

Festival

Lee Byunghee(Art Critique)

An old man is looking at a boy, who stands on the beach at sunset. The old man, despite his surroundings, is dressed in white suit and white shoes, wearing a white fedora, and is lying on a chair. As he sweats, the makeup he put on his face to look young is being washed off. The sun, dangling beneath the horizon and about to disappear, is giving out its most beautiful light, and the boy is shining brightly in such light. The boy is the only reason the old man decided to stay in Venice, which was at the beginning of an outbreak of the plague. He knew well that it wasn't long until his body stopped to function, and perhaps he wanted to get a taste of youth, shining such brightly, as close as possible. He recalls how happy and nervous at the same time he was while walking down the dim alley. Albeit coughing out blood on his handkerchief, he puts on makeup—something he never used to do. The mere fact that such desire is left inside of him comes as a surprise, and his desire to continuously gaze at the boy grows. However, his craving does not include conversing or making physical contact. It is satisfactory enough only to watch the boy emitting light on the beach that glows in gold. Despite getting cold sweats, the man cannot escape the beach, and, as if under a spell, he wonders around the boy. Along with cold sweat, black colored water is dripping down from his hair, which he dyed to appear any younger. His view slowly becomes blurry.

---- Oh Yongseok, "Dance of the Knight", *Tu*, 2011

Characters are surrounded by luminous colors which seem to be "full of delight". The human bodies, captured by pure colors, become brighter colors themselves in Oh Yongseok's roll painting, *Holy Night* (2012). However, in reality, bodies Oh has been depicting have been a lethargic scapegoat of cruel violence, held up to ridicule and put on show. Moreover, they are the ones that were looked at with intense sexual love, touched, rubbed and licked by greedy and voracious tongues of libido.

Violence and love are very similar to each other in terms of their mechanisms in that both happen between subject and object in the name of desire. The acts that happen in such relations might be possible in a covetous sado-masochistic or master-slave relationship. In Oh Yongseok's paintings, at a glance, bodies seem like healthy and sexy male models, and they are relatively well devoted to their role of objects for amusement. Although they might have some traumatic past in reality, we do not have any choice but to assume that their bodies might have been bound up with a love (or love-like) relationship without freedom and a fetishistic relationship resembling that of master-slave, assailant-victim and sadist-masochist.

Moreover, in his paintings especially the ones from recent years (2012-2013), it appears as though bones and muscles are taken away from the bodies. More accurately, it seems as if they're freed from some kind of suppression or traumatic memories. Never mind the fact that these bodies were tortured, murdered and stabbed repeatedly, and even if their fate was that of a tragic one, mistreated by the greedy and ravening hands of desire, here today, there is not a word to be told about them. All relationships, be it violent or sexual, remain aloof from the others. Now, the bodies transude only from colors; it is either, their faces are floating or they're soaked into color-nature background, with only traces left as mere silhouette. Gestures of unclear bodies are shown only through positions, postures and expressions, all tangled with each other. In other words, these bodies that went through de-subjectivization—or shells that escaped the limitation imposed by flesh as subject of pleasure—are only repeating certain acts, without being tied to any flesh or relationship. Now, the bodies become shells of those who have forgotten.

Bodies, left with nothing but gestures, could be one or the other: residue of memory, or new and free objects. It could be that, as brighter the colors emit light, more and more they assume the role of "sublimation". This, in turn, lightens the burden of the bodies. Much of the traces of violence are gone. For example, if these bodies, which are becoming colors whilst being surrounded by luminous colors, are those that were freed through severing from or utterly forgetting violent relationship of the past, then, naturally, such severance or oblivion must have had to experience painful loss. And during lamenting over that very loss, bodies, memories, images, objects appeared repeatedly and continuously. (I am referring to Oh Yongseok's past paintings in general.) However, in *Holy Night* (2012), it might be that Oh Yongseok's body-materials, which have been repetitive until now—in other words, summoned like ghosts—is finally exorcized and put to death, once and forever. Features of the exhibition, displaying bright, maybe too bright colors that make them seem to be emitting light and even become light themselves, is a huge change and venture at the same time. If I may, I am daring to grant opportunities of severance, oblivion and "sublimation" to the bodies.

Should this be an opportunity of sublimation, then, just like Oh Yongseok's description—which reminds a scene from the film *Death in Venice* (Luchino Visconti, 1971)—quoted above, such sublimation begins from the last scene, to where deadly greed's destiny is headed. When destiny of this desire, which is tied to certain objects, is done with all degrees of pleasure, new desires have no choice but to remain as zombies, maintaining a state of death drive similar to a never ending limbo, until they come upon new objects of desire. However, as a matter of fact, this is the portrait of agonized modern subjects. The fact that they have to cling to the dimension of 'life' amid endless array of habitual amusement and transaction, at a time when pleasure and melancholy doesn't work and desire doesn't seem to function, is

itself agony. To put it differently, no one else but death drive, surrounded by half-dead calmness, gives the ball, and ghosts are the only guests to dance wildly; there is just nothing left for us to do.

Those who can't forget live their lives hanging in between the sparse crevices of memory.

It has already been 6 years since I curated Oh Yongseok's first solo exhibition <Blow Up> (Gallery Jungmiso, 2007). What's left of my memory is the tragic tales of real figures (Vaslav Nijinsky, Elizabeth Short, Joey Stefano), which were all part of a collection of materials, and the stories that were spit out by Oh Yongseok who took painting, a rather extravagant medium, to describe such tales. His stories, coupled with mushy penises, were made into colorful dough, kneaded and drawn onto a canvas at the exhibition hall. Human desire's side of sadomasochistic violence, evil and fascinating yet refuses to be governed by the legal domain, and attention of the audience, a hedonist and an accomplice, is eventually captured as violence develops. Back then, during the exhibition, we put that very way of viewing on stage as a new kind of show. Such way of viewing is, as always have been, powerless when faced with the results of violence, and continue to watch extreme cruelty without bearing any responsibility. Distance between the viewer and the scene of violence is close, but far enough to stay safe; that is why such viewing may gradually pursue a more sensational and hedonistic stage. However, the fate of such pleasure proceeds to reach an empty bottom of desire, whose pleasure can't function anymore. Right at that moment, pleasure enters a whole new path of destiny, in which it may only be revived through establishing new relationships with objects of fascination.

Those who are sad but cannot mourn are the disabled who may never be done with past memories. Because he/she lacks the ability of oblivion, sadness may not be healed, and mourning not completed. What if we treat "painting" as a passive, or at least personal, work of mourning? Or, what if, it would be better to say, we stage mourning by portraying those who cannot mourn. In fact, today, no one can "mourn" in a proper way; there is no way that anyone could, upon being separated from or losing family or a personal lover, go through the whole process of mourning, overcoming the loss and finding a new object of affection. It is either there is no time to spare or the means of mourning are already programmed that they seem to end so perfectly. It appears as though degree of sadness and means (or duration) of mourning are calculated proportionally; the subject of mourning is, actually, left confused.

From a collective and larger perspective, this would include the historical vestiges that were so easily erased, disappeared, shattered and forgotten along the way of achieving national goals. How much the losses that occurred during such process were. When things (clearly, no one remembers what they were) were buried and such burial-loss was yearned for or mourned over, what exactly occupied the empty spot? Most, if not all, were looking out to hold someone (or something) responsible, or dealt with such loss by putting a price tag on it.

Maybe I got carried away with the introduction, but what I'm trying to say is that mourning stays at a personal level, and acting out it may never be perfect. Mourning should be seen as sublimation into another dimension, as opposed to something that ends in a perfect way.

When looking at Oh Yongseok's works, which I have been following the whole time, it feels as if a process of mourning is embodied in the repetitive acts. In his works are images that always and repeatedly appear and bodies that seem both sensual and cold. Images Oh gathered are distorted and reappear constantly. Here, the dominating sentiment a tragic, lonely, bleak and melancholic feeling. However, as it was always, these feelings do nothing but hover around the 'objects'. Encounters are out of order, relationships are severed and the distance to the object remains the same, no matter how much the bodies in his paintings look entwined or stuck with each other. And these feelings are prevailing mostly in notes concerning his works. Yet, this feeling—one that hovers around, neither owning nor being owned and always anticipating parting—is not new to us. In other words, those who haven't owned anything can't have properly gone through loss, and thus inexperienced in lamentation... It's a feeling of emptiness and blankness, felt when faced by a sudden deprivation, which happens to occur all the time.

It seems as though Oh Yongseok's another solo exhibition, *Tu* (Kumho Museum, 2011), originates in a somewhat impossible relationship and its invisibility which leads to an even more desperate emotion. In Oh's group portrait ("Dance of the Knight: Cowboy Dance Stag", 2011), figures mingle but maintain individuality, and the sorrowful sentiment toward those that have left, disappeared and are about to disappear. Traces of certain objects are merely suggested by silhouettes; it would be safer to say that this is a result of transferred collective memories, rather than just individual experiences. Nevertheless, collective memories became numb due to repeated losses, and are now insensible, without even knowing what exactly is it that have been lost; therefore, separation-loss-oblivion is insensibly repeated. If pleasure was to find new objects and make fresh relationships when its operating mechanism ceased to work, then how could an object reform itself when all ceases to weep over loss, and what kind of relationship could be newly established.

Darkness is the natural background that brightens the night as such in Oh Yongseok's recent exhibition titled *Chapter VIII: Holy Night_Therefore, darkness brightened the night* (Lotte Gallery, 2012). The same colors—yellow, white, blue, black and purple—that were used in his past works of melancholy, embarrassment, pain, cruelty and greed have become luminous and illuminated. Colors brighten colors, melancholy brightens melancholy and bodies are freed from their substances and return as ghosts or find a haven called light-color graves. Perhaps they have finally found peace, as the bodies are performing dances that shine so beautifully.