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Creating a New Identity from Tradition: In Case of Korean Modernist Art

When identity became an issue in Korean art scene in the 1970's artists were faced with the difficult task of creating a new Korean modern art, at once Korean and international. Then is a new Koreanesque art that combines specificity & universality, locality & globality being successfully established? If so, what is its identity? As an attempt to answer such questions, this paper will argue that the identity of Korean modernist art was based on the cultural tradition of the Chosun Dynasty and oriental spiritualism while tracing the history of reception of western art.

The artistic endeavor to unite tradition & modernism, western materialism & oriental spiritualism was first embodied in the movement of Informel of the late 1950's and the attempt to create Korean modernist art became serious by monochrome painters of the 1970's. Monochrome Painting shared common aesthetical ground not only with American Color-Filled Painting and western Minimalism but also with Japanese Mono-ha (物派) in its interest in the material itself and the reductionist idea. However, Korean Monochrome is different from western Minimalism in that materiality and spirituality meet as one on the painting surface thus creating a space of coming into being. This also distinguishes it from Mono-ha which is concerned more with the material's spatial and time relation. As the Japanese critique Nakahara Youske (中原佑介) and the Korean critique Lee Il both argued, white monochrome suggests something spiritual, natural, and cosmic entity before it is a color. In sum from the meditative and immaterial space of Monochrome Painting was born the oriental spirituality vis a vis western materiality. Although Korean Monochrome Painting can be regarded as a reflection of western formalist modernism, it should be evaluated to be at once Koreanesque and universal since it is in step with the western art of the same period while also being deeply rooted in traditional spirituality.

It seems too early to mention the Korean identity in the artistic practice of postmodernism. While Contemporary Koreans, descendants of the Chosun period, are best suited by modernism, especially minimalism, postmodernism seems far from Korean sensibility. This explains why artists opted for Minimalism rather than Dadaism, Surrealism, and Pop Art, the postmodern inclined ones. In a sense, such selective attitude was the first step in establishing the Korean identity. Then isn't it possible to create a Korean style postmodern art? This will be possible firstly by leaning on past culture far different from the simplistic Chosun style, and secondly by illuminating the side culture other than patriarchal Confucianism, exemplified in the rebel spirit, shamanism, folk art, and maternal culture. In sum, it is expected that a Korean identity in postmodern art will be born from these two cultural sources.