

# The Virgin, the Vivacious, and the Beautiful: On RYU Biho

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There are two constants in RYU's work: history and light. On the one hand, his work is driven by a desire to examine and observe real-world events and phenomena critically and, on the other, an urge to shed light on the inherent and immutable essence hidden in these events and phenomena. Songs, gazes, strolls, practices, and sleep reside between these two impulses, and the artist describes the interplay between these two in his art as "wandering between realism and romanticism." RYU is acutely conscious of the deep tensions and absurdities modern Korean history is rife with, and they have been a dominant theme in his work since the early 2000s. In *Caster* (2002), for example, the artist compiles a list of words, expressions, and catchphrases repeatedly used in news reports:

"Retaliatory measures - exposing crimes - emergency arrest - expanding the voter base - integrity of public officials - preemptive attack - bloody battle - heated exchange - climbing out of slump - start of an investigation - disarmament - battle engagement - major clash - historic low - team Korea -

history and citizens - historical mission - harmony and cooperation - realizing the dream - national defense - safety of the public - North Korea - reconciliation - security - establishing facts - survival of the nation - peace on the Korean peninsula - national disorder - political maneuvering - military service fraud - defamation - political retaliations - fabrication - side-effects - discouragement - aggressivity - hate - quiet rebellion - impending threats - parallel decline - turbulence - direct hit - important juncture - proactive response - leading role - faithful implementation - since the founding of the nation - consolidation - full mobilization - unanswered questions - world-class - amazement - women and mothers of our nation - leading brand - outstanding effects - clueless - realignment - search for directions - contest of power - dreams and promises - you who are successful - leading brand - switch now - it's dramatically different - anticipating with excitement - still in love like the first day - amazing strength - protect - zesty flavor - my collection - judgment of history - new history - Asia becoming one - protective shoulders - cornerstones for a new era - real welfare and justice - example of a public official - fight against corruption - clean government - transparency and integrity for public officials - Korea of hope - esteemed citizens - it's great to love - decide today."

These clichés are so firmly entrenched in Korean discourse and popular culture that a news report could almost be written on any subject by combining them. However, RYU's work does not directly fall into political, social, or historical realism. His work is often dotted with ambiguous

signs that are difficult to define or explain with words like stance, attitude, or viewpoint. *Hospitality* (2002) blends the exchange between Kim Dae Jung and George W. Bush during a Korea–US summit with images of underwear advertised on a home shopping channel and silly and absurd stories of people dating. At first glance, this work appears as though an attempt at ridiculing a past chapter in Korea–US relations. At the same time, the fact that an important political event that marked history is viewed on the same plane as ordinary TV ad slogans makes one feel that there could be something more to this work than what is presented at the surface. However, what we are witnessing is an entirely new point of view. By “entirely new point of new,” I am not just referring to this almost unconscious and automatic overlapping of contrasting meanings but the advent of an “angelic” or “demonic” viewpoint in which all things lose their concrete sense. Neither angels nor demons concern us much, as they are both beings dwelling on the fringes of our time and space. Just like Laplace’s demon, they simultaneously look in all directions from all points of view, across eternity and its myriads of instants.

*The Fragmented Light* (2011) introduces us to fascinating shapes. This project exhibited in Daegu featured works including *The Fragmented Light*, *The Language for a Time-Traveler*, *A Neruda’s Song to Honor Birdie*, and *The Guide of Time*. All these show two or three-dimensional

geometric shapes, which are various combinations of triangles, rectangles, and circles that continue to appear in his subsequent works. What is most interesting is how this artist, who has until now treated extensively political and social themes, deals with the abstract, geometric elements that now take center stage in his work. These two sides of him seem quite incompatible. It is perplexing for viewers who are compelled to wonder whether they are faced with a new side of him, whether this is about an inconsistency in thematic choices, or whether these shapes are structures that are on the extension of a particular narrative. In later exhibitions, including *TWIN PEAKS* at the Nanji Gallery, he continued using abstract elements, such as combinations of geometric shapes and light. At times, they were used as explicit and realistic signs (as in *Samsung [Three Stars]*) and at other times, as multivalent signs, of which *Following the Segmented Light* (2014, Gwangju) is a case in point (fragmented light stands at the same time for Gwangju, hand signals, dazzling light, supernatural power, etc.). Moreover, they are sometimes used as signs denoting even more abstract totalities (such as sunsets or ritual ceremonies).

*Circle, Square, Triangle*, the 2016 exhibition at the Nam June Paik Art Center, defines a circle, square, and triangle as three fundamental structural aspects of the world. A circle stands for nature's property of circulating continuously, like the action of a spinning top or flowing

water or the fleeting shadows of a tree reflected on the surface of water or the ground. Meanwhile, a square signifies the technical and epistemological dimensions of relationships and communications, as exemplified by artificial lights and the light's reflection shining on someone else's face. The triangle, represented by a person walking into a forest and an ant busily crawling toward an unknown destination, corresponds to the property of beings as that which continuously moves in time, space, and labor. *Circle, Square, Triangle* makes it clear that geometrical analogies and light are significant catalysts in RYU's works.

Furthermore, *Circle, Square, Triangle* provides clues for understanding certain static scenes encountered in RYU's works, particularly in his black-and-white videos. People appearing in these are often almost entirely still with their gaze turned to an indefinite elsewhere (*A Reverie in the Fog, A Man Who Became a Landscape, The Song of Wind, etc.*) or are slowly walking to somewhere (*Triangle, Walk, ABOUT SOLITUDE, The Wanderer's Song of Wind, etc.*). These videos bathe in an atmosphere not encountered in his other works, vibrating with an unusual emotional frequency (if compared to a vinyl record, these works would be a disc's B side, while the rest is the A side). They show us entirely different themes and worldviews in a radical departure from RYU's earlier videos, installations, performances, and 3D works, marked by concrete themes and strong thematic consciousness. Compared to

his previous realistic, concrete, and, at times, geometric pieces, these videos are much darker and more static, abstract, and introspective. Borrowing the logic of *Circle, Square, Triangle*, one could say that the geometric essences residing beneath the surface of life and existence emerge from the darkness and reveal their silhouettes. The human figures featured in these gigantic abstractions gaze toward the sea and the forest (square) or slowly walk to some place (triangle), and the world surrounding them represents the boundlessness of a vast spatiotemporality (circle). It almost seems that the light emitted by this world and its “relata” is pushing off the darkness within the artist.

*A Prophet's Words* (2018) exist at the culmination of this “B side” dimension. What viewers see is a sleeping man's head. Even as he is sleeping, the man speaks. He could be sleep-talking, and his words could only be a meaningless jumble of unconscious thoughts. It is also possible that he is possessed by a powerful spirit that speaks through him to deliver messages from the world of nirvana. In *A Prophet's Words*, both possibilities seem equally likely. The word “prophet” in the title strongly suggests that the sleeping man delivers a message that reveals future events or meanings hidden until now. In other words, the prophet speaks through a sleeping man, and the message is delivered verbatim without restating or paraphrasing. Sleep is the temporary vanishing of all contexts and circumstances. A sleeper traverses the map of meaning

unhindered, as all distances are erased unexpectedly, suddenly, and randomly. Deeply buried meanings reveal themselves, but only briefly, like a flash of light that disappears as soon as it appears. The words that the sleeper won't remember waking are spoken through him by the prophet. What is the prophet saying to us?

“Let us content ourselves with this knowledge, which is not knowledge. What does this knowledge tell us? What it says is that heterogeneity, in the form of an absolute other (*l'autre absolu*), must suddenly appear amid the homogeneity—approval of those that are homogeneous—needed for understanding. In all relationships in which there is the intervention of the absolute other, no relationship of facts exists, and the passage to insurmountable wills and desires is no longer possible.”

- Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (The Unavowable Community), p 67.

On the “B side,” the people appearing in this realm of darkness form a community whose purpose cannot be precisely defined or classified. For specific reasons that are “heterogeneous,” in the sense of heterogeneity Blanchot talks about, their gazes, locations, and destinations they are heading to are incorporated under the unfathomable principles, rules, and immutable promises inherent to this world. They don't seem excluded or isolated or in distress or despair. Instead, they seem to be

simply acting according to particularly older rules. Even so, these human figures are neither abstract nor vague. One of the reasons why RYU's "other world" in black-and-white seems so surprising is that very little in his previous works foreshadowed such a shift in worldview. Did something happen to him in the interim? "Heterogeneity" has possibly lurked in his work for a long time, like dark matter. Later, after he began his conceptual inquiry into "circle, square, and triangle," a certain "other" that is difficult to discern through such a semiological analysis could have emerged in his world, perhaps through a process of intrusion.

In 2022, at the height of the pandemic, RYU was in residency on the faraway island of Gapado. He returned from the island with a strange piece. He documented the changing appearances of the sky over Gapado after sunset and before daybreak by taking hundreds of photos using an analog camera. The dust particles and scratches on the enlarged prints he made vividly translate his feverish excitement while capturing these photos. Although the artist said the images must be improved for imperfections, these performative traces suggested they were something beyond photography. The images showed large, coarse particles, violent wind, a sky smeared with dark clouds, and the dramatic contrast with flashes of light piercing through the murkiness. These photos later led to a video titled *The Virgin, the Perennial & the Beautiful Today*, an animation-style video showing a succession of still



images of a stormy sky. He used the morphing technique (transforming one shape into another for a smooth transition between scenes) so that the scenes shift to one another by morphing into and out of geometric shapes. As the sky is continuously divided by sharp lines, viewers see a never-ending series of planes. These planes create the illusion as though one is looking at a sky, reconstructed as a patchwork of many-sided pieces, through a transparent film. While the surface of the agitated sea displays the gigantic flow of differentiation through infinite particles and fractals, RYU's sky is continuously split into multiple planes of all shapes as if this endless segmentation is its essence and reality. It is as though all these sharp-angled planes are implicit facets of the silence and calmness of this world. The artist described these geometric planes as figures produced by "the conversion values of specific points between two still images of the ever-changing shape of clouds," calling this process the "production of images of hidden dimensions." The world has a binary structure, consisting, on the one hand, of still images and, on the other, of continuous flows. These binary terms are what Gilles Deleuze referred to as "coupure/movement" in his discussion of cinema (*Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* [French: *Cinema 1: L'image-movement*]). Deleuze equates individual planes (*plans*) of a film with the cuts (*coupures*) of the world, which, according to him, is constantly splitting into multiple versions. The world is a whole (*ensemble*) made up of spatiotemporal cuts, seen from all possible

viewpoints. In other words, it is a “universe” (the “universe,” the combined whole, is one of the possible versions of itself at the same time as comprising countless other versions within it). RYU captures these “specific points,” popping up like bubbles on each plane—almost like embryos of automatism—and use them as vertices to generate lines. The lines then delineate transparent geometric planes, which he calls “hidden images.” The illusions created by the geometric planes of Gapado Island’s sky are so otherworldly that one can even detect a mystic and metaphysical note. This perhaps calls for reexamining the relationship between “geometrical analogies” and the “manifestation of the world,” the two elements encompassing RYU’s work. It is intriguing why his work so incessantly swings back and forth between the real and the metaphysical. How can one explain this combination of a sincere interest in real-world events and their historical background and significance and an opposite impulse of diving into abstract and almost transcendental temporalities that seem to lie above and beyond the worldly?

Geometrical Irreversibility: One of the biggest challenges in interpreting RYU’s work is to figure out the origin or background of his dark, static videos. This series of works is singularly “laconic,” full of gazes that stay in a “low zone.” By “low zone,” I mean the complete absence of explanation of any kind, as well as the total lack of emotional elements

and any developments they could trigger. What is at the fore is the gaze of the observer. As a result, viewers who follow this gaze also become acutely conscious of their own because sensory dimensions are dreadfully lacking in the interaction between the work and viewers. The gaze arises between the screen and viewers like a solid object, and this dynamic could be described as reflective. Furthermore, the performative flow of time revealing itself on the dark screen is concise and complete, and the world inside this screen is the one consisting of concise and complete moments. Even though these moments can result in complex interactions called events depending on their arrangements, each plane ultimately reverts to its concise and complete forms, hence, the geometrical nature.

The universe is made of geometry and algebra. It is simultaneously pervaded by the consistency of the unknown, held together by infinitesimal numbers known as cosmological constants. If any of the minute elements constituting it were altered ever so slightly, the universe would collapse. Even as it creates infinite variations through algebra, the geometrical homogeneity gives it a gigantic and consistent background. Geometry gives rise to abstract fragments. Things perceived through our primary senses are converted into countless moments that are fragments of experiences. This process is irreversible but is never the same as it varies according to the properties and flow

of spatiotemporality. It is an infinite movement in all directions, taking all possible forms of events and relationships, and the artist's role is to actualize and visualize this potentiality in time and space—the infinite network without cause-and-effect limit; the incessantly flickering library; railings and corridors that extend out of sight; and the potentiality of the universe is a locus resembling Schrödinger's box, where all possible outcomes exist simultaneously.

What makes artists so fascinating is that each of their works is a trajectory and a path simultaneously as a single number. No individual artist can ever present all possible meanings. In RYU's works, we are dealing with constant back-and-forth movements and vibration, outbursts against the beyond and depression, varying levels and complete self-identification at all instants, withdrawal and excitement, obsessive pursuit and playfulness, resignation to the reality of the world, and intellectual self-examination and silent labor. To manifest all these things at the same time, an artist necessarily must have something of a split personality. Similar to the sky of Gapado Island, which he described as virginal, perennial, and beautiful, an artistic journey's paths and movements draw a unique and irreplaceable, if transient, trajectory.

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