

Foreword: On Ah-Bin Shim's Solo Exhibition *Opposite Poles of a Unity*

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Representative, Space Willing N Dealing

The earnest philosophical intent behind Ah-Bin Shim's fourth solo show is already hinted at in the exhibition title *Opposite Poles of a Unity*. Her video installation series *You & I* (2012-2013) is composed of works employing ingenious, straightforward devices. A video monitor is paired with a mirror to create the effect of decalomania: thus the on-screen figures encounter his or her own reflection in the opposing mirror surface. In the 2013 installation, a male figure holds a fishing rod in hand and alternately dozes off, yawns, fidgets or scratches himself in frustration, as one may have seen fishers doing as they sit and wait for something to bite. And then something finally does bite, and the video image shows the man wrestling with the taut line. But since this scene is echoed in the mirror positioned directly below the monitor, to the viewer it seems as though the man is fishing for his own reflection, trying to reel in what appears to be his duplicate image hovering just beneath the surface of the water. The work prior to this (the 2012 installation) similarly shows a character in a tug-of-war with his own likeness. The twinned images constitute a set of poles that are linked by the tautly stretched tension of the rope. Whether a piece of rope or a fishing line, these mediating objects function as tools that make visible the opposite poles of a given situation. The parallel figures reconfirm their being by mutually ascribing a distinct otherness to their likeness.

To observe the work *Birth* (2013), the viewer must crouch on the floor and peer through a hole; by doing so, she comes face to face with a mirror image of herself. This work continues the underlying theme of the exhibition by impelling the viewer to realize the unity of this image and its (actual) counterpart. Beside a golf club suspended in mid-air, there is a long shelf on which a monitor displays a video of a naked woman down on all fours and moving her body back and forth in a sexually suggestive manner. On the opposite end of the shelf there is a hole, and a cracked eggshell lies on the floor right below this hole. A red thread emerges from the cracked shell, crisscrosses over the floor in a haphazard way, and then disappears through another hole in the facing wall. Below this hole, on the floor, is a patch of artificial turf that invites viewers to kneel down and peek inside the hole. Doing so, the viewer is confronted with the image of her own crouching shape as relayed in real-time by a surveillance camera installed in the ceiling. The viewer gradually realizes that the nude woman in the video was in fact herself.

In the installation *Jiang Taigong* (2013), we see a more straightforward expression of the theme. A 162x111.6cm canvas is propped up at a right angle to a mirror of the same dimensions that has been laid flat on the floor. A fishing rod emerges out of the canvas, casting its line over the mirror; the float appears submerged in the abyss that is the looking glass. This work derived from Shim's realization of the similarities between fishing and the artistic process. The fish represents inspiration, motive, and opportunity. The artist, not knowing if and when she can catch this fish, must wait with rod in hand.

Green is a predominant color in many of Ah-Bin Shim's paintings. And holes abound, bringing to mind the putting green. In this exhibition as well, we see golf clubs and balls, artificial turfs, numerous holes. When asked about the repetitive use of these images, the artist replied that for her golf is a symbol of desire. Desire... Of all the ball games, golf is the sport that makes use of the biggest expanse of land. The aim of the sport is to propel into a small hole an even

smaller sphere object. The ball rolls over the vast green towards its final destination, in the midst of much betting and a flurry of social activity. Shim sees a wry humor in all of this. And she succeeds in extracting from this landscape of games a philosophical insight. The process of hitting the ball, walking in search of the ball, finding it, then sending it far off again—this repetition is what is at root of the thrilling sense of achievement, rather than the keeping track of who succeeded by how many strokes. In this sense the game does resemble the primal process of birth. For Shim the hole is an inescapable pit and a portal to another world. Overall, she makes much more active use of the exhibition space through the works shown here than she has done in her previous exhibitions.

Ah-Bin Shim was first introduced to me as a gallerist rather than as an artist, when she joined the gallery for which I was working in 2004. Not long afterwards, I discovered that she was in fact an aspiring artist who had recently returned to Korea after finishing her studies at an art college in the UK. I knew that in between her work at the gallery she was also devoting time to her emerging artwork, and was curious about the direction it would take. I was also keen to witness her development as an artist, knowing there would be elements of the minimal, clear-cut efficiency and lack of superfluity familiar to me through our collaborations at the gallery in her work. At the end of 2005, Shim went to Japan for a three-month residency program. But upon her return, she went back to working for the same gallery, and in a few years became its director. There were times when it seemed to me that she was getting farther and farther away from the path of an artist. On the other hand, because I was well aware of her dual inclination and capabilities as artist and employee of an organization, I felt she would do well whichever path she chose—artist or gallerist. Shim continued to combine the two interests, and in 2006 had her first solo exhibition in Seoul as an artist. The works shown in *Cheeky Art Show in Seoul* were both cynical and witty, and the paintings and video works to which drawings had been added were strong in narrative elements. This was characteristic of Shim's early style. The 2011 exhibit *You & Me*, which followed her decision to quit the gallery and become a full-time artist, was much more abstract. Narrative elements were cut and representational images were eliminated. Instead, geometric abstraction came to the fore. Lines, points, and simple figures were arranged in orderly fashion, but there was also a flexibility to the lines that led off in unconventional ways to tell a story. It was a style both more abstract and implicit.

When I run into Shim it is usually at some opening for an art museum or gallery show, and on such occasions she would be full of excitement. At each exhibition, she would take in the works earnestly and eagerly, expressing admiration and lavishly praising the artist. For me, this is sufficient proof of the joy she derives from being an artist herself. At one point in her career she had distanced herself from other practicing artists, regarding them objectively as she worked as mediator to bridge their work and the world. Now, as she resumes her life as an artist, she seems more than content to peer into her own image and plumb her own depths for inspiration, direction, and truth. This latest exhibition is a perfect example. As Shim delights in immersing herself in the works of other artists and revels in her own life as an artist, I too find myself delighting in the reflections I come across while standing in front of her works, of both myself and my life.