

In Shinra the Sun Shines at Midnight

Gianluca Ranzi

"When it leaves, the endless sky departs; when it comes, the whole earth arrives".

Eihei Dogen, XI Century

"Dark things tend towards brightness"

Eugenio Montale

There is an old saying that dates back to time immemorial and that has spread along the remotest roads of the East, from India to China and all the way to Japan: "In Shinra the Sun Shines at Midnight". The Korean kingdom of Shinra has become symbol of unspeakable remoteness, a mythical interregnum where polarities, opposites and differences are reconciled in a single vision capable of embracing extremes, while maintaining them in their respective spheres of influence. The paradox is the *great vehicle* of the Eastern spirit; in this vision yin and yang pursue one another and are united while remaining separated. Monad and dyad coincide, at the same time remaining separate, both in the cultural tradition and in the natural world: midnight and midday, darkness and light, obscurity and splendour, moon and sun, sleep and wakefulness, passivity and activity; to quote Nietzsche, Dionysian and Apollonian. In the Korean world of Shinra the paradox of the *coincidentia oppositorum* comes true, in an attempt to achieve an equilibrium, a recomposition of extremes, in a search for the secret of the intermediate stage between opposites. The superiority of the category of the "in-between" is asserted both as model of conduct and as moment of aesthetic enjoyment; the mystery of opposites that run towards or against one another, what Jung called "enantiodroma", is tackled and solved.

In this vision of intermediate stages, where Aristotelian logic vacillates and if a foothold is to be found for Western thought, it may perhaps be found in certain images of Heidegger - to render Eastern aesthetics it has indeed been necessary to coin new words independent of the logic language of Greek thought - Kim Minjung has sought and found, as a Korean, her own personal kingdom of Shinra. In fact, the point of the question expressed by Kim's paintings lies in a kind of aesthetic that does not centre on sensibility, as in the Western tradition, but on the tension of a stitch uniting the intelligible and the sensible, and thus, marvel of the paradox, on neither. Let us therefore abandon our Euclidean rule, the principle of non-contradiction and sufficient reason, the self-referentiality of art, the analysis of the form, iconology and colour theory. To enter Shinra and enjoy the illumination of Kim's works, the interpretation cannot be separated from life, from the subtle charm of contemplation and the eternally provisory. Aesthetics is the mother of ethics.

This is the approach behind the genesis of Kim's works: the sensorial stimulus exercises an initial, indispensable attraction on her, but it must then fade to enable her to immerse herself in everything, to return to a state of quiet, to once again focus on the inevitability of natural developments. Let us take a look at the facts: in late 1997 the first cycle of *Mountains* see the light of day; we may also say that they emerge from indistinctness, with their intangible, vague, misty series of atmospheric passages from pearl gray to absolute black. The genesis of that first series is to be found in distinctive moments and places where the artist has found inspiration: a walk at sunset, a rock in the ocean, a contemplation of waves. To a Western artist it would be sufficient to remember a state of mind that vibrates in consonance with nature and retransmits it as evocation,

memory, regret, emotional shade. An Eastern artist, on the contrary, replaces this consonance – that always ends up with vindicating a decisive role for the I of the perceiving subject – with *resonance*, where the person experiencing the sensation is a mere resonance box, of that very initial sensorial impulse, which is refracted and related to the infinity of everything. To Kim, the particular image that has set the process in motion – a ruffled sea, waves, a shoreline – therefore loses its finiteness and is lost in its infiniteness, and is generalized through its amplification: the only visual datum is considered limiting and the movement of the sea becomes pure sound that vibrates, returns and turns into successive, consequent, superimposed sound waves. In this case it is no longer sentiments and sensations that act as stimuli; on the contrary, they represent a kind of obstacle that prevents us from understanding the whole picture, and that must be overcome if we are to be able to once more immerse oneself in that state of nature, fusional and amniotic that binds us to everything around us.

Kim Minjung, a Korean transplanted in the West, acts as artist cum bridge, making the poetic extremes of the two worlds resound: on the one side the school of *Yugen*, on the other certain mature results of European Symbolism. *Yugen*, a Japanese word that expresses the profound mysteriousness of things, stretched between the concrete and real and the unutterable, inspires verses by Teika as: “I look beyond: there are neither buds nor maple leaves”, but it is above all when Zeami declares “the flower that does not exist”, it appears evident that their words resound in unison with those of Mallarmé: “I say: a flower! and out of the oblivion where my voice relegates any contour, insofar as it is something other than known calyxes, musically arises, idea itself and exquisite, the one absent from all bouquets”.

Is not that fragrant idea of flower, that turns synaesthetically into music, perhaps the very same as the one created by Kim Minjung, who turns ocean waves into sonic vibrations? To the Korean artist the immediate presence, be it sensation or memory, emotion or colour, does not matter as such. One somehow understands things with a certain detachment when one sees them from a distance, in perspective with respect to the universal in which they are immersed. In *Mountains* light, darkness, colour and time are thus captured in their successive manifestations, subtracted from the wear of habit and from details (just as Mallarmé relegated the contours of the flowers to oblivion) depriving us of the comfortable schemes and leaving us hesitant on the threshold of visibility, placing us before not so much the image as the idea of the image, sound waves that are not concretized in static figures but keep vibrating, and that may be composed in an infinity of tones and manners that resound with the immensity of everything.

They are works where the light of reason is replaced by the chiaroscuro of the becoming of everything because, as Dürrenmatt has written in *Promise*, “everything paradoxical installs itself in the uncertain glare that reigns on the edges of the world” and thus everything that reason cannot grasp with the senses. Also the sound tides of Kim’s *Mountains* appear in an unreasonably incommensurable space, enjoying an ambivalence between light and shade that embraces, merges and connects, with a painting that does not see its borders as limiting barriers, but as thresholds that may be crossed, back and forth; diaphragms between shade and light, between conscience and nothingness, oblivion and awareness, immobile vibrations of an atypical, atopic, timeless enunciation. Mountain ridges that continue as far as the eye can see, foams of a stormy sea that spread out and disappear, ghosts of sound waves that pierce time, the *Mountains* are all this yet none of it, as they go beyond space and time; this is why I prefer to think of them as thresholds, ready for sudden openings of meaning, illuminations that are as sudden, dynamic and changeable as life itself, or to quote Walter Benjamin, crossings that “comprise change, passage, stormy seas,

meaning". Moreover, one must not forget the singular consonance that these works, which unfold an apparently infinite range of shades of gray, have with the symbolic meaning of gray in Korean culture and society, which has since more than fifty years elected it as the official colour of the robes of Buddhist monks. Also in this case gray, in every shade from ash to anthracite, represents the world in-between, the meeting of the opposites between the white of divinity and the black of damp earth.

Like Gauguin, also Kim may assert that she "has closed her eyes to see" as sight does not suffice to make things appear in their full depth, in their nature that is not blinded by the overwhelming power of their mere temporary presence. Things are then "revealed" in the double paradoxical etymological sense of showing and at the same time veiling, as in the idea of truth according to Heidegger, who summarizes the manifestation/concealment of things from the root of the Greek word *aletheia*, which is what escapes oblivion, or the currents of the river Lete.

A Zen saying which interestingly also centres on mountains is an excellent illustration of this procedure and its nature: "Thanks to the chirping of the bird, the mountain becomes even more quiet". Birdsong does not contrast with the silence of the mountainscape; on the contrary, it improves it. So do the maculations and circles that plane lightly above Kim's monochrome paper; the void which is thus created favours that fecundity of thought that is never at ease with completeness and symmetry, but in alternations of voids free of images, that one must observe just as carefully as one would an abundance of material. The combination of form (fullness) and void is a distinctive trait in Kim's work: the colour is blended into the background, it seems to concretely pierce it, to cross from one side to the other. In this void full of the withdrawal of sensible things, but where the room allowed for other births is ample, what is manifest appears at the expense of what is concealed, when the resonance of everything is intensified and the detail overshadowed. One is reminded of Heidegger's thought on the idea of *aletheia*: what is true is accomplished by hiding, truth is not declared but re-vealed or un-veiled.

The result is the appearance of a kind of total void that abstracts and enclosed the grammar of the particular phenomena (points, circles, filaments, stripes, burns) to found a completely new syntax and give the work of Kim Minjung a state of impermanence. The artist stages a kind of void that creates a resonance space, and that cannot as such be considered a mere absence because it is inhabited by - according to her definition, *full* of - the emanations of the figures in the field and "vibrated" by the formation of their relations. To Kim Minjung *less is more* because the absence is revealed as a condition of abundance, where the void is the state of fullness and fullness that of a void, an abundance that is as sophisticated as it is terse and rarefied, that bears witness to the continuous metamorphosis of forms and of natural states, as for that matter the fire of the burnt paper is symbol of the instantaneous mutations of the elements that are part of the natural developments that distinguishes the life of things.

A thread of ink may thus become organic material and organize itself into a family of fluctuating terminations, the *Nautilus* assumes the form of a spiral and evokes the regeneration of things, the strips of burnt paper that appear on the edges and are superimposed in the cycle of the Stories are organized in vertical strips that seem to enclose the secret of genetic codes, or in other cases, as in the *Untitled* works, the small round pieces of paper are arranged in structures that gradually become more complex, that mark and move the ecru surface of the paper in the background, seem to be distributed by chance, like a pictorial accident, and to take possession of the scene by spreading on the canvas and intertwining the surface in every direction, as if wanting to physically

induce the idea of a threshold to cross, from the continuous exchange between germination and withering, of the transition from one condition to another, of the circularity between life and death. The simplicity of the organic world is also expressed through the irregularity, asymmetry and spirit of vagueness that are recurrent elements in Kim's work. Rather than getting lost in the complexity of tiny and irrelevant details, the artist aims at the economy of the stroke and the fullness of the form. Simplicity evokes pure aesthetic impulse because also the universe is simple, in spite of its complexity. The simplicity of Kim's gaze from within thus succeeds in capturing the complexity of a reality that has always been concealed behind the banality of chance, in penetrating beyond the threshold of phenomena in a private dialogue with the world, beneath the surface, because, as Henri Poincaré observes in *Science and the Hypothesis*, if "simplicity is on the one side hidden behind complex appearances, on the other it is precisely simplicity that dissimulates extremely complex realities".

This open and pulsating form of the work, that includes the accident within a syntax that moves on the highest level of living mystery and that evokes the marvel of existence, resounds in every work of the artist, favouring the dialogue between finite and non-finite (in-finite) and giving the work a mediated mobility: that typical quivering condition that is created by the burnt edges, and that reveals the forms as they flourish, change, are overshadowed and then re-emerge from the background, immersed in those resounding spaces that embraces, contains and connects them all.

This is the key to the great charm of Kim Minjung's work: a devotion to art that transcends itself in a profound contact with life, expression of an innate beauty and ungraspable amazement at incompleteness, at feeling oneself perennially *among* things, because the ways of the kingdom of Shinra are infinite.