



Choi takes his 'art furniture' global

NY critics call it 'object of meditation'

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Choi Byung-hoon's artwork is both practical and esthetic.

One of the most recognized pieces of the sculptor and art furniture maker is a chair which has a black sheen granite stone at the foot of a laminated and black varnished walnut veneer chair.

The over 100-kilogram stone counter-balances the weight of the sitter, giving the bent wood chair balance and function. But at the same time, the stone doubles as a subject of meditation, giving the sitter a moment of peace to ponder over the myriad of years it took to be formed.

It now sits in the permanent collection of the Vitra Design Museum in Germany.

Choi, a 61 year-old Seoul-based sculptor, known for pioneering the field of "art furniture" in Korea has explored the relationship between functional objects and art and made them into a whole new field of his own.

Devoid of accessories, various types of stones, wood and natural materials are chiseled into majestic art pieces. Many critics from home and abroad say his works are very oriental and have the "Korean spirit" in them.

"My benches look as if they are plucked from nature. Without details or additional materials to accentuate the pieces, they reveal their raw wooden texture," he said, referring to oval shaped wooden benches, resting on round shaped smaller rocks.

"They are neither detail oriented and clean-cut Japanese furniture nor Chinese ones that boast of the splendor of scale. My works stem from Joseon Kingdom's neo-Confucianism which values inner stillness and self-discipline."

And that became his philosophy and identity running throughout all his works.

His natural yet elegant art prompted Vitra Design Museum's founding director Alexander von Vegesack to draw comparisons to those of the late Isamu Noguchi, whose Asian heritage and modernist aesthetics distinguished his works from other contemporary artists.

He commented, "Common to both Asian artists is the reduction to simple outlined forms, the use of natural materials, the play with strong contrasts, and the great qui-



Choi Byung-hoon

etude their objects exude."

As one of the most prolific Korean artist and sculptors, Choi's works are scattered around the world in the hands of art collectors as well as famous museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Since he was invited in 1996 to the Galerie Downtown in Paris, he has held six solo exhibitions. Recently he came back to Korea after his successful U.S. debut, "In One Stroke," which ended its one month run on March 29, at the renowned Friedman Benda Gallery, in New York.

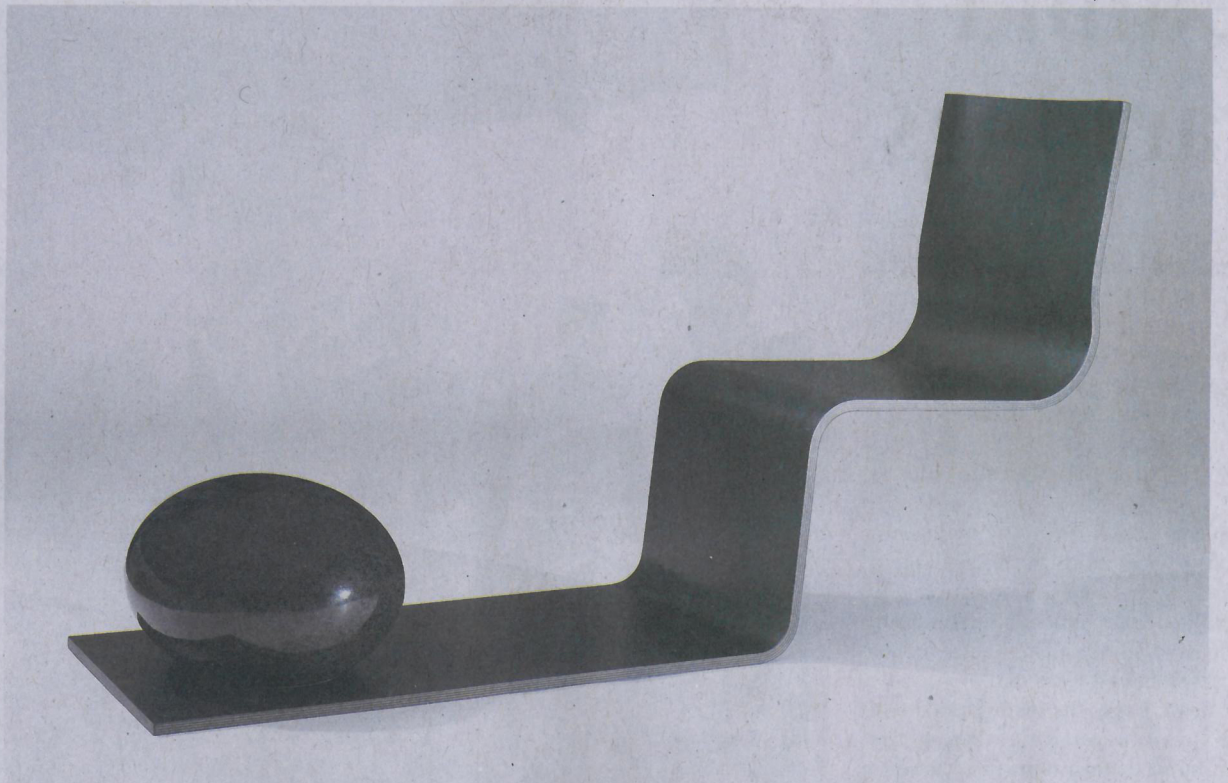
"While I was preparing for the New York collection, I came to know how enormous the U.S. art market is. What was amazing also was that they place no limitations on the scale or value of the exhibits. Once the gallery decided to exhibit my works, all it requested from me was to bring what hasn't been shown to others," he said.

The theme he chose for the New York collection was calligraphy, and he transformed brushstrokes into sculptural benches, made of basalt, volcanic rock excavated from the Indonesian coast. He took 11 pieces including one that weighed 1.5 tons and is three meters long.

"Calligraphy is a means of communication but it is also a means of meditation. One's mind should be concentrated to the fullest to draw each stroke. Unlike Western paintings that add layers of colors, everything is in one stroke. That is pretty novel for Westerners and the critics were awed at the novelty."

Upon the New York debut, local critics said that like Noguchi, Choi's works fall under neither the category of art nor design but in a separate category of meditative objects meant to instill inner quiet.

He said that to be a successful artist one should have their own identity more than anything else. "What I learned from the exhibition is that anyone who creates new values can have a chance to step into



Choi Byung-hoon's bent chair, created in 2007, is one of his famous "afterimage" series. It is now exhibited in the permanent collection of Vitra Design Museum, in Germany.

Courtesy of Choi Byung-hoon



Choi's basalt bench, included in his U.S. debut solo collection, was exhibited at Friedman Benda gallery in New York between Feb. 27 and March 29.

and succeed in the American market," he said.

As for the lack of world renowned designers in Korea, he said that Korean students spend too much time in brushing up their skills. "What is needed in the 21st century of convergence is creativity and identity. Design education that teaches standards should be replaced with studies on humanities, since without this a person cannot establish their own philosophy that sustains all their work," he said.

Choi also said that he has become interested in esthetics books to learn

creative ideas from them. "While I was reading esthetics books published in China and Japan, I felt that Korea's academic foundation in that field was relatively shallow. Those kind of studies should be integral so that students can use such references to establish their own creative identity."

Who is Choi Byung-hoon?

Born in 1952, the Seoul based sculptor is considered a pioneer of contemporary South Korean art furniture. He studied for both his bach-

elor and masters degrees at Hongik University in Seoul. He has held numerous solo exhibitions and invitational shows in Paris, Seoul and New York, and his works are exhibited in the permanent collections of the Vitra Design Museum in Germany and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Currently he is a professor at Hongik University. He recently held a solo exhibition, "In One Stroke," at the Friedman Benda Gallery in New York, from Feb. 27 to March 29.