



Byung Hoon Choi
afterimage of beginning 013-395
2013
Basalt
22.44 x 139.76 x 23.23 inches
© Courtesy of Friedman Benda and the artist

TO WATCH

BYUNG HOON CHOI

BY ANN BINLOT

The quietly meditative quality of the smooth, elegant works by South Korean artist Byung Hoon Choi evokes his beliefs in Zen Buddhism. Choi, 64, has an introspective mind and seeks to express a sense of inner harmony in his sculptures, whose organic forms are inspired by his country's landscapes. Although he is very well known in South Korea, it was not until this spring that he had his first solo exhibition in the United States, at Friedman Benda in New York. Titled "In One Stroke," it featured 11 bench-like pieces, vaguely recalling fallen logs, that were chiseled from basalt stone found in Indonesia.

Choi spoke to *Whitewall* about how Zen philosophy and the art of calligraphy inform his work, how he travels to the Indonesian island of Java to look for the right stone, and the sculpting techniques that he employs.

WHITEWALL: What was the very first object that you made?

BYUNG HOON CHOI: In 1973, when I was in my fourth year at university, I made a small bowl-shaped object in wood that was selected for the National Art Exhibition competition that year. It became the first step of my career.

WW: In 1978 you founded an association of young artists called *The Society of Contemporary Craft Artists*. What were your aims and what was South Korea's art scene like back then?

BHC: Art in Korea was at the initial stage of industrialization and modernism. But many of the established artists stuck to old traditions in their practice. Meanwhile, young artists felt that there was a lack of opportunities for producing their art. Under those circumstances in 1978, when I was 28, my colleagues and I founded The Society of Contemporary Craft Artists, which was rather progressive in Korea's conservative climate at that time. We regularly presented our work and started our own activities through this association. Our aim was to pursue the value of the future society of Korea. In the age of early modernism, we attached more value to the creative world of artists and presented innovative, challenging works by looking beyond the value criteria of modernism.

WW: Your works tend to be smooth and peaceful. Is this a reflection of your character?

BHC: Traditionally, Koreans have adapted to live in harmony with nature. Alongside this, Zen Buddhism, which is the traditional basis of Korean philosophy, is a thought process in the inner mind of Koreans. Zen seeks to restore proper humanity and complete human virtue through self-discipline that begins by immersing oneself in one's own inner world. These philosophies have deeply affected the world of my works.

Through the silence of inner reflection, rather than shouting about fancy appearances, I intend to express true beauty through minimalism and emptiness. So my work is a reflection of myself

and the great value that I attach to introspection and self-discipline.

WW: A lot of your works juxtapose two contrasting materials, such as rough stone and smooth granite. What do you seek to express about the dualities of Zen philosophy?

BHC: The rough, natural stone bears the reflection of mystical, eternal time, while the smoothed stone reflects modern time as well as the monism of Zen philosophy. It tells us that, while transcending time and space, the nature of all coexistent things at this moment is one.

WW: What can you tell us about the starting point for your new pieces and the "In One Stroke" theme?

BHC: They are based on the Korean spirit of calligraphy. In the East, calligraphy is a means of communication and of mind cultivation that allows one to portray the infinite freedom of the mind. Being in a tranquil state of mind, free from inward agitation or earthly desires and anguish, is a prerequisite for calligraphy. Fancy techniques or the recoating of brushstrokes are frowned upon. It is only when a single brushstroke from a tranquil mind constructs a form that one has reached the noble state of Zen. This is why I decided to use basalts, the igneous rocks that are black on the inside and whose outer surfaces keep their initial patterns until I sculpt them. The sculpting enables the inner black skin to become visible with "one

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Top:
Byung Hoon Choi
afterimage of beginning 013-394
2013
Basalt
20.87 x 133.86 x 27.56 inches
© Courtesy Friedman Benda and the artist

Bottom:
Byung Hoon Choi
afterimage of beginning 013-401
2013
Basalt
22.05 x 114.17 x 26.77 inches
© Courtesy Friedman Benda and the artist



stroke." The theme is a starting point for me to further my identity.

WW: Where did you go to find the rocks and how hard was it to find the right materials?

BHC: I used to travel to the mountains and rivers of Gangwon-do, the Korean province where I grew up, to look for stones. But as the scope of my work has expanded, I've been using basalts from Indonesia. To look for the right materials for my "In One Stroke" works, I traveled to a basalt mine in Sumedang in the Indonesian countryside in West Java—it's five hours from Jakarta by car. It was a very tough experience because I had to collect and transport the rock.

WW: Do you envision what you want to make when you find the right material, or do you have an idea of what you want to create beforehand?

BHC: Normally when I'm working on small-scale pieces, I first sketch and make models in the studio and then source the materials. When I'm working on larger-scale pieces, I find the materials first and then come up with the right forms.

WW: Your work has been compared to that of Alvar Aalto, Isamu Noguchi, and Henry Moore. Do you feel an affinity with their work?

BHC: In 1988, when I was a research professor at Aalto University in Finland, I carried out a research project on Alvar Aalto's architecture and furniture designs and became interested in his design philosophy. I also feel an affinity with the works by Isamu Noguchi.

WW: You used to be director of the Hongik Museum of Art in Seoul. How did you balance this position

with your personal creative aspirations? Would you be interested in directing a museum again?

BHC: I think we are living in a time where we don't need to look at art and design with a dichotomous way of thinking. So I had no problem in combining a director's duties with an artist's life although it wasn't easy, of course, to be doing both time-wise. But the director's position offered me many good opportunities that helped to shape my world of artwork. If I had the chance to direct a museum again, it would be fascinating to do.