

Between a thing-in-space and a thing-in time: interference tension in Hwang Limkyu's photography (2021)

Hwang Limkyu shows us the skull beneath the skin. This is a special privilege, as the skin - in his case - is the construction sites he prowls with his camera in his other professional life as an architect. The skull, of course, is the worrisome feeling that as we step into any manufactured environment there are hidden elements which we would rather not consider; weeping concrete, rusty reinforcements, rough-hewn concrete masses with which a building could not stand. But these things are the vital force behind Hwang's art. In these images the past addresses the future as old structures are revealed while new are on the verge of appearing. Traces of vanished humans and deprecated materials come to light, forcing us to confront challenging questions: what lies behind the smooth, geometrically-articulated walls of modern offices and homes? How much complexity is being hidden by builders' skills? Hwang attends to these questions with a brave and unflinching eye, even seeming - sometimes - to undermine his own achievements as a designer of built spaces. Is this all there is? Possibly, says Hwang. As this work progresses we see his gaze switch from the secular - cement, wires, seeping lime channels, all rendered in the most subdued colour palette - to something what: mystical? Utopian? Surely not. These carefully-curated images evolve into bright, tacksharp monochrome studies of daylight spaces, mysteriously repeated and overlaid, encouraging the beholder to question our unthinking day-to-day three dimensional suppositions.

When I was very young I was often taken on holiday to the English coast where there were still relics of wartime defences - massive poured concrete tank traps and gun emplacements, now vanished but then open to exploration. Hwang's pictures bring these to mind. We are in a subterranean and inhuman world of old cement and lime, materials culled from nature but rendered unnatural by juxtaposition; here a rusted steel rod, there a channel carved by drainage water, metal girders appear and disappear, designed to withstand chthonic violence. This is a netherworld created never to be seen - brutal in the sense of the French *brut*, raw, because it doesn't have to be anything else. What does Hwang mean by this? Why does he present what is normally hidden in such aggressive and challenging terms? His camera goes eye-to-eye with the aesthetic values of his profession. Hwang becomes obsessed with certain textures. He shows us the same wall from different perspectives. (or it? At this level, is it impossible to differentiate?) In these images digital sharpness renders all objects in the same plane; does the metal grid emerge from the concrete or does it disappear into it? Is this place human-scaled or something other? We are not told, there are seldom reference points and, sometimes, Hwang's repetition achieves semantic satiation, like a word spoken over and over again until it begins to sound strange and alien. Here, Hwang is at his best when he courageously excises detail, allowing the ambient light to fall away into blackness, leaving something mysteriously pure, but still suggestive. Our eyes search for a clue and, finding little, we are forced to alight on shape and form. Elsewhere Hwang reveals strange inscriptions left by the construction crews, which possess meaning of a different kind, but in these pictures recall hidden language. This is ironic - a turn from the measured, precise angles and quantification with which Hwang otherwise operates. We are tempted to play the 'like' game - 'this picture is like a forest', 'this image looks like a row of teeth', and so on. But this is to sell short Hwang's metaphorical game.

Internal concrete structures are the bones of Hwang's vision. Cables and ducts are the muscles and sinews. Power flexes through Hwang's second set, but it's a very ambiguous energy. What do these cables carry? Force or data - accounting for the difference is our job. Wires are encoded with colours, readable by possessors of special knowledge. We are not required to understand, provided it just works. A low-level light hangs perilously out of a wall. It's clearly operational, shedding a soft glow, but, we presume, its days are numbered. Hwang stakes a space for a physicality which sometimes borders on the ethereal, a mysterious connection between the built environment and the flattened photographic experience. The viewer is at liberty to find this counterintuitive, and even plain confusing. Elsewhere a cone stands guard in a cave of cement and mud, perhaps a warning not to approach unless you are an adept at this magic - or you are wearing a hard hat. Hwang is not without a sense of humour.

Hwang's palette is deliberately limited and he eschews colour completely when he bursts into the light, and it is here that we see his sense of the soaring given full reign. Rough-hewn walls and harsh site lighting give way to airy perspectives and tack-sharp geometry. Whereas Hwan's *untergang* work is forbiddingly claustrophobic, his final movement in this collection comes closest, we assume, to revealing his professional soul. But there's something else going on here. Hwang presents image on image, whether created in camera or in a computer, or through reflection - it's difficult to tell and the attempt to do so is a distraction. This is a brave attempt at stretching the boundaries of the photographic frame. In poetry, we might talk about *enjambment* - the stretching of semantics beyond a rhyming end-stop. Where some images are populated humans become indistinct icons. A work so constructed lives in the tension and difference - and the interference - between sound and sense. Hwang has only vision to play with. Given the strictures of a gallery frame or a plate in a book, Hwang's attempts to construct new shapes from old in Euclidean space, shows us something suggestively temporal ... what you are seeing here is both a thing-in-space and a thing-in-time. Here then is the interference-tension, which resolves as an attempt to create something durational within a single flat static object. Perhaps Hwang feels our discomfort at his enclosed and frightening spaces and would very much like to make eye-and-brain work quite hard (albeit at something else) before we leave. The satiation here is that of line and angle, node and vector, and is quite exhausting taken in large measure. This business of construction requires hard yakka, it seems.

Hwang is a photographer new to the public. It's a truism that reflective photographic work derives power from personal insights and that is exemplified in his case. The challenge for him is to bring his eye to bear on space away from his day-to-day experience.