

Jiyoon Lee, Towards Hybrid Sculptures- Gwon Osang, 2008

I first encountered Gwon Osang's works when I glanced through his Artist's book, entitled *Deodorant* that came to me by post in 2000. I was surprised and pleasantly shocked by the very personal and independent thought-process and work shown in the book. His drawings in the book showed an almost obsessive interest in and focus on the subject matter in hand, visiting and re-visiting the idea over and over again. His notes, full of frank expressions of his emotions and feelings, did not, as the title of the book suggests, remove the human scent of his works, but rather expressed and showed very human aspects of the artist.

Gwon Osang was born in Seoul 1974, where he was raised and educated and now works. In contrast many artists of his generation who left Korea in the 1990s to study in France, Germany, the UK or the USA, he remained in Korea. He graduated from Hong-Ik University, and unlike many of his colleague who ventured their sights to the global scene, he instead art and its visual language focusing on his sincere, almost obsessive interest in sculpture, and started develop his works with a keen sense that was tuned to the sensibilities of his contemporary generation. It was during the early part of his career that he first developed his *Deodorant Type*, which can basically be described as sculpture formed of tens, if not hundreds of individual photographs.

The idea of using many photographs to create a composite whole was not new. One such practitioner was David Hockney, whose joiners were created by putting together large numbers of individual Polaroid photographs to create a larger composite whole. This would, according to the artist, better emulate human vision, unlike a single wide-angle photograph which would show a distorted version of what would be apparent to the human eye. Initially formed in a grid pattern, they increasingly became more haphazard montage of photographs taken from different angles. In this sense many say that his joiners have some affinity with Cubism. However, what separates past practitioners from Gwon Osang dimensional in nature and thus were viewed as photographic works, Gwon Osang's *Deodorant types* are unashamedly three-dimensional in nature.

Gwon took hundreds of photographs of a singular subject matter from various viewpoints and by weaving them together, created sculptures that were reminiscent of but strangely different from the original subject. At a time when photography carried art world, these early works re-created a subject matter according to the artist's imagination using realistic representations of the subject, resulting in sculptures that were a hybrid between photography and sculpture.

In one of his earlier works, he took a photograph of a landscape through a window then, cutting an area within the window of the photograph, crumpled it and re-filled the space within the original photograph with the "changed" landscape. It is almost as if, following the statement by Rosalind Krauss that post-modern sculpture lies in the space between landscape and architecture, Gwon approached landscape via the photograph, deconstructed the architectural-window and created a "non-flat" photograph extending the definition of what a sculpture can be. If that is in the case, then he could use the photograph, which recreates reality in a limited fashion, to choose many types of landscape and in these landscapes humans, animals, cars, or other ordinary objects can be chosen as subject matter, and these subject matters can be re-created, being de-odorized of the subject matter's original functionalities and values.

The result of this process was that forms were changed by the whims and thoughts of the artist e.g. a man with two livers and two heads, a human form in an impossibly contorted position. Also as the chosen subject matters are from our everyday surroundings, each work not only exists on an individual basis, but also in close relationship with each other. This relational narrative was easily seen in his first solo exhibition at Maronie, Seoul- a man who seems to have a nosebleed a woman dressed as a doctor with her back towards the viewer, a dog nearby, and a caravan... It was easy to become overwhelmed with the craftsmanship and skill involved in creating these works, but what was more important is that each work, through the photographic media, represented the contemporary period and reality, and presented the contemporary period reality and that these change and deformation also brought to flight the artistic extension and contextual understand of his works.

His interest and research into sculptural form continued and he introduced a completely different class of photographic sculpture which he called *The Flat* and which can be defined as 'flat sculpture'. Made with C-prints, the artist does not define this work as photographic work. If his *Deodorant* works came from his desire to create sculptures that were as light as possible, maybe this work came from his desire to create the 'flattest' sculpture possible. The artist initially took the cutting of various clocks, lipsticks and rings of different sizes from fashion magazines and laid them out on the studio floor, each item standing vertically upwards. This laying down of cuttings requires craftsmanship and accurate calculation, as the final work is the large-scale photograph of this installation; each item in the photograph following the law of perspective. Thus, although the final work is all photograph, Gwon cites a certain work by Gilbert & George as a precursor and an example to support his calling it sculpture. The work in question is a large painting of the artist holding hands in an English garden. The work was described as a sculpture consisting of paint placed on top of a wooden canvas.

This approach, which involves a re-creation of reality using photographs, is consistent with his previous works. These large-scale works, although on first-viewing they look like photographs made using a CAD tool, on closer examination one can sometimes see the props behind the photographs, as well as shadows, resulting in the feeling of space and an awareness of the studio setup.

One of the interesting aspects of Gwon's artistic practice is his continuous insistence that he is a sculptor, not a photographer. Some have said that his *Deodorant Types* were a product of further development of photo-collage technique and hence should be seen as an extension of the photographic medium, whilst his *Flats* are photographs simply because they are photographs. This means that Gwon should be considered as a photographer. However, Gwon has emphasized, both in his writings and interviews, that he is first and foremost a sculptor. According to a recent interview, some of his fellow artists commented that this insistence could be seen as a performance of trying to be a sculptor. If this is the case then one can say that he has added an implicit element of performance into his artistic practice.

In his solo exhibition in 2006 at Arario Gallery, he presented a work which was of a completely different form than before. Without relying on photographs, he created a life-size bronze sculpture of a Lamborghini. Dubbing this type of his work as *The Sculpture*, the smooth surface of the sculpture was further worked by hand and glazed, and then placed on a large marble stand. In a period when it is difficult to find the historical meaning and function of monumental sculpture, and when the fundamental question of the existence of art is questioned, it is as if Gwon has exposed the underbelly of the materialistic and spiritually bankrupt reality of contemporary society.

Gwon walks the fine line between different mediums, and continues to create what can only be termed new genres of sculpture. He has expanded the scope and understanding of what a sculpture can be and I believe will continue to do so. It will be interesting to see how his work develops in the coming years.

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Independent Curator, 2008