

*This critique was written as an exhibition preface for You Hyeonkyeong's solo exhibition "Sunny, Shining," which will be held at Woonjoong Gallery from July 2 to July 31, 2026.*

You Hyeonkyeong - Landscapes Visible When Eyes Are Closed

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1. You Hyeonkyeong draws out something like scars left behind after intense impressions and dizzying emotions—arising from chance encounters with landscapes and people in daily life—have pressed in with a piercing ache and then receded. Because those are wounds pressed down by arriving too instantaneously, they are not on the dimension of iconography, symbol, or representation, but are what is suddenly stamped into the heart and mind, what might be called the indexical. However, this indexicality is by no means something that holds an equivalent relationship with that of reality. Although it is something left in the head and heart, it cannot remain as a mere footprint. What we see and remember is something that exists yet disappears and is absent, and although it possesses an emerging form, it cannot construct a whole body. It seems You intends to paint that very thing. She clearly leaves the signs of landscapes or people violently, but she never represents them wholly, nor does she intend to do so. She neither loses the object, nor does she try to embody it. In between, at the boundary, the desperate brushstrokes and colors, writhing violently, define a realm where image and matter, figuration and abstraction are intertwined. This painting, realized at the point where medium meets artist, aims at that which can only be expressed through painting.

2. The artist calls her paintings "abstraction." She paints things that took place, things that happened in daily life, ex post facto (after the fact). She moves forward by relying on memory. Every painting is a post-facto reflection. The artist tries to objectify the thoughts that arose while she looked, and sifts from them. Here, this inevitably involves a process of abstraction. The artist carefully takes out from her heart and consciousness the impressive images she suddenly

encountered in a specific time and space, and through those well-aged and filtered impressions, she painstakingly reconstructs what it was that she saw, understood, or rather, believed she understood. Here, her own memories, emotions, and understanding of the object collide. And they require a period of restraint until they are compressed onto a rectangular canvas. The process of finally compressing only what is to be left behind like this becomes abstraction. What settled inside her own abyss for a long time and pushed its way up as the ultimate countenance after fully enduring the weight of that time has become the painting. This painting, having survived within a long time of rumination and a dark abyss, has finally become an object of comfortable contemplation for the artist herself. According to the artist, "Abstraction encompasses will and consciousness, implying time that has become ingrained in the body." (Artist's Note) And she adds that abstraction is attractive in that if it is not ingrained in the body, it is difficult to realize even if one has knowledge and skill. In addition, the artist paints directly onto unprimed canvas fabric using solely "strokes and brushwork." Already, the base surface, the white color, is being subsumed into the interior of the painting. The expression "stroke" rather than "line" is interesting. Lines and strokes are of different dimensions. In painting or calligraphy, brushwork ultimately possesses the character of a stroke. Rather than a line that merely defines the outline of an object, the pursuit of a stroke – which itself already carries vitality and expressiveness and externalizes the artist's entire being – is of utmost importance in these paintings. Ultimately, the artist shows a painting that is fully possible with just those strokes. Or rather, she reveals the culmination of countless attempts and failures to create her own complete phrase and stroke.

3. Her recent works, in which landscapes and figures predominate, seem to be driven by various thoughts and emotions triggered by a specific space and the people who were there, and they generally carry a quiet and desolate feeling. As the background of the canvas fabric occupies more space than the painted parts, the colors/lines painted reluctantly while jostling with that surface were placed and departed excessively fast. The forms that emerge tearing through the dazzlingly white background present the artist's agency like a fingerprint through sharp lines, sunbeam-like punctures, the materiality of the paint, and urgently rubbed brushstrokes. The paintings possess a state of being instantly sealed by uninhibited, almost violent brushwork and sudden finishes. The dramatic staging of abruptly controlled brushstrokes and paint vividly calls to mind the process of creating the painting, while revealing the artist's gestures and emotions

on the canvas without filtration. Although she generally does not know clearly what and how she can paint, through the very act of painting, a body gradually takes shape. A sense of speed and the force of the brushstroke are important matters that determine this painting. It becomes the content of the painting at times, and at other times serves as a factor that causes an event to occur on the picture plane. These are a kind of indices that make the intensity of an individual's body, senses, and nerves felt. Ultimately, what this artist intends to paint is the external appearance and form of the world, but at the same time, the vivid skins of painting achieved through paint and brushwork; while implying the outer shell of a specific existence, it is similar yet at the same time never a representation, but a pictorial figuration of an existence that is not a mere lookalike. As mentioned previously, the artist calls her paintings abstraction. Her paintings reveal something and then erase it. The frustration of not being able to fully show it wrestles with her will to express.

4. Forms of landscapes or people, and sometimes landscapes and people together, were painted and then erased. Considerably abbreviated traces sway contingently. The picture plane, deliberately left incomplete with a studied nonchalance, appears unfriendly and even seems to deny the work itself. It implicitly resists any attempt to place the images – which materialize and unfold within the physical reality of painting – into a domain that visually represents art. This tendency is a primary characteristic of 20th-century modern art. You Hyeonkyeong carves out a path that is slightly different from conventional, stylized painting. Avoiding the figurative and the sensory while at the same time not being reduced to the conceptual, in that in-between space, she moves toward a painting that is not a sediment of an idea or an invention of a concept, but a figuration yet inevitably abstract, both figurative and abstract. The artist tries to remain faithful to her own body, emotions, memory, and instinct. She intends to paint that certain something that emerges based entirely upon them. The artist states that she paints "beloved subjects too profound to bear, my dad, my mom, the warm times spent with them, and humans who cannot escape birth, old age, sickness, and death, the poor people standing alone in the field." (Artist's Note) They are the people the artist wishes to resemble, and also "independent individuals who possess their own themes and safeguard those themes." (Artist's Note) Ultimately, compassion and affection for people drive the artist to primarily paint figures. This painting does not construct a logical narrative, but throws down a strange, poetic atmosphere with striking clarity. Mere traces of a certain kind simply make one see something. Or rather, they make one imagine, make one

remember. These lines, colors, and forms, which are like cryptic clues, traverse roughly truncated parts, torn-away situations, and erased and smudged memories and thoughts. Brushstroke and brushstroke are never sutured, vibrating right in that spot. It is a painting composed of fragmentary and accidental connections. The viewer's heartbeat, struck by an object that has pierced through time and space, remains bruised. In any case, there is nothing transparent in this painting. It removes the formal composition of the work regarding conventionally customary paintings and erases general expectations. It is a painting that searches for another possibility, another role, for painting. In this way, You Hyeonkyeong's paintings occupy a precarious position at the boundary between order and chaos, taking shape as something informel.