

SHIN HAKCHUL: PAINTING OF THE PEOPLE'S HISTORY (1999)

Interview with Shin Hakchul by Park Chan-kyong

Translated by Young Min Moon

Shin Hakchul (painter)

Park Chan-kyong (artist)

Time: In-person interview conducted on July 15, 1999 and telephone interview conducted on August 15, 1999

Place: Shin Hakchul's residence in Seoul

Park Chan-kyong: I have not had another opportunity to see your work since your solo show at Hakgojae Gallery in May 1991. How have you been?

Shin Hakchul: I wanted to take a short break, but ended up taking a long one. There were times when I found the act of painting a rather scary business. The Korean society radically changed after the democratic government was established; the demonstration movement disappeared. I didn't think about this in the old days, but I found myself confronting real people. In the past, people meant some abstract entity, but I now encounter my neighbors every day and run into normal people on the street. I was busy painting as a form of struggle in the 1980s, without having thought about people in this way. In hindsight, I think that my intended audience was the people of the dissident movement because we were engaged in an activist culture. However, as I said, I am a little scared of the act of painting. Although I am in the middle of a legal trial with respect to my painting *The History of Modern Korea—Rice Planting* (1987), it occurred to me that painting now includes aspects of self-censorship and self-trial. In light of the disappearance of the culture of demonstrations from a certain era and of the dissolution of the dissident movement, my audience has also effectively disappeared. Now that the people on the street have become my new audience, I fear both that my painting must appear unfamiliar to them, and that they may attack my work. When I close my eyes, I sometimes feel like people want to trample me.

PARK: I understand you have been working on some large-scale work. Could you tell me about it? Is it much different from previous work?

SHIN: Well, I am not sure what title to give to the work. It could simply be *The History of Contemporary Korea* or *A History of People*. *The History of Contemporary Korea: Gapsoonyee and Gapdolyee*¹ might be nice.

While my previous work was based on politics in the mainstream history and my own anti-Japanese sentiment and nationalism, my focus has shifted to the history of people in the mid 1980s. With my most recent work I have been especially interested in *seomin* 서민 (the working class people). I have been planning to make these paintings since 1985, immediately after the *Modern History* series. It was inevitable that these paintings would stretch horizontally, rather than vertically. Not that I intended it that way, but the narrative structure naturally expanded the work horizontally. I am now embarrassed to look back at *The June Resistance and Great Workers' Struggle of 1987* (1991). It's not as interesting.

PARK: Your work is less interesting if you excise eroticism. *June Resistance* is a case in point.

SHIN: Not that it was intentional... In reality, the 1987 June resistance itself was a debate on ethics and a theoretical battle, and in that context I could not add any other elements. After I completed the work I understood that this was the case. *The History of Modern Korea—Synthesis* (1983) was fun, but when it came to *June Resistance*, no matter how hard I tried, the theme was simply not fun because it was an ethical and ideological issue.

PARK: After the *History of Modern Korea* series, your solo show at Hakgojae began to reflect a significant change. There was a shift from diachronic synthesis and narrative structure to episodic moments in the form of a tableau.

SHIN: I tried to paint the history of people from 1985. I painted *Gapsoonyee and Gapdolyee* (1991) as a part of it.

1 . [All notes are translator's.] Gapdolyee (Gapdori) and Gapsoonyee (Gapsuni) are common Korean first names for men and women, respectively, in the early part of the twentieth century.

PARK: So you intended to synthesize them afterward?

SHIN: Yes, but when I painted them I didn't exactly have in mind *A History of People* which I am working on at the moment.

PARK: What was the reception of your Hakgojae solo exhibition? As I recall, you seemed to intentionally emphasize the materiality of the surface of the paintings, and I wasn't confident that they went well with your work up to that point.

SHIN: It was embarrassing, and done in haste. I had received the Minjok Misulsang [art prize awarded by the Korean People's Artists Association—Ed.],² and so I was obliged to mount an exhibition the following year. You have to exhibit when you develop a body of work. It doesn't work particularly well when you have limited time to produce the work. This was the result of my intention to convey a sense of realism and give it some weight, and I will continue to be embarrassed by it. I am a little clumsy as a painter. I work better in black and white.

PARK: It seems to me that your use of oil paint is not exactly conventional.

SHIN: I have never really used oil in a traditional manner; I haven't really learned to paint in any proper way. I had no intention to learn the craft in my college years. I just painted the way I wanted, in concert with the conversation I had with my friends.

PARK: Who were your friends at the time?

SHIN: A guy named Hwang Hyo-Chang; he was more mature than I was. It was in the late 1970s, probably around 1977. He helped me become more critical.

PARK: What do you mean by critical in that context?

² □. *Minjok* is a term coined in Japan during Meiji period in reference to Social Darwinism. After Japan annexed Korea, Korean scholars started using the term, which is variously translated as nation, people, ethnic group, and race-nation. The notion of *minjok* is central to Korean ethnic nationalism.

SHIN: It's like painting things such as dolls, or a doll trapped in a *soju* bottle.³ It's compatible with Song Changsik's generation.⁴

PARK: What sort of work have you done since you joined the Korean Avant-Garde Association (A.G.)?⁵

SHIN: I made this box, not unlike a coffin with a top that could be opened and closed. I put eight live roosters inside, and made holes that only allowed the roosters' heads out so that they could receive food. I probably made it in 1972.

PARK: It must have been shocking at the time.

SHIN: It was too earnest. When I showed this piece, the A.G. members were all curious. Kim Inhwan and Lee Kangso took me to a pub and asked me to explain what I was thinking.

PARK: Really, what was your motivation?

SHIN: I meant it as something suffocating, like the feeling of being trapped. It was a simple idea. Initially I wanted to make the work differently, by beheading the rooster against a fabric and lumber backdrop.

PARK: Was that a performance?

SHIN: No, I didn't behead it at the scene. I wanted to show the dripping blood, but the blood wasn't getting absorbed and instead spread out. Therefore, I had to change my plan to do this instead. When I used to hold a teaching position in Suwon City, I saw out through the car window that some trees

3 . *Soju* is a hard liquor distilled from rice, and considered a common drink consumed by the general public. The media commonly portrays the consumption of *soju* by the working class, or people in despair.

4 . Song Changsik is a popular singer songwriter, most prominent during the 1970s.

5 . Denoting avant-garde in its name, the A.G. group is an association of artists and critics that emerged in 1969. After the dominance of abstract art in the 1950s and the 1960s, this group of artists began to experiment with conceptual art, installation, environments, and performances.

were painted and others were cut off. I used to wonder why some were cut and others were painted. There was neither an apparent reason nor any sense of order. Anything went. The beheading of the roosters was the same thing. There was no reason. After the exhibition, I gave away the roosters so that people could cook them.

PARK: Were the people surprised by such a strong social message?

SHIN: Not really. They didn't think highly of my idea and I didn't know any better. I just painted what I felt in simple terms. I didn't quite realize that the act of painting itself was accidental, nor did I realize that the sense of suffocation could oppress my life. However, I did want to represent the sense of inertia. The exhibition was held at the Gyeongbokgung Palace Art Museum (currently the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea), and the A.G. group all showed there. It was later moved to the Deoksugung Palace.⁶

PARK: Have you made any other installation work?

SHIN: That's about it. The point is that, when I made an installation, I used to feel a certain pleasure in making spontaneous decisions, but the work would disappear. It gave me a sense of emptiness because there would be no trace left after. When I later made the transition to minjung misul 민중 미술 (people's art), I realized that the conception of such work had no roots to trace back to, and that was a problem. My work would begin from a momentary conception, but the problem was that I had no sense of urgency to know what part of my life the work had emerged. I am unaccustomed to metaphysical ideas. When I conversed with people at the time, I felt increasingly weary of metaphysical ideas, of concepts that were devoid of visual affect. I kept denying them repeatedly, and that's how I arrived at where I am today. Well, to be more precise, I did not willfully arrive at this state, but it's more like I wanted to do something and I wanted to be moved by it. That's how it happened.

PARK: But you practiced avant-garde art for quite some time, up until 1977.

⁶ . Built in 1395, Gyeongbokgung palace was the main royal palace of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). Deoksugung is one of the Five Grand Palaces of the Joseon dynasty, and was inhabited by various Korean royalty until the Japanese colonial period at the turn of the twentieth century.

SHIN: The coiled object series was a small breakthrough. Initially, I saw the act of coiling as simply a form of action, but the logic is that when you are sincere about one thing, beauty can emerge from it. Just as being devoted to the act of farming would make a difference, being sincere yields beauty from the simple act of repetition. However, as I continued doing this, my work began to return to old images, which is how this all began. Even that was a momentary decision. I had this potted plant that died. I pulled it out to dispose of it, but the roots retained the shape of the pot, perhaps because I hadn't watered it diligently. It was interesting. I saw the affinity between the human condition and that of the plant. I thought that the living condition of the plant inside a pot is in and of itself a work of art. I had thought that I could make work based on whatever I felt since my college years. So I coiled up some tree branches with threads, and that was the beginning. That was a concrete image. But it was no longer an image, or perhaps it was an image of nothingness. I used to believe that by simply being sincere and doing repetitive actions I could contain myself in them, and the acts would contain beauty, but I would always begin to doubt and return to the image. I would draw a line and simply continue coiling. Then, I gradually began to coil up some objects with threads.

I think that there is a deep relationship between shamanism and art, and that *gi* (energy) touches people in an honest way. It's some kind of an ineffable force that is distinct from the realm of everyday objects. For instance, you would view everyday objects quite differently if they were hanging at *seonangdang* or other such places.⁷ I think I was searching for some form in the series *Sincerity* (1975) and *Stream of Mind* (1975). I wanted to discover how my consciousness worked. As I was returning to the image I would make forms. I came to the point at which I could no longer continue. The act of coiling itself was labor-intensive and time-consuming, and it naturally led me to photography. I considered photography and coiling analogous. And that was it.

I am critical of civilization in general, and repulsed by contemporary civilization. I abhor plastics and vinyl. I feel like they came from hell. I keep encountering things that I hate. Then and now, I don't paint what I like, but what I hate, and I have to swear against it. When I made collages out of women's magazines, I would get quite upset. The same goes for yogurt containers. I found partly

⁷ □. *Seonangdang* is a small temple for spirits in Korean shamanistic tradition. Originating from ancient China, the use of *seonangdang* had been subject to many changes over the centuries. In earlier times, states, royal families, and powerful local families served spirits in *seonangdang*, while later in the Joseon dynasty its character shifted to folk-oriented spiritual practices.

burnt yogurt cups in the trash in front of my house, so I painted many of them. Once, the dairy company Bingrae called me to complain, asking me why I painted their ostensibly “pure” drink products.

PARK: How was the coiling work received at the time?

SHIN: By the time I made these works, the A.G. group had disbanded. However, I continued to exhibit with them. During the final phase of the three-dimensional work, I developed quite a clear position about my work. When I exhibited three pieces in a group show held at the Korea Culture and Arts Foundation (KCAF) Art Center,⁸ my cohorts came and complained that my work had too much to say, to which I replied that I still had a lot to say. I then split from them. Even then, my work was not socially conscious. Even up to that period, the people at Hongik University had no sense of the political in art.⁹

PARK: Did you ever see the Hyeonsilgwa bareon 현실과 발언 (Reality and Utterance) group exhibitions that were held in the early 1980s?

SHIN: I saw it once at the Lotte Gallery.

PARK: What did you make of it?

SHIN: It was certainly strong, but I wasn't sure that all of them were really paintings. It was too chaotic.

PARK: It appears to me that a major change in your consciousness occurred around the time you made the collage piece that used shoe images. What were the circumstances that gave

⁸ . Established in 1973, the Korea Culture and Arts Foundation (KCAF) was renamed the Arts Council Korea (ARKO) in 2005. The KCAF Art Center was, and is, located in Hyehwa-dong, Seoul.

⁹ . Located in Seoul, Hongik University has one of the largest college-level art departments in Korea.

rise to such a change? For instance, how did you get access to the news of the Gwangju Uprising?¹⁰

SHIN: I used to approach it through an institutional lens, for which I am very sorry. I should tell you this: I once visited the archive room at the KCAF Art Center in Hyeohwa-dong. I went there to meet someone, and happened to pull out a particular book of photo journalism published by the daily *Dong-A Ilbo*, entitled something like *One Hundred Years of Korea Seen Through Photography*. I couldn't bear to look at it without crying, as it contained images of the Kanto earthquake (in Japan in 1923) and the ethnic genocide and so on; those images profoundly influenced me. The university library also had the book, so I was able to examine it carefully. Its story begins at the end of the nineteenth century, and it is truly sad. This was my mindset when I painted *The History of Modern Korea*.

PARK: So publications and information about current affairs and social movements at the time had no direct bearing on your work?

SHIN: That's correct. For me, the sensation of an object as an object is what is important. Coiling up something with threads produces an object. What I am currently making can also be considered an object. Photographs, which are not really objects, are in fact objects for me. Photographs in the history books are objects. History itself that is written in words is an object. My thoughts continuously evolve in terms of "objecthood." Earlier on, I would think of things as objects as long as I got a certain sensation from them, even if they didn't have any bearing on social concerns I've had. However, as I began to create collages, objects began to take on specific meanings related to our reality, civilization, and history. For instance, how do you represent autocracy? You put in the face of Chun Doo-hwan, and that is autocracy. In my pictorial language, it is the human figures and objects themselves that specify narration and explanation.

PARK: You are saying that even when you paint an image, you consider that image an object even if it is not a physical thing that exists in three-dimensions. It seems to me that the recurring motifs in

10 . The Gwangju Uprising, or Gwangju Democracy Movement, was a watershed moment in the history of democracy in modern Korea. Taking place from May 18–27, 1980, Gwangju civilians and the people of the Jeolla province mounted protests, demanding the establishment of a democratic government, the resignation of the newly emerged military regime of Chun Doo-hwan, and the lifting of martial law. In response, the Chun regime sent in military forces to crackdown on the dissident movement, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths and over three thousand injured civilians.

your work, such as erotic images, muscular bodies, lumps of flesh, or shapes that appear to melt and drip down, should be considered in the same context.

SHIN: Here is a painting (*The History of Modern Korea No. 3*) with a boar head I did in 1981. With my eyes closed I feel something explosive and erupting vertically. Details are important in my work, but there must be sensations coming from the whole composition, or I couldn't care less. Therefore, my paintings are like sculptures. I sometimes feel like making sculptures. If anyone ever wanted to make sculptures out of my paintings, I would approve of it.

PARK: Did you meet Kim Yun-su while you were working on these paintings?¹¹

SHIN: I met him because of this painting. I exhibited the boar head, and people couldn't comment on it. Very few people initiated conversations with me. Even a friend would walk away from me on the street without saying hello. People were shocked. A Japanese person sat cross-legged in front of the painting and looked at it for an hour. Kim Yun-su must have seen this exhibition. I got to meet him later and together, we held an exhibition. There was an exhibition titled *Nouvelles Figuration en France* (New Figurative Art from France) at the Galerie de Séoul in May (1982), and I thought, tough luck, because my show was in October and I knew my upperclassmen from Hongik University would come and ask me if I had been influenced by the French exhibition.

PARK: What was the exhibition *Nouvelles Figuration en France* like?

SHIN: It was a great exhibition; French artists such as Gilles Aillaud, Jacque Monory, and Icelandic artist Erró took part in it. It was new figurative work, and similar to our own Imsul-neon artists.¹² Through this exhibition I got to meet the "Reality and Utterance" people. Naturally, I got to know the 1980s' *minjung* movement.

11 . Kim Yun-su is a Korean art critic, the former co-chairperson of the Korean People's Artists Association, and the former director of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA).

12 . Imsul-neon (임술년) is the name of an artists' group founded in 1982, the Year of Imsul according to the sexagenary cycle. The group prioritized the local site and context of contemporary art practices in relation to the social milieu of the time, shunning Western-centric values.

PARK: Do you think the existing mainstream Hongik people would have felt betrayed by the change in your work?

SHIN: But I am not greedy or political, so there would be no reason to badmouth me. Some of my close friends seemed to hate the change, and some grew distant from me.

PARK: Let's talk about your work in-depth. First, how do you collect the photographic images that are the basis of your work?

SHIN: Previously, I would only collect them from women's monthly magazines. I collected just about anything. In a sense, monthly magazines contained some aspects of the reality of the Korean society. In another sense, I was tremendously revolted by the world that was portrayed in these magazines. I think that this revulsion became my motivation.

PARK: I heard that when you were an art teacher you used many anti-communist pictorials that were collected by students.

SHIN: I used them a lot when they showed historical motifs. I would ask them to bring anti-communist pictorials to use. By the way, I still don't understand them myself. Even if I cannot make deeply urban expressions, my paintings are still quite urban. I still don't know why that is.

PARK: When did you come to Seoul?

SHIN: In my first year of college, 1964. Shock would be the right word to describe my experience. I wonder if my work is a kind of swearing at Seoul out of this shock. But I still occasionally make paintings of the countryside. I wonder what that's about. Maybe I still retain some vague sense of nostalgia.

My hometown is Gimcheon.¹³ It is completely rural some forty *ri* (about fifteen kilometers) from Gimcheon.¹⁴ Kim Yun-su came once and said that there was no place more barren than

¹³ . Gimcheon is a city located in Gyeongsangbuk-do, the southeastern part of the Korean peninsula, between Daejeon and Daegu.

this. There is almost no stretch of flat land, as it is largely mountainous, and no such thing as culture. However, looking back at it in Seoul, such a barren place seems quite cool. Maybe that's why I painted it. Sometimes I painted the rural scene intentionally, as I was engaged in the notion of “*minjok misul* □□ □□(national art).” *The Last Farmer* would be an example of this. Looking back at my childhood, it seems rather dreamy. *Rice Planting* depicts the history of my village. I was imagining the most desirable view of springtime in my village after reunification (of the two Koreas). The water in my village is not particularly great, so most of the farmland was completely reliant on rain as the only source of water. These days we don't plant barley, but in the old days we did plant barley alongside rice, and each house had apricot trees. The tree in *Rice Planting* is an apricot tree.

There was an incident in my village when I was five or six. The Kim family had a large well on their property, and a buttercup field in front of it. The plot was large and there would always be a fight over the boundary. In this long drawn out process, a man died a month after a fight broke out. The father of a close, older friend of mine also tried to kill my friend. But he couldn't because the village people were watching. The farmers were obsessed with the land, and the other villagers didn't even regard them humans. In the current parlance, they were bullied, so they had to move elsewhere. It's not like they would hold a trial in the countryside, and I would imagine that the same holds true even today. It's the idea of forming a community through ethical customs, without formal laws. The theme of my painting *Rice Planting* is a prosperous village that does not require the law.

PARK: Have you ever found the need to take photographs yourself, instead of using found images?

SHIN: I do take photos when I need them. Park Buldong would set up a scene with his subject matter to photograph.¹⁵ I like doing that too.

PARK: There seems to be a great difference between photo collages and paintings.

14 □. *Ri* is a traditional East Asian denomination for distance. One *ri* is equal to 360 steps. Due to the changes in denominational system over the centuries, there are now great differences in how one *ri* is measured in China, Korea, and Japan. In Korea at present, one *ri* is equal to about 400 meters.

15 . Park Buldong is a prominent *minjung misul* artist and a member of the Reality and Utterance group. His work is mostly photographic, at times juxtaposed with provocative text.

SHIN: Historical materials should be painted, but I am not sure if they all need to be painted. It's okay to paint what is impossible to obtain photographically, that is, to connect between forms. However, I don't think it's necessary to paint how photographs connect to one another.

I am in the middle of reading Sung Wan-kyung's book *Minjung Misul, Modernism, Visual Culture*.¹⁶ I think that what I have read so far is similar to much of my own experience; such as how the book describes artistic autonomy and freedom as an artist. I have done whatever I wanted to do since my college years, and as I think that anything could be a work of art, I can do just about anything to communicate my intentions and express my desires. In my essay, "From Autonomous Creation of Form to Naturalistic Creation of Form,"¹⁷ I referred to it as "the status defying gravity." Not for the place where we live, but to float in midair. To be one of an infinite number of sand grains, to be one for which it is fine to exist and fine not to exist—that is ultimate, limitless freedom. As my images always float, limitless freedom is absolute solitude. That notion makes me feel certain regrets. It makes me feel like I am alone and in my own thoughts. I feel as though I am by myself and conceived of myself. so there are no social relations. The largest problem is that this is totally unrelated to reality. I see that abstract artists are preoccupied with their careers and self-promotion, and that buying and selling of paintings depends on self-promotion. What are the criteria for the concepts of abstract painting? Standard criteria for assessing their values do not exist. My notion of freedom has no standard values and is unrelated to reality, hence floating in space. It's as though if I think it is so, that is all that matters. I am solitary, but then when you exhibit the work, and you have to explain it in order to communicate with your audience.

PARK: I tend to think that your work is not particularly difficult to understand. What do you think?

SHIN: Works by Kim Jung-heun and Lim Oksang do require some thought, whereas my work tends to be more explicable.¹⁸ I put in my best efforts to facilitating conversations

16 . Sung Wan-kyung, *Minjung Misul, Modernism, Visual Culture* (Seoul: Youlhwadang, 1999). [In Korean.]

17 □. Shin Hakchul, "From Autonomous Creation of Form to Naturalistic Creation of Form," in *Space* (Nov. 1979). Reprinted in *Shin Hakchul* (Seoul: Hakgojae, 1991). [In Korean.]

18 □. Kim Jung-heun and Lim Oksang are also prominent minjung misul artists.

between people, but when my work becomes too explanatory it can be too simplistic. I find that to be one of my weaknesses. Recently I have tried to resist that, but I am used to it and it doesn't work so well without it. I tend to explain objects as they are, rather than deconstructing the truth of an object, or convoluting it. Maybe my brain is simplistic.

PARK: It is certainly true that the initial shock of encountering your work from the 1980s has since gradually diminished. What would you say about that?

SHIN: I have not thought about alternatives or other methods with which to address that. I think that it would be best not to overdo what I am currently doing. Just because there is no more shock, doesn't mean it is necessary to go looking for it. I didn't necessarily intend to shock anyway. You make work as you do, and if it's true to your practice, you end up there naturally. I think that I am getting old now. I used to think that I could change things in the 1980s, and that ideologies could be changed. Now, looking at things anew from a different ideological dimension, I cannot keep up with the changes brought about by young artists in terms of their expressive means. This is why I think I've gotten old.

PARK: Is the painting you are currently working on, *A History of People* (working title), intended for a specific exhibition?

SHIN: I want to show it at a solo exhibition. I prefer not to have a show scheduled in advance, as I cannot work in a hurry.

PARK: You've used very bright colors in this painting even though you tended to use almost nothing but black and white in your previous work.

SHIN: You cannot avoid using color. But it's easier for me to not use color, and since I haven't used color for such a long time, I am not so good at it. It's silly and awkward. I would make photo collages, and I would think that I was approaching facts as they actually are. I think that doing things as they are is objective—that it is not lying. Earlier, I talked about the fear of people trampling me, but now I don't care about it. I just wish that what I do is as objective as possible. Anyway, I decided not to think about the ideological dimension. It would be better if the ideological dimension seeps out of my work even when I don't think about it.

PARK: Would you consider the work *June Resistance* as ideological as you just described?

SHIN: Yes. The fun part of painting for me has been to paint what troubles me or to paint in order to criticize others. But now I just want to paint things as they are. I've changed that much. Can you imagine how intensely people used to attack me?

PARK: What was the essence of their attack?

SHIN: That my expressive means was Western modernist. I meant to paint things in a very "hot" way, but they claimed that my formalism was cold. I really thought that I painted in a hot way. At the end of the 1980s these issues had not been clearly sorted out theoretically. I wanted to make these distinctions myself too. I wasn't all that thrilled by Oh Yoon's linear tendencies, so my desire to paint in my own way resulted in *Rice Planting*. As I was painting the theme of rice planting, I attempted to paint the story of my old hometown sister's romance. I tried to paint a romantic scene of a peasant and his landlord's daughter.

PARK: You've painted a rather utopian idea.

SHIN: A long time ago, I heard the sound of crying coming from somewhere. Later, I learned that the daughter of the second wealthiest man in my village had fallen in love with a peasant. The landlord married off his daughter to another man while the peasant was doing his mandatory military service. The cry was the peasant's who was back in the village on vacation. He was crying his heart out in a pine forest. Thinking back at this, sexual relations are pretty much the same everywhere. You do it on the grass. . . . That would be fun. Reality, history, and so on.

PARK: Were you close to Oh Yoon?

SHIN: It was not possible to be. He would look at me as if he held some profound anguish against me. He regarded me as though I had broken away from some sort of national form. You'll see that Oh Yoon's *gi* comes from some kind of repressed anger against all things that are not Korean, or things that are not related to the common people. His antagonism is the *gi* that you sense in the formalism of his work. I wanted to be closer to him. . . . I cannot quite

describe it, but when I look into his eyes, I see a certain repressed anger. Now that you bring him up, I had a chat with Sung Wan-kyung over drinks the other day. Sung has written a piece on Oh Yoon, in which he had used the phrase “the aesthetics of poverty.” I raised an issue with that, as I thought that Sung was being a rationalist. Sung wasn’t translating Oh Yoon’s *gi* into words, even if he had understood it. The same goes for Shim Kwanghyun, although he has made some efforts toward that lately.¹⁹ When I was involved with the avant-garde, I gave much thought to *gi* and the issues of shamanism that pertain to it. I tried to enter this arena, but didn’t quite make it. It all boils down to the question of freedom, how to be liberated, and where one can possibly settle. For instance, children’s art is truly full of *gi*, as is Kim Jeong-hui’s work.²⁰ There is a certain kind of reality in it, whether it’s good or bad. Though I didn’t know it at the time, there’s something significant. I just didn’t know what it was. Sung told me, “I did write in such a way.”

PARK: How does such *gi* manifest in a work of art?

SHIN: I haven’t thought about it to that extent. I have thought about a national form or a style but I don’t think the use of such forms would be appropriate. In my thinking, approaching reality as rigorously as possible could become a national style. If I am truly sincere about it and give it all I have in making work like that, that would also be “*gi*” manifest in a work of art. Not to contrive to make something of it, but it will be more like coiling the thread. If I were truly devoted to one action, I would imagine that people would like it and feel something from it. It depends on how hard one might be willing to try.

PARK: In that case, do you have any attachment to being painterly? What do you think of the painterliness in the work of Choi Gene-uk and Choi Min Hwa?

19 . Shin Hakchul is most likely referring to the cultural theorist Shim Kwanghyun’s books published after 2000, such as *Fractal* and *Heunghanminguk: Old Traditions for Changed Futures*, both published in Korean in 2005 by Hyunsil munhwa yeongu.

20 . Kim Jeong-hui (Kim Jung-hee) was one of the most celebrated practitioners of calligraphy, epigraphists, and scholars of Korea’s later Joseon period. He was also known by his pen names, including Wandang and Chusa.

SHIN: I can't quite practice like that. Perhaps because I've long held the notion that paintings are objects. When I occasionally do landscape paintings I create them in a painterly way. Perhaps it's the scientist in me; when I look at and feel something, I rationalize why I feel a certain way and grapple with how those feelings have come about. For me, feelings are of the utmost importance.

PARK: Do you make many drawings prior to making collages?

SHIN: I used to make a lot of drawings before I started using a photocopier. When photocopiers became widely available, I would go immediately into collages without making drawings.

PARK: I suppose that using a photocopier is convenient, in that it allows you to freely adjust the scale of images?

SHIN: Yes. Regardless of how self-conscious you try to be when you paint, the unconscious still plays a significant role. I believe that the unconscious is a real thing, and I would imagine that other people regard the existence of the unconscious in a similar way. After I quit teaching high school art I was in a study group, and in 1988 I read books such as *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. But I did not think it suited me so well. I preferred the potential of self-reliance rather than social consciousness. Even now, I think that the failure of socialism has a lot to do with it ignoring the power of self-reliance.

PARK: Yes, I think that your observation is quite accurate.

SHIN: When I studied socialism, I realized that you could not ignore the power of self-reliance. From now on, when considering a worldview, people should give proper consideration to the question of self-reliance in the unconscious and the culture that arises from it. Although I haven't quite investigated it, I think that certain aspects that emerge from an artwork unintentionally are very important in every case. In my view, plenty of such unplanned accomplishments have been made in the course of various social developments. Such is the history of corporeality. Studies ought to be undertaken in that area. Even with the painting I am currently working on, I didn't know at first, but after making a collage I realized that Korean history is like this. In a nutshell, it is energy. I didn't know in the beginning, but through hard work I began to see the explosive energy. I view the period from the 1950s to the 1990s as having tremendous energy. Whether this is good or impure energy, it is nevertheless incredible. Compared to that, the energy of our dissident movement was quite small

and insignificant. In hindsight, I understand the conglomerates and military dictatorship in certain aspects. The former president Park Chung-hee was truly bad, but I have gained some insight into this conservative man and thus I make fewer obscene remarks about him. Of course, he shouldn't have taken the path he did. At any rate, it remains true that their energy was explosive beyond comparison. Looking at the period from the 1950s to the 1990s, I doubt that any other country could match the kind of energy present in Korea. This is why I would like to see the military dictatorship and the conglomerates as part of the history of the unconscious. I also see our own *minjung* movement as a part of the history of the unconscious. I think that reacting compulsively out of anger, or taking actions without understanding the logic behind them also constitute a history of the unconscious.

As such, I find Kim Jae-gyu an interesting figure.²¹ I see him as an artist, and would like to become an artist like him. Why on Earth did he shoot at that moment? That is what I like about him. Beyond good and evil, I see that as animality, the unknown nature that is released when you are cornered. The compulsive reaction when things are no longer bearable—I want my paintings to be like that. I have even tried to make a collage of Kim Jae-gyu. I feel Kim as corporeality, a body, a chunk of flesh. Of course, being cornered would not be fun. It would be better to let out your energy without being cornered. I would like it to be the cry of the oppressed and the good in history, but paintings shouldn't have to operate like that. I would much prefer a kind of art that has an effect on you without having to explain all these things.

PARK: I think that was the most accurate description of your work. Could you elaborate just a little on these notions of animality and corporeality?

SHIN: Even when I write, I emphasize my own emotions and sensations. While I have thought that logic can produce miscalculations, what I feel is real, the truth. My intention is to determine why I feel a certain way about certain things. The body reacts immediately to sensations, and I seek the reason why such sensations come to me. It would be best to express sensations just the way I feel them, which I have not yet accomplished. It would be great if I could access this directly.

PARK: Have you found some new leads in what you're working on?

21 □. Kim Jae-gyu was a Korean Army Lieutenant General and the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. He assassinated Korean President Park Chung-hee in 1979, and was executed by hanging in 1980. His motivation for the assassination, professed at his trial, has been released publicly.

SHIN: I haven't found them yet, and I can only explain (rather than demonstrate) at this time. Images from advertisements are rather scary. They do many things on an unconscious level, and we need to carefully examine their methods. I think that there is a connection between advertisement and the way they enhance the images of corporations in the way they express without resorting to explanations.

When I am alone and sitting still, there is no informational input and I hardly think. However, I have a lot to say when I engage in conversations. Perhaps I am actually thinking because thinking that I hardly think is still thinking.

PARK: Do you follow certain principles or directions when you arrange images?

SHIN: I use different categories. When I think about *The History of People*, the first image conjured in my mind is of some unknown force. You could call it politics, as politics is invisible to our eyes. When you close your eyes you can see a certain image. I wanted to place that image at the top of the picture and place the struggle of the social underclass beneath it. *The History of People* extends laterally at the bottom of the picture, set against the background of military dictatorship. I wanted to represent their oppression through visual contrasts. Usually, I conceive of a large composition, but because of the low ceiling I could make it only two meters high. If the ceiling were higher, I would have included the stars, the sun, and the moon as though they were part of the sky under the autocratic military regime. When it comes to that work, the title triggers some images in my mind and I go chasing after them. I would add or remove details, but as long as I have determined the overall composition, I can insert them and the narrative would work out. My working procedures are relatively traditional compared to yours. I categorize images and insert them into my work.

PARK: The process must be fairly complicated.

SHIN: Certainly, as my work is large-scale. I inserted a story into the backdrop of military dictatorship. I also wanted to include the upper class, but that didn't make it in. The same goes for the issue of college entrance exams. I wanted to represent the people trapped in the military regime, to include scenes of torture, and hopefully I can do that next time. I think that words, not images, actually do exist as reality. I want to include the words in advertisement copies that are floating around. It seems to me that these words are afloat in

Seoul's sky. I want to insert words as narration in the first panel which has a lot of the sky in the composition, but I am not so sure. At first I thought of painting some dark clouds. At any rate, Joo Jae-hwan saw all this and called it "grotesque realism."²²

After I sold my house I stayed at a house out in the middle of nowhere. I am very fond of the wind. It makes me feel alive. Oak tree leaves don't fall, even in the winter, and like this environment, my paintings are somewhat sinister. The background of modern Korea's history is actually rather sinister, and the grotesque is my cup of tea. My work is not so much calm seawaters, but erupting forces, which explain those bulging muscles.

PARK: Now that I think about it, your work shares a certain affinity with the so-called magical realism of the Mexican muralists. I think that such things are difficult for critics to discern.

SHIN: Even I am not entirely sure, but I want my work to convey a certain feeling of exhilaration, of penetrating some sort of barrier, if you will. Perhaps I am a classicist after all, not that my work is classic, but classicist. I fear that much contemporary painting is so heavily theorized that it loses true pictoriality. Of course, I don't see my paintings as being so painterly. They are more literary. We also have to consider the legitimacy of the work as paintings and visual objects. I am interested in expressive language that is communicated not as explanations but as visual affect. I am pursuing painting not just as a language but also simultaneously as a sensation. But I think that my work has yet to go there. We share a kind of *gi* or energy, like that of Kim Jeong-hui's. However, it's merely *gi*, and I doubt if it is socially relevant. I am not fond of his work. His *gi* is like that of a coward. Perhaps it would have been respectable during the Joseon dynasty, but I don't think it's exemplary for our time. Even though the king exiled him on Jeju Island, he still bowed facing north, in an act of utmost respect for the king. That is the energy of submission, not of liberation. In common parlance, you could say it is *gi* devoid of pride. By contrast, the *gi* of Bada Shanren of China

22 . Joo Jae-hwan was a prominent member of the artist group Reality and Utterance in the 1980s. He maintains an active studio practice and is considered an influential figure for many young artists today.

as we know it in the art history textbooks is that of liberation.²³ Kim Jeong-hui's *gi* is that of subservience. He wanted to resume his post.

PARK: Your work is quite cinematic. Do you view a lot of films or videos and reference them?

SHIN: Now, I try to watch films. I borrowed some films from my children's room. There are many on cable television, but they are not particularly to my liking. I sort of get them without having to watch them. I used to want to make films in my college years, but I don't watch films. It's been ages since I last went to a cinema. I once went to a movie theater in Yeongdeungpo, Seoul and watched *Shiri*.²⁴ Seeing how such a lousy film did so well commercially was a clear demonstration of how lousy Korean cinema is. There was no content to it. Americans are like that. They are the best at doing business, and the businessmen run American politics. The US Secretary of Treasury, Robert Rubin, is a prime example. He convinced Kim Young-sam to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).²⁵ They are bound to be good at business with us, because they are positioned above us, looking down at us. We are underneath them and cannot see them. Even when painting, I can paint better when I am looking down at the people, looking beneath me with a bit of condescension. I wouldn't have been able to paint if I had to constantly climb up from below. Sometimes I do feel like I am looking down from above, which makes it easy. Sometimes I struggle because I cannot see, and it's necessary to have a view from above. What's unnerving was this article I read in the daily *Hankyoreh*; it was about how the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger predicted that Koreans would develop anti-American sentiments. It's a short article, but I pasted it in my studio. This article was uncanny, because it suggested that Kissinger could read the sentiments of the general Korean public.

23 □. Bada Shanren, born Zhu Da, ca. 1626–1705, was a leading Chinese painter and calligrapher in the early Qing dynasty. Originally a prince of the late Ming dynasty, he became a Buddhist monk after his country fell.

24 □. *Shiri* (1999), directed by Kang Je-gyu, is a commercially successful Korean film about North Korean guerrilla warfare in the heart of Seoul.

25 □. Kim Young-sam was a Korean politician and activist who served as the seventh President of Korea from 1993 to 1998. Kim was the first civilian to become the president in thirty years.

PARK: Thank you for this extended interview, it will be very useful for understanding your work. I have one last question. You have been dealing with the trial surrounding your painting *Rice Planting* for a long time. I am curious to know how that is proceeding.

SHIN: Sung Wan-kyung has submitted a testimonial, and I went back to the court again yesterday. The judge seems to be having a hard time deciding on a verdict. I think we gave it a relatively good fight. Cho Yong Whan is one of the best lawyers for human rights and National Security Laws. A Korean expatriate was once arrested in the US for infringing National Security Laws because he was involved with Korean college students. He was found guilty, but Cho appealed the case at the United Nations Human Rights Council and he was found not guilty. If they find me guilty I will also have to appeal at the Council. I believe the original sentence was three years with a two-year suspension. The verdict will be out on August 13th, and who knows what it will be. Sung did well, and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA)'s Hong Jongsu had a hard time when he evaluated the painting as infringing National Security Laws. When I showed Hong a photograph of *Rice Planting* and asked him if that was the painting he had investigated, he denied it. After ten years his memory must have failed. In his memory, the painting supposedly depicted the peninsula clearly divided by a metal fence into north and south, and it included a map, but when he looked at the photo he couldn't see those elements. So the trial was postponed so that we could bring in the actual painting to the court. Anyway, the lawyer has done a tremendous amount of preparation. It's the judge who decides. Is it possible for a judge at a lower level to overturn the Supreme Court's decision? I am cautiously optimistic to see the judge issue an order to the prosecutor to review the appeal after listening to Sung's testimony. But then, who knows. . . .

This concludes the interview that took place on July 15, 1999 at Shin Hakchul's residence. The following is a short phone interview conducted on August 15th, after the absurd verdict on the Rice Planting trial was announced.

PARK: I am really stunned by the verdict, which I find absolutely unacceptable. What are your thoughts?

SHIN: It seemed to me that the judge was in an awkward position when it came to making the verdict. He seemed reluctant to even be present at the court from the beginning, as though the trial was entirely unnecessary. In the end, he announced a sentence of ten months and probation. I don't accept it, so I will have to appeal. I will also have to file a complaint at the International Human Rights

Commission. In addition to attending to legal responses to such matters, I think it is necessary to make a forum in which we can discuss matters of cultural freedom and rights. There are many legal disputes other than the one involving *Rice Planting*, but they all seem to be regarded as isolated cases; I would like to see this as an opportunity to provide a new occasion for dealing with similar cases.

—“Shin Hakchul: Painting of the People’s History” was first published in *Munhwa/gwahak*, no. 19 (1999): 223–245. [In Korean.]