**Ok Seungcheol: 相**

By SooJin Lee (Assistant Professor, Hongik University)

Ok Seungcheol's painting work begins not on a canvas or sketchbook, but on a computer monitor. First, he takes screenshots of close-up scenes of characters in cartoons and animations, and then on the Adobe Illustrator software program, creates a new face by combining selected features from the faces in the captured images. The digital vector image thus created is projected onto a canvas so he can trace; then finally with a paint brush, he reproduces the jpeg image onto the canvas as precisely as possible. When he paints, he applies layers of acrylic paint several times to make vivid animationesque colors, and in ways to minimize the traces of his brushstrokes, thus emulating the effect of a printed poster. While many artists associated with “pop art” have borrowed images from cartoons (e.g. Roy Lichtenstein) or have created new cartoonish characters (e.g. Takashi Murakami), Ok has developed his own unique method and style of using cartoon/animation for his creative work: he creates and depicts unnamed characters which are pastiches of existing cartoon/animation characters that he has deconstructed and examined closely.

Ok's unique method of work—which straddles boundaries between painting and digital manipulation, art and pop culture, and appropriation and variation—has been the focus of the writings and interviews discussing his work. It is indeed an important, and theoretically interesting part in his art. The titles of his solo exhibitions so far, “un original” (2018) and “JPEG SUPPLY” (2020), also emphasized that particular aspect, with the curatorial essays concentrating on issues of postmodernism and post-internet digital culture. In this essay which will accompany the artist’s forthcoming third solo exhibition, I want to draw attention to what have remained underexplored: the form and content of Ok’s work. My analysis will approach them through three concepts: close-up, icon, and 相, which is the title of this exhibition.

Meticulously designed and systematically produced, Ok’s works have compositions that immediately appeal to and leave a deep impression on the viewer. A key in such powerful compositions, characterized by refined intensity, is the use of close-up. Ok focuses on faces only, often depicting a compelling face set up against a minimal backdrop. In some cases, he fills his composition entirely with a face or depicts a head cut off from the neck floating in motion. Ok, who was once a filmmaking student, explains that close-up for him is “a device to make things look unfamiliar and strange.” The faces in Ok’s works are either expressionless or have dramatic expressions, just like typical cartoon or animation characters. But unlike popular cartoonish characters, which are designed to evoke friendliness and affection, Ok uses close-ups to emphasize the formal qualities and artificiality of his characters. It is for the same reason that he gives neither names nor narratives to his characters.

The title of the upcoming exhibition, “相” (pronounced *xiāng*), was decided upon the artist’s suggestion. There are several Chinese characters that are used to refer to “image” or the related meanings; to name a few, 像 (image, appearance, resemblance), 狀 (state, condition, -shaped), and 象 (elephant, shape, form). Among them, 相 is the most eccentric, with nearly 20 meanings listed in the dictionary. While Ok usually avoids having interviews or giving detailed explanations about his work, 相 can speak a lot about his work, although it may seem like a rare choice. Most obviously, 相 is the character used in words related to face, as in 面相 (facial look) and 觀相 (physiognomy) for example. The combination of 木 (tree) and 目 (eye), the character 相’s primary meaning, “each other,” is said to be related to the image of a tree and an eye facing each other. However, its original meaning is said to be “to observe” or “to appraise” and the like, probably derived from the act of choosing the right timber from the woods. Furthermore, 相 also means “to pray” and “to exorcize,” which can be traced to the folk or shamanistic rituals of praying in front of a tree. In brief, all of these different meanings of 相 similarly point to some kinds of special relationship formed between a human and a tree/thing. This image of 相 also evokes an image of Ok concentrated on drawing faces, and an image of us the viewers looking closely at the faces depicted in close-up.

It is the world of images, created between humans and things, that Ok is fascinated with and is exploring through his work. In this mysterious and complex world of images, he pays special attention to the uncanny power and charm that artificially made faces give off. When a tree meets a human eye, the ordinary tree may develop a special meaning to the beholder. Whether such specialness is endowed by nature or the human, in any case it is the same phenomenon that led to the creation of icons (images of holy figures used in religious devotion) in the first place, and then to the rise of iconoclasm (the belief in the destruction of sacred images) when icons seemed to have become idols. Nowadays, the word “icon” is more often used to refer to a famous person or thing widely admired for having influence or significance in a particular sphere of culture or society. Whether it is a holy figure, a man of power or a celebrity, the most important part in an icon is the face. In any portraiture, the face is the natural focal point and “the face” of the protagonist, both literally and metaphorically. Faces are so symbolic that vandals in both eastern and western cultures often cut only the head off of a statue instead of destroying the entire figure. Faces represent some sort of humanness; that is why people add facial features to images of animals or objects when we want to personify them, and why we identify with robots having faces more easily than with those without.

Ok’s Instagram is full of photos of faces. They are mostly images of his works, but also many head shots of Buddha statues stand out. In his studio, too, Buddha statues are placed alongside his sculptural heads. Ok is not a Buddhist, but he has a deep knowledge of Buddhist art and a special passion and taste for Buddha statues, often travelling around temples and auction sites to study and collect them. He says that he is attracted to Buddha statues because “they all look similar at first glance, but actually each shows the particular style of the era during which it was produced.” Notably, there is a commonality between Buddha statues and cartoon/animation faces: neither of them is portraiture by definition, but they both have a widely recognized form that has been maintained while undergoing changes.

Ok is interested in tracing the affinities and differences between the individual works that comprise a particular style in visual arts. In his own work as well, he draws visual references from diverse sources and integrates them into an imagery or a composition. For example, in his painting titled *Plaster Statue* (2020), the distinctive angle of the female head’s tilt was taken from that of the famous statue of Giuliano de' Medici (in South Korea, known as “the Giuliano plaster statue,” the head is a famous study model often used for practicing figure drawing among students preparing for art college entrance exams). The viewers who cold approach this painting will only ‘feel’ that there’s something familiar with the figure’s posture; when they hear “the Giuliano plaster statue,” they cry out “Eureka!” So exquisitely Ok selects and applies reference images. Ok is distinguished from many other visual artists of his generation who appropriate images of subculture to facilitate their appeals to the viewers. He is an aesthetic researcher whose artwork is based on his sensitive perception of images—how they are created, flow, and operate. And he does it with his own philosophy and strategy. With his career on the rise, Ok is a young yet promising artist.

Over the past few years, Ok has steadily created unnamed faces and heads in various sizes and mediums, and they have been rapidly reaching the status of icon, admired and sought after by many art lovers. The exhibition “相” will present 14 recent and new works, many of which will be installed above the human eye level, mimicking the way propaganda portraits are exhibited, so that the audience will have to look them up. Marking the largest solo presentation of Ok’s work to date, “相” hopes to convey the wide spectrum of his vision and experimentation.

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