

Landscape of the Middle Voice

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Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands....¹

For Jang Jaemin, unfamiliar places are the starting points of his works. This may be due to his enjoyment of fishing since childhood, but wandering around the daily life surroundings to unfamiliar places is like traveling. We often seek new scenes from familiar places; and on the contrary, look for things that we can sympathize with in unfamiliar places. Memories of wandering and the body's experiences become the source of creation. Of course, photographs are used for records, but is merely a way of reminder, far away from the purpose of representation. In fact, landscape, instead of existing on its own, is interpreted as vision's awe that appears when a certain distance between the viewer and the object is maintained. Thus, the emergence of landscapes must be abnormal; something familiar must become unfamiliar to appear as a landscape. What does an unfamiliar state signify? It relates to the separation of nature and civilization. Karatani Kojin (b. 1941) suggests the birth of landscape as the allegory that signaled the beginning of modernism. He argues that humanity did not separate humans from nature before modern times. Through modern civilization's ideology of the pioneer, in belief that nature could be controlled, sublime landscapes were mass-produced, and media civilization has come to infinitely consume this production. Landscapes became images. Thus, the closer we approach landscapes, they are destined to disappear. Jang's landscapes are so. He contacts the internal of the landscape, not the grand view seen from the exterior. The distance between the viewpoint and the object is inessential. Jang daringly walks towards the core of the landscape. He walks within the forest and senses actual beings concealed in the landscape viewed from a distance, through his body: light, color, temperature, humidity, wind, even scent. Imagine the artist piercing through the membrane, that is, the landscape. Georges Didi-Huberman (b. 1953) interprets the theory of James Turrell (b. 1943) as a phenomenological asceticism of walking. Natural phenomena were fundamentally a symbolic channel that conveyed the meaning of words comprised of mythical narratives. However, landscapes are like nature that lost words. Civilization is gradually invading the wilderness and wiping out nature's voice. Jang sets foot into the landscape and wanders in an unfamiliar place. Loitering without a destination is his purpose. Thinking back, the word loitering gives a somewhat peaceful impression, but wandering in desolate places often presents unforeseen menacing situations. Jang mentioned an occurrence during his residency in Bretagne, France. Jang conveys the memory and impression he personally experienced in his paintings, rather than attempting to represent nature itself. Therefore, it would be accurate to call his works "anti-landscapes"

¹ Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings of Walter Benjamin 1, One Way Street/Thought Images*. Translated by Young-ok Kim, Mi-ae Yoon, and Sung-man Choi. (Seoul: Gil Publisher, 2012), p. 77.

rather than landscapes.

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) deemed that a child is not merely reading a book, but is completely immersed in the book's world. He believed that children were still at a stage when they could create their own stories in their sleep and track the paths in the almost vanishing stories.² Landscapes for Jang are like forest concealing secrets. In this forest, he discovers unexpected things. In his residency in Cheonan, Korea, he coincidentally came across a stone child totem pole, and this nature and supernatural belief became a painting. If a landscape is a complete story, Jang is like a child, who most enthusiastically rewrites that story. Not as the landscape seen through the eyes, but by touching with his own hands and wandering around, like a painting viscerally painted with the body. This being said, now the idea of 'Landscape of the Middle Voice' can be just about interpreted. The middle voice signifies a sentence with a passive voice but is understood as an active meaning. Jang's landscapes have the characteristic of an active agent that perceives itself. This hypothetical idea has already been touched upon in his 2015 exhibition, *Facing Disability* at Posco Art Museum, Seoul. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) named the conflict caused by the distance between the unfamiliar landscape and the observer's conscious as "facing disability," and explored how the landscape emerged from the gap in between civilization and nature. Jang has been expanding works under the subject, "events that landscapes remember" before the exhibition, and one can assume that in his landscape theory, the volition of anti-landscape has undoubtedly been reflected. Since his first solo exhibition in 2014, Jang is continuously painting works under the notion of landscape, in which the object and background are unseparated. In his earlier works, the object's forms relatively showed plainly, but with time, they gradually became obscure like camouflage. In *A Big Dog, Figure, and Giant Tree* (2019), forms emerge from the landscape long after looking into the painting for quite a while. The artist often uses the phrase, drawing in the landscape into the picture screen, perhaps this is the way he regards nature. Drawing in landscape can also be understood as a phenomenological relationship of interchange between touching and being touched, rather than viewing nature as something to be observed. The large-scale painting, its size reaching up to canvas size 500 (312x235cm), *Upper Region of Reservoir* (2020), has an exceptional savory sensation of occasionally swaying vibration in the water of the desolate fishing site in the remote night. "Fishing site," a subject matter Jang continuously uses for his paintings, extends to the thrilling movement transmitted to the hands while going back and forth between meditation and tension with a fishing rod set in front gladly in the stench of the night. This primitiveness of the night, unseen during the day, is the true subject and material of Jang's paintings. As the artist drew in his surroundings into a moment or a malerisch scene of painting, objects from everyday life started to enter his landscapes, as shown in *Keepnet* (2020) and *Rowboat* (2020). Meanwhile, objects in *A Statue at Night* (2020), *Fish and Point(s)* (2020), and *Tutelary Spirit Tree and Stone Totem Poles* (2020) induce the viewer to imagine supernatural beings in the landscapes. The works' titles impassively indicate the vestige of memories buried under the

² Ibid., p. 110.

landscapes like finding hidden images. Furthermore, many almost-abstract paintings are presented in this exhibition, which demonstrates the tendency of active landscapes. (*Something Round in the Grass*, 2019) *Alone in the Middle of the Night* (2019) reveals dynamicity – nearly that of informalism – and evokes a break from the forest where the eyes cannot reach. As Jang's tendency towards abstraction has grown stronger, it is a fact that his aesthetic attitude is more prominent than before. Nonetheless, it is esteemed that the prospect of his art is still taking place within the field of social discourse. Signs indicative of this claim can be found in Jang's conversation with Choong-Hyun Roh (b. 1970).³ In this conversation, Roh asks about painting's historical and political nature. Jang mentions his experience of realizing the fact that none of the military facilities nor anything related to the scars of the South and North Korean relations were photographed in Baeyeongdo Island. He explains that he wanted to tactually build up the ordinary landscapes of the place he set his mind to paint, rather than its symbolic meaning. However, landscape is already an idea generated from a dialectic relationship with modern civilization for him. Thus, landscape (anti-landscape) is no different than a silent witness that observed time, even before language. Although this premise does not signify painting's political nature, it is definitely something to refer to.

Something radiant,
something faintly bright,
something in the shade.⁴

The sentence above is from *Greek Lessons* (2011), a novel by Han Kang (b. 1970). The sentence comes from a scene where the character in the novel looks up in the ceiling, not wearing glasses, reminiscing on the unchangeable reality, and already vanished memories of the past. The sentence is like an explanation of today's art. *Greek Lessons* is a novel close to prose poetry that depicts the endless thoughts of things that have passed their pinnacle and socially useless beings. From knowledge to questioning, the history of art reached its current point by its solid borderline fading away like corroding fingerprints and pushing towards the outside of the consciousness. Painting has always been linked to idea. The world of painting is open towards the future, and the objects in the picture screen had distinct contours. Thus, the nearsighted gaze was not allowed. Early abstract paintings ultimately continued to another idea. However, as an out-of-focus image rather emphasizes the uncertainty of time, an actual gaze was able to appear. Looking at the blurry world without wearing a pair of glasses, the world instantly turns semi-abstract. This kind of nearsighted gaze seeks the essence of the object rather than distinguishing it. Instead of representing the object, Jang expresses its indication, mood, and sentiment. As the specifics are omitted, the lucidity of color, brushstrokes, approximate form and texture becomes more prominent. The most distinguishable component is the color in a coarse yet sensitive state. In *Windy Place* (2019), the grey multi-layered whim covering the

³ Conversation with the artist and Choong-Hyun Roh, HITE Collection (Seoul), February, 2015.

⁴ Han, Kang. *Greek Lessons*. (Paju, Korea: Munhakdongne Publishing Group, 2011), p. 115.

picture screen with a tree in the center sways harshly. The artist's process of forming relations by traversing across nature is a period of obtaining various perceptual experiences from visual landscapes. The process of painting is recovering the memories from that experience. Memories are not individual scenes, but comprised of movements of mental and physical commune and activate while the landscape unfolds. I believe I can conclude my theoretical interpretations of Jang's works here. To conclude, the manifestation of the abstract in contemporary painting can be seen as a multiplex result, connected to the end of a world nowhere to move onto. Then, an infinite number of paths to interpret Jang's paintings through different perspectives are open.