

Narrative Fragments without Clear Answers

In recent years, there are many instances where young Korean artists create narratives by combining documentary and fictional elements. The method is to construct a fictional narrative around real events and combine it with corresponding texts and objects. Bohnu Jang seems to be in line with such a trend, but she does not manipulate narratives or create stories in an artificial manner. Centered at biographically, Jang's work seems to be documentary photos that record real events. Yet, a close look at the artist's work reveals that it shifts between reality and fiction as different perspectives of biography. Text, time, and space are delicately intertwined with each other.

Through the encounter with time and its discovery, observations, analogy, and writings based on such encounter and discovery, Jang is heading towards a place that is neither in the realm of fiction nor non-fiction. However, Jang starts a game of puzzle during this process. She shifts between different points of view, places, and time, using found photographs as clues to the puzzle. The artist analogizes the time and place in which the characters in the photos might have lived, traces and observes them, and focus on the characters and places within the images. In addition, she puts a bit more story on what she has found, creating a narrative and providing a room for intervention for the viewers.

What should be noted in Jang's work is the process of guessing and finding the places where the photos are taken while she takes the images and memos as clues to find the places. It is the very process that differentiates the artist from others that merely combine reality and fiction. Through Jang focuses on the perspectives of the characters appearing in the photos by traveling to the places in the images, the action ultimately becomes an occasion to lead her to engage more actively in the perspectives of the characters. At this point, the artist's action of visiting the real places, analogizing and involving in the places, which goes beyond merely observing the places and characters, leads Jang's work to a mechanism of 'story.' It is an important point that makes the artist construct a new narrative that is beyond certain existence. Moreover, such intervention in the perspective by the artist provides a motivation for the viewers to assign themselves to the time and characters in the photos.

I saw Jang's work for the first time at her exhibition at Brain Factory. In the exhibition, old photographs, documents, and the texts in them, such as slide films and vintage photographs were installed in different spots in the exhibition space. The photographs and fragments of letters looked rather dry as if they were a kind of archive, forming a narrative that revolved around a person called K.

<Preface of Memory: K's Slides> is a photographic record of 'Jabun' as a

place, the 1980s (estimated time period) as a temporal background in the past, and traveling as a particular action. The character appearing in this work is an existence without any substance, which has lost its function. He existed in the time when the photographs were taken, but his existence reveals that he does not exist at the point of time when the images are shown. With the photos, one cannot know the situations when they were taken. There is no way to find out the personal history of the character in reality, without any substance and without any name... The artist creates a new narrative by overlaying a fictional character onto discarded photographs with unknown personal histories. However, they are not completely fictional but closer to a reading of photographic images by assuming the historical background and spatial characteristics. A narrative is constructed while the artist adds certain imagination.

In <Accustomed with the Night>, a series that was created after <Prelude of Memory: K's Glimpses>, Jang observes a personal history of a woman as a member of a family. The work was conceived as the artist received photo albums during her participation in a residency program in the United States. The albums were an extensive record of a family history that ranged from the birth of babies and deaths of old people. In this series, the focus is more on the fragments of emotions and psychological states since the source material is a personal record that includes a history of a person's development. Since the albums convey a woman's history of growth in the community of family, Jang is led to involving deeply in the psychological states and emotions of the protagonist, taking the photos as clues. Analyzing a person's life and follow the person's development as if one is reading through the person's diary makes one experience universal events and related emotions that a person goes through as he or she grows. In this series embedded with the possibility of developing many stories, Jang attempts to employ new approaches while thinking about the life of a woman. The installation using chocolate, which was exhibited in Betty exhibition at Dukwon Gallery, also took the same albums as its motif. The installation provided an opportunity to discover new possibilities and diverse expansions in the artist's work. The work symbolically presented a novel point of encounter between humans destined to be melt away and photographically that tries to fixate and commemorate it, offering a ground to see the possibility.

In her most recent series, <A Thousand Years>, Jang expands her work in a bit different manner. Firstly, 'Cyberpunk' as a space is a place that the viewers have experienced at least once or twice. The place becomes a mechanism that enables the viewers to approach it in a universal manner, assign their experience to the place, and actively engage with it as the universal spatial function of the city and nostalgia is put together in a mixture. The photos from the past, the photos taken

By the artist as she visited the place, and a few memories generate a new context and enter an abstract world. Here, the perspectives of the artist and the people in the photos are intertwined with each other. The diary-like text shifts between the perspectives of a party and a down-up, breaking away from the routine as it reveals the difference of time and perspective. The photos of weddings, school trips, desolate landscape of Gyeongju, and paintings also make texts and images drift around. In the series, a video of an interview with a taxi driver depicts a more active Gyeongju in the present in detail, emphasizing the temporality of the city that is painted in 'the past'. The characteristics of the city of Gyeongju, which possesses the richness of the past while being a declining, forgotten place in people's memory that craves to hold the richness, resembles the characteristics of photography. The series employs the 'demonstration of the existence', which is the characteristics of photography, as a method of creation. Moreover, it actively engages with the characteristics, stimulating abstract and distant emotions that are layered with the artist's journey to the time and places of the photos. It reaches its peak at the music video of the city, revealing Gyeongju as a place that is continued in 'images'.

Janáček does not only use photography as a medium but takes its property of bringing existence and non-existence, which is to bring that something 'has been there once', as a basis of her creation. Through the process of creation, photos that bring the existence of something in the past turn into a moment in the present that does not exist. When it is realized, Janáček uses the human desire of restoration and recalling as her creative process. In the end, she combines them. Photography as a clear proof of reality then becomes an abstract image. Combined with texts and objects without a specific author, they become even more ambiguous. This ambiguity is not vagueness that creates confusion, but one that invites the viewers to engage with it, inducing the viewers to involve in the artist's work. By involving in photographic images and drawing the images to a new world and space-time, Janáček makes it possible to create her work as a text that is accessible via different passages. And this directly reveals a dilemma of remembering and forgetting where humans as mortals are desired to be eternally fixated and remembered. Through photos where time, space, and the order of existence are put in disorder while texts and objects are added, Janáček enables the photos to possess a loose narrative structure, which become a medium to connect to different space-time.