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**A Balancing Act - Power, Division and Unity in Jaehong Ahn's paintings**

Striving of the spirit of the people  
----- of nature  
--- to unity.  
Appearance and divide are synonymous.  
Appear separate, distribute, duality, two opposing ends of the same being<sup>1</sup>

Separation and division, though they may seem adverse, are essential to create balance within a composition. After all, balance itself can be described as an ensemble of purposeful tensions. Jaehong Ahn's paintings celebrate this harmonic unity that can only be achieved through separation. The fantastical landscapes leave their viewer in a state of anticipation between the forces that encounter each other on the canvas and the ease of harmonic balance. Likewise, in the above writing on color theory, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes the human yearning for an appearance of unity. Further, he adds that for something to emerge into the field of vision, it has to first isolate itself from its surroundings. Goethe describes the fascinating interplay of optics and color, which stipulates that appearance and division are synonymous. The severed forces which confront each other in a painting's composition are the very things that make us perceive balance. Subsequently, balance cannot be achieved without division.

The inception of Ahn's paintings is solely guided by the artist's physical movements. Despite the composition of color and form which might suggest otherwise, the artist does not sketch nor plan his paintings beforehand. Ahn's process is determined by creating abstraction through automatic painting only to then move to figuration. The first encounter with the canvas, which he compares to a "labor of nothingness," is not led by conceptual thought or strategy, it is rather a to physical and mental introduction to the painting. Once the artist recognizes shapes in the abstraction that initiate a certain kinship within him, he begins to build textures and figures. Certain elements are painted over and covered repeatedly and sometimes disappear entirely. All the while never losing sight of the formal balance in his composition. Through this reciprocating process, he builds his sceneries. His intuitive motions on the canvas turn into wondrous and sometimes bizarre landscapes. The contenders and colors which enter this cosmos of tension are often separated into unreachable spaces where they linger, unable to overcome the divide.

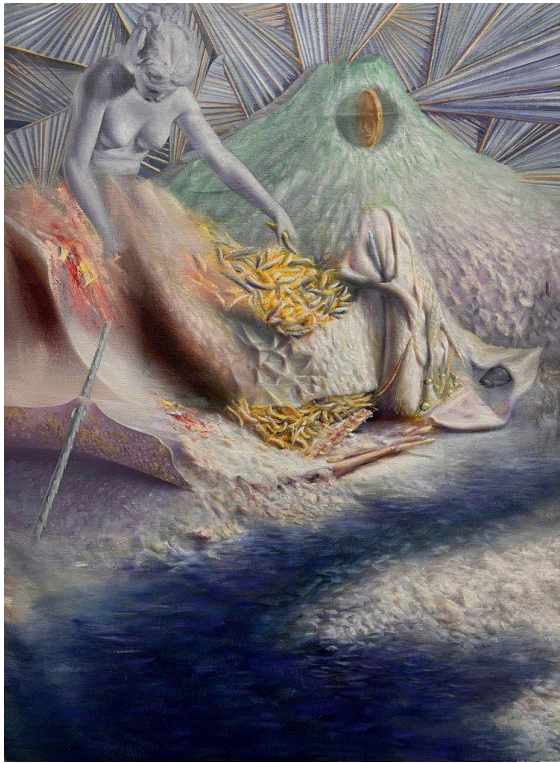
The formal indicators of separation and balance merge with the painting's subjects. Often figures are confined to an isolated area which they cannot leave. However, these scenes are less autobiographical and more an observation of what Ahn feels is a repetitive theme in

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Goethe: Dichtung, Dramen, Romane, Novellen, Briefe, Aufsätze und mehr (Über 1000 Titel in einem Buch): Biografien + Naturwissenschaftliche Werke + Epigramm-Sammlungen + Religiöse Schriften + Elegien + Xenien + Sonette und viel mehr (e-artnow, 2017). (own translation)



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Jaehong Ahn, *Showtime*, 2022, oil on canvas, 70 x 95 cm

human relationships and history. Ahn's quest for balanced tensions and division leads him to create god-like figures that command their authoritative positions on the canvas. Despite their power and eminence they seem to be unable to fulfill their tasks and connect with their environment. Some are disengaged, while others are evidently failing to rule. Ahn's paintings are a satire on the paradox that frequently occurs alongside power in our world. To be superior and hold a position above others, often is synonymous with becoming detached from what is ruled and losing sight of the subjects. This cautionary tale of the abuse and neglect that can develop with superiority is veiled by the dreamlike atmospheres of Ahn's paintings. The pastels and fairytale-like landscapes not only mislead the viewer, they also emphasise the absurdity of this persisting phenomenon. The paintings collectively tell the story of the inevitable divide between humans and the struggle against this separation.



Jaehon Ahn, *River*, 2018, oil on canvas, 260 x 120 cm

Ahn's painting *River*, for the first time, references an established visual symbol and allows the viewer to grasp a tangible narrative. The enormous fish is laying at the shore, gutted. Next to him is an equally large diving rod in front of the scenic mountain scape. With the ratio and scale of the painting mirroring medieval altarpieces and the subject borrowing the ancient symbol of *Ichtyos*, the artist makes an apparent reference to the struggles, the



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pressures and guilt that can be part of Christianity. Once again, Ahn's subject is a tale of power and division. This time he concretely explores the severed relationship between the Christian God and humans. The gutted fish suggests a sensation of perishability. Once the substance and the core has vanished, only a shell is left, which metaphorically is how many people feel about Christianity today. A God who sees and judges everything and yet does not give clear guidance, is, similar to the figures in Ahn's other paintings, detached from his followers and fails at providing them with direction and security. In the secularised world the symbol of Ichtys no longer offers community, but rather uncertainty and isolation. Moreover, the Christian churches are shaped by hierarchies which separate individuals from their community, and give them authority to determine the good and the bad. People are elevated over others and their power detaches them from the parish they are supposed to guide. It seems as though Christianity's essence of love and compassion has been gutted and it is now only an outward shell of itself. However, *River* is not only a final farewell to these mechanisms of Christianity but, as the rod implies, an indication of a new path. In his past oeuvre, Ahn created his own metaphors and symbols instead of using one that already exists within a communal vocabulary, and is thereby legible, pulling a metaphorical veil between him and the viewer. Perhaps through this sudden direct communication with the spectator Jaehong Ahn is breaking out of the habit of hidden messages and compositions that intentionally mislead the viewer and create a separation between artist and observer.

Ultimately, it is not merely the formal planes and compositions of Jaehong Ahn's paintings which create distance and balance. His artistic process is a journey of separation from himself and the viewer to then returning to a balance between what he wants to share and what is separated, a constant interplay in which the forces that oppose each other hold balance and create sceneries of fantastical expression. In his paintings, to appear and to hold power over the landscape is synonymous with being divided from it. The desire for unity between the god-like figures and their environment is a reflection of the natural divisions that are created through power in world histories just as in personal relationships. To view these paintings is a balancing act in itself. It is a game of severed and yet balanced conversation, of emerging and being separated. The artist, the canvas, and the viewer are divided forces that isolate and conceal and nevertheless come together in a harmonious dialogue and aspiration for unity.

Text: Paula Böke