

KONG SOOKJA ARTIST STATEMENT

< Beneath the Layers of Lacquer >

The group of artworks presented at this solo exhibition uses new materials: lacquer (*Ottchil*), mother of pearl and eggshell. The use of these materials is deeply rooted in Korean culture, yet reinterpreted as media for western art.

Lacquer, also known as *ottchil* in Korean, is a natural varnish that shines from beneath. Its mysterious luster reminds of a deep ocean that absorbs all thoughts of the world. Lacquer is extremely adhesive and protects underlying material from heat, moisture, corrosion and insects. This is why many historic antiques coated with lacquer are found intact after buried for centuries.

Lacquer is widely used in Korea for furniture and artifacts, usually with exuberant decorations. However, my works are mostly done within flat wood panel. Mastering the use of this familiar material was not an easy task. I had to understand the physical properties of lacquer and learn the traditional technique of applying it. Then I experimented with new methods, which was a painstaking process. On top of all the technical difficulties, frequent lacquer poisoning held me from production for days.

In the beginning, I used to realize the limitations of expression physically inherent in lacquer. However, after several variant attempts, I was convinced by the unlimited potential of this material; in the exhibition at Gwacheon Museum of Modern Art, I mixed the lacquer with color paint and applied on canvas. For the exhibition at the City Museum of Seoul, I cut out *Hangul* (Korean Alphabet) characters from mother-of-pearl, glued them on wood panel, and applied lacquer finish. Transforming initial ideas into finished products always involved trial and error. However, every finished work added confidence in me to overcome the material limitations and led me to try a more audacious experimentation.

In oil painting, I can instantaneously capture an inspiration with quick strokes and later polish it with time. For *ottchil* (lacquer) products, however, such flexibility is not allowed. A complete design has to be preceded, and once the production begins, each step has to be executed with caliber. Some procedures are highly repetitive and require great patience.

The two-dimensional flatness is emphasized with the use of monotone. Simplified expression, combined with the intrinsic depth of the material, produces surreal beauty. The pieces of my memory came together on the flat surface and formed a mosaic. Then they were solidified beneath the layers of lacquer.

Regardless of the medium, an artwork contains the creator's trajectory of life, and the world she has seen. We are influenced by other people and we sometimes encounter unexpected drama. These memories and events accumulate within the artist and emanate through different media. Art is a process of the originality taking form.

I have an unyielding passion that pushes myself to the unknown world. Such adventurous mind and tenacious perseverance unwittingly led me to where I am today. I express the utmost gratitude to those who helped me throughout.

Kong, Sookja