

LEE JIN YOUNG

The Inevitable Image-Object that Transcends the Medium of Photography

by Hama

In terms of its technological aspect, the medium of photography attempts to transfer the world into a clear and distinct image code. Some explain that this course of ‘imagizing’ goes through a process of standardization, warning people of the violent inclinations of photography. Others anticipate what kind of effect and meaning photography will bring in the future. Walter Benjamin’s theory embraces both. He defines the technical reproduction such as photography and film as ‘a work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’ that characterizes the destruction of the ‘aura’ and the art of exhibiting. Photography without ‘aura’ reproduces even its original painting, but because of its reproducibility, the original form can, on the contrary, be given emphasis. At any rate, photography has been developed as a mechanism that can confine and ‘taxidermize’ the image. Nowadays, the camera seems like a sub-ordinary function within mobile devices.

The general public and amateur photographers enjoy taking photos of beautiful scenery in high definition. We do not want to remember our experience through our physical eyes, and as Susan Sontag said, “Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it”.¹ The axis of visual experience changed with the age of the camera in the past and now that has changed even further. The experience viewed through the photograph is a different world from what we originally experience with our own eyes. It is obvious that photography has changed our perceptive frame, so can we then rethink this change by means of the photograph? In order to take a glimpse of the possibility of reconsideration, I want to talk about Lee Jin Young, who relooks at the photograph and at the same time goes beyond its sphere. This writing does not have any intention of criticizing or affirming photography; I only intend to follow the path of reading Lee Jin Young’s ambrotypes.

Accidental elements and the inevitable result

Lee Jin Young shows ambrotype photography through her series of works in ‘Wet Corrosion’, ‘Historia’, ‘Inframince’, ‘Memory of the Breeze’ and ‘Sky Garden’. The medium has the potential to generate different visual results during the course of the collision between the manipulation of the medium and artistic intention. Photography is normally treated as a mechanical image through the eyes of the apparatus and many photographic works are busy quickly offering something in accordance with the artistic intention. Although earlier photographs tried to show realistic images through its optical operation that paintings could not offer, it consequently did not prove photography could actually be any more realistic than a painting. However, since then, the reproduction of images have become extremely easy with the development of photography technology, in which the medium the photo is captured on has moved from silver plates to photographic paper to data. The process of transferring the image became clearer and easier. Nonetheless, what is the reason for Lee Jin Young to be deliberately using the development method of photography from the past? What kind of meaning can we discover in that technique?

The ambrotype, a type of the wet collodion process, is the biggest element that defines Lee Jin Young’s photography. This developing process itself is not only different from the photographs we are used to, but also the form that appears from it brings many questions to

¹ Susan Sontag, “*Sajinnae gwanhayeo (On Photography)*”, translated by Lee Jae Won, Ee Hoo, 2005, p. 48.

mind. The ambrotype uses collodion solution and the image emerges on the glass plate. This solution dries up very quickly, so one has to keep the wet state in order to get the image desired. This wet state is not in the same trajectory of light as when the image was captured. During the course of the artist effortfully developing the image clearly on the glass plate, she found accidental elements that arose from the photograph. In the artist's work, through wet marks, white spots and tears, its raw state is revealed. When one first faces an ambiguous and faulty image, the unfamiliarity makes it interesting. The flaws that are laid on the photograph directly reveal the ambrotype working process. Those flaws not only clarify that the photograph is a fictional representation of reality, but also demystifies the working process. From her 'Retrace' series to the current works that use ambrotypes, Lee Jin Young has been consistently producing works that establish the perimeter of the accidental.

The accidental tends to be always involved in photographs, whether it is Lee Jin Young's or others'. Things do not always flow with the artist's intention, but owing to the development of photography technology, it is easy to cover up the accidental element. The preparation technique of taking a photo itself is also an act of excluding the accidental. But when Lee Jin Young takes a photograph there is no room for accidental elements to slip in. In terms of her work, the accidental is reflected in the use of the scanner as her medium in 'Retrace', and it flows into the developing process of the ambrotypes.

In the developing process of the ambrotype, the flaws are vividly reproduced together with the original image on the glass plate. One might find it strange to know that ambrotypes were actually created in the development of photography to achieve better reproduction and clarity. With the images that Lee Jin Young unexpectedly gains and the images that she selectively shows afterwards, she destroys that stage in the development of photography in the past and goes the opposite direction. She does not create photography for the sake of clarity and mass reproduction (this might be contradictory in the context of some photographs in her catalogue, press release and enlarged photographs but I will speak of them later). The artist brings the past medium over to the contemporary and reverts the purpose of the advancement of photography, baring what today's digital photograph tries to conceal.

Vilem Flusser once said, "In the program of photography, although the apparatus operates the photographer's intention, the photograph should only intend for what the apparatus itself can carry out."² Lee Jin Young's photographs attempt to reflect her artistic intention, but as there are accidental elements involved, she has no choice but to just select the images that emerge from the developing process. The selection of the object being photographed can be done freely, but the image of the object cannot be attained in the way she planned for. Ultimately, the artist controls the image that she wants to bring out, as much as she can. In the words of Susan Sontag, "The photograph reveals itself only when the cooperation between the photograph and the photographed becomes loose."³ When Lee Jin Young's images become "loose" they reveal their **inevitable appearance**. Even at the moment of revealing itself the image is not the one intended. The accidental becomes inevitable when it is developed on the glass plate. When the accidental element appears as an inevitable result, it shows a different world from what the artist tried to visually capture. Lee Jin Young talks about the accidental element that is involved in her work, "In spite of the analogue development and its

² Vilem Flusser, "*Sajinnae cheorakeul wehayeo* (Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie)", translated by Yoon Jong Seok, Communication Books, 1999, p. 42.

³ Susan Sontag, "*Sajinnae gwanhayeo* (On Photography)", translated by Lee Jae Won, Ee Hoo, 2005, p. 90.

troublesome technological restriction of long exposure and development, the subtle and delicate marks and dust made from the accidental and inevitable are all major elements of my work and the foundation of my creative facture.”⁴

Beyond the two-dimensional image, toward the object of experience

Lee Jin Young’s glass plates and enlarged photographs have a secret alliance. The glass plate gives an inevitable image created by a concentration of accidental elements, whereas the enlarged photographs have the power to reproduce and swallow everything. When redeveloping the ambrotype, the accidental is not involved. Only the inevitable image is constantly reproduced. Thus, we can learn how violently contemporary photographers collect images by forcefully extorting it (including filmmakers). One can see the power of the photograph to reproduce itself with the same medium through the relationship between the glass plate and Lee Jin Young’s reproduced photographs. The original plate and reproduced photograph complements each other.

The glass plate is transparent and visually imperfect. Due to the fact that the glass looks different moment from moment depending on the light, one has to really focus when looking at it. On the other hand, the reproduced photographs, whether they are developed on paper or transparent film paper, show a full and complete image. The reproduced photograph fills up the visibility that is absent in the glass plate, though the transparency of the glass plate is lost instead. When you take a photo there is film or data left. Then, the film can be developed or turned into data. Data can be transferred but the way the accidental elements are inevitably condensed together during the development on the glass plates cannot be reproduced.

If the enlarged photographs are witnesses of reproducibility, the glass plates cannot be simply interpreted as a photographic two-dimension. On the contrary, the glass plates have a depth that sets it apart from plain paper, and allows one to treat it as an object. Thus, the artist can either insert acrylic plates in between or put two or six glass plates on top of each other. Therefore, these glass plates are not just a result of the development of photography but it also becomes the object, and can be used like a montage in which one can select and edit its visual elements. One can change the order of the glass plates and when they are inserted the plates allow for the image to be flexible to change. When the image is changeable it becomes a kind of ‘code’. Through the glass plate the artist obtains the object and at the same time she fills the empty glass plate with an enlarged image: this is the confirmed image. The result of the same trajectory of light functions differently.

Ambiguous images, different from clear and distinct images, are easily treated as a kind of magic due to its attributes of being abstract. Moreover, Lee Jin Young’s images are prone to the threat of mystification because of its exterior projection. The ambrotype works differ from the normal characteristic of photographs that causes the oblivion of the ‘production-subject’, the photographer. Instead, the ambrotypes remind the viewer of the operation of the ‘production-subject’. Lee Jin Young’s photographs are not meant to be decoded. They merely verify there was an individual there. The artist wants to show something that is there, whilst departing from the intention of earlier photography to show clearer and more accurate images. She makes a human’s visual experience that is endlessly ambiguous into an image. Lee Jin Young is not trying to clearly or distinctly offer an experience; she just reveals accidental elements that become attached to the image when the surface gets scratched. Lee Jin Young

⁴ Artist Note, “Historia” solo exhibition catalogue, Kundstoc Gallery, 2012.

revives indefinite experiences that emerge from her memory and evokes a different experience for the viewers.

In her show 'Memory of the Breeze' in 2015, she collaborated with Kim Jun to create a sound installation that expands her revival of experience from something visual to a synesthetic realm with the added auditory element. In that work she inserts six glass plates between many acrylic plates; an attempt to condense the senses that she felt in Mongolia. The collected sounds and the images of the glass plates do not act as real or clear proof of Mongolia, they rather revive a similar experience that has been left in her memory as fully as possible. I stated earlier that the artist selects and controls what images she shows: the similar experience that comes again from the memory of the actual experience has to be selected. The photograph transfers the individual's experience into the public object, yet Lee Jin Young's work continuously remains private. The viewer reinterprets them rather than accepting the artist's perceived experience.

Lee Jin Young raises a question on the direction of the development of photography and simultaneously focuses on the process of photographing. Therefore, the key factor is how one can invert the past production method and realize it in accordance to the contemporary world. She reuses the past method that was easily forgotten somewhere in the middle of the history of photography. Whilst she reuses this method, she tries to show how the medium can be translated contemporaneously. If the past method is differently developed in the present, that moment gives the contemporary mainstream method a chance to reflect on itself. At the same time, she selectively involves accidental elements in her method with watermarks, dirt, or fingerprints embedded in her work. This means that whatever she has experienced on the basis of senses rather than on the basis of information in the world is being preserved in the photograph. The glass plate also functions as the object and the enlarged photographs as verification, and these transcend the two-dimensional condition of the medium of photography. Lee Jin Young's works transform the developing process and its visual result. She is able to produce more image-objects and her works not only rethink but also transcend the medium of photography.