

Artist explores meaning of life through meaningless engagement

By Woo Jae-yeon

SEOUL, Feb. 15 (Yonhap) -- Artist Lee Wan hired eight laborers from a job center at 8,000 won (US\$7) per hour in January. The workers, aged 20-60 and coming from various countries such as Mongolia, Uzbekistan and Cambodia, spent seven hours a day painting an entire canvas with the finest brush. No one asked why. When they finished in three days, the artist drew, or rather doodled, on the painted canvas in an empty-headed act.

The painting is part of his solo exhibition, "A Diligent Attitude Towards a Meaningless Thing," an exploration of the time where the questions about the purpose of life and the meaning of work are conveniently ignored while people "diligently" perform what they agreed to do to make a living.

"These paintings bear no meaning. The workers just made a contract with me to do the job. The meaning, if any, is that the painting symbolizes the act of trading labor and money between the two parties," he said during a press briefing at 313 Art Project in central Seoul on Wednesday.



South Korean Artist Lee Wan talks during a press briefing on his solo exhibition "A Diligent Attitude Towards a Meaningless Thing" at 313 Art Project in Seoul, on Feb. 15, 2017. (Yonhap)

In his first solo exhibition in two years, he hopes to show the artistic journey he has taken to answer existential questions that are often dismissed as being naive in a rapidly changing world.

"I was always interested in how the world functions and what people feel about their life. When I asked such questions to people around me, few people could answer. Most of them said their jobs weren't that meaningful," he said.

Through his work, Lee hopes to warn of individual identity being lost when people blindly work and buy goods without taking a step back to put the activities into perspective.

"By looking carefully into things around me that are taken for granted, I want to rediscover a meaning in them."



The photos are scenes from the "Made In" series by Lee Wan. (Yonhap)

The exhibition features parts of the "Made In" series, which will be presented at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Lee will represent Korea in the global art event, along with Codi Choi.

He started the series which includes videos and installations four years ago, inspired by a product label on which various origins of its ingredients were written.

"I realized that so many countries are closely interconnected and intertwined (to make a product). I've been paying so little for a product which is the result of miraculous division of labor and benefits of mass production."

So he's taken on a time-consuming and unproductive mission -- visiting 12 Asian countries to produce from A to Z by himself to make a serving of breakfast and documenting the whole process.

In Taiwan, he stayed in a sugarcane farm for a month to participate in the sugar-making process. He successfully produced a spoonful of raw sugar. For a pair of wooden chopsticks, he went to Tibet where he secured a chunk of wood that used to form a thousand-year-old monastery's floor.

"Today, I feel like a product chooses me, not the other way around. The world is developing at a break-neck speed. We can easily become a mindless consumer."

The exhibition runs through March. 10.



The image provided by 313 Art Project shows "A Diligent Attitude Towards a Meaningless Thing 6" by Lee Wan. (Yonhap)

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