

Book Reviews

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1945nyeon Ihu Hanguk Hyeondaemisul [Moving Reflection, Korean Art Since 1945]. By Kim Youngna. Seoul: Mijinsa, 2020. 432 p. ISBN 9788940806036*

With the recent increase in global interest in Korean art and the accumulation of research, the demand for comprehensive historical descriptions of Korean art after the 20th century has continued. In many cases, the goal has been to publish a book that can satisfy both general readers and experts. This goal often struggles with a somewhat contradictory demand that the book should be general enough, but not at the expense of depth, the book should be based on common sense, but not too cliché, or the book should be comprehensive, but succinct. These challenges seem to increase due to the lack of consistency in tone and topic, as these books are usually planned for publication in the form of an anthology by multiple authors. *Moving Reflection, Korean Art Since 1945* (Mijinsa, 2020) is a recently published book by Emeritus Professor Kim Youngna of Seoul National University. This book is a very rare publication that nicely solves the above challenges that Korean contemporary art book projects have inevitably faced. Balancing between conflicting demands is by no means something that can be easily done. Since academic interest expanded from Western art to Korean modern and contemporary art in the late 1980s, this project was only possible for Professor Kim who built experiences as part of the first generation of art historians in South Korea. She carefully examined existing information, interpretations, discussions, and methodologies while continuing her research and teaching. In this sense, what readers can enjoy through this book will not be limited to lavish photos of works that are not easily accessible to the public. In fact, this book provides readers with the pleasure of experiencing her persuasive balance in describing contemporary Korean art history. The book includes several research papers previously published by Emeritus Professor Kim Youngna and condensed content from her previous books, such as *The 20th Century Korean Art* (1998) and *The 20th Century Korean Art 2:*

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The Period of Change and Challenge (2010). In this book, she also applies and introduces the works of her colleagues and junior researchers about Korean art history, presenting the normative history of Korean art since the late 20th century. The book, in this context, attempts to find a balance between pursuing the encyclopedic objectivity while revealing instructive subjectivity.

As suggested in the preface, this book aims to present “the syntactic understanding” [of Korean art history] and “to describe [it] in a balanced manner.” A reader can see that this goal becomes a primary principle of the book, which is strictly applied at various levels. First, in terms of the selection of the discussion subjects, the principle is clearly applied. For example, the book encompasses Korean visual arts divisions, namely paintings, sculptures, crafts, architecture, and photography, and equally deals with Western and Eastern paintings in the South Korean art scene. The book also includes North Korean art in the last chapter as a counterpart of South Korean art. Although there are differences depending on the importance of discussion or the degree of accumulation of research, the book provides a comprehensive approach to modern Korean art history by providing a well-proportioned share of each division. This is more than a mechanical balancing act that simply deals with little bit of everything. General descriptions limited to categorized art divisions, art circles, and systems can be consistent but fragmented. Therefore, it is impossible to have a comprehensive perspective on Korean art history without considering how these components interact and influence each other to define themselves through differences. As stated in the preface, this perspective can be legitimized considering that Korean artists are somewhat connected to each other based on regions, networks, or schools beyond the categorization of genre, especially in the narrow field of visual arts in Korea and have even crossed the 38th parallel. As clearly mentioned in this book, in Korea, modernism involved a diverse range of art, such as painting, crafts, design, and architecture, along with Cubism and Informel that were also of interest to both East and West painters. At the beginning of North Korean art, there were South Korean artists who moved to North Korea in addition to the fact that the art tradition was always largely shared by the two Koreas. In this case, comprehensivity is not just a single selectable value to describe Korean art history, but rather a reading method derived from the unique conditions of visual art production in Korea.

A sense of balance is seen not only in the selection of objects but also in the methodological approach of the book. The book impressively provides depth to artists’ careers and work, from the description of their artwork, life history, the context of the time, their relationships to Western art, and most importantly, the description of materials and techniques of their artwork. As the book offers fruitful and extensive explanation of individual works (of course within the limited

space), it provides historical examples that many other books just briefly introduce along with artists or artwork. These historical examples should not be simply reduced to a part of a specific art movement since these created differences in art history. The artwork described in this way are located at a place where the social and historical background of late 20th century Korea and the internal discourse of Korean art are intertwined. Therefore, these works are not reduced only to sociological evidence, but illustrate the logical and aesthetic value of autonomous art while mirroring the times. It is possible to say that these artworks go beyond the times but are also bound by the times. In fact, the author states that she tried to find balance between art and society. This task is fundamental in describing the history of Korean modern and contemporary art, which occasionally fluctuates between art and society. The author's concerns about such a tricky task are clearly revealed in her periodization. The transition of socio-historical period is not always same as that of art. If the periodization of Korean art overlaps with socio-historical transition, it implies the absence of autonomy in Korean art from social condition, or a historical transformation is too strong to affect the art's autonomy. Kim's periodization seems to have these elements in mind. Chapter 1 deals with 1945-1957, Chapter 2 deals with 1957-1975, Chapter 3 deals with 1975-1990, and Chapter 4 deals with 1990 onwards. By doing so, her periodization seeks balance between international order and domestic changes (1945 and 1990) and art's historic transition (1957 and 1975). This periodic distinction, above all, is this book's strongest argument.

Periodization is not simply a form of historical narrative that divides periods. It is rather an author's message to define a period specifically. In this respect, the periodization is a key argument of this book and forms a disputable argument among scholars. According to Kim's periodization, modern Korean art was born through two "new beginnings" amid the upheaval of Liberation and the Korean War (Chapter 1: Korean Art after the Liberation), experienced and struggled under the influence of Western art and the state intervention (Chapter 2: Modernism Art and State-Led Art), reaffirmed its true identity (Chapter 3: Finding the Identity of Korean Art), and then challenged beyond itself (Chapter 4: New Cultural Environment and Globalism). In the context of a "bildungsroman" of Korean art, the division of periods from 1945 to 1975 is critical. The fact that she uses "1945 (Liberation from colonial Japan)," not "1953 (the Korean War)," allows one to consider the two Koreas together and further suggests that the competing art theories within "Liberating Space" is the starting point of modern Korean art. Of course, it is also a period of formation of art systems such as art schools and The National Art Exhibition. And the fact that she uses "1975," not "1970" or "1980," is the most interesting argument. By doing so, Kim points out the synchronicity of the two art movements (Korean Modernism and Minjung art) rather than rehearsing

the widely accepted dichotomy of the two. She further reads them all together as a product of contemplating what the ‘Koreanness’ of Korean art is. Although this argument was briefly presented in her previous article “The Two Traditions: Monochrome Painting of the 1970s and Minjung Misul of the 1980s” (*Korean Studies Quarterly* 23(4), 2000, 33-53), the book exclusively adapts this argument as a decisive factor in her narrative of Korean art history. Of course, the widespread dichotomy contains some degree of truth as well, thus her periodization stimulates academic imagination and triggers controversy.

Moving Reflection, Korean Art Since 1945 (Mijinsa, 2020) could be one chapter closing for Kim who has worked on Korean art history more than 30 years. On the other hand, it will be a starting point for younger generations who start researching Korean modern and contemporary art. The starting point here means that this book faithfully reflects the existing research conducted in art history so far and draws a balanced map that allows junior scholars to view Korean art objectively. At the same time, this book poses a challenge that they must now start redrawing borders or finding unknown territory in front of the map that this book provides.