

## **Spiritualism and Essence in the Art of Nadine Rennert**

By Dongyeon Koh, 2013

“The body is like a sheet of paper, which is erased in the stone of rebirth, and will be rewritten with every new life cycle. Wherein the paper withers away, the essence always remains.”(Exhibition viewer)

When I hear people say that spirituality plays a central role in contemporary art, it makes me glad on one hand and worried on the other. Glad because art, since religion lost its status, has to some extent fulfilled society's demand for spirituality. In terms of external appearance, of course, it took on a form different to that of traditional religions, but the desire for spirituality constituted an important theme in the works of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century German expressionists and abstract painters. Discussion of spirituality in contemporary art, however, also makes me worried. In the West, it seems, there is a deep-seated notion that spirituality has all but disappeared from industrialized Western society but remains in modern East Asia. Discussions of spirituality in Western-centered contemporary art, therefore, often involve not Western Christianity but belief systems such as Theosophy, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Zen. It is hard, however, to regard the deep-rooted dichotomy at work here – that of Western modernization versus Eastern spirituality – as a conclusion reached through direct observation of modern and contemporary East Asian history. Ultimately, such notions are based on the age-old colonial historical view that view takes a Western-centric perspective onto foreign cultures and attempts to idealize or simplify them. When a foreign contemporary artist comes to Korea, then, and talks about spirituality, I get scared.

When I first came face to face with German artist Rennert's work, I felt a similar mixture of fear and joy. On one hand, I was surprised at the way she had visited Korea twice and had made efforts to find common points between Korean culture and her own works; I was also worried to think what she may have gained through such efforts. She has met designated intangible cultural treasure Kim Geum-hwa, one of the country's leading masters of traditional shamanic dance; in this respect, the route by which she has come to experience in Korean culture is similar to that by which most other foreigners come into contact with it. What I really wonder, however, is what the spirits summoned by Kim Geum-hwa have in common with the spirituality that Rennert seeks. This, precisely, is what I find interesting about her work.

Rennert shared with me a quote left by a visitor at one of her exhibitions. Since this, of course, was a highly personal response to her works, there is no way of being certain exactly the viewer meant. But one interesting thing was that he or she wrote about nature and some kind of hard-to-define spirit moving within it. Here, a phenomenon of confusion between the self and the other, and between

temporal distinctions, becomes apparent. Of course, things such as spirits and spirituality cannot be logically explained or investigated through positivism. The various spiritualities that religions speak of, moreover, be they in the form of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit or the Buddhist state of nirvana, are all alike in that they can only be experienced in situations that transcend the temporal and spatial limits of the everyday.

One interesting point, however, is that the strange moment of experience mentioned by this viewer was expressed as part of an encounter with nature of the most ordinary, everyday kind. In fact, issues of soul and spirituality in Rennert's work are embodied in the form of extremely simple, everyday subjects. In *Divine Discontent*, for example, the two childlike figures, with relatively pure-looking souls, appear as entities attempting to experience spirituality in the here and the now, rather than in the transcendence of the soul of which we generally speak. In her well-known 2008 work *Making of Selbdritt*, (2008) meanwhile, she has recreated her own figure embraced between different souls. At first glance, the three figures embracing each other here appear like a family. In symbolic terms, however, this work represents more than simple family love: it is more like a family tree whose members share a kind of common spirit but were born and achieved spiritual communication with the rest of the world at different times. The artist has embodied herself here as an assembly of entities that share a kind of spirit that existed before she was born and will continue to exist into the future. This work contains the artist's deep respect for spirits not present, in a manner similar to that of Confucian ancestor worship.

This is what makes Rennert's work so interesting. Spirituality in traditional Confucianism, in the end, is intimately linked to such enlightenment. Rather than positing the existence of any particular god-like entity, Confucianism teaches the greatest possible expression of respect for the souls of the departed, which it believes to be ever-present in our daily lives. This belief is also found, in the form of spirits, in the totally different unofficial religion known as shamanism. If the former concerns ancestors who passed away in relative health and comfort, the latter uses ceremonies known as “*gut*” to sooth and directly confront, as if fighting with, the souls of those who were not so fortunate. The role of a *mudang* (Korean shaman) in a *gut* is that of a medium.

How, then, did Rennert arrive at these same beliefs? The artist herself has mentioned her own personal experience, as well as scientific and psychological experiments. In many religions, however, including shamanism, the soul is something whose existence cannot be proved by normal methods. Rather, the Japanese and Hebrew definitions of “essence” have proved more helpful in understanding the spirituality the artist is attempting to describe. According to Rennert, both the Japanese and Hebrew words for “essence” refer to a basic,

skeleton-like structure; both languages use symbols related to the human body. In her quest to posit the spirit as the essence of human beings and find a definition for it, she must have been extremely glad to discover a physical symbol of this kind. This provided support, in the form of a linguistic definition, of her conviction that the spirit is something embodied in the most everyday, physical processes.

If there is a point at which Rennert's art meets traditional shamanism or Eastern thought, surprisingly enough it is where she attempts to equate spirituality with everyday spirits – more specifically, the spirits of ancestors who lived before us in the same place, or the energy that circulates ceaselessly in nature. In this process, the artist emphasizes the physical human body in its most direct, primary form, and contact with this body.

This is why I want to compare the spirituality Rennert seeks not simply to Eastern spirituality but to that of Western religion as defined by Heidegger in his 1927 work *Being and Time*. According to Heidegger, Greek theology attempted to explain spirituality through highly physical, empirical and sensual processes. Aristotle regarded calling the names of the gods and summoning their images as an important part of meditation.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, it could even be said that Rennert, in calling up the forms of spirits or creating actual, physical embodiments of their forms, has not strayed all that far from the Western tradition of recreating the forms of the gods. Ultimately, it appears that the human desire, be it Western or Eastern, to summon the incomprehensible, the transcendental and the invisible into the dimension of visible and tangible experience and sensation is repeated in Rennert's work.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Sadler, *Heidegger and Aristotle: The Question of Being* (NJ: Continuum, 2001), 1-32