Elephants, identity and abstraction: The winner of the 2018 Wolfgang Hahn Prize reveals the objects and ideas that have shaped her thinking
Influences_v2_frieze192.indd   133

Influences_v2_frieze192.indd   133

Influences_v2_frieze192.indd   133

Influences_v2_frieze192.indd   133

Influences_v2_frieze192.indd   133
Influences_v2_frieze192.indd   134

May liberal ideas of transparency and mere equivalence. Silence and isolation is an act of obscuring and resisting, was an attempt to render this silence as dignified. This project for the Sharjah Biennial, a dimension of opacity: a right to remain unknown. My men who migrated for work. I wanted their silence to reach back to Seoul after the Middle Eastern boom, their experiences remained unspoken, as they had after the Vietnam War. Subsequent social developments created a lasting silence: even without systematic suppression, some narratives remain untold or unacknowledged.

When I went to Sharjah in 2015, I met other such fathers and uncles – no longer Korean but Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Filipino and Indian. Most of the workers I spoke to hadn’t seen their families for years. Labour migration is a known fact but infrequently discussed. Instead of asking my father why he stayed so long, even after Korea’s democratization, I studied the period to gain my own understanding of it. This was my personal effort to honour not only my father’s silence but that of all the men who migrated for work. I wanted their silence to reach a dimension of opacity: a right to remain unknown. My project for the Sharjah Biennial, An Opaque Wind (2015), was an attempt to render this silence as dignified. This silence and isolation is an act of obscuring and resisting liberal ideas of transparency and mere equivalence.

Abstraction enables me to work through individual and collective narratives across history in a non-linear or elastic manner. Coming across elephants in various sources over time helped me to establish the animal as a metaphor for that abstraction. For instance, according to one theory, the Chinese character for ‘elephant’ ( 象 ) derives from the shape of the animal’s bones. Yet, it is probable that few people had ever even seen an elephant, particularly given that their existence in China has been contested. In modern Chinese, when you combine the symbol for ‘person’ (人) with that for ‘elephant’ (象), the resulting character signifies ‘image’ or ‘motif’ (象). The symbol seems to describe, then, a human imagining an animal they’ve never seen. It’s come to represent, for me, this discrepancy between seen and unseen.

In his essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (1936), George Orwell describes his days in Burma as a British policeman. The elephant stands between the colonizer and the colonized: represents artistic or individual consciousness. The hostile power struggle between humans is articulated by the act of killing an animal that has no relationship to the humans concerned. The creature’s irrelevance, or independence, represents artistic or individual consciousness. The elephant stands between the colonizer and the colonized: a figure of isolation that must be killed to define the distance between both parties. Yet the Westerner, affected
Abstraction is not a reductionist or simplified way of thinking: it’s a leap.

Romain Gary, 1953. Courtesy: Magnum Photos; photograph: Philippe Halsman

Haegue Yang is an artist based in Berlin, Germany, and Seoul, South Korea. She is professor of fine arts at the Städelschule, Frankfurt, Germany, and recipient of the 2018 Wolfgang Hahn Prize. Her solo exhibitions include: Kunsthaus Graz, Austria (until 2 April); KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin (until 13 May); kurimanzutto, Mexico City; Mexico; and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France (both 2017). ‘ETA’, a comprehensive survey of her work, opens at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, on 18 April. Yang will participate in the Biennale of Sydney, Australia, in March and the Liverpool Biennial, UK, in July.

Gary had served as an aviator in the French Air Force, as secretary of the French Delegation to the UN, and as a diplomat in Los Angeles in 1956, representing France as a consul general. He was an extremely glamorous figure but also an intensely mysterious and lonely man, who seemingly never found his true home. In his semi-autobiographical book, La Promesse de l’aube (Promise at Dawn, 1960), Gary describes his upbringing and how his identity as a French writer was the realization of his mother’s great ambitions, although her immense love for him was almost suffocating. In addition to appropriating the pseudonym Ajar, he revealed that his childhood surname had not, in fact, been Gary but Kacew, which was his stepfather’s name. (He had never known his biological father.) His continual rebellion against the identity given to him confirms, for me, that we view names as a way to evaluate and classify someone in society. Even literature is limited in its grasp of the existential struggle of identity.

Returning to the topic of the elephant: in Gary’s Les Racines du ciel (The Roots of Heaven, 1956), the book’s protagonist, Morel, appears out of the blue in French Equatorial Africa during the civil war: a period of violence in which the indigenous people fought for their independence from the colonizers, yet also fought among themselves. Elephants were killed to raise money for arms. As in Orwell’s story, the elephant was a sacrifice for human hostility.

The most poignant episode in the book describes Morel’s experience in a concentration camp prior to his arrival in Africa. Exposed to inhumane conditions, a fellow internee proposes that they play a game – imagining a woman is incarcerated with them – in order to stay sane. The fictional presence of the woman encourages them to maintain their dignity and, consequently, to survive. A German officer discovers their ruse, however, and orders the prisoners to imagine killing the woman, thereby ending the game. Morel then devises a new survival strategy, imagining not a woman but a herd of stampeding elephants sweeping away the inhumanity. He vows that, if he survives, he will devote his life to these animals. This reference feeds into the first: elephants may save humans, but humans do not save elephants. In this moment of existential crisis, the action of the imagination becomes amplified. For me, this power of amplification is abstraction. Abstraction is not a reductionist or simplified way of thinking: it’s a leap – a leap into a dimension that cannot otherwise be understood.