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The Twilight Zone: The Confluence of Childhood Scenes and Future Anxiety

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The Twilight Zone: The Confluence of Childhood Scenes and Future Anxiety

by

Jongwon Bae

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction

Although our variegated experiences throughout our lifetime would certainly affect us, to some extent, in various degrees, nothing seems more powerful than childhood experiences. That is, they seem to have a much more intense impact, and thus, are likely to leave an indelible impression in one’s life. Because they are so vivid and invigorating that many poets and artists such as Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Gauguin, Kandinsky, Picasso, Klee, Dubuffet, Louise Bourgeois, Paula Rego, and many more artists have appreciated them as the essential source of the most imaginative and vital art. ¹ Therefore, it is no surprise at all that numerous artworks are attributed to and to be interpreted as manifestations or returns of artists’ childhood experiences.

When it was suggested during a critique that my paintings also could be related to my past, particularly, certain memories related to my childhood experiences, honestly, I did not like the idea simply because I did not want to remember the period filled with mixed feelings of being awkward, anxious, manipulated, betrayed, disappointed and yet occasional bittersweet flash memories. Moreover, I did not want to deal with it again through my paintings. However, I have realized, whether I like it or not, my paintings come out of my past, my experiences. Admittedly, I am incapable of denying its existence, escaping from it or rejecting its return to my paintings from the unconscious. It became an inseparable part of my identity and still has been haunting me ever since. Correspondingly I started conceiving the causal relation between my

¹ Donald Kuspit. The End of Art. Cambridge UP, 2004, 12

According to Kuspit, these artists “have tried to stay in touch with the child in themselves, often by using primitive art as a touchstone (not to say whetstone), keeping it alive in defiance of the adult social world which demands that one play a prescribed role and identify oneself completely with that role.”
paintings and my childhood memories because certain unbidden motifs that can be closely related to the latter, have been continuously appearing as a form of denatured nostalgia in my paintings. Based on this premise, I intend to examine the aforementioned causal relation by analyzing my works, considering my childhood experiences during a socio-politico-economically peculiar and turbulent time period of South Korea, in the context of artist lineage, art history, and psychoanalytic theory as well.

Memory #1

While playing the usual after-school soccer, all the children vanished but I and cacophonous chatters abruptly subsided to deafening silence. My mom was unusually late, and our apartment was still locked so I was anxiously waiting outside at the empty street in front of our apartment building. The hand of the gigantic clock tower at a distance near the entrance of our newly built apartment complex was indicating it was almost five thirty. It was the time for watching a new episode of Astro Boy. The sun was rapidly setting with orange glow and the shadows, seemingly lurking behind apartment buildings and the clock tower, were ominously enlarging and elongating themselves like a

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2 Ibid., 110 “The work’s hidden meaning became more important than its manifest content, whatever the unconscious methods used to give it form. Form was the distorting mirror in which the unconscious saw itself as well as a springboard into its unfathomable depths, which the Surrealist work of dream art nonetheless attempted to plumb.”
bunch of humongous monsters. I somehow vividly remember that day; the waiting felt like an eternity in contrast with the sunset. As soon as I saw my mom, however, I felt shame, realizing I was not worrying about her whereabouts but was anxious not to miss the new episode of *Astro Boy*. It was another cozy evening for me watching the new episode of *Astro Boy* while having my favorite steamed dumplings my mom cooked for me.³

Growing Up with Astro Boy

In her essay, “Growing Up with Astro Boy and Mazinger Z,”⁴ Dong-Yeon Koh, points out *Astro Boy* (2009), the American rehash of Japanese animation *Mighty Atom* (1963) brought about a huge surge of interest, evoking nostalgia among the generation of South Koreans who were literally brought up with sci-fi Japanese animations like *Astro Boy* and *Mazinger Z* as after-school television programs during their childhood in the 1970s and 80s.⁵

As a result, the main audience for the animations in South Korea were mostly children. Since they were generally incapable of discerning nuances in the animations, they tended

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³ I am uncertain I saw de Chirico’s painting before or after this; whether the setting reminded me of de Chirico’s painting or vice versa, the overlapped and conflated image still lingers ambivalently in my mind.


⁵ Ibid., 165 The rapid industrialization and urbanization during the period caused numerous Korean families to migrate to urban areas and to live in apartments. Subsequently it also changed how children spent their free time; watching television became one of the main free time activities for them.
to see the animations as “the epitome of euphoria,” and to view the world as a simple dichotomy: good vs. evil, South Korea vs. North Korea, democracy vs. communism, etc… They were also led to believe a techno-utopia could be achieved solely by the scientific and technological advancement. It turned out later that these messages conveyed by the animations were well suited for the South Korean military dictatorial regimes’ propagandistic ideals. Koh argues that the popularity of sci-fi Japanese animations in South Korea at the time not only had to do with children’s interest but also, in fact, significantly affected by the economic, political and educational motivations and decisions made by the military regimes during the period. Koh concludes that it was a nostalgic period for the generation of people who were children at the time when the naive techno-utopian belief coexisted with doomsday scenario looming large in “the repressive social atmosphere under the military dictatorship of South Korea” (172).

I start my painting, using brushes, palette knives, and others, applying and scraping paint with gestures like automatic drawing, to create a grisaille. At a certain point, some unbidden images keep emerging. To put it another way, I frequently excavate them from the surface.

Similar to the symptom of pareidolia, maybe my brain projects images to the surface from the

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6 Ibid. “Most South Korean children had been exposed to an array of creative literature, popular culture, and educational material that underscored anticommunist and anti-North themes throughout the 1970s and 80s.” Unlike some Japanese Sci-fi animations which subtly reflected the Janus-faced aspect of technological advancement, the animations made in Korea at the time bluntly propagandized this ethos of simple dichotomy, anti-North and exalted the economic development and technological advancement as a panacea.


8 Koh, 160 The incipient Korean broadcasting industry preferred Japanese animation to American made because of its cheap loyalty.
unconscious. From that, I construct the painting as I go along. Though I like the accidental and unexpected images and compositions, I attain through this process, I have been perplexed by the persistent encounter with recurring metaphorical and ambivalent images of technology.

Initially, I tried to ascribe it to my readings of futurists like Nick Bostrom, scientists such as Stephen Hawking, and visionary entrepreneurs like Elon Musk who have been constantly warning us the possibility of significant risk that technological advancement could bring, especially in developing AI (Artificial Intelligence) and subsequently realizing the technological singularity through the intelligence explosion without proper preparation of humanity. Technological progress, as human history lucidly demonstrates, always comes in parallel with war and destruction. In contrast with the past where people killed people with new technology, what is distinct and truly startling about the warning is that AI will be capable of annihilating human civilization which AI would determine its existence unnecessary or even deleterious. Although my ambivalence and anxiety towards the technological progress in the future provided an interpretation of the leitmotifs, there were some motifs whose origin still remains to be explained.

9 Hawking acknowledges that A.I. is a “dual use” technology, a phrase used to describe technologies capable of great good and great harm. For example, nuclear fission, the science behind power plant reactors and nuclear bombs, is a “dual use” technology.

10 See Bostrom and www.huffingtonpost.com/james-barrat/hawking-gates-artificial-intelligence_b_7008706.html Although many organizations and governments are beginning focusing on the moral and ethical implications of AI, intelligence explosion is to occur much faster than we are expecting.

11 See www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/08/21/elon-musk-joins-100-experts-urging-un-act-killer-robots/ and Bostrom. Nevertheless, various governments are working on regulations to prohibit the use of AI for developing autonomous weapon systems.
As mentioned earlier, dreaming techno-utopian future was the sliver lining in my childhood; something that evoked familiar, homely, and optimistic sentiment. Yet, it was a rude awakening to discover that this naive belief and vague longing were mainly induced by indoctrination and manipulation. Irrespective of my intention, however, this damaged and repressed memory seems to keep returning repetitiously, almost compulsively, in my work as leitmotifs. Correspondingly, they no longer appear familiar, optimistic, and comfortable. Instead, they seem rather strange, ambivalent, and awkward.

Admittedly, I had no desire to interpret my paintings, relying on psychoanalytic theory’s narrow interpretation. To be specific, I had no intention to make paintings that evoke a feeling of uncanniness. I am not even sure whether my paintings actually conjure up such a feeling.
However, based on the facts, I have come to realize that the Freudian concept of ‘uncanny’ is relevant to my paintings and it can provide a viable interpretation of them.

Freudian Uncanny

“Psychoanalysis began as a would-be science of the enigma. It soon found itself, however, and as if inadvertently, deeply implicated in the enigma of art. Increasingly caught between science and art, Freud's work can be seen as a series of enigma variations based on the theme of Kinderszenen (scenes from childhood)”12

In the beginning of his essay, *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud expresses his annoyance that conventional and mainstream aesthetics tends to only focus on the areas of positive sentiment such as beautiful, attractive and sublime, notwithstanding “aesthetics is not restricted to the theory of beauty, but described as relating to the qualities of our feeling” (311). He then indicates there is a noteworthy and peculiar but has been thoroughly disregarded concept in aesthetics, that is, the concept of uncanny.

As Freud acknowledges that the term ‘uncanny’ is difficult to define, it is generally assumed whatever elicits fright and fear. However, he points out, the reason it deserves a special name is that it possesses an inherent peculiarity that enables us to discern it from the broad and general category of fear and dread.13 The German word ‘*Unheimlich*’ which can be translated into English word, ‘uncanny,’ is the opposite of ‘*heimlich,*’ or ‘*heimisch,*’ which means ‘familiar,’

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‘native,’ and ‘belonging to the home.’ Hence, it is tempting to come to a hasty conclusion that ‘Unheimlich’ or ‘uncanny’ is dreadful since it is novel and unfamiliar (313). However, it is unlikely that all new and unfamiliar things are dreadful. Rather, what is new and unfamiliar is more likely to be dreadful and uncanny. Hence, according to Freud, “Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny (313).”

After a lengthy scrutinization of the subtly varied definitions of the word ‘heimlich’ throughout the lexicons of foreign languages as well as German, Freud indicates there is a notion where heimlich and its antonym, unheimlich, converges at a certain point “so that what is called heimlich becomes unheimlich (326-327).” In other words, the meaning of the word heimlich is to be ambivalent and “it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich. Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich (330).” Correspondingly, Margaret Iversen points out, in her essay, In the Blind Field: Hopper and The Uncanny, one of the most distinctive features of Freudian concept of uncanny is this convergence, conflation or oscillation of heimlich and unheimlich: the familiar and the unfamiliar. Iversen specifies uncanny “involves the return of something that was very familiar in infancy or childhood, but made strange, distorted, by repression and the return of the repressed.”

According to psychoanalytic theory, Iversen further asserts, paintings that are dealing with repressed childhood experiences and dreams are destined to be perceived as uncanny.

14 Margaret Iversen. “In the Blind Field: Hopper and the Uncanny.” Art History Vol. 21 No. 3 September 1998, 411

15 Ibid.,416
Iversen maintains Edward Hopper’s *House by the Railroad* (Fig. 3) “can be seen as a once cosy, ‘heimlich’, maternal home, now crossed by repression represented by the railroad tracks (412).” Consequently, “The house does not fade into the misty distance. On the contrary, it looms up all too closely, too powerfully. The past here returns uncannily” as a form of denatured nostalgia and repressed and therefore damaged memories which “cannot return so benignly” but rather demonically.

Similarly, most of my paintings’ pictorial space is occupied by the dominant presence of certain things that could be metaphors for technology: engine, locomotive, vehicles, and etc. Some of them do not recede or just stay in the picture plane, rejecting being faded into the past or settling into the present; it is by no means benign return but rather close to uncanny one. Besides, they are moving forward and towards the viewer’s space ominously, projecting themselves into

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16 Ibid., 411

17 Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty, MIT Press, 1995, 164

18 See Fig. 4, 7, 8, and 9.
unknown and precarious future. Thus, an ambiguous and indefinite space, a sort of twilight zone is created in my painting, where past memories, present anxiety, and future uncertainty coexist and collide simultaneously. Furthermore, the idea of painting as a window onto an imaginary world has been reversed here. In a way, they are claiming it and trying to establish their Cartesian space.¹⁹

According to William Dunning, Caravaggio, in his David with the Head of Goliath (Fig 5), adopted a novel strategy to create paintings with a new force, “paintings that expressed a living Cartesian presence by their invasion of the viewer’s own space.”²⁰ Dunning notes:

Caravaggio gives us no indication that David is not standing against the frame of the painting. If we read this as David’s position, then his outstretched arm seems to thrust Goliath’s head through the picture plane to invade the viewer’s space. Thus, the existence of David and the head of Goliath are defined,—in an almost Cartesian sense by their extension into the viewer’s space. Moreover, the space in front of the picture plane is defined and made palpable by the extension into that space of the objects that occupy it. Masaccio, in the fifteenth century, had invited the spectator to enter the illusionistic space of his painted world, but Caravaggio’s David seems to reach through the “pane” of the picture plane to invade the world of the spectator.²¹

¹⁹ Descartes’ conclusion that space, and the objects that occupy it, define our existence.


²¹ Ibid., 97
Frank Stella, who regards the creation of space as the principal goal of art, also emphasizes the importance of Caravaggio’s activation of the viewer’s space, besides the stage of the painting, by penetrating the picture plane. Before Caravaggio, Stella maintains, paintings could move towards all the directions but forward and thus “could not create its own destiny.” Paintings are to be real by establishing “the projective space.” In other words, “The road to pictorial reality must pass through the dissolution of perimeter and surface.”

Iversen points out that it is also one of the salient aspects of Hopper’s paintings. Many Hopper’s paintings compositionally imply “a subjective point of view which points back to the

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23 Ibid., 19
implied presence of someone situated” in the viewer’s space.²⁴ Iversen further demonstrates here some of the modalities used in the paintings of Hopper, Degas, and Rembrandt to compositionally address the spectator in the blind field:

That is to say, some works of art are structurally dependent on the implicit presence of a spectator or an ‘actor' of some kind in the spectator’s space. The outward gaze of a figure is one way of establishing the presence of an implied spectator in the blind field of the painting, but a steep or oblique point of view is also effective. Degas's frequent use of oblique perspectives suggests that he intended the point of view to be experienced as subjective, and this is underscored, for example, in by props (a table and newspaper in the bottom left-hand corner). This was a theme that Alois Riegl pursued at length in his book Dutch Group Portraits (1902), where he argued that the coherence of a painting such as Rembrandt's The Syndics (Fig. 6) depends on the figures' intense attention to someone near the spectator's position.²⁵

Placing picture frame or a stage is another way to hint the presence of the implicit viewer by activating the viewer’s space.²⁶ It also suggests the images are simulacra inside of another simulacrum. Other modalities and compositional devices like outward gazing of the figures and oblique point of view, as Iversen suggested above, are also serving the same purpose in my paintings. For example, in the painting: *Et tu, Brute?: The Scene of a Brute Assassination* (Fig. 7), the figure’s outward gazing, oblique viewpoint, and the picture frame at the lower left corner establish an implicit viewer and its space. In its foreground where the painting’s drama is occurring, the figures are stacked one over another until the most picture plane is filled with them. As this is happening, there is a propensity for parts of the figures to penetrate the picture plane—a leg here, an elbow there. These figures seemed to extend from pictorial space into the real space of the spectator, conflating reality and illusion. The cluttered disarray of this

²⁴ Iversen, 424

²⁵ Ibid., 424-425

²⁶ See Fig. 4,7,8 and 9
foregrounded scene and the turmoil in the sky contrast with the all but empty piazza that is the painting’s vanishing point with an infinitely receding facade of the building.

In the paintings, *The Elephant Dream* (Fig. 4), *The Circus Street* (Fig. 8), and *The Simulacra* (Fig. 9), the signs and the reversed texts are depicted and placed in a way that can be regarded as either notational or gestalt images. As a result, they are to be oscillating and conflating between the two systems.

Moreover, they are to transform the paintings’ two-dimensional plane into both a reflecting surface (mirror, a pane of glass) and a transparent plane, calling into question where the viewer is located; are we standing on the other side of the mirror, seeing through it? The reversed, slathered and impastoed texts are intended to be illegible. Nonetheless, its more

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According to Goodman, painting stands at the opposite extreme from a notational system, since works in this art form are “analogs,” characters in syntactically and semantically dense systems. It is important to emphasize how that does not mean that a classification of paintings according to a notational system could not be found, or even found easily.”
prominent physical and material presence than the recognizable images behind it is to imply the world we perceive and understand through our senses would have less substance in it.

Additionally, continuous texts suggest the infinite repeatability of simulation or Nietzschean concept of ‘Eternal return.’ In the painting *The Simulacra* (Fig. 9), the idea of a painting inside another painting serves the similar purpose besides its self-referentiality; a painting or a simulacrum, which means an image without the substance or qualities of the original, connotes double, another modality of uncanny, as well as the classic notion that we are living in an illusion or in a simulation or multiple simulations where nothing is real and substantial.²⁸ The intention

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²⁸ A more advanced computer in the future could be capable of running multiple sophisticated simulations simultaneously.
for using square format surface for some paintings is that it is carceral, suggesting a jail and confinement, hence, indicating the notion that our perceived world is an illusion or simulation where we are imprisoned. Likewise, wide rectangle format is used for the painting *Et tu Brute?* (Fig. 7) to imply the same notion with cinematic or video gaming reference.

Regarding the choice of palettes and others, saturated colors, the juxtaposition of complementaries, and chiaroscuro are strategically used for creating a dramatic effect. It is also interesting, almost hilarious, to find myself compulsively choosing certain colors more than others such as blues. During my childhood, being indoctrinated by the military regime’s simple but very effective propaganda, color red instantly signified North Korean communist, enemy, and an evil force. On the contrary, blue stood for democratic South. Thus, whenever we were making
anti-North posters several times per year, most posters ended up being filled with red and blue. I think this childhood experience is still haunting and affecting me in a way. So I intently use reds more in my paintings to offset and defy the enjoinment to avoid reds.

The Circus

Richard Thomson, professor of fine art at the University of Edinburgh, and guest curator of Seurat’s Circus Sideshow at the Met explains there are various reasons why many modern artists have been fascinated by the circus, besides the sheer excitement provided by its dynamism and visual spectacle, namely color and drama. While artists such as Renoir and Degas were fascinated by the innovational aspect of the circus, many artists, including Seurat, were attracted to its association with melancholy and alienation, particularly through the notion of the sad clown. The solitary and weary Pierrot, a stock character of Commedia dell’arte, depicted in the 18th Century Watteau’s painting, according to Thomson, could be the origin of the notion that had become a firmly established trope by the end of the 19th Century. Thomson argues artists were fascinated by these members of traveling circus because artists themselves were able to identify and empathize with these fragile

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
people who were living precariously on the edge of society.\textsuperscript{32} Thomson continues: “The painter trying to sell work that the bourgeoisie wasn’t interested in was like a clown doing his best to entertain, but not always succeeding. So, circus performers became an equivalent for artists, who treated them almost autobiographically.”\textsuperscript{33}

Not only just artists, but aren’t we all similar to those circus performers who play routinely and repetitiously their roles on the show to entertain the audience while undergoing solitude, alienation, and precariousness of life? Hence, to speak in metaphors, our life is a circus. Again, implicit viewer and its space, stage-like setting, texts, and refresh or power symbols suggest the classic notion that our life is a show, circus, illusion, or simulation. Apparently, it presumes the implicit viewer such as an impresario, audience, god, or simulator, and the show that is supposed to provide the viewer with some type of pleasure, perhaps voyeuristic.

I watched not only many animations but also films on television during my childhood. Among the many great films I have seen, whenever I have to choose the best ones, one of them is always Federico Fellini’s \textit{La Strada}. I was not sure why I was so attracted to \textit{La Strada} which I saw several times on a 13-inch black-and-white television. Perhaps it was Gelsomina’s childlike, naive, and innocent persona wonderfully played by Giulietta Masina,\textsuperscript{34} with which I could thoroughly empathize. I am unsure, but probably the traveling circus in the film is still lingering in my mind.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} In one of his interviews about the film, Martin Scorsese raved about Masina’s performance; he found it so much attractive and convincing as a child as well as an adult. “Martin Scorsese on La Strada” YouTube, uploaded by Dalibor Obrad, 4 February 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaHn_ALcODM&t=3s
Iversen suggests, “For Hopper, … painting from memory allowed the motif to become saturated with unconscious reverie.” In fact, Hopper’s own statement clearly supports this idea; “So much of every art is an expression of the subconscious, that it seems to me most all of the important qualities are put there unconsciously…” Accordingly, against conventional and convenient sentimentalization of Hopper’s work, Iversen argues it is rather deeply unsettling and menacing than sad and lonely. In a similar vein, some of the motifs such as train and circus in my paintings can be interpreted.

Memory #2

One night, my father suddenly took me to a train station and a few moments later we were on an overnight train to the remote mountainous area of South Korea where he ran an ore mine. He told me there was an accident; He is a kind of reticent man but whenever a conversation is inevitable, he is the talker, and I am the listener. It was the first time not only I traveled by train but also in a sleeping car. Moreover, it was the only trip I took with my father alone during my entire life so far. I still remember the feeling of elation as if I became one of his trustworthy associates and how small but cozy the bed was. While lying on the bed, I saw the huge and bright moon through the window seemingly kept following us. From time to time, it disappeared but came back, overcoming repeatedly the ominous black silhouettes of the mountains.

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35 Iversen, 412
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
In addition to the memory mentioned above, I probably have been influenced by other memories to have a romantic notion about train. One of my favorite childhood animations was Galaxy Express 999 (은하철도 999: Ginka Tetsudo Three-Nine) in which a young boy who travels by train that appears to be a steam engine throughout the galaxies in a determined quest after his mother's death. Strangely, however, I could not remember what the boy’s quest was until lately; getting a free bionic body to be immortal, which was a big part of my techno-utopian dream. Additionally, I loved reading detective novels such as Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series and Agatha Christie’s novels like Murder on the Orient Express which I saw Sidney Lumet’s film adaptation on television several times during my childhood.

Metaphorically speaking, a locomotive is to suggest the Nietzschean idea of ‘Eternal return,’ assuming us as transient passengers on a train called life, perpetually circling its route and getting on and off without knowing the purpose or destination if there is any. It is also very similar to the idea that our universe is an infinitely repeatable simulation.

Although a steam engine, connotes technological progress, as one of the major catalysts for the nineteenth-century industrial revolution that unprecedentedly modernized our civilization, it is also unfailingly reminiscent of the past problems: Luddites, alienation, pollution, World War I and so forth. Its presence as the past trouble in my work is to ask similar questions: are we living in a more humane world than before?; Is our present and will our future be really different

38 It seems Nietzschean ‘Eternal return’ sounds very similar to Hinduism’s Samsara (Continuous flow of life), Buddhism’s reincarnation, and other ancient Western beliefs although Nietzsche did not openly acknowledge their influence. Probably Nietzsche was aware of both ancient Eastern and Western beliefs such as Gnosticism, Pythagoreanism, Hermeticism and Egyptian belief that also support reincarnation or continuous flow of life. The only obvious difference of Nietzschean idea of ‘Eternal return,’ from that of other religions is that there is no salvation or escape in it like Nirvana in Buddhism, thus, amor fati, love of fate.
from the past?; aren’t we doomed to commit the same mistakes over and over again? Perhaps “our culture contrived and unnnatural and doomed to disappear, as have all great cultures in the past”\(^{39}\) like a simulation programmed such a way.

Memory #3

It was just one of those days of summer in Korea when the rainy season lasts more than a month, hence, no after school soccer but staying home. However, it was perfectly fine because I had something very exciting and fun to do.\(^{40}\) That is, drawing some scenes from my favorite stories of ancient China or Greek myth with my ball-point pen in the back of an old calendar my father usually kept in his library/office. While I was looking for a calendar, I happened to find a set of large books filled with dark but humorous, scary but funny, bizarre but fantastic, erotic but cruel and sacrilegious but pious images; I had never seen such images in my entire life of ten years and was dazzled by such a meticulously delineated, mesmerizingly colorful, and unfathomably dark images;\(^{41}\) I used to fancy black-and-white animations and its detailed delineation at the time, so the encounter with the images was an indelible one at least, probably similar to finding a hidden gem or biting into a forbidden fruit. Later I realized they were all reproduced images of so-called ‘masterpiece’ Western paintings, especially the paintings of Arcimboldo, Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Bronzino, Velásquez, Caravaggio, Vermeer, Rembrandt,  


\(^{40}\) It was not watching animations though; they were on the air from five thirty evening daily.

\(^{41}\) No color TV was available in Korea at the time; it was 1980 when the colored program was first broadcasted in Korea. In fact, many things were in black and white format; newspapers, textbooks, etc., as if promoting the similar world view.
Goya, Caspar David Friedrich, Arnold Böcklin, Turner, De Chirico, Dali, Ernst, Magritte, and others.

When I came to the US to attend a college, I found out there are myriads of other types of paintings such as Pollocks, Rothkos, de Koonings, Twomblys, Gustons, Rauchenbergs, Stellas and so forth. Now I understand and appreciate them, but, they, honestly, do not evoke such an unforgettable sensation I had when I saw the paintings of Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, Romantic, Symbolism and Surrealism, even it was through the images of reproduction. One of the reasons of this palpable difference, again, must be that it was an experience during my childhood.

In this regard, Kuspit aptly evinces that children “were open to the unexpected and seemed unexpected themselves. They acted as though everything was unexpected, which made everything a surprise”(104). In citing Baudelaire, Kuspit even calls them “the epitome of freedom,” since “every sensation was new for them, which made them absolutely modern. In short, they hide nothing and express everything, and thus seem liberated” (104). Kuspit continues, while children’s “innocence, naïveté, and spontaneity” of vision as well as their

42 To add insult to injury, numerous corruption cases in massive scale have been discovered in Korean educational system and the problems still continues… This is one of the reasons I decided to leave Korea.

43 David Joselit. “On Aggregators.” October Fall 2013: 13-14 According to Joselit, an art world asynchrony is engendered by the separate time frames when modern art was introduced and adopted in various parts of the world. For example, Western European avant-garde art was arrived at non-Western world as “hegemonic or neo-colonial languages” and “pressed into service as an agent of cultural and economic modernization rather than an opponent to its many devastating consequences.” In fact, getting an exposure to any Western art was rare at the time in Korea; traveling abroad, importing cultural information, artifacts and having such exhibitions and others, like the right to the freedom of speech, were restricted and censored by the military regimes.
unfamiliarity with “external reality,” and obliviousness of “practical considerations” are deemed to be unfavorable in the adulthood, just because of those characteristics of them, “their sense remained fresh, they expressed their feelings directly, and their thinking was unprejudiced” (104). Furthermore, owing to their “non-normality,” that is, their inherent resistance to “adulthood, especially the adult bourgeois male, who thought of himself as the epitome of normalcy,” they appear to be capable of making a direct connection with the unconscious, “to live out of it, and were entirely uninhibited in its expression — that made them free spirits. They were the new utopia — a personal utopia” (104). Correspondingly, Kuspit maintains “The unrepressed child” was the nemesis of “social repression” and procrustean cultural bed that promote and prescribe “standardization, regimentation, homogeneity, conformity — everything that seemed to mock and block the development of free, spontaneous individuality”(105).

Individuality

“A lot of times maturing as an artist is just starting to do the things you like to do… Don’t make so-called contemporary art. Be yourself. Give yourself the most pleasure… That’s the reason to be an artist… you’d be surprised at how many people don’t know that and make art for somebody else.”\footnote{John Currin. “John Currin.” Walter Annenberg Annual Lecture, Whitney Museum of American Art, 29, Oct, 2013, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY} In a similar vein, what I have been striving to find is my own color, voice, or visual language, namely, Individuality. This journey has to be nobody else’s but mine. I believe the struggle, challenge, sacrifice, pain, endeavor and pleasure all have to be my own experience in my studio. More than anything else, I paint for myself, not for anybody else. Hence, I accepted
the fact that I cannot satisfy everyone’s taste, even not for my mother’s. In his book *Beauty*, Roger Scruton pertinently argues:

Expression does not deal in concepts but in intuitions—particular experiences, that are conveyed by communicating their uniqueness. Two works of art can represent the same thing; but they cannot express the same thing—for a work expresses an intuition only by presenting its individual character, the character that requires just these words, or just these images, if it is to be put across. That is what is going on in art—the communication of individual experiences, in the unique form that identifies their individuality. And that is why artistic expression is valuable—it presents us with the unconceptualized uniqueness of its subject matter” (116).

In unison with Scruton, Denis Dutton emphasizes the importance of individuality in art. He points out it is one of the twelve characteristic features found cross-culturally in the arts. Moreover, it is demanded by high-art traditions where “desire to experience an individual’s distinct and developed emotional tone, the manifestation of a personality, draws audiences to art.” He then indicates “The artists whose work has survived and achieved wide cross-cultural appeal are people whose output is marked by a persistent, distinct emotional tone, within individual works and also across a whole output.” Furthermore, Dutton conclusively states:

If personal distinction is a basic desideratum in social life, it is much more important in the life of art. The appetite for seeing a strong artistic personality stamp a distinctive individuality on an artistic performance of creation seems to be universal. The fascination, sometimes near obsession, with individual expression is evidence for its being an extension into the arts of an evolved adaptation relevant to interpersonal recognition and evaluation (232).

Lineage

While researching other artists’ use of figure/ground relationship in an effort to find my own, I stumbled upon Jonathan Lasker’s work. At a glance, his work seems deceptively flat and

45 When I called my mother last month, she asked me with a sigh “Why don’t you paint something bright and beautiful? They look dingy and strange!
purely abstract painting. Lasker’s palette choice, mainly primary colors and other bright colors with black, certainly reminds me of Pop art and plastic tools and toys. The incongruous juxtapositions of hard-edged geometric, biomorphic shapes and seemingly sinuous and gestural but, in fact, carefully premeditated lines are to create tension in his work, according to the artist.46 “I have painted unhappy marriages of the biomorphic and the decorative, the mark of the loaded brush and the geometric, the psyche and popular culture. I want a painting that’s operative. I’m seeking subject matter, not abstraction.”47

I tried to adopt this “unhappy marriage” concept of juxtaposing discordant and incongruous elements to create tension in my work, too; placing illusionistic three-dimensional object in, a seemingly shallow surface, letting these contradictory elements collide.48 Like Lasker who creates spatial depth not by using traditional linear perspectives but by concocting certain visual devices, I also tried to create an ambiguous pictorial space and depth without using linear perspective. My intention was to use the concept of Lasker’s 'Unhappy marriages,' by combining the elements of surrealism, abstract and sci-fi and creating a hybrid of high and low art.


47 Ibid.

48 see Fig.12 and 13
Although it seems the elements of Lasker's paintings are discordant, but they are essentially in abstract forms. Consequently, the level of incongruity seems subtle and the purported tension, thus, lessened. It is operative and they still seem to be abstract paintings.

I think there are several artists using similar strategies such as John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage who are creating hybridized works of their own with deft painting techniques, combining the elements of high and low art; the Western figure painting and cartoonish/caricatural figures; Symbolism, Surrealism and pornography in variously inventive ways. Both artists’ main subject is figure, especially female body, that is depicted with exaggeration, distortion, and sexual provocativeness with traditional medium. The difference is that Currin’s work reminds of caricature and often conjures up comical and satirical sentiment while Yuskavage’s work evokes mysteriousness and surreal atmosphere with a peculiar palette.

Inka Essenhigh, is to be one of the contemporary hybrid surrealist painters. She makes her work through automatic drawing to discover the subjects. It seems there is a lineage stemming from symbolism painting to metaphysical, surrealism, Ab-Ex to contemporary sci-fi infused surrealistic painting. Essenhigh’s work can be one of them. Essenhigh’s earlier work seems to be more like sci-fi cartoon with its glossy, flat, bright, slick surface created by using
enamel. In fact, it was categorized as “Pop Surrealism” by critics and assumed it had been
influenced by various elements such as 19th-century caricatures, oriental art, Arabic miniatures,
and contemporary comics.

Takashi Murakami’s work was not well received initially in Japan, his home country,
because the public was not able to differentiate his work with other familiar Japanese pop
cultural images such as anime or manga and therefore, unable to understand and appreciate
what he was trying. Nevertheless, with his strategy of repackaging peculiar and
indigenous Japanese pop culture through the Western high art platform such as painting and
sculpture, Murakami has achieved both the recognition of art world as well as a tremendous
commercial success. In addition, his non-Western cultural heritage and thus, free of the baggage
of the Western art history made his hybrid work exotic, fresh, fascinating and free of confusion.

By adopting the ideas, I have been trying to combine high and low art forms such as sci-fi
animation and the Western traditional painting to generate a synergy effect and create a
hybridized work.49 Nonetheless, I must acknowledge that the idea has not been used audaciously
or fused effectively into my work yet. Perhaps my childhood fascination with the Western
painting is still preventing me from experimenting more boldly and radically. Hence, my work

49 See Fig. 4, 7, 8 and 9
has not become a fresh hybrid but still seems to be hovering somewhere between sci-fi and surrealism paintings. Recently, I am intrigued by the work of Laura Owens and Nicole Eisenman. I found the figure/ground relationship, the juxtaposition of abstract/figuration, the use of palette, and contrast between flat and volumetric depiction in their work are worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

Thanks to living under the Korean dictatorial military regimes for more than two decades, undergoing their draconian rules and dogmatic propaganda that enabled them to manipulate and sway the public opinion thoroughly, I have despaired of our reality and, at the same time, have been fascinated by the susceptibility of our perception to illusion and deception. As it is suggested constantly throughout human history in the concept of the allegory of the cave, Cartesian skepticism, Nietzsche’s ‘the veil of Maya,’ the teachings of Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and those of many other religions, and, recently, simulation theory, we have felt it poignantly and pondered over it from time to time. Indeed, we may have been being imprisoned and disoriented in the multiple layers of illusory systems that function as a maze, seemingly conspiring to hinder us from finding the truth and to keep our existential crisis at bay. Not only because of the ever-present ephemerality and absurdity of our lives but also owing to the substantial progress in quantum level scientific knowledge, it has now become more convincing than ever before. It is wishful thinking that scientific/technological advancement in parallel with the progress in humanity could eventually dismantle the illusory systems, resolve the ontological deadlocks and consequently, emancipate us. However, as we poignantly realize, our world now is a convoluted mess where the dread of the past, the history of destruction stemming from
caveman’s aggressiveness, keep returning and the progress in humanity we have been dreaming still seems remote to reach. That is why the warnings of Bostrom and others sound so convincing and make us almost certain about our future uncertainties; technology and science inevitably would advance while the human condition would remain the same or even worse.  

Besides this manifest content, however, its hidden meaning is to be more vital, according to Kuspit, as the work relies on the unconscious to create form. He continues, “Form was the distorting mirror in which the unconscious saw itself as well as a springboard into its unfathomable depths” (103). In this regard, he conclusively states, “Without the unconscious for inspiration, art begins to run on empty” (105). That is why children’s “emotional primitiveness” such as innocence, naiveté, and spontaneity of vision has been cherished by many modern artists to gain access to the unconscious and used to inspire themselves in creating their own art. In a similar vein, I think neither my paintings appear to be a child’s work nor emulation of it. Rather, it appears to be something, I, once as a child, wanted to make and express but incapable of doing it with a ballpoint pen and no skill and knowledge in painting at all. Maybe that is why my paintings seem to be a strange amalgam or a twilight zone where two opposite, antithetical elements coexist, vacillate, and conflate between; Western European paintings and animations; high and low art; the philosophical ideas and the pop-cultural notions; the past and the future.

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50 According to Petoski, to engineer is human and we learn from every mistake and failure to progress and innovate. However, as AI reaching intelligence explosion, we might already cross the Rubicon.

51 As mentioned earlier, I start my painting with automatic drawing to attain forms and compositional ideas.

52 Kuspit., 12

53 It made sense when it was also suggested that my painting somewhat reminds of the illustrations of children’s books.
anxieties; the gestalt and the notational images; the familiar and the unfamiliar; the conscious
and the unconscious; the despairing and the hopeful; the nostalgic and the uncanny.
Image list for Thesis show images

1. Installation View 1_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017

2. Installation View 2_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017

3. Installation View 3_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017

Jongwon Bae, *The Circus Street, 2017*, oil on canvas, 72x72 in.

4. Installation View 4_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017

Jongwon Bae, *The Elephant Dream, 2017*, oil on canvas, 72x72 in.

5. Installation View 5_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017

Jongwon Bae, *The Simulacra, 2017*, oil on canvas, 60x60 in.

6. Installation View 6_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017

Jongwon Bae, *Et tu, Brute?: The Scene of a Brute Assassination, 2017*, oil on canvas, 48x72 in.
Installation View 2_Jongwon Bae_November 16, 2017
Jongwon Bae, *The Circus Street*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72x72 in.
Jongwon Bae, *The Elephant Dream*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72x72 in.
Jongwon Bae, *The Simulacra*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60x60 in.
Jongwon Bae, *Et tu, Brute?: The Scene of a Brute Assassination*, 2017, oil on canvas, 48x72 in.


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