Lowly resume

Catalogue essay by Soo-Jin Park, Curator, Art Space Seoul

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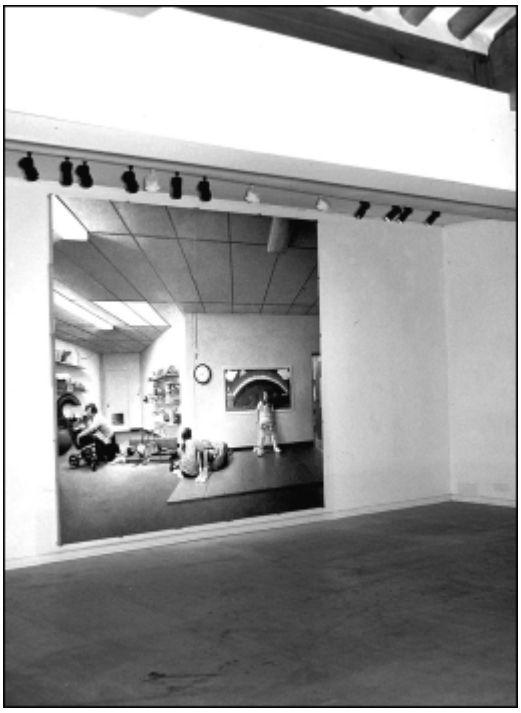


Tim Lowly's art has the strength to stir the soul. His art is like a fable and at times like poetry. As one would use any material ingredients, he uses ideas and images to create unlimited possibilities of combinations. Lowly recalls the story of the Bell-maker in Andrei Tarkovsky's film, "Andrei Roublev" and believes that for him the act of painting is not unlike the act of bell-making1.. Perhaps this is why his work is so quietly affecting, like the way the sound of a bell reverberates after it has been rung.

Lowly's art is based on his life. His biggest influences are his childhood and adolescence in Korea and the birth of his daughter, Temma. With his parents, who were missionaries, Lowly lived in Korea from 1961 to 1976. The 16 years he spent in Korea had a tremendous influence on his perception of the world and his art. He ceaselessly questions his own identity and seeks to exist on the outside of the "boundaries". The exclusion he must have felt as a foreigner in a "one-race" Korean society and the cultural crisis of being back in the United States has perhaps caused him to relate to those on the outskirts of society. Observers of his art note this sense of "otherness".

The other major subject of his art, his daughter Temma, was born with many serious handicaps. In thinking of Temma, he asks earnest questions about human existence and paints her with deep affection and reverence. Despite her disability or rather because of it, Lowly believes her existence illuminates the meaning of "human" and "perfection". His first work based on Temma, "Autumn of Ashes" expresses the sacredness of humanity. Through his portrayal of Temma and other handicapped children, he intends to show the transfiguration of the divine into human and in this way they become icons in his work.

Lowly seems to believe that art should strive for a careful balance of both the senses and the reason. His early works tend to emphasize the senses but have since become increasingly intellectual.

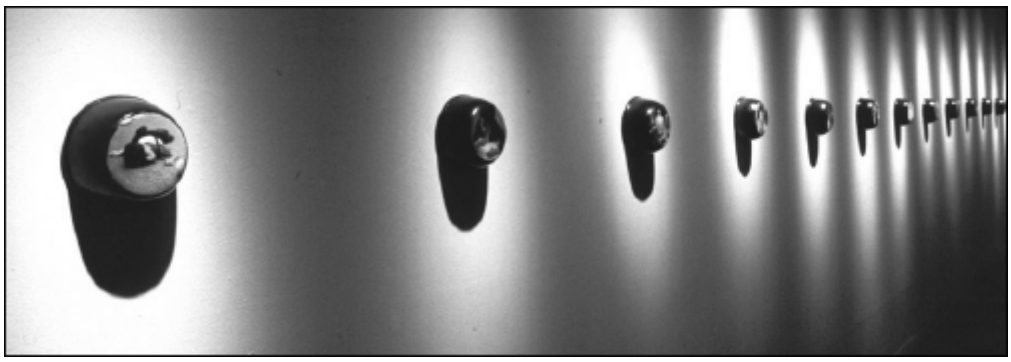
In 1981 Lowly graduated from Calvin College and returned to Korea, where he was exposed to and heavily influenced by Min- Joong Art. Since then he has expressed his desire to create art that lives and breathes with the people. To him humanity is the mediator and the passage through which he connects to art, and the window through which he sees the world. To the question posed by Tarkovsky in the previously mentioned film, " What is art and what must it do?" Lowly intends to seek the answer in human beings.

From his earliest works to the present, his consciousness of his subject matter was always clear, but the allegorical images that appear on the surface are increasingly complex, thus showing his tendency

toward a more rational and intellectual approach. His complex allegorical works follow and contribute to the historical tradition of Northern European Renaissance, Modern Realism and American Magic Realism.

Lowly's unique style, culminating from the influence of Modern Realism, including Korean Min-Joong Art and American Political Art, as well as Northern European Renaissance, is realized through the medium of egg tempera. His stylistic usage of egg tempera is conceived from the techniques of the Renaissance masters. His use of ink and its capacity to express the essence of an idea parallels his use of egg tempera.

Egg tempera is a combination of egg yolk and powdered pigment. It dries quickly and, like ink painting, is difficult to modify. It requires a rather laborious and repetitive work process of building layers of paint. To Lowly, the labor of using egg tempera brings the spiritual and the physical together, adding to his concept of the balance between the reason and the senses. By combining the transparency of tempera and intense colors with complex allegorical images, Lowly creates an uncanny world of silence and calm, where time stands still.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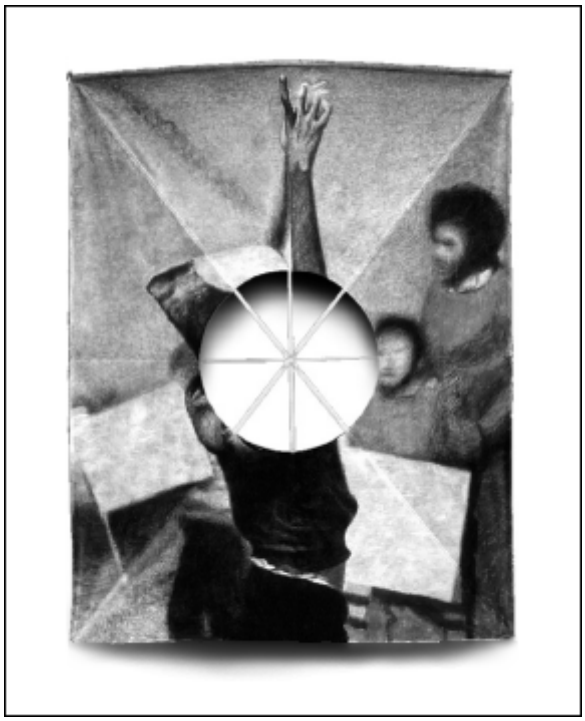
The works exhibited in this collection consist of images of children on Korean ceramic bowls and Bahng-Pae kites. These images are from photographs taken at the school for disabled children which Temma attended. From a personal standpoint his work could be seen as his psychoanalysis of his family, a reflection of emotional and spiritual self-therapy, but at the same time it serves as a bigger contemplation of humanity and society.

Lowly's art is like a fable containing a paradox. In contrast to his clear images, the meaning it carries is complex and unclear. Because he presents a clear image as a signifier on the surface, it is more difficult to decipher what has been signified. It is like the Edgar Allen Poe's story The Purloined Letter in which the letter could not be seen because of its placement in an obvious spot. In addition, his art does not contain a single meaning, but rather one that has many changing forms depending upon the viewpoint of the interpretation.

Lowly creates an unfamiliarity in his art. The images themselves are familiar to us and yet they seem strange and remote. Perhaps it is because from a surrounding of what is believed to be known, he brings to the surface a part that is unknown. By making the familiar into the unfamiliar, Lowly makes us realize the ignorance of our knowingness.

As stated earlier, Lowly creates the "otherness" through the images of those who are excluded and through the viewpoint of his painting. His work is a symbolic product, in that it is created through the eyes of the viewer. His painting brings to the consciousness two things: the gaze of the child and the gaze of the viewer. Let us take a look at the children's eyes. They are gazing at something which is unknown to us. But since they exist in a desireless2 state of an imaginary world, their gaze become those of the symbolic viewer. The desire we see in the painting is in truth our own desires transferred into the eyes of the children.



The Bahng-Pae or "shield" kites that Lowly has painted on are unusual in that they can fly only if the center is cut out. The image is arranged so that the hole is placed on the center of the body of the subject, thereby emptying the center of the person. This emptiness symbolizes a lack and this lack is the connection to what is real. In other words, this paintings' connection to reality exists in the center of the kite, the hole. The hole contains the heart of the child and here exists our own desires.

The emptiness of the center is what makes the kite a kite, and the human a human being. If one may say, a lack is what motivates desire and desire motivates humanity, one may conclude that perhaps the driving force behind human history is desire. To go further, if death is the only force that can quench desire, the lack is what maintains life itself. Lowly's work illustrates his belief that handicap or exclusion does not mean a deficiency of human qualities, but rather it is what makes one more essentially human. Evoking the myth of Sisyphus, human existence is to ceaselessly fill the hole that cannot be filled and in this realm lies the purpose and the meaning of Tim Lowly's art.

1. "Andrei Rublev" is a film set in 15th century Russia, where the citizens are stricken with war, famine and disease. Through the story of the monk/icon painter Andrei Rublev, the film asks the question "What is art and what must it do?"
The story of the bell-maker is as follows: A pale youth is lying in bed in an impoverished hut. Some soldiers under orders from the lord of the province come to visit the hut to find the boy's father who is a bell-maker. However they find out that the boy's parents and siblings have all died of the plague. As they turn away disappointed, the boy suddenly announces that his father has taught him the secret method of bell-making and asks that they take him to the castle. The soldiers warn him that failure could only lead to execution and take him with them.
For a period of a month the boy devotes himself to making the bell. When the bell is completed and hung to be tested, large number of townspeople gather to listen. The bell is struck and the sound is at first blunt and wooden, but soon it penetrates the silent sky and spreads throughout with clear and beautiful tone. After all the people disburse, the boy cries tears of deep emotion and the monk who was watching him ask for the reason of his tears. The boy answers, "My father never told me the secret method. He passed away with it."

2. "Desire" in this text refers to sociological desires rather than biological need.

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