

Dear Barbara,

Thank you for visiting my studio few weeks ago. Although it was a short conversation we had for 2-3 hours, it proved to be enough time to confirm the sense of aesthetics we have in common. I especially thank you for your interest in the small drawings of mine, which largely went unrecognized so far. The small pamphlet *Numerals* you gave me as a gift would be a good reference point when I work on my new drawings.

As we didn't have the chance to discuss my ideas around Modernism—initially propelled by the title of one of the works *The Apocalypse of Modernism*—and as you expressed the wish to know more about my ideas on the definition of Modernism, I thought it would be appropriate to continue on this dialogue over email with a hope that this text will convey the despair and hope I felt for Modernism.

I first encountered the idea of Modernism as an art historical term while still a student—especially how the concept began as a questioning of painting as a mode of representation. I learned that the starting point was Impressionism. The genealogy of Modernism continued onto Cubism, abstraction, and later to literal art, also referred to as Minimalism, finally culminating with the “death of painting.” This logic essentially was about the epistemological question of “what is a painting?”

The logic was undoubtedly indebted to the ideas of Clement Greenberg, which was so deeply engraved in my head while being trained as a painter at school. I would immediately recall this historical context every time I was asked about my ideas on Modernism. In other words, Modernism is a self-referential, critical attitude that entails an artist's constant doubt about himself and his work.

This very logic goes onto assert that Modernism was an artistic response to the crisis of the Western paradigm (aka the crisis of traditional models and standards) and was inevitably based on the historical and cultural experiences that are Western-specific. Precisely because of this, there has been a critical dialogue on how the art practice in the non-Western context, where different cultures have persisted on, would not correspond to the theories of Western Modernism. Hence were the criticisms that the Modernist art from the non-Western regions could somehow bear resemblance to Western Modernism but never exceed or surpass the quality of that of the West. This idea that “Modernist art made outside of the West is not good enough” needs a reconsideration if we take into account that the crisis of the Western cultural paradigm is not limited to the West but has become a problem for the entire human civilization. According to the information I gathered from various sources, the problem surrounding the term Modernism in the non-Western regions would never resolve itself if we avoided a direct confrontation with it and it would call forth another set of intricate, complex issues of transplantation and translation of tradition and culture, Orientalism, practice of decolonization and so forth. As a non-Western artist, you have to confront these issues through your critical observation and life/practice even if it means you'll be left with scars and bruises.

In any case, so far was my idea and definition of Modernism.

As I continued to make my work and expanded my curiosity in the studies of humanities in the following years, my ideas on Modernism evolved to embrace the concept as a paradigm of human civilization at large rather than an idea limited to art. I was able to realize that Western civilization is synonymous to modern civilization and this modern civilization became a paradigm of the Western imperialist expansionism that endorses a globally homogenous identity.

My curiosity led to the questions of “What precisely is this modern civilization of the West and what does it mean that it is now in crisis?” I would dare not hash out all the information I have gathered from my discursive reading habit. Besides, I would think this is a common knowledge to anyone with a slightest intellectual curiosity in the subjects of history, social sciences, and culture. This wildly disorganized information I have digested only contributed to an intellectual anguish as a non-Western artist. Some of the questions raised were:

how to sustain one's presence with a sense of dignity and cope with the collapse of our own civilization in the face of the ever expanding exertions of the West (all in the name of modernization and globalization)? To which direction would the rage and despair of the many "unfortunates"—the painful byproducts of Western modernity's universal victory who have failed to receive their own share of the fruits of Modernism—guide this world to?

About ten years ago, while I was having these kinds of intellectual questioning, I was deeply drawn into the 19th century Korean cosmology/philosophy *Jeong Yeok* (正易, a new interpretation of *The book of change* 周易). By all means, I wasn't extensively reading the idea in a scholarly sense but was rather intuitively drawn to the concept. According to this philosophy, the universe has passed the 50,000 years of growth (spring and summer; referred to as former genesis 先天開闢) and entered the 50,000 years of harvest and burial (fall and winter; referred to as latter genesis 後天開闢). In other words, the universe now has ceased to grow and has entered the autumnal stage. In the era of the latter genesis, the politically and socially weak people would become the subject of history and the authorities of the past would step back from the scene.

I understood the age of growth (former genesis) as the progress and development of Western Modernism and the latter genesis as that of the survival of non-Western regions in the crisis of Western Modernism and resurfacing into the frontier of world history. In the latter genesis, where growth has ceased to happen, the world will be governed by a new order, value system, and a different set of standards—other than traditional standards of Modernism that had enabled growth. I can make a faint conjecture that this era will accompany poverty, suffering, and frugality, but I must confess that I have yet to find how art should respond to this new paradigm. I do know, however, why I can't fathom the answer to this. It is exactly because I'm one of the rare few non-Westerners who have had the privilege to receive the fruits of the Modernism. I'm still indulging in the lingering sense of comfort that a modernist life could offer.

The series of works titled *This is not the answer* emerged after this open and honest assessment of my conditions and as a result of my continued effort to seek what I could possibly do as a painter. These "endless drawings," which entail continuously erasing and adding different layers on the surface while casting a constant doubt over my previous works, could be a metaphor for this sense of despair I felt in the modernist world. The small traces that I left on these works, however, bear a glimmer of hope, which is what was left in the aftermath of despair. Perhaps I could refer to this as the "excess of despair"?

This is it for today. I will write again with more thoughts soon.
Good bye for now.

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Kim Yong-Ik