

HAEWOOSOO, "A PLACE FOR DISPELLING ANXIETY"

by

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Submitted to the School of Art and Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

December 2009

Accepted:

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HaeWooSo, "A Place for Dispelling Anxiety"

The famous Korean singing group "Seo Taiji and Boys" declared sudden retirement at the peak of their popularity during the 90's. It was shocking for their fans and was a big issue for some time. They said that the process of creating new music was agonizing, as if their bones were being carved. I remember that I laughed at their reason for retreat. I was too young to understand the difficulty of composing music and the massive pressure faced by a top singing group. Now, over 10 years later, I can fully sympathize with them as a fledgling artist myself and can comprehend the reasons that they eventually came back to the stage. The process of producing artwork is definitely painful, yet it is also a great pleasure that makes it impossible to stop.

At the beginning of this semester at Purchase, I was really frustrated with my work and I felt as if I would not have any ideas for my paintings anymore. I even considered stopping painting. I was depressed and stressed out with the last semester because of the amount of work to do and my uncertain future. My problems obstructing the development of my work and giving me anxiety seem to stem from a conservative stubbornness and lack of confidence in my paintings. I often stick to my first idea and become afraid of changing my work. At the same time, I usually doubt my idea of composition and color until somebody else either

agrees with it or compliments me on my paintings. I am overly conscious of other people's viewpoints and opinions. Therefore, if teachers give me different advice for my work, I become very confused and cannot decide how to then apply it. It was really hard to overcome the slump and problems. I often had to paint over the paintings that I did not like and I changed colors again and again until it looked better. It took a lot of courage to decide to change my paintings, but I could learn lessons from it. I perceived the progress of my paintings while trying to fix spoiled paintings and awkward colors. Besides, it is interesting that the old paintings are visible through the new paintings. This process helped me to reduce my obstinacy and have confidence with my decision.

The attraction of painting for me is the fact that I can create my own world and invite other people into it. After I came to Purchase, I finally began to learn systematic painting skills, colors, and critique and attempted to paint ranging from still life to abstraction. At the end of my second semester, I began to paint myself and surroundings from my perspective. While thinking about the composition of my paintings, it became clear that it was easiest to paint myself and my surroundings. Not only setting up the environment for painting but also finding still life subjects and models was more difficult for me, an international student. This is partly because when I needed to buy something for painting, it was hard to know the names of the things I was looking for, or even the places to buy them. I

felt like an alien in the United States for a while. Acquiring objects was difficult, therefore, the content of my paintings is focused on myself and is related to loneliness, solitude, and my relationship with objects from my memory or imagination. However, I do not want my paintings to look gloomy, but rather fun and playful, with unique colors and compositions, because I do not want to be depressed by the situation. I would like to cheer up and comfort not only myself, but also other people with my paintings. Viewers can see only some part of my body that can be seen through my eyes, not my face or whole body. I invite people to the space that I see. Bright hue is another important element to catch people's attention. In my painting I might be shouting, "Look at what I see and feel it with me!"

One day I put my first toilet painting upside down to make it easier to paint the upper part of a big canvas, but I found the composition to be more exciting this way. There was a kind of dizzy feeling as if the figure would fall down, so I decided to keep it on the wall like that. Since then, I rotate my paintings after I finish them and decide the direction to hang them on the wall. The bathroom and toilet scene is a subject that I have painted many times because it is personal space that helps people to fall into a daydream. In Korean temples, this place is called a "Haewooso." It means "a place for dispelling anxiety." Paradoxically, painting itself is my anxiety and simultaneously is my Haewooso. I

hope that my paintings are also “Haewooso” for viewers.

Before I started to study Fine Art as my major, my favorite painting style was the old masters’ realistic paintings. I thought that realistic paintings were the ideal type of painting and my goal was to obtain the craftsmanship to depict real life accurately. However, after I learned about a number of artists all over the world and many different painting styles, I began to understand that all of them have their own unique beauty. It is impossible to say what style or artist is the best and choose a favorite.

I tried to paint like the Pop artist Wayne Thiebaud in my first semester at Purchase. I painted symmetrically and used thick brush strokes like he did. My paintings are still quite symmetrical and have Pop influence. Learning from other artists is the essential lesson for young artists, but sometimes I – who am somewhat inadaptable – cling to their style and struggle to develop one of my own. I think that the symmetrical composition is something I should get out of because the composition seems to give my work limitation. Another artist I really like is a female Japanese artist, Yayoi Kusama. I encountered her paintings in the Asian artists' show in Seoul during the first summer break and I became interested in her patterned paintings. I am also pleased to incorporate patterning, which adds a level of abstraction to my work. Since seeing the painting "Wave" in the Cleveland Museum of Art, I started to love Paul Gauguin's vivid color paintings. I

have made one painting with the colors on his "*Self-portrait with Halo*." Strangely even though I liked his painting, I realized that his colors were not exactly matched with my painting. My paintings need my own color with my feeling of the subjects. Then I started to trust my color choice. I had thought that color was very difficult (I still think so) and I did not have a good color sense. However, my use of color has matured involuntarily.

Another aspect I love about painting is the fact that viewers can project onto them their own unique interpretations. When I prepared my portfolio to transfer to American colleges, a Korean artist, SueJin Chung was my reference artist. I tried to make complicated paintings like hers to distract people from the fact that I was still rather unskillful and I wanted them to focus more on the difficulty level of what I was creating. At the time, I did not know the concepts of her work. When I recently found information of her paintings online, I was surprised because the interpretations of her work are totally different from mine. I try to make everything have specific memories and stories on my canvas. However, she tries not to give any emblem to still life subjects and figures in her paintings and uses them merely because of shape or color. She grades each entity by color and shape and then puts them on the canvas with thorough calculation as if painting is mathematics. Her paintings look like figurative painting, but her principle is like abstraction. Nevertheless, people who do not know her motives

try to find her story in her images. Her notion was quite fresh for me. After I read her explanation, I wondered whether or not the artist's intention is really significant for viewers. It seems that viewers decide the art's meaning depending on their own experience and thought. For example, some people read sexual meanings or a female issue from images in my paintings due to my semi-naked body on a toilet or symbolized objects around me. It is possible that my subconscious would reveal itself in my art when I depict myself as a lonely single woman in a foreign country. However, as a matter of fact, I did not intend it at all and I am not comfortable with painting sexual imagery. I paint a woman, myself, but I do not want to emphasize her femininity, but rather make just a person. My parents have not sexually discriminated me like many other parents in Korea and expected me to have the same responsibilities as a man. I grew up being respected as the first child in my family. Therefore, I did not feel that I was different from men and have not taken myself as a woman seriously. The fact that I am a woman is less significant to me than the fact that I am a person. Since I thought about that, I started to enjoy different interpretations of my images. The analysis of other people often inspires and refreshes my work. They stimulate me to think differently about my paintings and help me to understand my work better. Now I realize that there is no such thing as a "correct reading." I only hope that people enjoy my art. I want to make people curious and maybe even a little bit confused.

Maybe that is why I like when other people interpret my paintings differently from how I do. I enjoy keeping them guessing.

I like to paint. I truly feel anxiety while struggling with my paintings, but the anxiety is dispelled when I finish paintings with satisfaction. After I hung my paintings for the senior show, people asked how I thought about my work. I answered, "Not too bad." Someday when I am asked the same question, I hope I could say "Very good!" •

Reference

Michael Torlen

Paul Gauguin *Self-portrait with Halo*