

Ponder and create outside of faith

(Kim Sung woo, Independent Curator / Director of Primary Practice)

He who has ears, let him hear. This passage appears several times throughout the New Testament as well as in the Book of Revelation, the last and only book of prophet from the New Testament. It not only emphasizes the importance of listening and obedience to the Word of God but also points to one of the fundamental elements of faith. In other words, “He who has ears” is not someone with the physical ability to hear. Rather, it is those who are ready to receive the message, that is, have the ability and willingness to understand the message. This passage, which underscores the importance of faith, is also a matter of whether the recipient is ready to recognize and accept the truth.

For some time, Lee Dong Hyuk has paid attention to physical spaces that have been the base of faith. Staying in ruined churches across the country, he finds the desolation that remains after the community built on faith disintegrates. The transcendental reality built to confront the fundamental questions around the conditions of human existence, the universe, and death now only reflects a weary and precarious way of living along with a ruined landscape. The space, now in shambles, begins with the signal of the collapse of the utopia that all beliefs promised. Here, only the empty shell left behind by past worldly activities exists, and the form of the ruins is actually rendered foreign and unstable, separated from the normal (or believed to be normal) order of time and space. It is an empty space left by an unapproachable world, nothing more than an evidence deserted by an unpromised future that reached reality. In the end, the faith in an absolute being and the system of truth that it stood above left its traces in the spaces that were broken up in the conditions of life. To the artist, the form of these ruins may have seemed like an irreplaceable place that made a very special impression and, at the same time, a unique construction that could indefinitely expand. It would have been a landscape that could only be fully seen when one sets aside belief in the transcendent and transposes it with the realistic conditions of life. Where was absolute faith, and where did its many followers go? Faith collapsed, and only an empty armor of its ruin remained in reality.

In this exhibition, Lee's works that dealt with the past experience of places now exist in relation to a few passages from the Book of Revelation. As one of the core texts of Christian eschatology, it describes the end of humanity and the world afterward, including the final judgment and the creation of a new heaven and earth through prophecy, symbols, and parables. The artist pays special attention to the scenes described in the text and interprets them from various dimensions. At first glance, this method reminds us of his previous solo exhibition, *A Nuance Remained on the Window* (2022, A-Lounge, Seoul). For example, the artist captured the entangled two figures that can be seen differently depending on the viewer's perspective, sometimes as one body and sometimes as two beings in an intense physical altercation. These experiments explored the possibility of expanding images that oscillate between figuration and abstraction by turning the object into a mass rather than a part and extending the icon derived from the human body into a completely different shape. In this way, he creates a narrative that goes beyond logic.

This exhibition goes a step further from the existing method and deconstructs the meaning of the icon both on and off the canvas, thereby securing room for a narrative to enter through multiple layers. As in his previous works, one icon is seen differently depending on the direction, but it now also transfers and expands into other works. The gaze that focuses on the icon from multiple viewpoints sometimes moves from the center of the object to its peripherals, changing its angle, dismantling the entire form and, at the same time, relegating it to one part of the canvas' composition or to the background. Especially since these icons originate from Biblical references, images that deviate from the existing structure of symbolism allow greater space for alternative significance. For example, the icon of the horse, which symbolizes war, famine, and death, and foretells God's judgment and the end of human history, or represents purity, victory, justice, and salvation, appears entangled with the other objects or animals or hides in the abyss of the dark background. Its movements are even only partially portrayed on another canvas. In this process, the collectively agreed symbolic value becomes meaningless and is left only in its traces with ambiguous significance. It is not only a form that can be relevant anywhere while leaving room for the symbolic value that the existing sign held but also a space where the pictorial materials that make up the form are forsaken. These elements that hover over the pale canvas like ghosts are not much different from the ruins' impressions. Icons whose symbols have been dismantled are merely the conditions of reality that linger after the faith in beings that transcend human has faded. This is an image of a space that evokes a special emotion; it is where anything is possible.

Meanwhile, the way the artist uses images does not stop within the canvas but expands their narrative possibilities beyond it. Although the icons he introduces are religious symbols and therefore already have their narrative quality, the way they appear repeatedly in different canvases with varying angles and compositions creates a cinematic sequence. If the frame, an external system, tries to bind the significance to the internal image, the images that continue beyond the canvas extend the gaze outward, not into the canvas. Even in the divided spaces, the parts that originate from one source and are segmented or stand at different angles make the frame of the painting rather more impressionable, allowing the gaze to reach the empty spaces between the canvases. This structure creates a slippage between sequences rather than completing the narrative, reinforcing the multiple narrativity inherent in iconography. In this formulation, serial thinking in the exhibition extends to icons, canvas, and even spatial approaches. The artist's decision to intentionally cut and renew the (non)linear narrative guides the viewers to the richness of the narrative itself rather than its context. The unfixed, disconnected and limited viewpoint surrounding the subject is far from the didactic narrative of the past. In this sense, concrete iconography, non-explicit landscapes, and situations that seem to be abruptly cut off from the context continuously drive new narratives through repeated escapes.

In its relationship with images, text acquires a visuality that strengthens faith. Lee's image, however, neither serves as a complement to the written text nor does it intentionally convey the narrative. Rather, it simply scatters and reappears, desiring another faith beyond belief in the after-image left by the text. These attempts can be understood in the realms of translation. The process of reinterpretation in a new context allows us to discover new meanings that were not present in the original. The artist, like Walter Benjamin,

acknowledges the potential for translation that is latent in the original work that has yet to be visualized. Still, that possibility is not limited to the original work itself. He actively disrupts the existing knowledge-power system through the movement and transformation that comes with translation and demands that new values be found through dismantling existing communal values. Therefore, in his work, the system of belief collapses in the translation, transfer, and transplantation of icons. Misreadings and re-readings that occur during the translation process themselves create holes for new interpretations in an otherwise tight system.

Faith transmits on physical conditions. It spreads through language, solidifies in the form of a space, transcends time through engraved writing, and renews and strengthens its sacredness through images that would never dissipate. Narratives that extend between cut-out icons, different perspectives, and images that skip across the canvases. Icons no longer exist for sublime beliefs and transcendental beings. Scattered and fragmented images only create loose links for a potential narrative. He who has ears, let him hear. Now is the time to become those who speak on their own, rather than the passive ones who only listen. Facing the landscapes laid out before our eyes by Lee, we must make our own choices, contemplate on them, and comprehend them from outside the existing belief system. Now, who are those who will only listen and mindlessly accept? It is time to see, ponder, and create.