

Ryu Biho's Third Solo Show

Flexible Landscape

By Yang Ji-yoon, Independent Curator

This year Ryu Biho presents his third solo exhibition, *Flexible Landscape*, after his solo exhibitions *Sleepwalking* in 2001, and *The Steel Sun* in 2000. During the eight years preparation for the show, Ryu experienced distress and anguish, and underwent profound changes. When I first heard his ideas for the exhibition, I understood they were complex, even tangled. He has extracted and arranged his anguishes one by one, to shed light on social systems, aesthetics, artistic autonomy, Korean authenticity, and the fusion of Tao (or path) with the media. From its beginning 2000, when Ryu debuted in the art world, *Flexible Landscape* has come to feature changes in the media environment, social systems, and above all, the artist himself.

Unrealistic Art - Art Imitates Life

We often say art is unrealistic, imaginary, and illusory. By making it, we confine its capabilities, to underline the gap with reality. Even in the arts of social participation, since May 1968 in France, and all the community arts that have emerged since the 1990s, the practical role and function of art remains controversial. To it, reality is used by artists as the onset of their art, or as a metaphor. Art prefers uncertain structures of reality, to a straight investigation of reality, addressing it as if it were a symbol. And so the artist reproduces stories, images, sounds, and ideas, so reality can be called a work of art.

Landscape of a Social System

Although landscape painting reveals an artist's attempt to represent reality, the world the artist reproduces is regarded as a fictitious image. Despite aspirations to represent reality, landscape artists often reach the conclusion, reality cannot be reproduced, and represented reality gets considered an unrealistic utopia.

Ryu Biho's solo show *Flexible Landscape* presents a landscape of Korea's current social system. It starts from two concrete incidents that occurred in Korea, in Songdo Newtown in 2008, and Taean County in 2007, and shows the landscape of a power system, extant within an elaborate mechanism of social exchange. Ryu is representing capitalist systems and Korean situations.

Flexible Landscape begins from two realistic incidents, the construction of Songdo Newtown and the oil spill in Taean Country. In Songdo Newtown we witness a site where capitalism deforms nature, by reclaiming the sea and by the building of an enormous business complex. In Taean we see the destruction of an ecosystem caused by an oil spill. Ryu represents his imagination through

metaphors of the ecosystem, environment, and pollution. Based on objective reality, he reproduces these through his subjective imagination. Created within a conflict-structure of external elements and individual psychology, Ryu calls this world 'sub-topia.'

Sub-topia: In-between Reality and Representation

Sub-topia is the world created by lending imagination and energy to the enormous social systems associated with such issues as economic growth, economic crisis, the exhaustion of energy, and environmental pollution. It plays an ontological role as a new change and formation, rather than offering a positive or negative value of change. More important for Ryu is its physical, chemical, and natural formation. In the landscape of this sub-topia, power systems are bilateral: those who have it are at one end, those who don't are at the other, and power is not always the overt subject of politics.

For Ryu the exhibition functions within fields of education, religion, the environment, and food, where citizens usually cannot see power systems. Its role is to present alternative measures of reality. Ryu Biho expects this sub-topia, a fantastic world presented by an artist, will offer a stimulus to engage reality through an exhibition, a system of artistic communication.

Exhibition Structure

Displayed near the entrance of the venue is Ryu's *Deep Light* series, a sculptural work imbued with black light that does not appear to be cubic. This series, featuring deformed men and nature, after the destruction of nature caused by oil, is the psychological clot contemporary men conceal inside, or a clot of silence the artist has kept for last eight years.

In *A Better Tomorrow*, digital imagery composed in shapes that appeared in *Deep Light*, a boy holding a stick lies down on the ground, while a city can be seen burning like Sodom. This animation-like, theatrical depiction is peculiar to Ryu Biho, who conveys narrative in a metaphorical manner.

Another digital work, *Fantasia*, is a landscape addressing the recovery of nature, in a departure from the conventional, anthropocentric worldview. A city can again be seen in the distance, and a UFO shape falls down into waves of water.

In *Flexible Landscape*, architectural structures from our reality, including the Bank of Korea, Chosun Ilbo, and Yoido Full Gospel Church, appear distorted by Ryu's subjective vision. The artist presents arbitrarily changing scenes, after selecting primary buildings that provide major services. He represents powerful authorities that govern us or provide service to us by infiltrating our daily lives in a sweet, delightful manner.

Euphoric Drive, a video of a car racing game scene, is a 3D animation in which one slides along a yellow street at slow speed of 10-20 kms per hour while billboards pass by. For the artist this work stems from the fact people feel assured even when in a strange place, if there are familiar brands around them. If one who enjoys Starbucks coffee in the United States finds Starbucks in Korea, they might feel stability, and a strange traveling-site might turn into a familiar, friendly space.

Invisible City, a video chronicling a performance is the work concerning an intangible social system. In this work, the artist intervenes in a Daehakno park where an unusually huge number of pigeons flock in a pleasurable manner. He writes the words Invisible City on its ground and these letters are covered by the pigeons that gathered to pick up the crumbs he scattered. Left on the ground are these letters. Unlike his other pieces, this video appears insipid and flavorless, pointing to the direction Ryu's work has to go ahead.

Epilogue

Flexible Landscape is an outgrowth of what the Ryu witnessed and experienced over the last eight years, plus his anguishes about his social environment, difficult psychological conditions and encounters. Ryu has experimented with artistic intervention in reality, and with our relationships within society, based on concrete incidents. And he presents an imaginary sub-topia, and expects it to give us stimulus to see the reality of the world. Through Ryu's work, the landscape of social power, and power systems, are far from fiction.