

The Horizon

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Roughly 15 kilometers from Manhattan lies Brooklyn, one of New York City's five boroughs, a mosaic of diverse neighborhoods like Williamsburg, Sunset Park, and Greenpoint. Walking through its streets reveals a vivid mix of cultures, with Latin American, Caribbean, and Polish communities coexisting in shared environments. Morgan Avenue, the title of this exhibition, sits further east, an area bearing the vestiges of Brooklyn's industrial past, with warehouses and former manufacturing hubs now transformed into spaces frequented by artists and musicians.

In a studio on a street lined with austere, dark concrete and brown-gray buildings, Suh Yongsun completed his latest city paintings. Inspired by his experiences in New York, these works capture scenes from decades of observation: people waiting for subways, commuters on buses, and at times, desolate streets or isolated buildings. At first glance, these scenes may appear as fleeting snapshots or almost objective landscapes. But does Suh's *New York* series merely serve as a visual record, an objective portrayal of the city?

This past spring, I had the opportunity to speak with Suh while he was working in New York. He shared his thoughts on observation, describing how drawing people begins with careful study, a process in which the artist inevitably perceives certain details more profoundly. Since each artist's scope and style vary, the subjects they choose to capture differ as well. The New York series is the culmination of his committed observations and sketches while traveling by subway between Brooklyn and Manhattan, a journey that often takes over 30 minutes. Yet, this time is not a linear passage; it unfolds in layers, with each encounter absorbed and integrated through his consciousness. Through these city series, which he has pursued since the 1980s, we are invited not only to see what he observes but also how he sees – compelling us to consider the nature of his vision, not merely as a perspective, but as a unique perceptual journey in itself.

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method* (1960), describes understanding as a "fusion of horizons," where one's visual and cognitive perception is shaped by unique historical, cultural, and personal contexts that expand and transform through interaction with others. In the end, the world an individual perceives and interprets is inherently partial and cannot attain full objectivity.

Similarly, in Suh's paintings, signboards, streetlights, and subway structures appear as snapshots in fleeting moments. Yet, recognizing the viewer's presence outside the picture plane exposes the

impossibility of neutrality in painting.¹ This awareness allows the viewer's perspective to merge with the artist's, forming an expanded, shared horizon.

In terms of subject matter and technique, his work is often interpreted through the lens of German Expressionist artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Beckmann. The figures, moving aimlessly within bold colors and fragmented compositions, evoke the loneliness, melancholy, and nihilistic existence characteristic of Expressionism. While color served as a tool to express dominant psychological themes in postwar German society for these artists, for Suh, it directly reflects the transformations of 1980s Korean society. He recalls that prior to the city series, most signage in 1970s Korean urban streets featured black lettering. However, the introduction of color television in the 1980s brought about a notable shift in the use of color throughout daily life.

*"One thing I realized after observing Korean cities for a while is Korea's relatively conservative stance on usage of colors throughout history... Confucianism favored monochrome ink paintings, which partially contributed to the prolonged tradition of subdued palettes... as the 1980s came and a transitional period of generational liberation took place, I feel like I witnessed and took part of such a transformative shift."*²

In his 1991 solo exhibition preface, the former professor at Seoul National University, Jung Youngmok, noted that Suh's use of color transcends more than visualizing specific emotions. That is, it represents *a process of dismantling existing notions of color within the context of Korea and an attempt at transformation of the status quo.*³

Titles from his city series, such as *Sookdae Entrance, 07:00 – 09:00* (1991) and *14th L Train* (2017), *56 St. + 6 Ave* (2019-22) reflect specific locations in cities like Melbourne, Berlin, and Seoul, allowing viewers to infer the geopolitical contexts of the backgrounds. The depicted subjects in his painting such as specific alley walls, subway ticket gates, and pedestrians at times, appear in enlarged forms. This precision ironically turns them into universal symbols of the city, making it challenging to identify their backgrounds without titles. In *34 St.* (2017-2024), the figure waiting for a train mirror both an everyday

¹ Suh Yongsun, "Living in a city adds much more complexity than being in nature. Human existence is socially determined, and therefore, whenever someone walks by, we constantly and subconsciously judge them based on countless standards of our own. To objectively perceive something, in my opinion, is impossible from the outset.," *Radar*, "Validation of Being," April 21, <https://radarseoul.com/Suh-Yongsun-ENG>.

² Ibid.

³ Yongmok Jung, *The intellectual symbolism of distortion and contrast*, Suh Yongsun solo exhibition intro, 1991

other and ourselves, suggesting that survival for modern individuals involves navigating daily routines rather than grand actions. Suh offers his perspective, showcasing these urban landscapes experienced in non-linear time. This does not reflect a pessimistic view of the unattainable nature of objective reality, but rather suggests the enduring potential for interpretation and the hope of infinite horizons.