

A Rose Is A Rose and Not A Rose

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With each breath in and out, pink roses bloom in succession, following the subtle movements of the swaying air flow. As I stare blankly for a long time at the painting hanging on the wall, a scene emerges before my eyes that seems like a dream, but might be real life. At first glance, it may seem that the roses have been carefully drawn on the entire canvas, but it is difficult to readily conclude that the roses were drawn intentionally from the beginning. This is because certain shapes, which do not seem to be the result of sincere representation of an object or the expression of passionate emotions, float vaguely and dimly on the stains which are like air, or like a thin film applied with paint. Yeesoookyung's roses bloom right in front of my eyes in this way, like unreality superimposed on top of reality.

One day early last summer, Yeesoookyung abruptly informed me that she had been painting roses. Although it was quite a sudden statement, the combination of the artist and the rose did not feel particularly strange to me, nor did it seem new. Her recent exhibition¹ that had used the rose as a motif, and her series of paintings² that frequently featured this charming flower immediately came to my mind. However, the roses in these new paintings were somewhat different from what my rather hasty predictions had led me to expect. This flower, which Yeesoookyung had been drawing almost compulsively throughout the past year, and is drawing still, was a strange, sensual, and extremely beautiful flower that had never appeared in her previous work, or in anyone else's, and, as such, seemed to exist nowhere else.

The rose, with its gorgeous petals that spread out in layers and its sweet scent, has long been loved as the 'queen of flowers.' For the ancient Romans, the rose was the flower of Venus, the goddess of love. It has been regarded by Christians as a symbol of martyrdom (red rose) and purity (white rose), and its heavenly fragrance and beauty are said to remind humans, who fell

¹ "Oh Rose!", 2020, Space: Willing N Dealing.

² Titled *Past Life Regression Painting*, the series of paintings was first showcased at the exhibition "When I Become You" (2015, Daegu Art Museum) under the title *Past Life Retrogression Painting*. Since then, it has appeared (under a modified title) in the exhibitions "Saint Breeders" (2015, Atelier Hermès), "Oh Rose!" (2020, Space: Willing N Dealing), and "The Story of a Girl Named Long Journey" (2021, Seoul Museum of Art).

to earth through original sin, of the glory of heaven. In the East, the rose has been compared to a beautiful woman, and it has also been a symbol of long-lasting youth, or love that lasts forever. In terms of meaning, this is also in line with the fact that the Romans, who regarded the rose as a symbol of death and resurrection, often planted this flower on the tomb of a loved one.

In Yeesoookyung's work, the rose is a compelling subject through its retrograde connections with her experiences in previous lives. The rose, which has been a symbol of love and beauty in different times and places, leads the artist to a new life each time on her special journey. "I am walking through a forest of red roses, in full bloom. . ." In her retrograde experience of her previous lives, the rose appears, without fail, at every juncture of transition from one life to another. Roses, as she said, are a signal that announces the beginning of "a fearful yet thrilling journey to the unknown world." It is impossible to avoid death every time as she moves on from one previous life to another, but the fearful and thrilling feeling of being born again blooms, as a rose.

Through her retrograde experiences, Yeesoookyung, a skilled storyteller, attempted to face the canvas with a completely new eye, breaking away from the solid context of tradition, customs, and discourse that painting had built over many centuries.³ The artist, who has boldly entered the abyss of the unconscious through hypnosis, ruminates on the scenes she faced in numerous moments of her endless past, one after another. Going back to her previous lives several times, she discovers countless and endless ties with people, and moments of joy and pleasure, beyond the time of the far distant past. However, there are also memories of anger, sadness, anguish and pain. Emotions and sensations that were incomprehensible in the ever-repetitive life are finally embodied in paintings by following the guidance of the rose in the unconscious.

Walking through a forest or in a garden full of roses in bloom, the artist finds herself in a previous life, when she was the head of a matrilineal tribe⁴ that worshipped whales, and then in another previous life, as a grieving woman who sets out on a journey into an unknown future after losing her old and sick husband. Passing through the rose-covered forest, she finds herself reincarnated as a bear roaming around the cubs of her previous life to avenge herself on the hunter who killed her. In another life, she is reincarnated as a monk, and dies suddenly

³ At the same time, this retrograde experience of previous lives also seems to be an effort to be free from the context of the work that the artist herself has attempted.

⁴ The narrative of a previous life as the matriarch of a matrilineal tribe, which appears at the beginning of the retrograde experience, was partially excerpted for the subtitle of the *Oh Rose!* series shown in the exhibition "Nine Dragons in Wonderland" (2022, The Page Gallery).

while meditating in front of a wall. After that, she wanders as a spirit and permeates into a Buddha carved on a rock (磨崖佛). She is born as the daughter of a man falsely accused of treason, and before marriage, her entire family is killed before she revives as a bubble. She soon enlarges her body greatly to become a tsunami that sweeps away an entire village.

In this way, the rose appears as an intense image throughout the *Past Life Regression Painting* series (2014-). Sometimes roses serve as a background for the narrative of the artist's previous life, and sometimes they overwhelm the entire canvas, dyeing the revived memories of her previous life red. On the other hand, the roses in the *Oh Rose!* series (2022-) do not rely on a specific context or specific shape. It is impressive to see the smooth movement of the hand, as if the artist was determined to embody the sensation she received from the roses, rather than carefully observing and fully grasping the roses in front of her and transferring them as they were. In the end, Yeesoookyung's roses, represented in an unrealistic form, break through the entangled and accumulated narratives beyond consciousness, and summon the essence of the rose to touch the primordial senses.

Perhaps that is why, despite the common subject of the rose, the *Oh Rose!* series does not have a significant connection with the *Past Life Regression Painting* series, which uses roses to construct concrete situations and contexts. Rather, the sensation captured throughout the work is closer to the *Flame* series (2005-2009), which, along with the *Translated Vase* series (2002-), was Yeesoookyung's representative works in the early 2000s. A sense of déjà vu. The roses that bloom surreptitiously, as if they are breathing, and stretch out along the vine remind us of the energy of the flame that seemed to go out but continued to burn fiercely, evoking the essence of the flame rather than representing it, and thus shimmering more vigorously.

Since her first solo exhibition⁵ in the early 1990s, Yeesoookyung has been expanding the scope of her work in various ways, promptly capturing and flexibly responding to the discourses and methodologies of contemporary art. Then, with the *Flame* series, she suddenly opened the door to a completely different world.⁶ For her medium, she chose cinnabar, which had been used in the East to draw amulets to drive away evil spirits. As if controlling the inner flame with the magical effect of this material, which had also been used as a medicine to soothe madness, she trapped the red flame within her entire canvas. It was a silent cry, expressed in a completely different temperature and sense, appealing to certain primitive and fundamental

⁵ Yeesoookyung's first exhibition as an artist is said to have been a solo "Getting Married to Myself" held at Gallery Indeco and Gallery K in 1992.

⁶ "Flame", 2006, One and J. Gallery.

emotions, making it quite different from the context of her previous works.

The flame, which was raging violently and red-hot, as if it were trying to burn the whole world, gradually changed around 2008, embracing the narrative surrounding the artist's everyday life. When the artist first started drawing flames with a cinnabar, the large canvas was filled with flames wavering and burning, but at some point, these wildly sprawling flames transformed into movements that seem to trace the shape of something delicately. The movement of the hand, which had repeatedly rendered only the energy of flames, gradually transformed into various shapes like clouds and grass, and sometimes dragons, monsters, and girls' faces, creating fluently and elegantly repeated patterns. The artist's gaze, which had been buried in inner emotions, opened to the outside, and began to sensitively capture and register the vibrations and waves of the body and mind about the world.

Just as the flames of Yeesoookyung are shapes that burn with emotions hidden inside or reacted to the external world, with hatred and frustration, fear and anger, roses are also the result of blooming one by one, as if breathing certain emotions, or perhaps spitting them out. Although the intensity and amplitude of emotions and breath are not the same, the mind of the artist seems to run unstoppably on the canvas. The flame of the earlier period, which poured out a mass of indistinct emotions with an intense energy, was gradually refined and calmed as the artist responded and listened to the outside world. But the intense image of the rose derived from the concrete narrative of the experience of retrogression to previous lives instead removes the context and background that the artist used to rely on and gradually transforms into an unnameable, ambiguous and mild energy.

As if it had become easier to focus on and immerse herself in the 'act of drawing' itself through freer and more liberated gestures and breath once the artist broke away from a concrete narrative structure, now only 'painting' and 'I who draw it' exist in Yeesoookyung's world. The rose is not a 'rose,' but a 'medium' that reinforces a moment of full awakening. Repetition and concentration sometimes separate the body and mind in ecstasy, but sometimes induce a lucid awakening. In the ceaseless flow of time, confirming the existence of the 'I' that repeats the action at every moment of the flow, and confirming the fact that 'I' exist here, moment by moment, in an endlessly extended time – this is a magical incantation that at a single stroke, relieves the anxiety that is prevalent in an ambiguous world.

'That' specific rose, which appeared in countless narratives over a long period of time, in fact, does not exist anymore. This is because the roses of the modern age are the product of

repeated crossbreeding to obtain gorgeous and sophisticated breeds. It is futile to remember the age-old meanings or ancient symbols, and associate them with roses that are found easily around us. The appearance and shape from which such meanings and symbols originated have long since disappeared, and the roses I have seen so far may, perhaps, have nothing to do with the stories of the past that have been piled up, layer upon layer. It is the same with Yeesoogyung's rose. The object named a rose, the journey to the previous lives induced by the rose, and the memories full of pain and suffering – in all of these, the rose itself is no longer important.

For the artist, who describes herself as having “a very strong fear of death,” the act of painting is an act of reassuring herself by dispelling her fear of her existence itself disappearing or vanishing, or of the cessation of time. The moment Yeesoogyung fully concentrates on painting, she is clearly aware that only two things exist in this huge universe: the artist herself and her work. Through the act of painting, she embodies on her canvas a world in which she is free from the fear of parting or death– that is, the world she will never leave, never be separated from; a world that will never disappear. And she willingly chooses to become one with this world. She sinks into the moment when all her fears are wiped away, all her senses are heightened and she is filled with bliss through the rose.

Yeesoogyung says that in order to paint the rosebuds, she waited for the vision of roses to emerge from amongst the stains. She says she has spent hours staring at the stains. Was the rose a sign of the plenitude of the world, where the fear of the unknown was completely removed? Following the melody of a song recited in a low tune, rose buds burst into flower here and there on the canvas.⁷ A white light that seems to blind one's eyes, the light erases the roses in full bloom in the room. The rose is light. Just light. Waiting for the rose, thinking of the rose, drawing the rose, weaving the sensation of the rose again and again, I stand in front of the door Yeesoogyung has approached. I breathe in and out deeply, and breathe in again; then I hold for a moment. A rose emerges. What should I name this?

⁷ *In the Flower Garden* (2022).