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Three Painters, Three Squares: Interface / Vortex / Unfolding

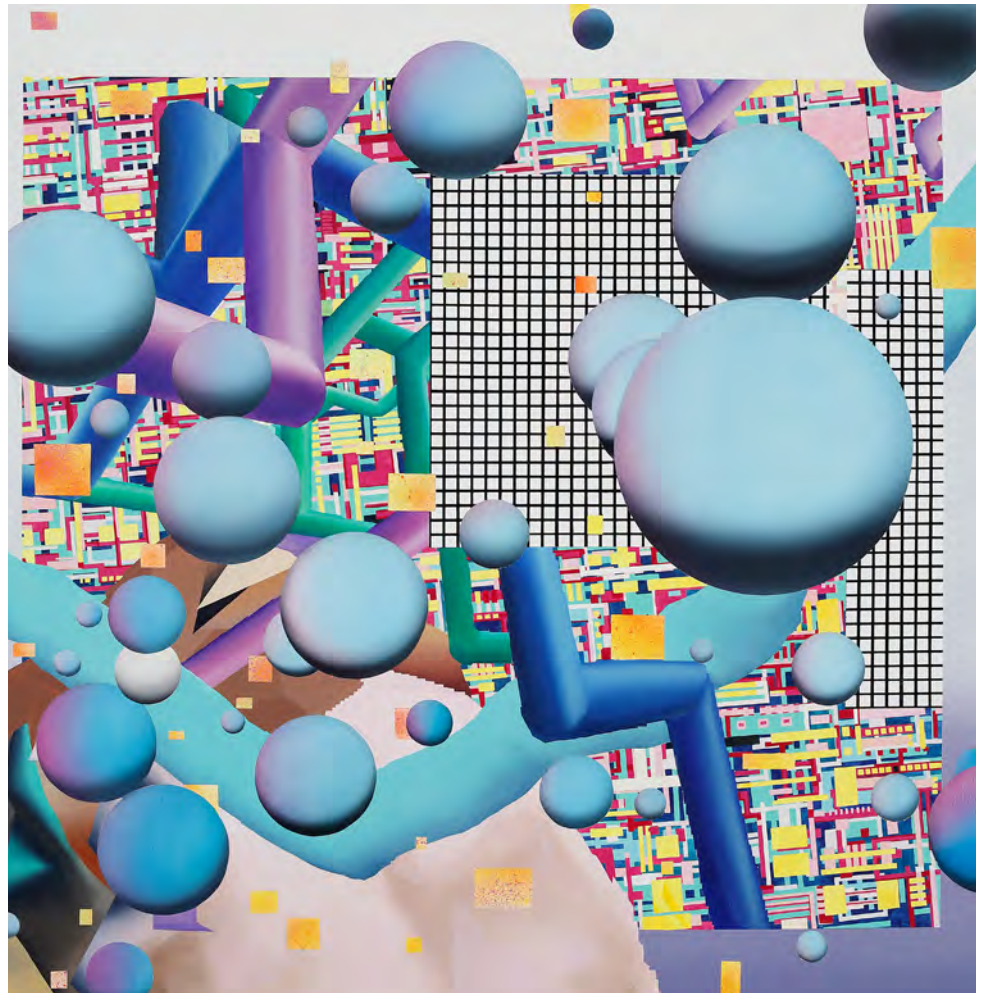


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Gwen Seol – Painting as a Digital Psychological Bird’s Eye View and Interface

There are moments when the monitor that once emitted light incessantly stops showing and the residual glow glimmers across the black screen. Seol works in a digital environment to capture and draw the afterimage of the flashes left on her eyes. Her work begins by reflecting on what the eyes saw between the waves of “windows” and “tabs” that rush onto the screen. While observing the rising impression resembling drops beyond the pool of memories, Seol felt the traces of the data –flickering beyond count– taking geometric abstract forms and bouncing upward through the surface of consciousness. The foam created from texts and images, which flow on the currents of scrolling, soar upwards in idiosyncratic shapes and colors, according to its own impression to become the group unit of the work.

FIGURE 01 →



Seol heeds the fact that the sea of information, which can deepen indefinitely without a predetermined depth, is pressed by the flat monitor and presented as

a shallow surface. Focusing on these characteristics, the series of *Spaced* (2019) gives volume to flattened objects on LCD screen as an attempt to reassemble them in a pictorial space. Substances in the real world float on the screen, which were broken down into pixels after passing through electronic circuits, are again converted into geometric shapes of units with pigments and are revived on the physical conditions of the canvas. They are multiplied into many while seeping through the base of the fabric that goes into the illusory space; they are assembled and imbricated after being adjusted into various shapes and volumes as they repeat the process of collision and harmony.

The mechanism of reconstructing the psychological experience of the artist wandering through the space of internet space in arbitrary interpretation and retrospective of the geographical features of the place reminds the viewer of the psychogéographie of the Internationale Situationiste. However, unlike the situationists who suggested a path that drifts free and playful wandering against the uniformity and visual order of the city, it is evident that under the surveillance system of algorithm, filtered currents are the way to separate and avoid them for those who swim through a strong network. In the end, as the artist confesses *The Attempt to Locate the Things without Location Goes Futile Because that Knowledge Presupposes the Knowledge of My Own Location which Alludes Me at*

FIGURE 02 →



the Moment (2021), her work is limited to post-mortem efforts to finish surfing the internet which was only swept away by the tide, and to draw a rough bird's eye view of the lost route.

However, her works, which transform the geography of the repressive virtual world based on her individual impressions, can function as an interface that leads to a new connection to the past journey in a real space beyond the screen's liquid crystal. Accordingly, the artist ruminates on drawing a shape angle of refraction that turns around the controlled communication path, contemplating conversation as a connection device that penetrates the recently passed virtual space as an alternative narrative. The surface of the recent work, which has no brush strokes due to the use of reflective light of subtle metallic colors and air brushes, boasts a smoothness comparable to processed glass. The colors painted with light transparency also embody the scattering of the remnants spreading slightly overlapping with digital splendor. The composition of the work also tends to gradually program into a system in which the canvas is divided into a 3x3 grid and meets a new vector; this is placed on a plane graph as a module with coordinates.

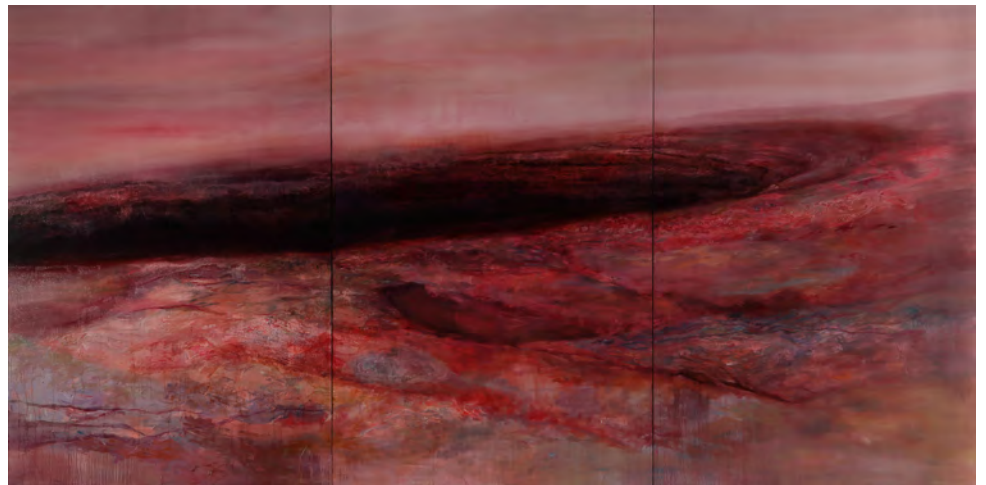
Seol's work, *Wait for Loading While Waiting for Loading While Waiting for It to Load* (2021), which allows the viewer to experience a loss of direction (as a direct reference to the title) with the endless loop on the surface, can open a circuit of encounter in a monotonous landscape by providing an opportunity for temporary settlement and detour in the busy cyber city space. In an era of unwittingly widespread exposure to digital graphics and regulations, her works reproduce the subjectively experienced and retrospective aspects; thus containing the potential to be liberated with a sense of wandering that revives signage and contemporary urban landscapes dominated by smart devices.

Byun SungWon – Portrait of a Drop-being, Scenery of a Vortex-being

A cylindrical chunk of tissue, tightly clumped and soaked in water, is precariously erected on a mound of sand softly heaped like a pile of salt. *Holes* (2020), built up with dried crystals from tears, is suggestive of a huge monument of sadness. Looking into the dark interior of a deeply-dug well recalls the memories of a gloomy day. One feels the sensation of being dragged into the inner vortex swirled up by the towering teardrops.

While arguing on the concept of subject, Giorgio Agamben stated that it needs to be regarded as "a vortex in the flow of becoming"¹. In other words,

FIGURE 03 →



1

Giorgio Agamben, "Vortexes," *The fire and the tale*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 61.

humans can experience pain and joy as a true subject by immersing themselves in a vortex centered on themselves and by paying attention to their senses. He also added that even if one tries to be separated into the shape of the drop and attempt to be separated into the outside, as if one's existence persistently winds his/her body toward the interior of the vortex, one will create a small vortex falling into the water and eventually become sensual.²

In Byun's work, which delineate the feeling of emotion felt with extraordinary sensitivity, 'the drop (a part of the body separated from the sensing subject)' and 'the vortex (to dig thoroughly into the outer skin with traces of irritation, subsiding and rising onto somewhere)' are presented. For example, the artist, who felt unrealistic tension that seemed to suck everything into the actively energized tunnel of the five senses, embodied/configured this tense sensation using the body of supernatural life. The fifteen chapters of *Sensory Forms* (2019) depict a spiritual animal's bodily organ where the artist feels the acute energy that he perceived. The ear of the creature is tilted open to the fullest to collect all kinds of sounds and guide them deep into the earhole, and the eyes are overworked and swollen yet fully awake. While countless holes remain in the skull, in which sharp emotions flow in and out, the muscles of the back and legs are still stiff with anxiety. Panic visualized into a specific shape enables a haptic understanding of the unstable inner world.

On the other hand, Byun recognizes the skin as a psychological boundary that both connects and blocks itself to the outside. In accordance with this recognition, deep skin damage in the work is represented as a huge passage through the inner abyss from the outside. In his *Where the Anxiety Lingers* (2019), the scars were depicted like the craters on the moon. The vehement movement of the blood, aggregating toward the darkish red pool of anxiety, carried through blue blood vessels reflected under the red skin, is presented as a surreal landscape painting. Also, the blotchy bruised skin was regarded as the '*Sign* (2019)' of an incident that would either explode or get sucked in and eventually disappear. Maximizing this imagination, Byun's *Omen* (2020), created on a nearly 4-meter-wide canvas, presents a galactical landscape of blood undulating with wounds. When one stands in front of the huge canvas, an ominous vibration is manifested, situated in between uneven terrain, texture and blurred contours. At last, a prospect that enables looking directly into an aspect of neurotic fear and pain opens up and recoups the subjectivity of perception.

The shape of shattered and driven being drawn by the artist relying on the slip of pigments draws a trajectory of water drops and vortices; this drags the eye, which used to wander outside of the surface, to the ecology of transcendental sensation of affliction. The artist opens the eyes of the consciousness of who used to see it this way; by presenting the brightness of the eye that can fully react to the jolt of the real, his remark resonates with Agamben's revelation that "whoever seizes the greatest unreality will shape the greatest reality"³.

Ahn Kwanghwee – Folding, Stacking, Unfolding

In a typical white-cube gallery, the well-folded clothes stacked on the white shelf form four columns while showing their sides in black. The black square created by the lines and the whole view of display reminds a viewer of a color-field painting in the modernist art museums. However, when the viewer takes a step aside and look at the side of the 'painting,' it reveals its volume of the side in gray with the well-folded layers. This is because it is *The Black Square Made by Folding and Stacking Well* (2020). While having the wonders of the hidden side between the

²
Giorgio Agamben, "Vortexes,"
The fire and the tale, trans. Lorenzo
Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press, 2017), pp. 59-62.

³
Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and
Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans.
Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1993),
p. xix.



overlapping grays, the viewer turns to face *The Unfolded Side of the Black Square Made by Folding and Stacking Well* (2020). Through the neatly hanging gray sweatshirts with an emoticon and a partially covering black rectangle, the viewers may find the truth of the black square that they first encountered. There are two 'black squares' installed in different ways. Why did these flat black squares have to be displayed folded, stacked, and unfolded instead of being completely painted or covered?

FIGURE 04 →



These two works were exhibited along with three pairs of sneakers at Ahn Kwanghwee's solo exhibition *Show Down* at ThisWeekendRoom in 2020, and the exhibition was in display like a streetwear store. *Words Puzzle for Outside* (2020) is a piece of black sneakers with graffiti images of English verbs written on the left sole and adverbs on the right sole; a phrase can be made by combining each side of shoes. However, the graffiti images are drawn over another graffiti-like words on each sole. It is also a side of unfolded surface designed to be stacked in another way.

In this clothing store with the surfaces of black side or lines, hip-hop music recorded by the artist is being played. The music video of the song is in display over a blue screen in the middle of the exhibition hall, and is, in fact, the main character here. The artist, who has grown up listening to and making hip-hop songs since his childhood, has been steadily produced songs and music videos in hip-hop and expressed the hardships of lives as an artist through them. From *The Pathetic Rhymes* (2017), *Reversible Reaction* (2018), *Noise Cancelling* (2019), and *Show Down* (2020), he produces and presents new songs and music videos at his exhibitions every year like musicians who make their albums every year and hold showcases to commemorate their latest release. Even when he is invited to the special exhibition under the theme of video or music, the artist also releases a 'remixed' version for each exhibition adequately and accordingly just as the hip-hop singers extract and rearrange parts of the original song for special performances. It brings up a question: why do Ahn's works comply the status of art though it shares a similar format and presentation approach of hip-hop music? The answer can be examined through the structure of his works that he folds,

stacks, and unfolds.

Ahn's music video consists layers of layers. Let's disassemble and take a look at each layer. First, his work begins when he finds some released hip-hop beats on the Internet and plays as the background music. He writes lyrics based on the content he wants to deal with; he collects emoticons, ASCII art, various memes, and short GIF video clips whether they are relevant to the topic or not. After setting an appropriate background image, the collected images are arranged according to the flow of the song. Some images appear on an appropriate place then disappear, while some images remain on the screen changing places. After placing all images stacked up sequentially, the lyrics are laid on top as subtitles. Lastly, it is completed when the voice of the artist that hits the listeners ears hard without any reverb-effect. The numbers of sentences filling this paragraph proves that each piece of works consists multiple layers.

FIGURE 05 →



However, what is perceived in the completed music video is the smooth cortex of pigments that are well stalled rather than a thick matière. Although the song, images, and texts are overlapped in different ways and weights, they are thinly adsorbed on the screen without a sense of thickness. When the video is played, the thin layers are folded and unfolded, floating on a light screen. Unlike the way of sounds that people usually hear, the flatly manipulated voice, which shall not give a sense of space, plays a role in bringing the flat surface into contact with the uppermost layer of the work. The composition of a flat surface in which several sides are stacked, folded, and unfolded again is based on the principle of printmaking that the artist majored in. The structure of printmaking is also woven in the way emoticons, figures, and text are printed on the sweatshirts and sneakers' outsoles that are folded and unfolded to present a flatten side as we first explored. Furthermore, *BB* (2020), another work displayed together, depicts what the artist felt while learning tattooing techniques for a living by piercing and injecting ink onto the skin with a needle on a gun-shaped machine; the apricot-colored rubber plate dotted with three BB pellets remind the artist of the engraving printmaking technique from the relevance of needle, ink, and pointillism.

As it is well known, printmaking is a method of making art works designed to enable mass production and reproduction. In the Middle Ages, where the illiteracy rate was high, it was a means to widely share criticism and satire on society; in Korea, it was a weapon for the minjung-artists to fight against political

irrationality in the name of the public. Considering this history, it is necessary to pay attention to the context in which Ahn Kwanghwee adopts printmaking in production of subcultures such as hip-hop music, streetwear, and tattoos. This is because subcultures, such as hip-hop, triggered as a resistance against the mainstream society and formed an emotional solidarity through its uniqueness in music and fashion. Today, the work of reconstructing the altered hip-hop culture into the language of printmaking by incorporating it to the logic of capital can be a mechanism to reflect on the essence of hip-hop culture and to strengthen the artist's social message in hip-hop songs. On the contrary, new forms such as music videos that allow digitized audiovisual data are significant in that they occupy the possibility of countless expansion following the printmaking techniques. Thus, Ahn's lament over printmaking, in which he keeps the old way of folding, stacking, and unfolding in the midst of an ever-innovating media environment, is not necessarily 'pathetic'.

— Kim Yeji, Independent Curator

FIGURE 01 Gwen Seol, «Spaced I», 2019, Oil and acrylic spray on canvas, 91×91cm

FIGURE 02 Gwen Seol, «Wait for Loading While Waiting for Loading While Waiting for It to Load», 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 97×162cm

FIGURE 03 Byun SungWon, «Omen», 2020, Oil on canvas, 390×194cm

FIGURE 04 «Show Down», ThisWeekendRoom, 2020, Exhibition view

FIGURE 05 Ahn Kwanghwee, «Noise Cancelling», 2019, Single-channel video, sound, 17min

