

Hye-sook Yoo, Repetitions & Differences

Eunlog Sim (Art Critic and Curator)

At present, despite a deluge of myriad unique art, there are very few cases of motifs or particular techniques that have become indefatigably linked to an individual artist; rare examples being Daniel Buren's stripes, Lee Ufan's dots and César's compacted cars. There are, of course, innumerable examples in art of stripes and dots, but they seldom become so intimately associated with an artist's distinctive style. Hair is also a common element in art, being that every person has at least some hair, but it has nonetheless become Hye-sook Yoo's trademark, and she is often referred to as the 'Hair Artist'. However, despite the renown of César's crushed cars, his early welded sculptures and later expansion period are equally as important as his compressions. Indeed, one must be familiar with all these stages in order to achieve a proper and unbiased understanding of César's art. Likewise, in Yoo's case, her earlier and later works, as well as her hair period, are all important. Thus, we must explore the overall progression of her art if we hope to comprehend it fully.

The End of the Sublime and then...?



[1-1] (left)[1-2 (center)][1-3 (right)]

[1-1] 1992, acryl on canvas, 130x130cm

[1-2] 1991, acryl on paper mounted on canvas, 114x88cm

[1-3] 1991, mixed media on canvas, 200x100cm

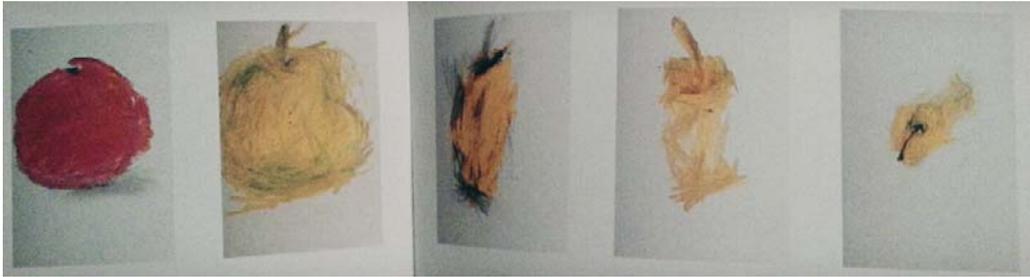
In artwork [1-1 (left)], multi-layered colored planes, like semi-polygons, overlap each other. The individual colors have complementary and coexistent relationships. Each color retains its own character, in spite of spreading over and permeating throughout the others. They are

independent, yet would disappear in the absence of the others. The layers of color begin with the dark blue tone and overlap, one by one, until the red. As a result, we feel the depth of darkness, perceived in the distance beyond the red and white. This sense of depth, achieved without perspective, is heightened in [1-2 (center)] and [1-3 (right)]. Darkness of unknown measure oozes from beyond the yellow tone which initially dominates the pictures. The works seduce the viewer with bright colors and immerse them into their multi-layered depths, and are reminiscent of the multiforms of Mark Rothko. The modern notion of the sublime in Rothko's art is not that explored by Kant, a prevailing Western sense of loftiness or grandeur, but the sublime of the dynamic of deepening coexistent relationships. Moreover, this limitless depth is achieved via two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional expression. One is able to glimpse the same kind of depth in Yoo's work. As Rothko emphasized the importance of silence and meditation, saying, "Words would only paralyze the viewer's mind and imagination", likewise Yoo's artworks are untitled, without any words or language, and are thus remindful of Rothko's later works.

The Other Side of Daily Life

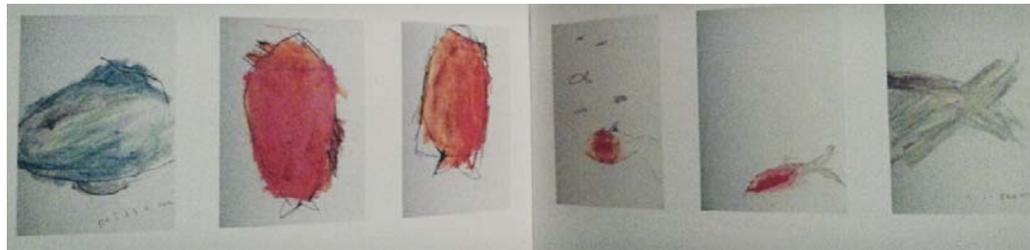
The infinite depth beyond the black tone and the infinite sublimity beyond the red tone consumed Mark Rothko. Once fallen, there was no way back for him, but where Rothko ended Hye-sook Yoo was just beginning. There are very few artists able to escape from what could be called the bottomless abyss of the sublime, but Yoo's life and her artistic instincts gave her fingers new movement. While the works introduced above were created as if she observed from afar, somewhat removed from the canvas, now the artist began to depict everyday objects in a more sensuous, tactile way, seemingly closer, working with the fingertips rather than broad strokes of the arms. The themes become figurative and palatable, which might be considered, in a sense, opposite to her previous artistic concerns. She draws ordinary peanuts, fruit, fish, croissant and other frequently observed everyday subjects. Sometimes, she draws in the style of realism, using minute detail, so that a peanut shell is instantly recognizable at a glance, but sometimes she might describe a clumsy oval shape which, without identifying features or helpful titles, could just as easily be a potato or kiwi. Whereas Yoo previously searched for depth through use of layers of color, now the artist wished to explore the depth of seemingly mundane objects, rather than lingering only

upon the surfaces of the everyday. She took diverse approaches towards achieving depth. For instance, in the case of *Apple* ([2 -1 Series]), she is not content just to depict the outward appearance of the fruit, but rather studies the inner apple, eating it up bite by bite, until at last only the core of the apple remains.



[2-1 Series]

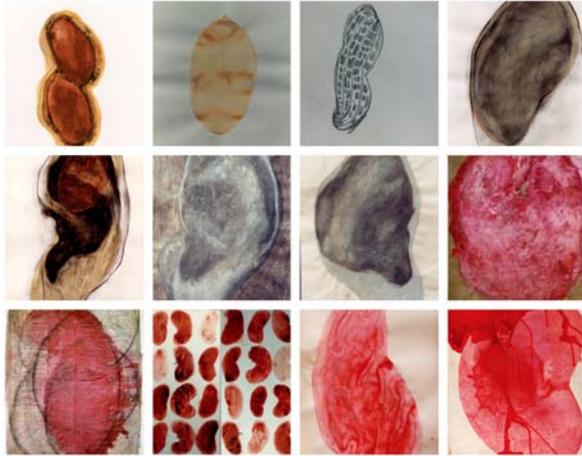
[2-1] Apple, oil pastel, pencil on paper 1991, 21x14cm (each)



[2-2 Series]

[2-2] Poisson, oil pastel, pencil on paper 1991, 21x14cm (each)

In *Poisson*, a series of six paintings [2-2 Series], the front part of a blue fish is drawn in the first painting and the word "poisson" (fish) is written at the bottom of the canvas. From the second to the fifth paintings, the fish appears red, and recedes gradually, as if replicating the arduous journey of an actual fish. In the last painting, there is the tail of a fish which is similar in color and size to the fish in the first painting, so as to appear to be the same fish. In the wording on the canvas, only the last syllable "sson" remains. The leftover letters, "son" (sound), seem to signify aurally the journey of the fish. The artist's search for depth would only intensify as her attention shifted to peanuts and beans.



[Reading Things \[2-3\] Untitled 1996 -1998 acryl, aquarelle, pencil, and mixed media on paper or fabric \(section\)](#)

In *Reading Things* [2-3], created over several years from 1996, the artist depicts a stream of consciousness inspired by the appearance of peanuts, beans, and others. Sometimes she portrays a peanut shell, or the shelled nuts inside still wrapped in an inner layer of red skin; sometimes the naked peanuts or beans themselves. Just as the shapes of ears emerge stealthily from Giuseppe Penone's stacked potatoes, followed by eyes, noses and lips, likewise the forms of an ear, fetus, heart, or even hair appear in Yoo's beans. With disregard for biological rules, her art morphs from plant and vegetable to flesh and bodily organs, and vice versa. We follow the procession of images with no obvious connection to one another, other than the stream of sensuous shapes and colors.

'Hair' and its Variations



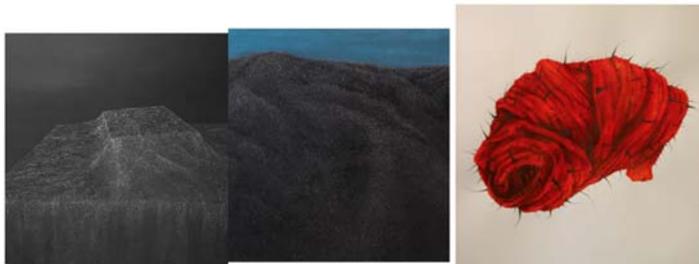
[\[3-1 \(left\)\]](#) [\[3-2 \(center\)\]](#) [\[3-3 \(right\)\]](#)

[3-1] Untitled, 2001, mixed media on canvas, 190x60cm (section)

[3-2] Untitled, 2017, acrylic, pencil on canvas, 200x165cm

[3-3] Untitled, 2005, mixed media on canvas, 80x80cm

Hair has significant meaning mythically and traditionally in both East and West, due to its location on the highest part of the body; the head. In Buddhism, one takes the tonsure and severs familial relations so as to devote oneself to religion. By shaving the head, connections with the everyday world are cut. In Catholicism, the covering of nuns and other women's hair when attending mass may have derived from similar intentions. The source of Samson's power was his hair, and each of Medusa's hairs possessed the strength and energy of a snake. Implying such worldly connections, relationships, and energies, Hye-sook Yoo manifests hair with all of her strength, as if each hair were alive. Indeed, this intense vitality of the hair seems somehow to exist of itself, regardless of the host. The hair, ([3-1 (left)], [3-2 (center)], [3-3 (right)]), though enlarged realistically, appears suddenly unfamiliar, as might one's own image when taking a first selfie. The canvas is bisected vertically by a parting, [3-1 (left)], a section of a human head but at the same time evocative of a landscape. If one encounters the work [3-2 (center)] without any prior knowledge, one might perceive a delicate abstraction rather than detailed figurative art. The painting [3-3 (right)] does not look like hair, but rather recalls a landscape of dense vegetation in a field, moving with the wind. The artist elicits strangeness from something familiar, creating an identity crisis. *Hair* freely traverses the borders between living plant, animal, inanimate object, and even landscape, and furthermore between figurative and abstract art. This lack of any sense of boundaries is also evident in the *Bean* series; prompting a sense of déjà-vu (Le déjà-vu/ repetitions with differences).



[3-4 (left)] [3-5 (center)] [3-6 (right)]

[3-4] Untitled, 2015, acrylic, graphite on hanji (Korean paper) mounted on canvas, 130x162cm

[3-5] Untitled, 2011, acrylic, graphite on canvas, 100x100cm

[3-6] Untitled, 2008, mixed media on paper, 76x56cm (section)



[3-7 (left)] [3-8 (center)] [3-9 (right)]

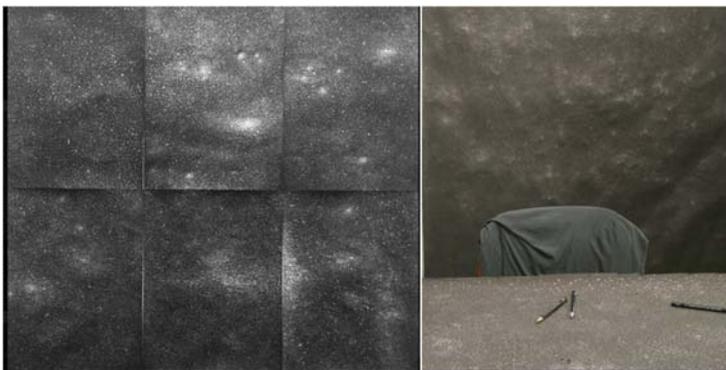
[3-7] Untitled, 2009, acrylic, pencil on paper, 38x28cm

[3-8] Untitled, 2011, acrylic, pencil on paper, 45x35cm

[3-9] Untitled, 2011, acrylic, pencil on canvas, 80x60cm

Hair begins to play in diverse variations; repetitions but with differences. Hair is transposed from its natural place upon the head so that it becomes a hirsute veil when draped over objects ([3-4 (left)]). If expanded to fill the whole canvas or spread out on the ground, it becomes a field or a hill covered with vegetation ([3-5 (center)]). When seen up close, it conjures images of animal fur surrounding the moving muscles of a wild beast. When worn, it becomes a fur coat ([3-7 (left)], [3-8 (center)], [3-9 (right)]). The fur garment contains the memory of its host. The coat that has just been taken off, having enveloped its host just a moment ago, still retains the memory of that body ([3-7 (left)]). Gradually, it loses those memories, returning to what it was; the original fur garment. At a time when the artist was largely utilizing dark hues in her work, the sudden red of [3-6 (right)] is shocking. This is an expression of the artist's self-awareness, a reminder that she has not forgotten about color. In fact, we have already experienced the same intense red in artwork [2-3 *Reading Things*], depicting the somewhat ambiguous beans, heart or croissant. The hair in painting [3-6 (right)] is as spiky, strong and thick as thorns. On the other hand, it could just as readily be perceived as possessing a much softer quality, so that it might begin to resemble waves of water or light, as if detailing the varying flows of sense and energy through the figurative image of hair.

Daily Life, The Invaluable Obstacle



[4-1 (left) series of 6] [4-2 (right)]

[4-1] Untitled 2009, pencil on paper, 40x30cm(x6)

[4-2] Untitled, 2013, Fine art pigment print on Hahnemuhle

What crosses one's mind when one thinks of Hye-sook Yoo is, of course, "hair", but although it is often equally hard for an artist to progress to their next stage as it is for them to establish a trademark style, Yoo chose to move from the microcosm of hair to the macrocosm of constellations. Her use of the color black in *Constellation* [4-1 (left)], a series of 6 images using graphite, illustrates how successfully it is possible to create orbs and pinpoints of light like stars. Fascinatingly, the sense of Yoo's earlier works, 'Sublime', and the themes of her later period, 'Daily Life', are unexpectedly both present here, as can be seen in [4-2 (right)]. The constellations of the universe occupy the top half of the image, and the everyday objects (the ongoing painting, a desk, a chair, pencils, and so on) are depicted in parallel at the bottom. The artist is simply displaying the universe and the everyday alongside one another, rather than attempting any forced harmony or awkward amalgamation. The artist used a camera to capture one of her completed works simultaneously next to a work in progress, then utilized pigment printing to complete the image. In this way, the 'sublime' space meets the 'everyday' space, without explanation or intervention, resulting in a new and uncharted third space.

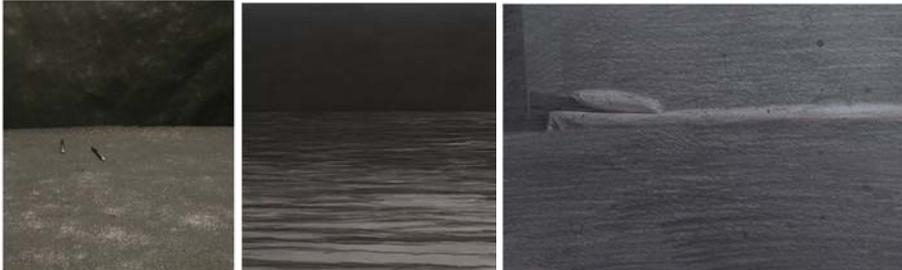


[4-3 (left)] [4-4 (right)]

[4-3] Untitled, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 30x30cm

[4-4] Untitled, 2016, mixed media on canvas, 114x146cm

Light is represented through dots in *Constellation* [4-1 (left) series of 6], yet through fine and thicker lines in the *Pool* series [4-3 (left)] and [4-4 (right)]. Perhaps the thin filaments of hair have become waves. As Pierre Soulages brings out strong light over black pigments using thick bands (*Outre Noir* by Pierre Soulages), Yoo creates a gentle light flowing over dark tones using delicate lines.



[4-5 (left)] [4-6 (center)] [4-7 (right)]

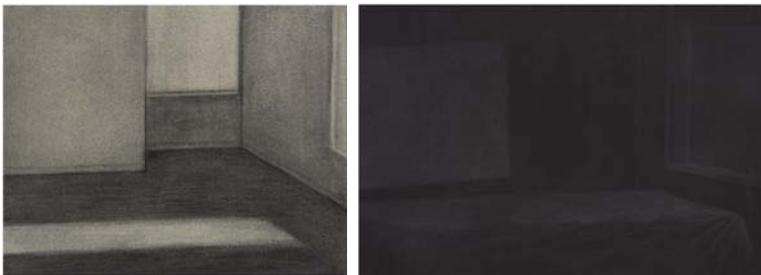
[4-5] Untitled, 2013, Fine art pigment print on Hahnemuhle

[4-6] Untitled, 2016, acrylic, charcoal on canvas, 100x200cm

[4-7] Untitled, 2016, graphite, charcoal on print, 13x18cm

One might not immediately recognize what one is seeing when viewing [4-7 (right)]. It appears that a long object divides the painting into two parts or that the object is stuck between two already divided spaces. The artist's explanation that her recent works were inspired by *Morning Sun* (1952) by Edward Hopper renders these objects more easily identifiable as a bed and pillow viewed from the side. We can see Hopper's contemporary and unusual spatial influence, but the structure is nonetheless reminiscent of *Constellation* [4-5 (left)] or *Pool* [4-6 (center)]. Like *Untitled* by Mark Rothko (Black on Gray), 1969/70, Acrylic on canvas, 203.3 x 175.5 cm), in which there is evident tension between the brushed

gray section and the black section of unfathomable depth, generating an irresistible attraction, the three works [4-5 (left)], [4-6 (center)] and [4-7 (right)], from different time periods, are also deeply absorbing for similar reasons. Rothko's boundless depth is reflected geometrically in Yoo's works of the background of everyday space. Like the chair covered with a hanging garment positioned on the border that divides the picture in [4-2], there is a bed and a pillow in [4-7 (right)]. The bed recalls the "canoe" in the *100 Years Ago* series (2001) by Peter Doig. Yoo distinguishes between finite and infinite space with a rather more mundane and ordinary bed. Without the 'chair', 'pencils', 'bed' and so forth, we would lack the sense of "unfamiliarity" which the artist wishes to stimulate, and would fall into the play of the painting, moving from finite to infinite and vice versa. Thus, these everyday objects are not milestones guiding the way to infinity or abstraction, but are in fact deliberate hindrances intended to prevent our minds from easily wandering.



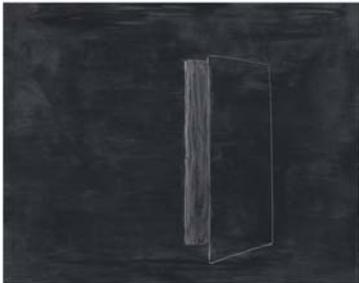
[4-8 (left)] [4-9 (right)]

[4-8] Untitled, 2017, charcoal on canvas, 51x60cm

[4-9] Untitled, 2017, acrylic, pencil on canvas, 140x200cm

Light is rendered through points (*Constellation* [4-1 (left) series of 6]), lines (*Hair*, *Pool* etc.), and now planes ([4-8 (left)], [4-9 (right)]). In [4-5], [4-6] and [4-7], light seems to fill the air, playing in space, like Impressionism, even though the three works were produced during different periods. But, is it due to Hopper's influence that the light pauses for a moment, or else it seems so quiet that even the light is still in [4-8 (left)]? Since the discovery of perspective, paintings such as this, in which the light is motionless, can baffle modern viewers. Even in Piet Mondrian's paintings, with extraordinary "balance and proportion", there is some sense of movement, albeit slow, like the unhurried steps of Plato strolling with his students. In [4-8 (left)] and [4-9 (right)], the light is not reflected from outside, as in

Hopper's painting, but seems to possess its own luminescence. In *Hopper* by Mark Strand, the poet describes how the light that Hopper portrays does not seem to fill the air, but rather stick to walls or objects. Even though Hopper's paintings have an obvious light source (ex. light coming through the window), the relationship between planes of light and shade upon the walls, floor or ceiling is constant.



[4-10]

[4-10] Untitled, 2017, oil pastel on canvas, 51x60cm

In Yoo's recent work [4-10], is the half-opened 'door' the source of the light? The door might be another hindrance or warning against heading towards another world. The image recalls another of the artist's works [1-3], painted 30 years ago, in which depth, in defiance of logic, oozes to the surface, and space is formed as the geometric shapes loom, formed in lines that seem like they might disappear at any moment. Those lines, drawn loosely in the middle of the canvas and then dwindling away, appear to have been completed 30 years later in [4-10]. The artist, in the bright, yellow-toned world of [1-3], opened an unfinished rectangle in the middle of the canvas and passed through into an area of bright yellow, red, and green beyond. Here, she prepared everyday foods (peanuts, apples, croissants, etc.), neatened her 'hair', played with 'variations of hair', before creating her own unique and uncharted spaces. Known as the 'Hair Artist', the work of Hye-sook Yoo merits as much care and attention as one would require if counting all the hairs on a head, not only in regards to her motifs, but also her techniques and working processes. Most of her work thus far, including that which does not relate to hair, involves time spent in infinite repetition (as innumerable as

hair), patience, and physical labor. This repetition is not habitual and without variation, but is more akin to the repetition of Gilles Deleuze, returning to something only in a way which is always somehow different. And, now... she leads us towards another door [4-10].