

Lee Jin-Young's Photography Installation work:
Stains and traces: hazy shadows of time and its fossilization

Kho Chung-Hwan, art critic

Roland Barthes says the essence of photography is death. Under all circumstances, photography can not capture reality – the moment of reality captured by a photograph immediately turns into the past. The photograph becomes proof and evidence of that reality just for a while. In photos there is no place for reality or for the present tense. It is not the present that is captured in the photo's own time, only the time of the past or the past tense exists. In this way the photograph seals, preserves and remembers reality in the past, and it may be a commemorative or archaeological medium, a museological or monumental medium. It may thus be the ontological medium that allows a meeting with the traces of existence – thus death. The photograph creates a desire for absence, and with this it may be a medium of sensibility that was invented to arouse and bring about nostalgia and melancholy. Barthes also separates every sign or symbol inside the photo as studium or punctum. A cultural sign is a studium and a personal sign is a punctum. A punctum is a sign that cannot revert to a cultural symbol, nor to a particular decisive meaning, and it is a sign with no emblem – Barthes also called this 'trauma'. It is a sign where despite its apparent stimulus, its cause cannot be known. Although Barthes uses punctum to label signs inside photos where the stimulus is unknown, the punctum may be generalized as unknown signs that a photo by itself unconsciously opens.

Lee Jin-Young's photography is not much different from this. Through her photograph, rather than existence itself, the traces of existence are brought out, as well as nostalgia and melancholy – the emotional heritage of romanticism (as one can commonly understand in the expression of 'emotion of the times', certain emotions can be the invention and relic of a past era). One photograph will make you fumble around to find the unknown sign that the image has unconsciously opened up, and using that sign as a guide, the initial state of the incomplete existence inside the photograph is abstractified. Likewise, Lee's photograph is closer to the evidence of existence and time, rather than to the evidence of incident and accident. It is not so much a witness of times and history; it is searching to dig into the grain of sensory and aesthetic existence.

In her photography Lee Jin-Young harkens back to an old technique – the wet collodion process. The glass is treated with photosensitizer solution and before this solution dries, the (long) exposure and development must be completed. In the history of photography, the wet collodion process where the method sensitively responds to light and can easily distort the image, comes before the dry process by which one can achieve a more stable image. The dry process comes as the intermediary stage before it proceeds to the method using film. So why is the artist, as a photographer, using an old technique that is obsolete? Hasn't this method expired? It is perhaps only the case in a scientific perspective. In terms of photography as a scientific achievement, the progress of obtaining and creating secure images more easily is most definitely an evolutive process. When this kind of method based on necessity and sufficiency is developed, the ongoing experiment

is only regarded as a step towards that final method or achievement. However, if you change this perspective and think about the numerous ongoing experiments, perhaps the failed attempts actually stimulate artistic imagination. The scientific outlook on photography and artistic perspective of photography is different. The scientifically failed photo can be rather, more interesting if one looks at it from the perspective of art. Perhaps it is because this is in line with the abnormal, the incomplete, the failures that art is concerned with. It connects with what has been overlooked or repressed by the inertia of the system and when it is brought out implicitly or unconsciously. This is the reason why the artist persists on using the wet glass negative photograph. Lee is fascinated with the accidental, the unstable and the incomplete – it is from here that the charming image one would never have realized in a normal photograph is discovered.

Investigating the special characteristics of Lee's images will give light on why and how they are so captivating. The term 'wet collodion' is a fluid and unstable one. Moreover, you have to maintain the state of wet collodion whilst developing the image in the darkroom the whole time. The unforeseen happenings, the incidents of chance that intermediate the process –it is from this process that a kind of image that is unheard of and that even the artist herself does not know or expect, is obtained. So to speak, it is from inside a single screen, a blurred image derived from long exposure, an image distorted by a fluid and unstable emulsion, from the dust and scratches, smears, fingerprints, air bubbles and other unforeseen things that happen by chance, that culminate into a full image. The glass plate's transparent thickness conclusively instils the unique aura of the photograph. It is very interesting that the glass plate itself as well as the enlarged print of the glass plate make up a transparent surface of a frame.

The way in which the subject of the work is held inside the transparent thickness, as if it is congealed or solidified, as if the traces of existence is in taxidermy and time is fossilized, gives a delicate feeling. The person, landscape, still-life are reconciled into one mere trace, as if it has been fished out from afar, or from time. It is as if it were rescued on the cusp of falling into oblivion and it feels like one is looking at the hazy shadow of existence. It is like seeing the trace of existence rather than existence, the afterimage left by reality rather than reality, and hearing what lingers after a sound rather than the sound itself. It is as if this trace, afterimage, what lingers, is granted its own skin and body. In other words, everything that is present in Lee's photos – people, landscape, still-life – are all of a sudden made into something not real, made into one trace; a hazy shadow. Rather than this being a deprivation of a sense of reality, it may be the act of bringing out another grain of existence, something immaterial and invisible, which reveals only through suggestion, above layers of sensation. In the artist's works, the ambiguous and multi-layered complexity of existence that reveals itself as chance and the inevitable, the visible and invisible, material and immaterial, the sensory and implied, the predictable and the unpredictable, reaches a full embodiment. It may be that time has obtained a body. To look at the artist's photographs is to look at the incarnation of time, time that transforms prosaic reality into unrealistic objects and objects that are yearned for (the emotion for antiques is not irrelevant), and it is to look at the alchemy of time which transmutes nostalgia and melancholy to one's sense.

The artist's most recent theme is 'In-between Landscape – Landscape in between'. Between one landscape and another is a different landscape. There is a landscape that comes before its definition, a landscape before its meaning. In that sense, there is a landscape of potentiality. We can understand the way the artist ignores the different subject matters and regards all of it together as a landscape, as her general understanding of the world. In other words, it is the merging of the world of 有形無形 (visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality), the sensual and conceptual world, the material and immaterial, and the external and internal landscape. The artist is concerned with what is in between consciousness and consciousness, between meaning and meaning: something that clearly exists but is merely caught by consciousness as hazy shadow. The artist is interested in its attributes and its textures. She is interested in what will not initially be turned into meanings, or what *will* refuse to become meanings. It only opens up itself through suggestive forms, the things that barely exist, things that sometimes give wounds (Barthes defines trauma as such). For this reason, perhaps, he is interested in where a landscape, a world or an existence opens up. Barthes claimed that punctum cannot be opened because it is something personal. It will be the same with the punctum that the artist opened. No one knows what the artist exactly saw from a scene, a world or an existence. No one knows what the artist was attracted to, often what Barthes's trauma is, or what Jacques Lacan's *jouissance* means. Such things that are sealed in the photo the artist would neither hand over nor could she give away what makes her works alive and enchanting. In other words, art offers itself to the unknown textures of existence, to the exploration of its qualities and so does Lee's photography. It seems that in this way, the artist's works illustrate a way to read punctum that is perhaps indecipherable.