

Rheem, Daul: On the Objectivity of Truth

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I would like to open the discussion of *Rheem, Daul* by invoking the figure of the Dokkaebi¹, a concept widely familiar to all Koreans. When an object unexpectedly appears in a place where no memory of its movement exists, or when two people describe the same person yet offer startlingly different accounts, we often summon the presence of the Dokkaebi. The Dokkaebi serves as a being that alleviates the uneasiness when our solid perception is undermined, becoming an entity onto which we can pass the blame for such dissonance.

The Dokkaebi, in fact, underpins the series of metal support structures that Rheem Daul has been steadily developing since 2022. This series, exemplified by works such as *Choi Jae Yeon* (2023) and *Alexa Okuwen* (2023), features translucent linen, either hand-painted or digitally printed by Rheem, draped over both sides of a lattice-structured metal frame. In the space between the fabric and the grid structure, paper fragments are embedded, adding another visual layer atop the images inscribed on the linen. As a result, the forms perceived by the viewer shift continually, depending on the angle and lighting from their vantage point. The shape that emerges in these moments, neither fully tangible nor intangible, manifests before the audience as a fluid entity, mirroring the elusive and ever-changing figure of the Dokkaebi, defying any fixed portrayal.

What stands out as particularly interesting is the presence of a metal zipper that seamlessly unites the 'painterly surfaces' layered front and back. The zipper, far from serving merely as a decorative element, functions as a practical tool. It allows the artist to directly intervene during the exhibition, stripping away existing fabric and applying new images, thereby facilitating a form of artistic metamorphosis. In essence, this work—where only a thoroughly subjective form is perceived, independent of the physical frame—undergoes a complete metamorphosis throughout the exhibition, driven by the artist's repeated interventions. While witnessing the same exhibition and works, each viewer encounters an object that is distinct both physically and conceptually. In this context, the zipper emerges as a pivotal instrument. It embodies the medium's dual nature, straddling the realms of painting and sculpture, with the power both to conceal and reveal the material itself. Unzipping the surface image, which initially appears as a fixed, flat painting, reveals a structure that oscillates between liquid and solid states. As

the internal sculptural elements are uncovered, the viewer realizes that much of what they had perceived was, in fact, merely the product of a visual illusion.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) explored the essence of truth as a concept that emerges from the interplay between *concealment* and *unconcealment* in his work *Being and Time* (1927). For Heidegger, truth is not a fixed concept defined by the accordance of facts; rather, it is a dynamic concept, an event in which what was once concealed is brought to light and understood through human perception and experience. This concept, which he terms *Alētheia*, can be encountered within his another central notion, the *clearing*—an open space where beings reveal themselves and can be understood. The *clearing* can be seen as a conceptual space where individuals, drawing on their unique experiences and perceptions, uncover and engage with the essence of beings. In Rheem's work, the zipper functions in a similar way, allowing the viewer to encounter the materiality that drifts between painting and sculpture, as well as the fluidity of liquid crystal, which continuously generates heterogeneous combinations. Here, the viewer's presence is as crucial as that of the zipper. The viewer becomes a being with the power to discover entirely different meanings from those perceived by others nearby, grounded in their own language, understanding, and senses. In front of the piece titled *Fon Suthamphong* (2024), the viewer is able to find oneself in a *clearing*—one shaped by their very own active engagement and willingness to understand.

Rheem likens the repetitive layering and stripping away of images in his work to a form of spirit possession, or '*Bingui* (빙의)'. It is intriguing that the artist chose this specific term, which in shamanistic beliefs typically refers to the phenomenon where the spirit of a supernatural being attaches itself to another's body, to articulate his methodology. Rheem's interest in the relationship between spirit and body, or possession, is consistently found in works such as *Psyche* (2021-2023) and *Jeongisu (The Storyteller)* (2024), which are featured in this exhibition. *Psyche*, inspired by the myth of Eros and Psyche in Greco-Roman mythology, features a video of tropical fish swimming, played simultaneously on two iPhone devices placed side by side. Although both devices play scenes extracted from the same video, differences in their processing speeds create a discrepancy in duration, resulting in two distinctly different videos. Rheem describes this phenomenon as 'the body that harbors the soul alters the soul,' likening the video to the soul and the devices to the body.

At this juncture, one can discern the artist's attempt to question the very essence of truth. Earlier, we observed how both the support structure series and *Psyche*—despite originating from the same source material—yielded results that diverged significantly from their initial points of departure. When the appearance of *Fon Suthamphong*—or, more precisely, the combination of images one perceived—is merely an incidental outcome of one's position, the angle of the work, and the lighting at that moment, can one truly claim to have seen the actual work? Can we truly assert that the videos played on the two devices in *Psyche* are identical?

In *Jeongisu (The Storyteller)*, the interplay between blurred truth and fiction resurfaces. This kinetic sculpture, which employs sensors, takes the form of a chime bell that sways in response to the movement of the wind. Instead of producing real chime sounds, however, it emits an artificial, digitally coded soundscape throughout the exhibition space. The term 'Jeongisu' refers to individuals in the late Joseon Dynasty who specialized in reading novels aloud to commoners. These narrators, akin to storytellers, did more than merely read printed words; they infused their recitations with dramatic emotion. One such Jeongisu, named Lee Yeop-bok, is said to have narrated *The Tale of Im Gyeong-eop* so vividly that a listener mistook him for Kim Jajeom, the man responsible for the wrongful death of General Im Gyeong-eop, and fatally stabbed him with a tobacco knife.

After experiencing *Rheem, Daul*, one might come to realize that truth, or perhaps truthfulness, may never be an objective concept. With every single visitor of the show perceiving and interpreting the works differently, any attempt to describe what was seen is likely to conflict with another's account. As the artist stated, 'Illusion is ultimately a part of reality,' much like the folklore surrounding encounters with a Dokkaebi. It is said that people conjured the existence of Dokkaebi to project and fulfill their desires and wishes in a world that often defies their intentions. Much like Greek and Roman myths, which were passed down to help people comprehend the inexplicable suffering and complexities of the world. During a conversation, Rheem once expressed fascination with the idea of 'acknowledging the existence of the other as an unknowable being, relating to it without harm, and facing it directly rather than averting one's eyes in anger or fear.' In a world where many truths remain beyond our reach, this may very well be the attitude we ought to embrace.

¹ Dokkaebi (도깨비) are mythical creatures from Korean folklore, often depicted as mischievous goblin-like beings with supernatural powers.

Translated by Jae Ted Kim