

## Decorative Value of Figure Paintings with Qualities of Still Life Paintings

Ejung Ban

A man crouching down with his hands on his knees, a woman showing her back with her open arms wrapping herself, people exposing only their heads, wrists, and ankles in dense green woods, a man standing beside a Dalmatian in front of an open door, and body parts of subjects like the man covered with uniform patterns: Woolim Lee has repeatedly used such representative identical symbols in advanced forms, thereby imprinting his own brand as an artist. He attached three to four fixed titles to his representative symbols, which consequently generates an imprinting effect.

A woman with an hourglass-shaped body and wearing a traditional style hair ribbon, a man wearing a butch haircut, and an expressionless slate-grey face have established themselves as signature characters in Lee's painting. These iconic figures have been presented under fixed titles such as "A Walk," "Mong (Dream)," and "In the Woods." Even so, particular icons are not exclusively linked to specific titles. For example, a figure of a man with a butch haircut, crouching down in front of the door, was entitled in 2002 as "Mong (Dream)," whereas the same figure was given a title "In the Woods" in 2020. The man with black floral patterns standing side by side with a Dalmatian was named "A Walk" in 2009, whereas the same figure was given the title "In the Woods" in 2021.

Signature icons that have become that artist's unique brand, fixed work titles, and characters appearing alone in the image, and a variety of objects appearing in the artist's paintings since the mid-2000s all seem to exist with no regard to their interconnections; a singular icon continues to appear in different works under different titles: considering the general context, it can be assumed that Lee's oeuvre primarily focuses on the first impressions and decorative values of subjects rather than particular themes or narratives, which can be assumed as a reflection of a changing trend in painting.

Woolim Lee's figure paintings mostly place single—sometimes two—impressive character in a manner of still life paintings. His figure painting of a woman, whose body is shaped like an hourglass covered with floral and other diverse patterns, shows only the woman's back and not her face. The characters with slate-grey skin with emotionless faces are viewed as unanimated still objects. Looking into the chronology of his work, it is revealed the

crouching man figure painting, regarded as one of his representative works in his earlier career, is perceived like a ceramic still life object due to the posture of his hands and feet gathering; the tightly closed mouth and eyes turn a complicated narrative into a succinct and condensed one.

The appearance of almost identical figures in works with different titles also seem to be reminiscent of the original form of art or the beginning of highly favored artworks that value the visual impact of first impressions and decorative values beyond the restrictions of work titles and the emphasis of content and themes indicated by the titles.

Painters today carry out projects, defying the boundaries of genre in which they experiment with flat surfaces as well as two-dimensional planes and three-dimensional figures. Furthermore, they are not bound to a single medium. This is also true for Woolim Lee. He once created a figure of a woman figure wearing a dress that looked like a burka covering the entire body from top to toe into a flat surface sculpture, which he frequently featured in a number of his paintings. The fact that contemporary art is now witnessing the emergence of a new painting in abstract form is an evidence that generations of painters who are exposed to new media and the Internet have a different aesthetic sense than artists from the previous generations. This is a part of the process in which a changing trend of painting will arrive.

The term “decorative art” is often defined as objects with functional applications as well as attractive appearances. Interior design, architecture, and craft are categorized as decorative art, setting them apart from fine art. Although separating decorative art from fine art seems reasonable at first, it is hard to draw a clear line between the two art forms. That is because works of art with a long history, including ancient Chinese art, early medieval art, and Islamic art, belong to decorative art. More than anything, among the artworks that are revered for all times and places, many received attention due to their decorative values. The Arts and Crafts Movement in the late 19th century is viewed as a collective attempt to introduce original decorative value to mass produced goods rather than art; since the mid-1970s, a group of painters influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement carried out art projects stressing decorative value, inspired by fabric mosaic embroidery wallpaper produced in the Islam, Byzantine, and Celtic regions.

I have already mentioned that Lee’s figure paintings are close to still life paintings in terms of their qualities. Let’s take examples from his key works: the figure of a man with a

butch haircut, crouching in front of a door, looks like a ceramic still object, exists as a well-developed ornament—regardless of the meaning suggested by the title, whether it is titled “Mong (Dream)” or “In the Woods.” In general, the main characters in Lee’s paintings have been represented in forms that resemble ceramics, among other various still objects. Let us look at the woman who is wrapping her own body with her two hands. This work has been interpreted in two ways: the hands embracing the woman belong to herself; or somebody else’s hands are popping up out of the forest. Whatever the case, the hourglass-shaped body of the woman wearing a one-piece dress seems to overlap with a pottery still object.

In addition, floral patterns that previously had covered the body of a character were replaced with blue and white porcelain patterns around the year 2019, which further highlights the still life characteristics in Lee’s paintings. Among his recent artworks, “A Walk” (2021) shows flower patterns on a dress worn by a woman were replaced by blue and white porcelain patterns. As a result, the character’s streamlined body shape synchronizes with the curved body of the porcelain, making the character more look like a still life. In the genealogy of Lee’s artworks, many pieces deserve attention. Among his representative characters, a woman’s streamlined body shape seen from behind naturally reminds viewers of a still life of pottery, adding decorative value to the painting. The effect of “being pottery” possessed by the appearance of a subject to be reproduced has been further enhanced through the discovery of a new material around the year 2020. The newly found material was resin which added to the aesthetic effect of pottery on the flat painting surface.

Shadows, which had played a peripheral role in his early works, seem to have come forward around 2019. Throughout his career, Lee has never used shadows to generate perspective to paintings. Just as the character appearing on canvas exists as its own being, shadows are also seen as an element with identity.

After all, in “A Walk”(2019) the shadow of a running horse was cast in front of an owl, which assumes the role of the main character, decorated with blue and white porcelain patterns; in “The Landscape along with a Tiger” (2021), the shadow of a man sitting on a chair is cast in front of a tiger covered with red and white porcelain patterns. In both paintings, the “running horse” and “man sitting on a chair” that cast shadows are not seen on the canvas. The shadows in Lee’s paintings exist as their own beings, not ancillary to the main subject.

As in “A Walk,” “Mong (Dream),” and “In the Woods,” there are some noteworthy

elements: works loosely classified under fixed titles; expressionless faces; the rear and side view of characters being stressed for depiction in figure painting; figure characters keeping silent in response to loud storytelling; figure paintings with qualities of still life paintings; independent presence of every element appearing in the same screen being emphasized instead of their interconvertibility; decorative bodies of characters; objects adorned with patterns from flowers to blue and white porcelain. All of them are the signs of a changing trend in painting that is emerging in the era of art where art with too much storytelling is drawing to an end.