

ROH

Practising Skinship

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In Korea, there is a word called *skinship*, assembled out of *skin* and the *-ship* of friendship. It names a platonic touch, or non-romantic contact between people who are close, like a hand held. Understood to occur between family or between friends, ikkibawiKrrr applies it to the surfaces of villages, doorposts, floors and stones. A sheet of paper is laid over a weathered stone and rubbed with charcoal until the surface delivers itself up to the page, an operation they call 'rock n' feel'. The suggestion is that touch closes distances that looking preserves, whether those distances are between beings, geographical, or temporal. And if skinship names the affection language cannot mediate, 'rock n' feel' is the method by which it is practised.

It was first put to work in their 2024 solo exhibition *Rocks Living in Rewind* in charcoal rubbings of Maitreya statues—the Buddha of the future, prophesied to return and save all sentient beings—which recorded whatever their hands could reach, like a ridge, or its weathering. What drew the collective to these figures is the way they outlast us through their seclusion from the city, holding a past while standing as witness to a future we will not see. Through physical contact, the works kept the evidence of hands pressed for a time, seeking a way of belonging. The same touch now crosses a greater distance in *Lalu, Lagu Lalu Lalu: Then, Another Passing Song*, where charcoal rubbings record ikkibawiKrrr's contact with ancient stones in Central Sulawesi and South Korea.

Their research began in the Lore Lindu region of Central Sulawesi, a highland area holding no fewer than two thousand megalithic remains, evidence of an Austronesian expansion around three thousand years ago. Why the stones were carved and raised is not fully understood. The theories are multipally about the stones as conduits between

the living and the dead, as with the *kalamba*, the cylindrical burial jars; others portray a goddess who turns moral transgressors to stone, among them *Tadulako*, a village guard petrified for stealing rice.

Spending time with the site attuned them to a way of living with one's ancestral inheritance that keeps it entwined in daily life rather than set apart from it. What is clear today is that these stones are not consigned to an uncertain past, but carry on alongside the communities that live among them. They are active participants in harvest and death ceremonies, reinforcing community ties and affirming shared values. ikkibawiKrrr's interview with Min Sun Jeon for the exhibition includes an anecdote from a friend who once fainted passing a large megalith, and woke to find that a chronic pain had left her body. It is another way of approaching what animist ontologies across Southeast Asia have entrenched in daily practice and beliefs: that vital forces congeal in material bodies like stones and trees, that this force can be transmitted, and that humans might relate to a sentient ancestral entity and even benefit from the relationship by practising skinship and daily rituals. It is this everyday existence with one's past that sent the band searching for petroglyphs in Korea, to look for the same condition in a place where they had felt relics stood severed from the present.

ikkibawiKrrr are aware of the traps of this backwards-looking gaze, and the kind of pull these ancient stones can easily exert on one looking for a utopian other. This trap, nostalgia, is named in Lucy Lippard's *Overlay* (1983), her book on artists drawn to the art of prehistory. The pull toward ancient stone, she argued, is usually a longing for an era imagined simpler, or for "any time when what people made (art) had a secure place in their daily lives." Come upon a ring of stones on an empty moor, she writes, and you ask who made it, when, why, and what it has to do with you. But a nostalgic answer to them, that we have fallen from the fluid categories of understanding that these ancients kept, is a dead end, a way of mourning the present instead of living in it. The real task, she suggests, is to make the recovered forms "meaningful *now*," to press them into present hopes, struggles and fears rather than embalming them a second time.

If ikkibawiKrrr do yearn for a time when art and life were less distinct, the yearning is directed at the present. It is about tracing an encounter and sharpening our questions about what we potentially lose when we petrify these distinctions between art and life, between beings, and if that thing is the sense of belonging that dwindles when we sever our ties from ancestral life. In engaging evidence of prehistory that continues to live close to its neighbours today, woven into the fabric of daily life,

the collective's work makes a case for the absence of a clean before to return to. There is only the tangled now, in which stone, time, human, cement, trash will not stop relating to one another.

The cave in which their single-channel video *Walking in a Dead-End Cave* is set, for example, offers little to long for. Once a half-initiated tunnel project from the Japanese Occupation period, then a damaged armoury during the Cold War, the cave now functions as a space for ikkibawiKrrr and musician Taehyun Choi to pace its interior, blowing balloons at varying frequencies and intensities. Making sound is, as much as touch, a human gesture and a means of connecting to this hallowed terrain and wound of war and colonialism, its former functions and memories concealed. Participating with Choi in his existing performance practice, their balloons yield visceral, gut-deep noises that respond to and feed back from the cavern.

Against the dissonance of the balloon-players, our entry into the cave reads less as harmony than as a searching, complicated call-and-response with the traces of an obscured history. Nothing in particular comes back legible, and at times the sounds unsettle us in jolts. The players keep at it, sounding into a space that will not answer. This is characteristic of ikkibawiKrrr, who more often than not arrive and mingle with their surroundings even when the stories are not immediately told. The relationship they develop with the space comes not from being answered but by allowing dialogue, memories, and time to accumulate.

The task is taken up again in an installation of small sculptures arranged in a tangled network of wood. As they convey in their interview: "In art, there is often an emphasis on the symbolic meanings of such figures, but before turning to symbolism, we wanted to focus on the immediacy of what is shown and what we instinctively feel." Following the exercise, before we look for symbols, or work through its thickets of meaning, what do we see? Two-legged aluminium foil beings, a broken cement iPhone, a bowl made of rice, among others. All forms of beings here can be encountered as they stand, made in the manner that things get made in ordinary life, casually, without a governing idea or an expectation to perform a messaging role. The installation further carries the collective's experience in the field, encountering what appears as somebody's debris while signalling a previous purpose, some evidence of the care put into a thing's making, its temporary custody and, for whatever reason, its disposal.

Once again we are drawn into a practice that treats artworks as impressions of life lived with others. This exhibition would not exist without the generosity

and friendship of Ama, Nisa, and the many experts in Indonesia and Korea who made the journey possible. Accumulated here is the pool of knowledge that forms when thinking is done in company, and how much distance an artistic practice can cross when it treats art-work and exhibition-making as occasions for relationships, rather than as their result.

A collective who asks us how we might meet our ancestors having lost our ground are describing a worry they hold themselves. The villages and hometowns they have filmed are emptying, and behind their fieldwork is a question about where, then, a person is supposed to be from. They have made of that concern a method, so that belonging accumulates by staying in touch in the meaningful now.

References

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