

Promise of a Forest

We all hold in our heart a forest of our childhood. The fear and excitement, both physical, that it instilled in us never quite disappear from our time-worn memory. Some of us never knew beaches, briny sea spray, and shouts of crowds, nor bald and scarred mountains, nor great feverish cities, their hotels and museums, nor the spare speech of the peasants of the Golden Plains. Some have known the world in its nooks and crannies, famous landscapes that leave only vague traces merged with a painter's line or an author's adjective, ancient cities of the desert, ruins that fire the imagination. Yet we all remember a forest. Was it remote or nearby, primary or tamed, dense, dark, or smiling, southern or northern, humble or crackling, peopled with deciduous or coniferous trees, legends or litter, does a stream run through it? Was it a small grove, near the village, that to us seemed boundless and haunted? Was it the sacred forest by the gates of Rome that concealed Egeria and Numa? Was it a tiny park surrounded by roads and buildings, with its untended pond and bed of leaves in the fall that already suggested to us the possibility of another life, a splendid elsewhere? Better never go back there – age taught us disappointment – and keep our first forest like a promise of wandering. This is how Stevenson started off in literature on his travels with a donkey in the Cévennes: *"And to look down upon a level filled with these knolls of foliage, or to see a clan of old unconquerable chestnuts cluster 'like herded elephants' upon the spur of a mountain, is to rise to higher thoughts of the powers that are in Nature."* A child doesn't conceptualize the sensory and intimate experience of the forest; let's join the child in its winding curves.

My meeting with Min Jung-Yeon came about in a distinctly urban setting, a street in Cannes where we had lunch on the verge of summer, among its Italian-style ochre façades, amid the characteristic sound of air conditioning that pours hot polluted air back into the city. In just a few instants we had changed continents. As a little girl, Min Jung-Yeon lived in the Korean countryside. Her father, Min Moungh-Chul, was head of an orphanage. She went with him on his strolls looking for stones for his collection. Min Moungh-Chul perpetuates this tradition arisen in the 14th century in Korean aristocratic and learned circles. Finding stones with inspiring and varied forms, mysterious or symbolic, and presenting them with elegance on a specially designed base that clings to the irregularities of the stone, often made of wood, sometimes covered with sand, emphasising their character and inspiring meditation. So, the piece becomes a miniature garden, itself a parable of the world, and is placed inside a library or on a desk. Nature, and even more the perception that the collector casts of it, enters the house to nurture poetic or philosophical thoughts. I have before me photographs of stones in Min Moungh-Chul's collection: they are authentic works of art. A mountain we can hold in the palm of our hand. In her youth Min Jung-Yeon grew up beside orphans, but she was not one of them. She had few friends, she was different, she spent a lot of time in the forest. The Forest is the refuge of the solitary, but a dangerous refuge as wolves of all kinds conceal their dens therein. An ugly encounter awaited Min Jung-Yeon there, *a bad personal recollection*, as she says in a low voice. She never returned to the forest of her childhood. Time goes by and unfortunately, blindly fells what we love, but what we fear as well. Min Jung-Yeon went off to the Hongik University in Seoul, then the Beaux-Arts in Paris, in 2005, where she was a pupil of Jean-Michel Alberola, "the masked painter" whose aphorism "the way out is inside" influenced a great many students. She experienced the success of exhibitions, adopted our country, yet today she would like to be reconciled with the forest of her childhood. This is how the idea of the installation *Weave (Tissage)* came about.

Southern torpor is fairly remote from the Korean mountains and even the Guimet museum rotunda. The street in Cannes is so noisy, I cannot take my mind off the father's stones and the daughter's fossils, as if they belonged to my own experience. It is through drawing that I entered Min Jung-Yeon's work and understood its obsessional character, the adjective is not too strong. There in Indian ink and watercolour she minutely embroiders disturbing contrasts between well-defined elements that for the sake of simplicity we shall call "figurative", and undefined therefore "abstract" areas that unfurl like clouds or liquid spots spreading by capillarity. On the one hand the precision of a Capuchin monk's line, with a very thin brush, when it is a ruined architecture, an abandoned pavement, or the outline of a cypress tree, that *silent dead*, on the other hand this vapour, this mist, this curl of smoke, and in my heart the memory of the calcite ornaments that are the glory of the pink cave of Dargilan, caressed by the Jonte River. Min Jung-Yeon is

fascinated by duality, the so random equipoise of the opposites, awareness and unawareness, construction and destruction, what can be controlled and what never can be. Formerly satiated with drawing or texture, now her works preserve far more virgin spaces, as if to add a new scale of coexistence between form and void. Drawing proves again on this occasion – let us think of Matisse – that it is a medium allowing to express the subtlest concepts by its hypersensitive delicacy and tendency to the ineffable. I am not fond of psychological, political, or sociological reflections that tell the readers to understand a work only through their angle. Painting, like literature, follows the laws of singularity, not theories. But could I speak of “duality” and “coexistence” without calling to mind the noxious reality of a country, Korea, split in two for over sixty years?

It is rather risky to describe an installation that is still only on paper. The best works of art are able to go beyond on their own, as if they had their own independent existence, their author’s intentions, and the words that conceived them. *Weave* proceeds from the idea of reconciliation, the forest being the tree that hides the forest of symbols dear to Baudelaire. For Min Jung-Yeon the notion of weaving consists in assembling materials differing one from another without mixing them, preserving intact each one’s nature to end up creating something new, a chimera possessing an unknown morphology. As I write these lines I am receiving the first pictures of the panels on which Min Jung-Yeon is drawing. The naked trunks of birches emerge out of undulating waves made of feathers, a mantle that inhales and exhales with the same rhythm as the surf. Of course bird feathers speak of migrations, but of memory also. The river that flows, like a chronology, is a misleading image. Better to speak in terms of layers, memories accumulating, one after another. An installation of drawings like a film set, a labyrinth-like *trompe-l’oeil*, walls clad with mirrors, Min Jung-Yeon also seeks the viewer’s complicity by making the second and third dimensions of her works resonate. There is no imposed overall view, the coincidences of the eye are the sole guidelines. Will the forest of birch trees and feathers keep its shadowy promises?

On this July Sunday the light gradually declines on my cherished library. In the garden the heat is still suffocating despite the pines’ striving to shelter us. In a few hours I shall have to leave my beloved home to return to the Côte d’Azur. Between two catalogues and the jaw of a round-nose skate I placed a fossil of a trilobite that Min Jung-Yeon gave me. She sent it to me in the mail, wrapped in a pretty Provençal fabric. As is my custom I thanked her clumsily despite the pleasure I felt. In this street of Cannes while waiting for our coffees, we forgot artistic questions to discuss fossils. What better parable of memory and layers could there be? She also told me about her expedition in the Egyptian desert where she had ferreted out a fragment of a meteorite. It is in the infinitesimal that infinity dwells. I had been intrigued by the complexity of her relationship with the act of collecting, like a form of wisdom and introspection, when with me it becomes good old bulimia and accumulation. Later I lingered over the questions on time and space she had conjured up for me, I applied them to the works she had shown me, her projects, I delved again into Lao Tseu whom I admired as a youth, less for his ideas, that for me remain covered with a veil, than for his poetry. Despite all my efforts, is Eastern thought too evanescent and subtle for a mind as European as mine? I am like the squirrel dazzled by the moon, doubtless charmed by its beauty but unable to know exactly what is it all about. I love Min Jung-Yeon’s work without being able to fully explain why. Should we always present the right words or restrain our irreconcilable temperaments to an intermediate space? Like a language consisting of letters and ideograms unknown to us, I am happy just listening to its music and praising its mysteries.

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July 2019