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Interview by Joël Vacheron

COULD YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND HOW YOU GOT STARTED IN YOUR CAREER?

It is important to say that I was born and raised in Korea. I then moved to Tokyo, and later, New York. Ever since I was young, I have spoken different languages and have been exposed to foreign cultures. This led me to sometimes writing in Korean, Japanese and English all in one sentence. This continued for more than 15 years. I make photographs of moments that can't be translated into spoken words. I started looking at my work that way recently. But to briefly go back to how I began, when I moved to Japan with my sister, I had a camera and a lot of time on my hands. At that point, I didn't have any friends or an agenda, so I became obsessed with taking pictures. In the beginning, it was all about colors and shapes. My hobby began with the visuals that stuck with me. Without much change, it became mundane. I was taking the same picture of ramen every day! Essentially, I was using the film camera for what Instagram is used for now. I photographed my sister and we made stories. I would buy paper from the craft store, cut out shapes and put them in her hair, or apply stickers to her face. She would wear pink, and we would go to a location with a blue wall or something. I made a tableau of all these images that I probably saw in a magazine. My only reference for photography at that point was from fashion magazines. I didn't even know that a fine arts side of photography existed. One day, my sister was crying and I got upset because we were supposed to go on a shoot and I had prepared everything – props, clothes, films – and I was very much looking forward to it. She was crying and I took pictures of her. I was being a bad sister because I just wanted the pictures. This got me thinking that maybe I should study photography and find out what was in it for me. At the time, I didn't know

about many photographers. I went to a bookstore where I found a book by David LaChapelle, which captivated me. His bio stated that he had attended the School of Visual Arts in New York, so I applied there. I studied, graduated, and then all of this happened.

YOU ARE KNOWN FOR THE MINIMALISM OF YOUR STYLE, WHERE YOU PLAY WITH ABSTRACTION, MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS THAT ARE ALMOST AT THE LIMIT OF VISIBILITY. HOW DID YOU FIND YOUR VOICE AND YOUR LANGUAGE?

I think that I have to go back to where I started. When I was experimenting with my sister, I was drawing ideas in my journal for photographs. The drawings were simple and I wasn't sure if they could stand alone by themselves. When I attended art class in Korea, you were supposed to follow instructions on how to draw – like how to sketch the perfect shadow of an apple. All primary education was geared toward going to a reputable university. So even if you wanted to be a painter, you had to go study fine arts at a university. There was a clear-cut method to draw an apple perfectly. Naturally, my drawings always felt like 'wrong answers'. I started drawing because I wanted to show my sister the image first. I wanted the photos to look exactly like my drawings. I sought out deserted areas, looking for clean backdrops. I never really planned specifically, that there would be one tree, for example, but I would have rules. I wasn't even aware that all this could be done in a studio. The location of my shoot mattered most in terms of how I created. In Japan, I would shoot against a white wall, using it as a canvas, and the frame would be limited. I was always aware of where I was, where I was going to be, what I could use, and how I could translate that into a photograph. When I came to New York, I didn't have

a room that I could comfortably photograph. I started going outdoors looking for blank spaces, for example in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Back then, it wasn't so crowded, and I was actually able to find empty walls. In my third year at school, I realized how repetitive it was, and started having difficulty dragging my friends out to participate. Then I considered using the classrooms at school. I wasn't experienced with using lighting or a studio, but ended up using white walls in empty classrooms as my backdrops.

AT THIS POINT DID YOU ALREADY HAVE IT IN MIND TO WORK IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY? OR ANY DIRECTION IN PARTICULAR THAT YOU WANTED TO TAKE?

Not really. I wasn't really into photographing models or working with stylists or makeup artists. All I wanted was to make what I wanted to see. I didn't really have a clear idea of what I wanted to do after graduating, and was focused on making the body of work that I wanted to finish before graduating. Around that time, I discovered photography festivals and magazines featuring interesting works. I ended up submitting work to the festivals and magazines as I finished my senior thesis. Through these opportunities, my work was exposed to individuals who saw that I could do some work in fashion.

COULD YOU TALK THROUGH SOME OF THE THEMES THAT INSPIRED THE WORKS FOR THE SHOW AT THE MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DU LOCLE. IN PARTICULAR, WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO ADDRESS THE WAYS THAT WOMEN ARE REPRESENTED?

I thought I needed to get out a bit, to do something different, and be less disciplined. Photography is, in a

way, a very disciplined medium. That is one of the reasons that I started to cut out negatives. It was a small way of liberating myself. I was looking for a new project, and perhaps, a new process. Last year, I found a Korean article about a guy who had been waiting in the restroom in Seoul's Gangnam neighborhood to commit a random murder. A lot of places in Korea have restrooms that are for both genders and this guy had been waiting in the stall for a woman to come in so he could kill her. The security cameras revealed that many men went into the restroom before the 23-year-old woman was killed. This incident kind of overstated the feeling of hatred towards women in Korea, what is known in the West as "misogyny." I had always thought that gender issues were more apparent in Korea and Japan than in America. It was finally evident for many people in Korea that there are men who hate women. Everyone started talking about it. Conversely, there were guys who started saying that feminism is stupid and pointless. I was shocked. I knew gender inequality existed, but wasn't fully aware of real hatred against women. I wanted to know more, so I started following the female figures in visual culture from Korea and Japan. And I noticed that there was this kind of huge movement where all these girl groups who had been viewed and portrayed by media as passive and school girl-like, even though they were older than 25 – always with pink cheeks and school-girl outfits…etc. – were actually considered cute and cool by regular girls too. Girls also like pretty girls that you see on the media. So I was just curious as to why and started wondering how I had missed these things when I lived in Asia. I remembered seeing *Gravure* magazines at every convenient store in Tokyo. *Gravure* is essentially a watered-down version of *Playboy* – all females in it are portrayed as "the girl next door". They are often photographed as passive and helpless, sometimes playful. One day, I was playing with

houselights and paper that I had on hand, and printed out one of the images from *Gravure* that I found online. When I started researching the pornographic visuals, it hit me that there is a clear formula in the way women are portrayed, which is totally familiar, but looks strange and intriguing. I printed out some of the images, cut out the body figures and photographed them. From there, I kept making images with similar positions and poses, but at the same time I started expanding the stories a bit. That is how it all started.

BECAUSE OF YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE FASHION INDUSTRY, HAVE YOU FOCUSED ON CERTAIN ASPECTS ENCOUNTERED THERE? WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR MAIN CRITERIA WHILE SEARCHING FOR IMAGES?

While researching the images, I started thinking about the photographer, and where he or she stands while taking the images, as well as how the models are treated. I also started thinking about how I myself treat women and models. In a way they are always passive in my images. I try to make my photo subjects feel as comfortable as possible, but how do they feel? I started thinking about all this. When I was selecting the source images, of course, I was looking for the most common poses and most provoking images, but at the same time, I was looking for the subtle moments that maybe the image-maker was pushing for. I thought about how to make the models lively, and how to maintain their voice, while still making a decisive photograph. It is very difficult and contradictory, I think.

I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THIS QUOTE FROM JOHN BERGER WHERE HE SAYS: "MEN LOOK AT WOMEN, AND WOMEN WATCH THEMSELVES BEING LOOKED AT".

Misty, Utopia series, 2016

IT IS ALWAYS ABOUT THIS KIND OF POSITION IN WHICH WOMEN ARE COMPOSING THEMSELVES ACCORDING TO A DOMINANT MALE GAZE. OBSERVATIONS THAT WERE MADE IN THE 1970S, WHEN FEMINIST MOVEMENTS WERE QUITE STRONG, WERE QUITE LINKED TO HISTORIES OF REPRESENTATION AND ART HISTORY.

NOW YOU ARE COMING WITH THE SAME QUESTIONS, SO IT SEEMS TO BE SOMETHING THAT IS DIFFICULT TO CHANGE. AS YOU HAVE BEEN WORKING ON CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS, DO YOU THINK THERE IS ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TIME OF BERGER IN THE 1970S, THE WAY WOMEN WERE DEPICTED IN PAINTINGS IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES, AND THE IMAGES THAT WE GO THROUGH TODAY ON THE INTERNET AND IN SOCIAL MEDIA?

Around the age when girls enter junior high, they start going out, taking selfies and become well exposed to and aware of social media. How can you grow up as a woman without becoming familiar with the male gaze? It is almost impossible – especially in Korean and Japanese culture. When I make these images, I always consider where I stand with this issue. I often have to think about the fact that people may assume that I'm making a self-portrait because I share the same background as the models. So, even though I am using the original source materials that are predominantly informed by the male gaze or influenced by pleasure, the results are second-handedly by a female one: mine. Can they ever be truly free of the male gaze? This is one of the questions I push myself to answer as I work on this project. Of course, it is also for the fun of it. I

was at a mall in Seoul the day before yesterday. There was a really narrow, small restroom with two stalls and a sink. There were five girls who were changing out of school uniforms in the restroom. It was Saturday and they probably told parents "Oh, I'm going to the library" and brought a bag full of clothes and makeup. They were using the restroom as a changing room. There is definitely a mentality of wanting to look pretty regardless of who is looking at you. When you become aware of how much appearance matters, to some degree, in your social circle, it can help friends to deepen the bond. Also, you start having the desire to look a certain way – inspired by K-pop idols. You may not even be interested in guys that much. You are much more obsessed with the "pretty girl" at school, or a pop star. Although the ideal of beauty created by media also cannot be completely free from the male gaze. So yes, it is not the same story in that sense, but I was more responding to the idea that at certain point you realize why you want to look a certain way. There is an age when you want to wear something to draw more or less the attention depending the situation. It is a playful and inquiring way to explore sexuality. So I think that it can't be completely free from someone's gaze and from the social environment. Maybe you are not aware of it at age ten, but at seventeen definitely. The selfies on social media might not be controlled by the male gaze, as depicted by John Berger in the 1970s, but it's nearly impossible to control the perception of the selfies by the viewers – consider who is "liking" them? To a certain extent, a good chunk of the world will consume and diffuse its own projection of the female presence in visual culture. In my opinion, it is not just a matter of femininity and how female is represented. The unequal access to education, wealth, and cultural capital has a strong impact on male perception. It will take a long time to change this situation. But progress is being made every day. I wasn't even

Fuchsia, Utopia series, 2016

aware of misogyny in Korea until I read that article last year. Since then, more Korean people have come forward as feminists. Small changes are happening, and due to social media and online movements, it can spread fast. I stay hopeful and optimistic about the future.

THANKS TO YOUR ACTIVITIES, YOU HAVE BEEN ABLE TO OBSERVE CLOSELY THIS CULTURAL PHENOMENON ON DIFFERENT CONTINENTS. WOULD YOU SAY THAT IT IS RELATIVELY THE SAME IN ASIA, IN NORTH AMERICA OR IN EUROPE?

I think that because the only teenager that I truly know of is myself in the past, I tend to look at Korean teenagers with more affection and attention. I could make more connections in terms of imagining the teenager's life in Korea nowadays. For other countries, I can only observe as an outsider. My initial knowledge of youth lifestyles in different countries comes from the media, mainly Hollywood-produced movies. As my understanding of young Americans was based on fiction, I think that I can just understand the superficial codes to a certain degree. In New York, kids are more casual in comparison with Seoul-based kids. I mean there are those who wear fancy clothes, but I don't see those types a lot where I live. It is more casual, wearing rucksacks and Converse sneakers. I always view them from a distance. I wonder how different it is growing up in LA. When I see teenagers, I immediately think about myself, and how I grew up. When I saw girls changing clothes the other day at the mall, it made me remember when I was 14. At that time, really long and huge pants were popular but forbidden to wear near school. You had to pin the hem of your pants to your sneakers because they were so long. After school, my friends and I would go to the bathroom to change into the pants

and go out. We looked really convincing as a '90s K-pop group. As far as Korean students go, the beauty game is high. They really keep up. But the funny thing is that everyone looks the same, too. At the moment, the most popular trend is thick eyebrows that tilt downward at the ends, which makes the face look more angelic. A pale white face and bright red-colored lips are also trending. I was on the bus the other day, and went by a couple of middle schools. Every girl who got on the bus had the same face. It is really mind-blowing, but also fun and endearing.

PHYSICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN NOWADAYS ARE AT STAKE. THERE ARE LOTS OF ISSUES. AS A PHOTOGRAPHER, DO YOU THINK THAT THERE IS ANY CHANCE TO CHANGE MENTALITIES? THAT YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO EDUCATE PEOPLE ON HOW THEY ARE VIEWING IMAGES?

I feel like this is the start of something. Making images, I'm always thinking, "Do I need to go there?" There are certain images that I could make, but wonder if I have the courage to go against my personal nature. I'm still fighting with those ideas. I haven't really figured out how to be socially active through photographs. It is something to think about – to make something that can contribute to positive change as the viewers experience the work. I have a couple of ideas, though, that I am testing to see whether I could go that far. For example, I have a folder called "Crimes" where I store things that I want to make but wonder whether they are a bit too obscene for me. The first image is called *Peach*. I have been researching a lot of women's issues recently. Apparently, women read a lot more crime novels than men do. Novels and blockbusters, like *Gone Girl* or The *Girl on the Train*, portray women as victims and strong

protagonists at the same time. The *Peach* is based on a murder case that happened in Korea more than 30 years ago. The case is frightening and unpleasant. Later, the story was made into a few movies and books by male creators. I think there is something that needs to be said from my point-of-view as well in the near future.

YOU ARE REWRITING THE CODES TRYING TO FIND SOMETHING. YOU HAVE THIS NOTION OF A BLANK CANVAS ONTO WHICH YOU CAN BUILD A NEW FEMALE FIGURE. IT IS ALMOST AS IF YOU HAVE DISEMBODIED THE CHARACTERS AND ARE NOW GIVING THEM SOME NEW FEATURES.

Yes, it is always a process of addition or subtraction. Bright colors, metaphorical shapes and the anonymity in this work can open a different conversation with the viewers beyond the original source material. Regardless of whether the viewers are familiar with the source or not, I hope viewers could build their own stories, and measure their own relationships with female figures in our visual culture.

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