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Understanding sense: through Choi Byungso's solo exhibition at Arario Gallery, Seoul

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"The joy of art lies in showing how something takes on meaning."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

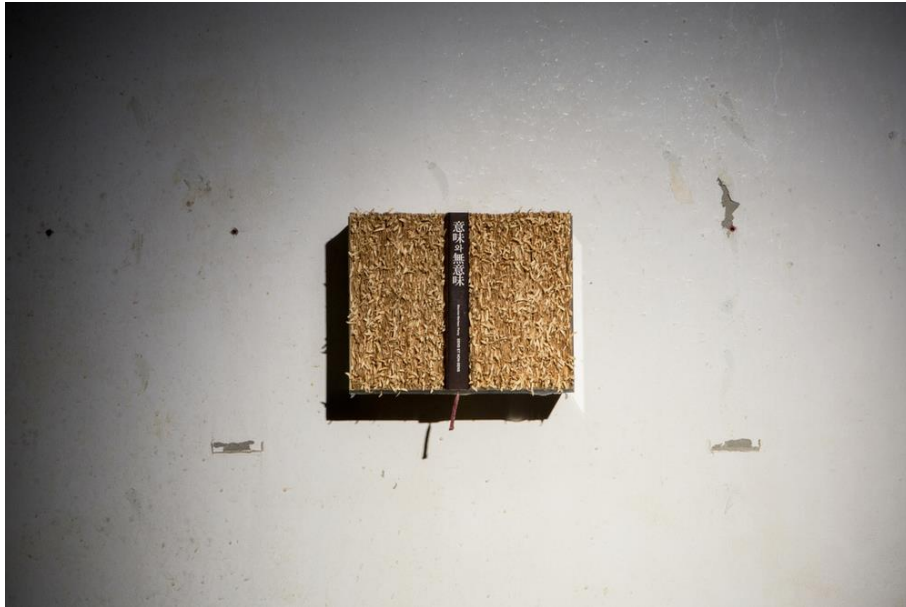
Arario Gallery presents SENS ET NON-SENS: Works from 1974 to 2020, a solo show by Choi Byungso, a Korean artist born in 1943 in Daegu, Korea. The exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of Choi's paintings and installations made between the 1970s and recent years: exploring his art and anti-art, and his experimental approach to "sense" and "understanding."

Choi holds a unique position in art history as an artist whose style sits between the radical Korean avant-garde of the late 1960s, and the manipulation of media characteristic of the 1970s Dansaekwha Korean monochrome movement. From early in his career Choi rejected the traditional method of drawing and expressed that one can draw not only by using a brush on canvas but by "erasing" or "covering" existing materials. The practice of erasure started by chance in 1975: Choi was listening to a Buddhist holy recording on an LP and just began to draw over newspapers with a pen. This rebellious act of erasing existing articles showed Choi's frustration towards social repression caused by the military dictatorship of 1960s Korea, which continued into the 1980s.



Detailed photograph of Untitled, 2019, Paper, ballpoint pen, pencil, 160 x 480 x 1 cm (63 x 189 x 0.4 in.), Four pieces,
Photo by Eazel

In the basement of Arario Gallery is Untitled, 2019, the largest work in the exhibition and which comprises four pieces of paper rendered in ballpoint pen and pencil, Choi's signature style. With graphite drawn over ink, again and again, the papers have acquired a metallic finish. From afar, the work resembles a series of thin steel sheets whose peeled-back edges are rough and sharp. On closer inspection, the papers remain fragile yet perfectly rigid: hardened by the continuous layering of pen and pencil. It felt important to look at Untitled first, even though it is not the first work in the exhibition, as it sets the tone and the scale of Choi's practice, where he takes knowledge and transforms the viewers understanding of it.



Untitled 998, 1998, Box, book, ballpoint pen, 23(h) x 18 x 28 cm (9.1(h) x 7.1 x 11 in.), ©Choi Byungso and Arario Gallery

Returning to the entrance level, *Untitled*, 1974 is spread out across the floor as six wooden sticks lying at angles on a military blanket. Depicting the Korean traditional game Yut Nori, yet with six sticks instead of the usual four, Choi has laid out an impossible play. On the wall is *Untitled 998*, 1998, a book placed on a glass shelf so that it can be examined from underneath. The content of the book is shredded and glued in scraps to the cover, either side of the spine. While the book's pages cannot be read, the spine of the book reads "意味와 無意味 Maurice Merleau-Ponty SENS ET NON-SENS," the namesake of the exhibition.

"The experience of unreason cannot simply be forgotten: we must form a new idea of reason"

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

With its title translated as "sense and nonsense," Maurice Merleau-Ponty's book questions conventional ways of applying perception to aesthetics, ethics, and to the sciences. This title is fitting for Choi's exhibition, an artist who has constantly challenged existing methods and rules integral to the hierarchies of art - especially those that uphold the purity of medium as important to making artworks. To explore the way that the "phenomenology of perception" is expressed, Ponty looked to Cézanne, an artist who did not ever intend to distinguish between order and chaos. Instead, Cézanne would start making each of his paintings by forgetting all knowledge that he had acquired, attempting to "recapture the structure as an emerging organism."

A similar gesture is found in works by Choi such as *Untitled 016000*, 2016 and *Untitled 975000*, 1975 in which common objects – here clothes hangers and chairs - are used as media. Laying these out in new formations, and as an artwork, Choi allows the viewer to recapture the way in which they look at these everyday objects: refreshing the way in which the items are perceived.



Untitled 016000, 2016 (on the floor), Hangers, Dimensions variable, Installation: 730 x 430 cm (287.4 x 169.3 in.), ©Choi Byungso and Arario Gallery



Untitled 975000, 1975, Chair, masking tape, Dimensions variable, ©Choi Byungso and Arario Gallery

Beside this installation is *Untitled*, 1975 where a National Geographic Magazine image of birds in flight is accompanied by the six words "sky," "cloud," "wind," "birds," "flying," and "meeting." Juxtaposed with this piece is *Untitled 975000 (Newspaper, Bottle, Suitcase, Umbrella)*, 2016, a series of photographs in which the objects named in the title are seen on separate, ordinary chairs. Both artworks offer the viewer a chance to interpret two kinds of language: visual and text. In the first work, the visual language of the birds against a blue sky can take onlookers into an imaginary world to make up their own narrative, but the written text almost prevents this by giving a definitive and dead-end description. As warned by Ponty and made visible by Choi, language is a learned habit, and an absolute principle, which sets limits for us before we can interpret objects in any other way.