

# HOLLIS TAGGART

The Language of Rice in Hayoon Jay Lee's "Fields of Vision": 쌀의 언어

It is an extraordinary experience to find artworks that make such a vivid and memorable impression. There are works that touch one in the moment, and then disperse like a fleeting fragrance; but there are others that create a chain of thoughts and sensations which linger for some time afterwards. An intense curiosity was aroused in me when I learned about an exhibition by an artist who takes rice as her subject and who creates various works, including paintings, reliefs, and installations. Having written poems, such as 'While Eating Rice' and 'You, Chopsticks,' rice has always raised fundamental questions for me. So, I had a strong desire to engage with this art.

On a rainy day, I headed to Manhattan to see these rice works. After walking through the Chelsea art district, I entered the Hollis Taggart Gallery. A traditional Korean drum and a large circle were lying on the floor of a white cube-shaped space, and a red rice bag was hanging from the ceiling. These were mesmerizing images! Countless stories were ready to pour forth, like a flood from my heart, as I prepared my eyes and mind to analyze each piece of work.

Rice! Rice! There is just too much to say about it. Rice is survival and maternal love in its purest form, in fact, just like a mother's milk! However, when it is turned into money, wealth, and avarice, the result is war, sadness, and cruelty. After all, isn't rice an eternal heaven as well as an eternal question mark for soul? I was alternately overwhelmed by sadness, left gasping for breath, and bursting with anger after looking at Lee's work for a while. The artwork *My Mother's Land* (2015) reminded me that rice can represent a bottomless pit of greed, akin to a government official being acquitted of receiving millions of dollars in bribes. Or, how can we forget the tears of a forty-year-old man who was sentenced to jail for stealing a dozen eggs out of desperation and hunger. The artist is certainly sincere and dedicated to revealing some deeper truths. True art cannot exist without penetrating the veil of life's secrets. I want to bless the spirit of this artist for sending a message about darkness and light by kneading each grain of rice together as if she's bringing together people's hearts.

The world is in a state turmoil, where rice has become a signifier of social class - how unfair! Yet, there are still plenty of kind-hearted people, who, with a generous spirit toward those in need, are metaphorically sprinkling rice seeds on scrupulously prepared ground. In every situation, there is still reason to hope and dream. I stood in front of *Dream Land IV* (2019) for a long time, feeling warmth—in the work, a blue ocean and the curves of peaceful mountains and earth were laid out in a measured way under a sheltering sky.

After seeing the exhibition, I realized that each person would be left with a different

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impression received from the artist, before disappearing back into the rain. Upon returning home, I searched Hayoon Jay Lee's name on Google, as I was curious to learn more about an artist, who is sometimes referred to as a 'rice artist' or even a 'rice goddess.' I watched a video of her in front of a 'Statue of Peace,' pointing her finger and staring silently at the Japanese Embassy across the street, while rice is pouring all over her body. I took a moment to pray for those 'Comfort Women' and other victims of past suffering and violence. No human life is unaffected by what came before. I wanted to give a round of applause to Hayoon for not ignoring a history of pain and loss. Instead, she taking on the difficult duty of an artist, which is to console people. I whispered quietly that the work I saw that day was definitely an epic poem of sorts that made me ponder deeply, returning to many long-considered thoughts and questions—What is rice? What is the nature of existence? Finally, how can we live in the light? —I muttered a passage from a poem, in which a person's story is like a dance, one that is observed by sharp blue eyes.

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