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# Chung Hyun

Chung Hyun holds a solo exhibition in Paris, France. (3. 30-6. 12 Palais Royal). He presents the *Standing Man* series, and drawings at the IBU Gallery. The human figures, made out of railroad tie that has long endured not only rainstorms but the grave weight of trains, fully convey the 'aesthetics of endurance' that only the materials having persevered ordeal could exude. Through a pictorial composed of selected works from the artist's early days to the recent and three essays, we examine his art from various angles.

Photo by Boggi Kim





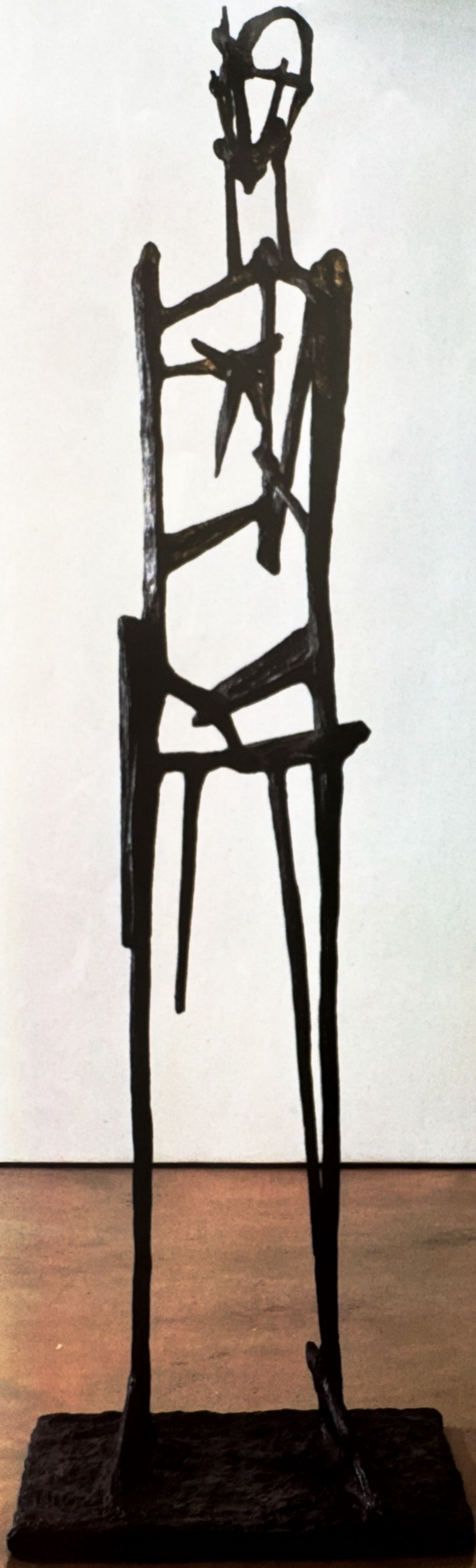




*Untitled*, steel,  
87×95×237cm, 2008

Left page: *Steel Tree*, steel,  
960×60×60cm 2009  
Previous page: Exhibition  
view in Hakgojae Gallery,  
2014





*Untitled*, bronze,  
250×75×60cm, 2012

Right page above: *Untitled*,  
ascon, 287×60×43cm,  
2004

Below: *Untitled*, ascon,  
275×47×49cm, 2004

Next page: *Untitled*, railroad  
tie, 300×75×25cm, 40  
pieces, 2001-2006









*Untitled*, resin, steel,  
60×67×215cm, 1999

Left page: *Untitled*, wood,  
273×250×43cm, 2000



Left: *Untitled*, bronze,  
45×16×18cm, 1991  
Right: *Untitled*, bronze,  
53×19×10cm, 1997

Right page: *Untitled*, bronze,  
60×42×42cm, 1995









Above: *Untitled*,  
plaster, manila hemp,  
38.5×26×32cm, 1990  
Below: *Untitled*,  
plaster, manila hemp,  
40.3×24×45cm, 1990



Left page: *Untitled*, plaster,  
manila hemp, coal tar,  
95×30.5×27.5cm, 1988

# Existential Energy in Materials

*Chung Hyun creates abstract and expressive forms of human bodies. Human body is a traditional theme in sculpture. His human bodies are difficult to recognize as human bodies as they are abstracted by omission of facial features and limbs. Powerful feeling emitted from the whole body of work and the rough surface of the sculpture remind us of the swift brush stroke of action painting, and the uneven surface created by digging and tearing seems to express scars or psychological agony.*

Kim Yisoon

Any analysis of Chung Hyun's artwork must address two issues—his materials and his conception of the human body. For more than 20 years, he has been using traditional materials (such as plaster, wood, and iron) to faithfully produce sculptures that are reminiscent of either a full human body or the head and torso. His sculptures require close attention in this era when virtually every genre has been deconstructed and dissolved, and when the use of new expressive materials is considered mandatory. The consistency of his productions is quite impressive, but he also deserves credit for boldly introducing unconventional objects and substances, including rail ties, Ascon (asphalt concrete), and coal, into the field of sculpture.

Chung Hyun began creating atypical likenesses of the human body in the 1990s when he was studying abroad in France. He fabricated a human skeleton, wrapped it with Manila hemp, and then applied coal tar to it. Having the distinctive shape of a human frame comprising only skin and bones, the resulting sculpture was reminiscent of Informel's expressivity. He experimented with another new way of creating a human figure by molding wet clay into the rough shape of a person, and then beating the clay with a two-by-four and a shovel. Unlike the conventional method of carefully sculpting by using either carving knives or hands, this inventive technique of smashing the clay with a blunt object produced a completely different type of sculpture, which renounced the fine details of the figure in favor of recording every trace of the artist's

audacious movement. The use of such unexpected tools and techniques augments the resistance to reality which is inherent in Chung Hyun's mind. Furthermore, the indistinct traces left behind by his pounding serve as the minimal sign of what is required to transform a lump of clay into a artwork.

Chung ceaselessly experiments with new materials. During the 1990s, he primarily used traditional materials like plaster and bronze, but in the 2000s, he began sculpting with rarely used items like rail ties, Ascon, and coal. More recently, his work has entered new territory yet again, as he has become fascinated with rebar. His sculptures are noted for placing greater emphasis on the characteristic of the material, or the materiality, than on the subject matter of the human body, which is often merely implied. Like other sculptors whose artistic interest moves beyond narrative-centered sculptures, Chung tends to focus more on the formative aspects such as shape, structure, and materials.

The use of rail ties opened a new artistic and creative world to Chung. He is interested in rail ties because they endure harsh exposure to the wind and rain, as well as the heavy weight of trains, over many years. These extreme conditions lead to their inevitable deterioration and eventual disposal. Chung always waits until the rail ties have served their time before using them for his artwork, but his sculptures do much more than merely present the found objects as they are. He hacks the surface of a rail tie with an ax, or else cuts it with a saw, thereby using his tools to accentuate the materiality

of the rail tie rather than any intended figure or form. The process of cutting and hacking with a chisel or saw is not meant to tell the story of the artist through the rail tie, but to vent its own power and energy.

The same can be said of his use of Ascon as a sculptural material. Just as the rail tie is eventually discarded, Ascon is a road pavement material which is dug up by a hydraulic shovel and thrown away once it reaches a state of disrepair. Chung collects the Ascon scrap, which he then cuts and scratches until it somehow begins to resemble a human figure. For his more recent work, he has been using rebar, either as an architectural frame, or to resemble the tips or stubs which are sometimes left on a sculpture from the casting foundry, which are typically removed with a grinder. By recycling discarded or rusted rebar, Chung instills it with vitality, particularly since he uses it to create organic figures like a tree.

Chung Hyun's creative process of hacking, cutting, and chiseling is ultimately designed to bring out the inherent qualities of a material and to affirm that the material itself is bursting with energy in need of an outlet. The artist meets the material and its raw energy through the mediation of sawing and chiseling, which leads to a powerful synergy between the artist and the material. Materials are always one of the most important factors in sculpture, but this is even truer in Chung's case. Materials are absolutely vital to Chung Hyun because he uses them, more than anything else, to express his artistic abilities and his creative consciousness.



# Movimento dell'anima

*Chung Hyun states the essence of sculptor as power, and energy. He is a sculptor that seeks to not present works that have achieved eternity through an ultimate completion, but rather present the process itself of the time's power and material's energy flowing and moving. Such aesthetics of the raw and the "non finito" is clearly evident in not only his representative human figures, but the drawings using pencil, conte, or coal tar, and also his work of moving the steel ball used in steel mills directly into the exhibition space. His art reveals the energy still embraced by discarded materials, paying tribute to the trivial.*  
Young June Kiehm

The sculptor, Chung Hyun's works contain 'flow'. They are the visual epic poem that compresses the stream of time, consciousness and spirit. They are the experiential records that embody the traces left by the passing time in our lives. They shape the speed, power and movement of the 'flow' and are the multi-dimensional creative results that encompass the space, which becomes the medium of the stream. Also, they are the echo that delivers to the world the power and energy of the visualized language of the will of creation that flowed out from the inside of the artist.

His works give the audience a chance to see and feel how Chung has embodied the 'flow' and created the echo. By showing new drawings next to the three-dimensional works that has been already presented before, it gives an opportunity to review the artistic context that has been developed by the past works. From 'the figure sculpture' series that introduced the artist's bold presence to the world to the 'steel ball' series and to the 'drawings on paper' that look like they have been developed from the artist's heart, the exhibition concisely presents artistic records of Chung Hyun.

Some of his drawings look like face of human, trees or grass and the figures exploding the compressed energy have been filling the gallery wall. The artworks possess the power that may be found from the three dimensional works. They are no less compared to the 'human figure' and the 'steel ball', which are exhibited together. Chung sculpted on the paper moving pencil and conté as if he was chiseling, sawing,

and axing. He swung a brush soaked in coal tar to visualize the energy and its flow that are conveyed from the arm. However, as much as such works has been categorized as 'drawing', it is ironic and yet interesting that they are two-dimensional works having nature and presence of three-dimensional works.

'Non finito'. It is the artistic concept as sculptural expressional technique that comes up instantly as one faces Chung Hyun's work. 'Non finito' implies 'unfinished' or 'in-completed', this could be interpreted roughly as 'the act to be seen as incomplete intentionally or that of a result'. Or it may summarized as 'completed incompleteness' or 'incompleted completion'. 'Non finito' as expression technique is used in order to deliver dramatic effects such as sorrow and tragic beauty that were evoked from the remaining existence or object which are not finished, which are nothing but almost remain as 'raw materials' and deep lingering imageries from unfinished story. And the finished 'non finito' works gain strong existence and enormous power. They are fitting tributes to his own name. In fact, even if most of his sculptural works are intentional 'non finito' but they are rather be discussed as 'non finito'-like. Most of his 'figure works' share the concept- from plaster made form wrapped with Manila hemp one layer by layer to railroad tie, asphalt concrete, resin, and up to bronze works, the ones exhibited in the exhibition. They only have differences in materials, forms, working methods, but these are completely finished raw objects, with embedded power

inside. His ultimate goal is not realization of ideal form, or abstract concept and value but rather process of becoming something and the moment, and the existence in that process because they reveal and include the power enabling everything and the act itself.

### Hommage to the Banal

As if this particular feature speaks itself, it is also evident in Chung's perspective on drawing. "Value found from trivial objects, something before that is expressed in words, liveliness, something raw, an image that cannot be forecasted, spontaneity, freedom from criticism, depth of tenacious wandering..." At first glance, it coincidentally seems like a description of Michelangelo's 'non finito' work 'Slavery.' It is a lump of energy that appears like a man who struggles to escape from the rock that imprisons him. Although the man is called 'slave' now in present day, Michelangelo did not name this existence that carried this basic strength. And Chung Hyun paradoxically named his 'figure work' as 'untitled.'

Then what about his 'steel ball' work? This work is definitely the most controversial artwork made by the sculptor. It can be speculated as same with 'figure work' made with railroad ties or asphalt concrete, this particular work began from his hope 'to see a man's sanctity exposed through maturity and endurance created by accumulated time.' However, what Chung actually does is to relocate a lump of steel that is used to break steel plates into pieces at industrial settings, so it is hard to say



*A Face*, railroad tie, 160×92×110cm, 2001

whether to consider this as his work. It is not a 'non finito' work and definitely, not a work created to embody 'completed incompleteness.' Can something be considered as a work of art without any intervention by an artist? Marcel Duchamp's most famous readymade work 'Fountain' was a factory-made porcelain urinal signed "R.Mutt" and titled 'Fountain' by the artist and was presented upside down at an exhibition pedestal, and since there was a least amount of intervention by the artist so it was acknowledged as an artwork. The amount of intervention was trivial but a new context was successfully created through conscious effort so it can be called as an 'artwork'—something that was 'made.'

However this 'steel ball' basically was relocated from where it originally came from to an exhibition. It does not even have a name. A gesture can be named as a flower by calling it a name, steel ball should be something other than a lump of steel.

'Steel Ball' has an open ending. It is an afterword told by something raw waiting to be cured and could also be a testimony for energy, or spirit that constantly flows but never disappears. Chung explains his work to be 'not a relief after an intense explosion but rather draws in, becoming quieter and

more composed, to self-examine than claim' and it is an introspection of Koan implied by him. It questions whether if an energy, a power that has been innately buried within this lump of steel that has endured time and incidents until 16 tons worn down to 12, can be felt; and inquires with a mischievous smile, whether or not you have an intuition or an insight to feel this energy. Perhaps, Chung believes 'steel ball work' is possible without calling by its name and without any intervention of action. Maybe he considers perceiving the existence of eight tons of energy and ardent incidents lost due to smashing and wearing out, breathes new life into to this lump of steel. This awareness and realization have placed once abandoned steel lump at a steel mill waiting to become an industrial waste, into an exhibition room as a work of art, so it is not a speculation made by a writer who sentimentalized over this work.

If a sculpture's quality is power and energy, then Chung Hyun is a person who handles it. However, energy's basic qualities are movement and flow. This said, Chung is basically a person who works with movement and flow. According to Leon Battista Alberti, in an artwork that outstandingly captured movement, you can feel 'movement of the soul (movimento dell'anima)'. Chung Hyun's work capturing movement and making flow creates strength—and that is 'movement of the soul (movimento dell'anima)'.









Untitled, coal tar,  
115x116cm, 2006

Previous page: Exhibition  
in Hakgojae Gallery,

# The Affirmation of Sculpture

*Unlike the informel or abstract sculpture, Chung Hyun's human figures transform the limitations of place into a stage and dance on it with the material. "The sculptural" that his art pursues defies the binary oppositions between form and material, and mind and body, ultimately affirming the primary "power of the sculpture itself" and the "genuine truth of sculpture". This Nietzschean sense of affirmation retraces its steps back to the very beginning and completely recovers the original and unharmed totality. Having embodied not only the affirmation of sculpture, but the secret of an eternal return that re-affirms the initial affirmation, Chung Hyun is a sculptor of repetition that constantly (re)initiates sculpture every moment.*

Wonbang Kim

The sculpture by Chung Hyun has been generally categorized as 'sculpture of the human figure'. This is not entirely wrong. Based on the body of work ranging from his first solo exhibition in 1992, objects constructed with railroad ties around 2000, the work using asphalt-concrete prepared for this exhibition at the Kim Chong Yung Sculpture Museum, and drawings, it is clear that the form of the human body is a recognizable characteristic of his art. The artist himself does not deny that his work began from the study of the human figure and continues to deal with the problem of the sculptural depiction of the human figure. For example, he has said, "By means of sculpture I attempt to reexamine and reinterpret humans and the human figure (···) There still remains a lot to do with the human figure. It is not a thing of the past." His work has also been widely viewed as "man's existential state in the face of crisis and despair" or "a portrait of ourselves today with a layer of appearance stripped away". Sometimes a term like stoicism is suggested to describe his work. The work constructed with the railroad ties in particular is discussed in relation to a kind of "long period of stoicism". Chung Hyun himself has said, "The railroad tie is a work of art on its own in that it has endured for many years snowstorms and rainstorms, while the train weighs down from above and below the pebbles dig into the wood."

But, the form of the human figure and the anthropomorphic element only make up a partial aspect of Chung Hyun's sculpture and a critical description of this

partial aspect seems to be the starting point of study of special qualities of Chung Hyun's work. By asking questions like 'To what degree is his sculpture about the human figure?', 'How does the human figure manifest itself?', and most of all, 'What else is the work about, if not the human figure?', we can discern and analyze his work within the dynamic shifts of the structuralized boundaries between the 'human figure/non-human figure', or 'presence of sculpture/absence of sculpture'.

## Sculpture, Dance and Stage

During his study abroad in France, Chung Hyun abandoned the kind of realistic sculpture he had done in Korea and began rough modeling with the clay using tools like a square bar, a lump of metal, and a shovel. The artist considers this period "a turning point leaving behind academic sculpture." He begins to think of the human figure as "simply the object" and at the same time, his sculpture turns away from the teleological concerns of representation of the human figure and begins to take on 'various forms of play taking place within the limited condition set forth by the human body'. When he says that "the human figure is simply the object", it means that the form of the human figure is not the final aim but it doesn't necessarily mean that his work is completely turning away from it. In Chung Hyun's previous work as well as the new work made with asphalt-concrete clumps pulled apart with a power saw, contours of the human figure like a corpse are present,





however vague they may be. This presence of the human figure can amount to no more than just an arrangement of heaps of stone and represents a figurative sculpture that has 'taken a step back'. This sculptural retreat however brings out new aspects, key elements that were previously left out by the epistemological and intelligible reading of his work focusing on the human figure and its anthropomorphic aspect. What stands out can be described as a furiously entangled dance; a dance between the power that is applied to the material and the material that resists that power. The condensed heap of rubbles penetrated and sliced and sections of asphalt and rubbles that have been cut, such are the manifestations of the dance.

#### Cybernetics of 'Whole Sculpture'

But if we are to say Chung Hyun's work is all about the 'aesthetics of the material' or the 'expression of the material' then it would be no different from the aesthetics of the Informel or Abstract Sculpture. The unique qualities of Chung Hyun lie here – that there is a kind of stage providing simultaneously the place as well as limitations for this dance with the material. That stage is in fact the form of the human figure and the dance with the material only takes place on this stage. In doing so his work is able to retain both materiality and formality, and body and spirit, instead of being reduced to either one of the two extremes. I would like to use the term 'Whole Sculpture' to designate this characteristic of having both elements together. Furthermore we can conceptualize

such ontological position as 'the sculptural'.

The aim of the intense dance with material is not to copy the human figure. The form of the human figure is merely the temporary stage set up by Chung Hyun, the dancer. As the dancer's job does not lie in copying the form of the stage, the stage only becomes aware of its boundaries intermittently or accidentally from time to time in the midst of the dancer's erotic exercise. 'The totality of the whole sculpture' (unrelated to the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk) is the result of conserving altogether the dance and its stage, the aesthetics of the sculptural ingredients and the form that these ingredients represent. Chung Hyun's sculptural form does remind us of the intense process of the existential endurance, but we should go one step further to really focus on the intensity and endurance of the dance which sustains the whole preservation. That is in fact the intensity and endurance of the sculpture itself. Within the site of the 'Whole Sculpture', there are two pathways leading to the human figure. One is the 'reproduced human form', in other words the 'human figure', and the other is the dancer who dances with such human figure and its materials. Whereas the former is merely an object of visual perception, the latter exists only in the first person 'I', in the 'here and now'. The latter is 'I as a firsthand participant who is sensually immersed in the sharp refractions of the asphalt clump that is before me at this very moment'.

The core of Chung Hyun's work is not the problem of the human figure, but

Left: *Untitled*, coal tar,  
79×55cm, 2014  
Right: *Untitled*, Steel,  
126×126×110cm, 2014

Left page above: *Untitled*,  
bronze, 50×34×41cm,  
1996

Below: *Untitled*, coal,  
42×29×37cm, 2005

Previous page: *Untitled*,  
railroad tie, 250×160cm,  
2002

that of the body, and although this body is not visible it signifies the entire field of my presence where intense mutual exchange between me and the object takes place. Chung Hyun's material struggles endlessly as if to copy somebody's face or pose while caught in a vortex created by the precarious balance, material's self-preservation, and the evidence of the great weight that's been applied to the material. Sculpture was originally about an 'interaction between representation and its rebellious material' (think of Michelangelo and Medardo Rosso). But in art history a majority of sculpture pursued the extreme victory of one side. In the case of realist sculpture, any trace of sculpture's cybernetic movement is completely erased for the epistemological aim of creating 'a specific human figure', 'the pose describing a certain action', or 'a certain historical event'. Or in the opposite case, such as Minimalism, the shape of the human figure is eliminated to show the material itself in a state of excessive self-awareness. Chung Hyun preserves the scene of these two extremes entangled. And it is as if what we normally consider figurative sculpture was already there (pre-existed, so its present state is read as the destructed form of that human figure), or is to be achieved after (so that one expects to see a realistic rendering of a human figure very soon). To maintain the simultaneity of having both pre- and post- qualities as long as possible is the very task of Chung Hyun's art, because sculpture in such precarious position is in fact 'the reality of sculpture' and 'whole sculpture'.



I hope that this year's 'Today's Artist' exhibition will be an opportunity for Chung Hyun's work to be seen in a new light. By which I mean that some of these critical rhetorics that his work has been associated with should be reconsidered in a wider context, rather than disappear altogether. For example, phrases like "an artist who dares to singularly pursue the human figure" or "the portrait of the dejected human spirit in contemporary society" are mere thematic discussions from critical-theoretical point of view. Instead, his work merits attention for its unique methodologies, including his profound investigation and intuition towards sculpture itself, and the greater premise on which the very different experiments are based from his early to the present work. Only then do we recognize that he is 'not just an old-fashioned sculptor of human figures but a very avant-garde pioneer'.

In the genre of figurative sculpture that can easily be subjected to arguments relating to formal aesthetics or romantic symbolism, Chung Hyun's work brings the focus back to 'the power of sculpture itself' and 'the realistic quality of sculpture' by emphasizing the possibility of layered readings and physical cybernetics. It aspires for what Nietzsche called 'affirmation',

because affirmation is not a rational action like approval and persuasion, but rather a process accompanied by a bodily exercise that restores wholly the original totality by going back to the starting point. Chung Hyun is a sculptor of repetition who starts from the very beginning every time, through that very affirmation about the medium of sculpture itself, and for the re-affirmation of that affirmation.

#### Chung Hyun

Born in Incheon in 1956, Chung Hyun earned both his B.F.A. (in 1982) and his M.F.A. (in 1986) in sculpture from Hongik University. He also studied sculpture at École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France. He is currently an associate professor in the College of Arts at Hongik University. Since his first solo exhibition in Gallery Won in 1992, he has thus far had 17 solo exhibitions as of today, as well as participating in several significant group exhibitions. In 2004, he was the first recipient of the Today's Artist Award given by the Kim Jong-Young Art Museum of Art. He was also awarded the Artist of the Year by Korea's National Museum of Contemporary Art in 2006 and 28th Kim Se Choong Sculpture Award in 2014. His works are housed in various museums including the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Busan Museum of Art, Daejeon Museum of Art and Gyeonggi Museum of Modern Art.