

<Persona> of Hee Seung Chung

Co-existence of me and my second self. The capture of that delicate moment.

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* When was it? Where was it? With the innocence of ancient time, without a tint of time and space, she is there on the indifferent white background. I am standing in front of her, but she is not looking at me. Her gaze deflects me, aiming at something, but also at nothing. That sad emptiness in her gaze halts my steps. I would like to approach her to gently tap her shoulder saying, to say 'It's alright.'

- In front of the <Persona>

* As if a camera zooms in, his face fills the whole screen. Gray beard, wrinkles resembling the winding journey of life, face bursting into tears. The king of fair-faced youth, once upon a time, who had embraced all the support of farmers for his courage to lead the uprising of the farmers. But, the time did not spare him to keep his appearance as a wise king of youth. When Richard II encountered his last moment after he lost the absolute power and the loyalty of his subjects, which were once seemed to be eternal, his face must have looked like this. Especially when the last moment was plotted by the once-loyal subjects. Who am I gazing on? The <Richard II> of Shakespeare, or the actor who is playing that role? Or else, is it myself reflected in the character?

- In front of the <No matter where, of comfort no man speak>

Prologue

Influenced by Ingmar Bergman's film <Persona>, this project consists of three episodes: the <Persona> that is in landscape format, and focuses on individual character, <moving tableau> that dropped the background and focuses on the character's face and his/her expression, and <No matter where, of comfort no man speak> that captures the changes of facial expression in the form of still cuts.

Although the photographs of Hee Seung Chung focus on persons, it seems that those can be hardly called portraits.

But why?

What has happened to the characters in her photographs, who wear subtle sadness in their faces?

#1.

Being born is the beginning of the journey toward death. Since human beings are bounded to that antinomic fate, every human being wants to leave the trace of their life on earth, to be remembered by that trace in an image as good as they could ever wear. Hence, people long ago used to stand in front of a canvas with pleasure, in spite of all the inconveniences of embellishing and posing themselves for hours without moving. As camera was invented, people could get their portrait in an incomparably short time and then the skilled dexterity of artists was pushed away by those small black boxes. Although there still were some inconveniences, it was just ‘a moment of a blink’, compared to the old days. The desire to be remembered motivated the development of the photographic portrait and people happily smiled in front of cameras in order to satisfy the desire. Considering this historic background of portraits, it becomes clear why it is hard to name the <Persona> of Hee Seung Chung, ‘portraits’. Although she borrows the form of portrait photography, what artist tries to capture is not the actors or the character they portray, but the transient moment, in which a character transforms into another being, or rather precisely, it is the mystic moment, in which two characters, two different personas co-exist in one individual.

#2

Persona. The word, persona, derives from the Latin for ‘character’ or ‘hypostasis,’ and originally means ‘mask’ worn by actors in ancient Greek theatre. As a philosophical term, persona refers to the beings such as human beings, angels, and gods, who possess the nature of rationality. In psychology, persona means the socio-psychological masks, under which individuals play their roles given to them under various circumstances. If Hee Seung Chung’s <Persona> series focused on one of these meanings, there would not have been many things to be said. However, the artist freely inter travels those various layers, which are unfolded around the term ‘persona.’ Because of the dynamics in the

two dimensional space called photograph that seem to have nothing to do with mobility, we cannot easily walk away from her images.

In order to show transitions of a persona, or co-existence of different personas, the artist came up with a strategy. First, the artist recruited actors/actresses, as if she determined to start faithfully from the origin of the word 'persona.' Then she requested the actors/actresses to immerse themselves in the emotions of lamentation and deep sorrow, and show it as facial expressions. Not by reflecting some private miseries or sad memories, but she requested them to immerse themselves in a certain situation of a specific play of their choice. At a certain stage of the immersion process, actors will completely sympathize with the characters in plays they have chosen, then as the plays approach to the end, they will find a moment, in which they are separated from the characters, and return to themselves. At a fraction of that very moment, two personas may co-exist. That fraction of moment is what Hee Seung Chung is focusing on.

Taken in a simple landscape format, Hee Seung Chung's photographs in this series create strong empathy to the viewers. So, they cannot easily walk away from the actors in the photographs, who are immersed in lamentation and deep sorrow. It seems partly due to the visual mechanism designed by the artist. First, against the convention of the photographic portraiture, the artist chose a landscape format. By eliminating all the details and placing upper half of the subject in evenly lit bright space, the artist completely intercepted viewers' gaze from being distracted by other objects, so viewers can focus on the character. The characters' gazes are slightly deflected from direct front, so they can avoid confrontation with the ones of viewers. The crossed directions of gazes create depth in the dimension. Although the artist did not apply any perspective mechanism in the photographs, while the gazes of viewers and the characters constantly missing one another, a new dimension that mingles them all together, can be created. Gradually, viewers fall into a mystic illusion of walking around the subject in the photographs. This viewing process creates powerful psychological relationship with the viewer and the subject but then simultaneously or gradually alienates the viewer by her visual devices such as obviously artificial space and unnaturally neutral lightings where the subject is placed. That flow of consciousness resembles the actors' journey into the characters in the plays, and coming back to themselves.

In the course of life, we have to wear many different faces willingly or unwillingly depending on the roles, on the circumstances, or on other requirements. And there is a time when I suddenly recognize my other face within me, and surprised. As I turn around from the photographs of Hee Seung Chung, suddenly I want to look into a mirror. What would my face look like now? And I begin to wonder which persona I am putting on my face at this moment.

As I mentioned in the beginning, Hee Seung Chung's photographs have many layers. Someday, her work may be defined in the extension of photographic portraiture. However, if someone asks me to categorize her work, I would like to group her <Persona> with landscape photography, which captures the moment of co-existence of life and death and transition from one life to another. Although the photographs of Hee Seung Chung do not contain any feature of landscape, what she wants to show us is not illustrating the definition of 'persona,' but it is rather a moment, in which different beings are co-exist and mingled, a moment that slides off to the air as soon as it is captured. I look forward to seeing the diverse and in-depth landscapes from the inner world of human beings, which her black box will portray in the days to come.