would not comply. Thinking with my hands, firmly grasping the handle of the brush, the energetic power of the brushstroke became visible on the field of representation, and in the flow of energetic power back into the painter's sphere of life, a painting was created.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hiltmann/Song, (see note 1), S. 157ff. Cf. Deleuze, Gilles, *Francis Bacon – logique de la sensation*, Paris 1984 [cited from the German edition: *Francis Bacon – Logik der Sensation*, Munich 1995, p. 62ff, with a quotation from David Sylvester's interviews with Francis Bacon]: "Very often the involuntary marks are much more deeply suggestive than others, and those are the moments, when you feel that anything can happen.... The marks are made, and you survey the thing like you would a sort of a graph. And you see within the graph the possibilities of all types of fact being planted." (Sylvester, David, *The Brutality of Fact, Interviews with Francis Bacon* [1975], London 1987, 56)

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze (see note 7), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 165. Elsewhere it is said of Song's painting that it neither "seeks a path into abstraction" nor is "the energetic power of her singular brushstrokes weakened by narrative-figurative motifs". (154ff)

<sup>10</sup> Max Ernst's adaptation of the Dadaist political collage for a pictorial strategy of the unconscious "beyond painting" is based on a very similar idea, which he meant primarily as "freedom from convention" (cf. Drost, Julia, and Spies, Werner, *Max Ernst – Retrospektive* [Exh. cat. Albertina Vienna/ Fondation Beyeler Riehen/Basel 2013], Ostfildern 2013, 47ff. Gilles Deleuze also describes the painterly function of Bacon's diagram as a "catastrophe for the figurative and aleatory conditions on the canvas" and "the emergence of another world". The marks and strokes are "involuntary ... non-representative, non-illustrative, non-narrative", they are "asignificant strokes" through which "the painter's hand" intervenes in the picture "in order to shake off one's own dependence and to break up the sovereign optical organization." Deleuze (see note 7), 62ff.

<sup>11</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 164ff.

The:

...numerical organisation of individually drawn brushstrokes, the fixed sequence and the rhythm result from the objectivity of things. The Korean shoe requires three brushstrokes; the post, only one; the pot requires five, seven or nine brushstrokes layered on top of each other, depending on their size.<sup>12</sup>

With the pot in particular, Song has impressively depicted the congruence between the recalled observation of an artisanal practice (in this case, the production of the object) and the actualisation of its memory as a painterly sign. The memory is of the potters she observed as a child in her home village, “as they drove the potter’s wheel with their foot, thinking with their hands, forming the clay.” Thinking with the hands obviously connects the work of potters and painters, not with the intention of equating painting with craftsmanship alone, but of looking at both – craftsmanship and art – from an elevated aspect, according to which they bring to light something in the material that was not there before:

With this ability they continued a circular movement that corresponds to the rotation of the earth in the cosmos, a movement that repeats itself monotonously yet always renews itself differently, until from the circular lump of clay under their hands, first hesitantly, then suddenly quite clearly the form on the potter’s wheel becomes visible, as if it stepped out of its will to exist and into being. Right from the start, a pot: no joining of individual parts – you think you’re dreaming. If the potter was too hesitant, the clay would not follow his hands; if he was too hasty, the form would not cooperate.... But if the potter intuitively followed the rotating clay with his hands, without hesitation, then the clay also followed him.<sup>13</sup>

With all the power of intuition, however, what remains is an obvious difference between sign and object, which does not manifest itself in the act of painting but rather on the level of visibility. Following the trail of the brushstroke and identifying it as both object and non-object requires a reflection on the part of the viewer that can lead to misunderstanding in a Western context, especially with reference to Deleuze and Bacon’s criticism of figuration. With Deleuze, it makes sense to assume that the symbolic character of the brushstroke creates a space of meaning for the picture that would be located outside its representability (or “representationalness”), as it were. The sign would thus lead to a constant “shift”, perhaps in this particular sense even to a “delimitation” of the picture’s meaning. This would not be sufficient, however, to explain Song’s painterly procedure, for the use of calligraphic methods in her painting does not *generate* a difference between sign and meaning, it is *based* on it. It does not encompass “non-painted things” in the sense that it consciously omits a space of meaning as undepictable or unnamable, as the neo-platonic project of European art has for centuries; rather, it helps this “non-painted thing” in the tension between representation and sign

<sup>12</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 157.

<sup>13</sup> Hiltmann/Song (see note 1), 164. Pages 162–168 contain exact descriptions of the physical and conscious painting process according to the three formal categories of Asian calligraphy: “Structure (*ku-fa* = bone technique), consistency (*jou-fa* = meat technique), composition (*chin-fa* = tendon technique).... In this aesthetic canon of calligraphy, the use of bodies and the body of the painter finds its meaning.” (168)

to a *presence* that, because of its method, corresponds more to an energetic state between picture and viewer. In other words, knowledge of the things her paintings appeal to is never absolute, never assertive, never even symbolic (like the famous “madeleine” at the beginning of Marcel Proust’s), *À la recherche du temps perdu*), but always concrete, where the regularity and contingency of the simple handling of things makes it possible to experience, in equal measure, their spiritual potency.

The reference to Bacon contains a second important aspect, however. For although Bacon never tired of emphasising that his paintings were, above all, informed by an interest in form and colour, they inevitably produced emotional effects in the viewer – fright or compassion with the obviously tortured figures depicted. In a very similar way, Hyun-Sook Song succeeds in directing the painterly event in all its formal severity through emotion in such a way that her works, despite all their formal reduction and concentration, condense into uniquely expressive pictorial spaces. She pays special attention to the light effects of her pictorial ground. In this connection, she mentions the tradition of European Romanticism and its anticipation of Impressionism, from Caspar David Friedrich to Turner and Manet, which had always interested her. In this sense, the monochrome background can certainly be understood as a level of transcendent mediality. But what seems to become visible from this background possesses the essence of dream-like manifestations, which always seem to be captured as if in transition from emergence to disappearance. It is no coincidence, but rather the consequence of her painterly practice of visualising, that some of her pictures react directly to media reports about catastrophes or Auschwitz. It is precisely these images that seem to evoke most clearly the pictorial elements of tragedy and horror, also found in Bacon, such as bones wrapped in cloth and laid out for display, or a curtain pulled down vertically before the image.<sup>14</sup>

Even beyond the obviously tragic or frightening, Hyun-Sook Song’s painting visibly aims at that fleeting moment of objective appearance, an interspace of pictorial perception between “not yet” and “not anymore”, that expresses a constantly renewed hope for contact with the disappeared. In contrast to the painters of European Romanticism, among whose successors Francis Bacon can be counted, Song’s paintings are able to create this present, to escape Romantic futility – and it is this deep conviction of the inherent abilities of every painted sign that gives Hyun-Sook Song’s pictures their powerful presence.

<sup>14</sup> As in Song’s painting *13 Brushstrokes on Masses of Shoes (In Memory of the Liberation of Auschwitz and of Korean Women Forced into Prostitution under Japanese Rule)*, 2005, or *Brushstroke Diagram (Under the Impression of the Sewol Shipwreck in Korea)*, 2014. See, for example, the function of the curtain in front of the weeping pope in Bacon’s *Study after Velázquez* (1950) or the central panel of his *Crucifixion* (1965) with the animal carcass with bound forelegs.