

The Artistic World of Ahn Changhong: Witness to History, Voice of the Zeitgeist

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This is an abridged version of a much longer critical essay titled "Ahn Changhong: Drawing, the Ancient Future," written by Kim, Chongki (art critic, PhD in philosophy) for the exhibition catalogue of the Ahn Changhong retrospective. The exhibition, held from July 8 to October 11, 2024, at the Jung-gu Cultural Center and the Bokbyeongsan Small Art Museum in Busan, introduced the public to the work of the Busan-born artist Ahn Changhong. It is the author's hope that this selection conveys something of the artist's true essence.

1. From *the Post-Human Series* to *Dangerous Play*

— Allegorical Transmutations of Reality and Magical Realism

Let us begin with the words of the artist himself:

If someone were to ask me whether I was happy as a painter, I would simply answer that I have strived to see the truth. Rather than the sunny side, I've turned to the shadows to the victims who are the subjects of history yet excluded from the spoils of victory. I've tried to look at history through their eyes, to perform, as it were, a ritual of remembrance for the nameless dead buried beneath the barbarity of history. If, someday, people can feel the pain and convulsions of the era I lived through by looking at my work, I would be content. For me, art is the spirit of unrestrained freedom, a cry of rage and resistance against absurdity, a form of testimony, and a product of the spirit of the times(Zeitgeist).

Throughout his entire life as an artist, Ahn Changhong has never lost touch with the spirit of the times. As a witness of those times, he has shared the sorrow of the victims through his works, expressed solidarity with them, and criticized and resisted the injustice of the times.

His art is often searingly intense at times directly exposing the violence inflicted by power, at other times graphically portraying the mechanisms of sexuality and desire under consumer capitalism, or laying bare the wounds of those anonymous souls sacrificed by authority. What runs through all of this is, in his own words, "a cry of rage and resistance against absurdity, and a form of testimony."

Ahn Changhong was born in 1953 in Miryang, South Korea, the third son of a police officer. The breakup of his family following his parents' divorce during his childhood left him with great psychological trauma. He spent his early years in Miryang before moving to Busan with his father. After graduating middle school, he left home and began an independent life. He briefly attended Dong-A High School in Busan as a self-taught student, but was expelled after a year and a half due to unpaid tuition fees. He worked on construction sites, designed handbags, and slowly awakened to the realities of the world.

In his youth, Ahn lived and worked in neighborhoods such as Chungmu-dong, Nampo-dong, Bupyeong-dong, and Daechong-dong - places that deeply influenced him. There, he married, raised two sons, and produced his major early series: *Post-Human*, *Family Portraits*, *Dangerous Play*, and *War*. These neighborhoods were also home to the U.S. Information Center (now the annex of the Busan Modern and Contemporary History Museum), and were the sites of large-scale protests during the 1979 Bu-Ma Democratic Uprising, in which students and citizens resisted Park Chung-hee's Yushin dictatorship. It was here, too, that enraged students, furious at America's complicity in the suppression of the Gwangju Uprising, set fire to the American Culture Center in Busan. Later, during the June Democratic Struggle of 1987, these same streets saw the largest demonstrations in the country.

Ahn Changhong personally experienced the Bu-Ma Uprising, heard the reports of the Gwangju people's revolt in 1980, and took to the streets during the June 1987 movement. All of these moments found their way into his work.

In his early works such as *Self-Portrait* (1973), *Self-Portrait in the Mirror* (1973), and *Heart of the Universe* (1973), Ahn Changhong engages in intense self-reflection as an artist, striving to establish his own identity with a deeply self-conscious gaze. Moving beyond these introspective pieces, his paintings such as *Hospital Room* (1976) (Figure 1) and *Behind the Cremation Curtain* (1976) (Figure 2) reveal an expressionist style imbued with

strong existential overtones. In these two works, Ahn already hints at the erasure of the subject or the dissolution of being by deliberately omitting the eyes of the figures.

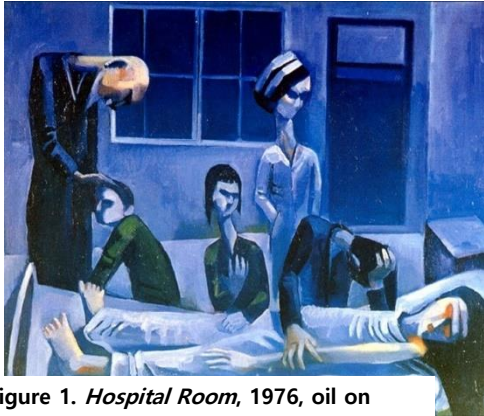


Figure 1. *Hospital Room*, 1976, oil on canvas, 100 × 80.3 cm.



Figure 2. *Behind the Cremation Curtain*, 1976, oil on canvas, 72.7 × 60.6 cm

Each individual depicted here is elevated to the status of an anonymous, ordinary person through the erasure of their pupils, suggesting a universalization of identity. In this context, life and death, though occurring within the private sphere, are equated with the life and death of all humanity. Furthermore, the absence of pupils intensifies the sense of annihilation inherent in death.

In *The Scream* (1986) (Figure 3), this mode of expression becomes even more intensified.

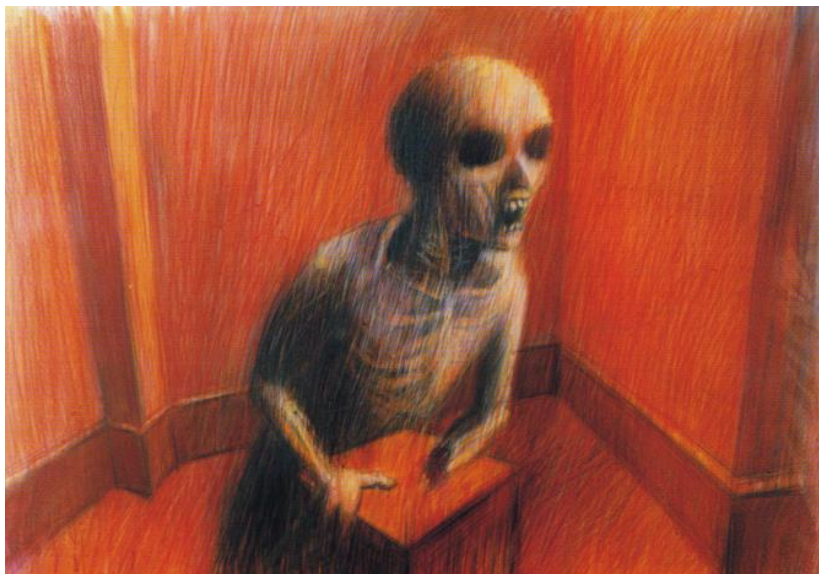


Figure 3. *Scream*, 1986, colored pencil and drawing ink on paper, 79.5 × 109.5 cm

Among the significant works from this period is *Memory of That Day* (1980) (Figure 4), which depicts scenes likely drawn from the May 1980 Gwangju Uprising. The painting

portrays strange, mask-like figures with hollow eyes and mouths, writhing in pain yet also lifting one another up. The artist has violently scratched the surface of the painting in a chaotic and rough manner, leaving behind traces and marks that evoke the wounds of history and the cries and laments of its victims. This expressive technique appears not only in this work but recurs throughout many pieces from that period and beyond.



Figure 4. *Memory of That Day*, 1980, oil paint and water-based paint on paper, 171 × 114.5 cm.

Also notable are Ahn Changhong's 1984 *War* series, which exposes the inherent violence and oppressive nature of war. In particular, *War II: In the Barley Field* (Figure 5) evokes comparisons with works such as Goya's *The Second of May, 1808*, *The Third of May, 1808* (1814), and *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1820–1823). Like Goya's paintings, Ahn's work addresses the Korean War (the 6.25 War), not through the lens of anti-communist ideology, but by confronting the universal horror and carnage of war itself.



Figure 5. War II (In the Barley Field), 1984, colored pencil and pastel on paper, 79.5 × 109.5 cm

Between 1979 and 1982, Ahn produced a series of works titled *Family Portrait*, which later developed into the 1985 series *Commemorative Photograph – The Spring Days Are Gone*. While rooted in deeply personal narratives, *the Family Portrait* series marks the beginning of a conscious effort by the artist to perceive and situate his private history within the broader scope of national history.

By translating my childhood family photographs into paintings, I began to uncover the arduous and buried history of our people embedded within them. The history of those who were sacrificed to build the narratives of the victors—the wealthy, the privileged, the powerful—is not merely personal. I came to believe that my art must actively reflect this truth. To draw out the pain hidden within the one-dimensional photograph into a three-dimensional expression, I began painting veins over the faces, initiating a process of overlapping those personal images with the throes of the times.

In the *Family Portrait* series, Ahn renders the faces in the photographs as mask-like and pierces holes where the eyes and mouth should be, thereby erasing the referential relationship between the depicted figures and any specific individuals outside the painting. As a result, each figure in the series transcends personal identity and is expanded into a representation of the universal human condition of our time (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Family Portrait, 1980, oil on paper, 130.3 × 162.3 cm

The theme of “the disappearance of being and subjecthood,” which featured prominently in Ahn Changhong’s recent work *Ghost Fashion*, and which had already been explored in his *Post-Human* series, emerges here with even greater intensity.

Ahn’s photo-paintings are inherently dual in nature. By introducing scratches, rips, and traces of dripping—elements absent from ordinary photographs—he renders the image unfamiliar, blocking emotional identification and prompting reflection instead. At the same time, these marks—wounds not found in conventional photographs—pierce my heart. As I view these photo-paintings, I am reminded of the tragic events in history that such ordinary people may have endured. In this way, the photograph acquires a broader sense of historicity and universality (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Commemorative Photograph – The Spring Days Are Gone, 1985, ink and acrylic on photograph, 142 × 95 cm.

2. Consumer Capitalism and the Dialectic of Desire

During his tumultuous years in Busan, Ahn Changhong created works that breathed with the spirit of the times—capturing the pain of the era and the resistance of the people. Although he personally rejected the institutional framework of university education, he earned a stable income by teaching entrance-exam art to students. However, when the number of students increased and his income grew, Ahn chose to abandon it all and left for Seoul in 1988. The fiercely uncompromising artistic spirit of his youth could not reconcile itself with the financial stability gained through exam-focused art instruction. Thus, he left Busan—a place that had become the root of his identity and the foundation of the direction and ethos of his artistic practice—and moved to Seoul.

After spending eight months painting in Seoul, he relocated and settled in Yangpyeong, where he lives today. Although more developed now, at the time Yangpyeong was a remote, nearly isolated rural area. There, Ahn deliberately withdrew himself from the dazzling desires of urban civilization, effectively “imprisoning” himself in order to begin exploring the dialectic of consumption and desire through his own visual language. This period marks a transition: the critical consciousness of his youth in Busan, which had focused on social resistance, began expanding into a broader civilizational critique of consumer capitalism. The foundation laid during this time would later become a key lens through which he analyzed Korea's distorted form of capitalism—pariah capitalism—a crude and vulgar version of consumer capitalism, and the anthropological condition of “sex and desire” that thrives within it.

During this period, Ahn Changhong explored the contradictions that persisted in Korean society despite its achievement of formal democracy through the June Struggle of 1987. On the one hand, there was the continued eruption of powerful social movements driven by unresolved structural inequalities; on the other, the development of consumer capitalism distorted everyday life into a realm of indulgence, sex, and drugs. This duality is vividly captured in *Our Everyday Life* (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Our Everyday Life*, 1989, pencil on paper, 79.5 × 109.5 cm.

In the background, depicted through a perspectival composition, we see mass protests and street demonstrations, including the intensified labor struggles that followed the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987. In the middle ground, figures indulging in sex and pleasure are shown—one couple engaged in intercourse is visually equated with mating dogs. Nearby, a fetus, aborted with the umbilical cord still attached, lies in a sewer, where a child holding a baguette urinates. In the foreground, a man—his arm pierced with multiple syringes—plunges himself into ruin through drug abuse.

Through this stark juxtaposition, Ahn poses a fundamental question about the origins of pleasure-driven consumption and desire in a consumer capitalist society. He probes how these forces distort and degrade human life, relentlessly pursuing the problem of desire within the context of contemporary capitalism.

If *Prostitution* (Figure 9) addresses sexuality not from the perspective of pleasure in a consumer capitalist society but rather from the broader viewpoint of human alienation. Then, beginning with works such as the *Spring Outing* series, Ahn Changhong directly confronts the issues of consumption and indulgence in consumer society (Figures 10 and 11). The wealthy women, adorned with dazzling jewelry and accessories, are portrayed with vacant, hollow expressions—unlike the woman in *Prostitution*, who, though set on a diagonal axis, maintains a piercing and assertive gaze.



Figure 9. Prostitution, 1980, collage on colored paper, 35 × 23 cm



Figure 10. Spring Outing 1, 1990, fabric and oil paint on paper, 109.5 × 79.5 cm.



Figure 11. Spring Outing 2, 1990, fabric and oil paint on paper, 109.5 × 79.5 cm.



Figure 12. Woman, 1991, gouache on paper, 48 × 75 cm

As Jacques Lacan (1902–1981) stated, the subject is a “desiring subject.” Yet because the object of desire (*the objet petit a*) is always already lost, the subject is marked by a fundamental lack, which manifests itself in the form of desire. What psychoanalysis teaches us, however, is that our desire is always profoundly entangled with the desire of the Other.

Needs such as hunger or thirst can be satisfied, but **desire** points to something beyond

basic needs—something fundamentally unfulfillable. For example, my desire to own a luxury item does not vanish once I obtain it; instead, it shifts toward another object. This shift often occurs even more rapidly when I realize that others possess the same luxury item. This is because the true aim of my desire was never the object itself, but the **difference** it creates—the distinction that sets me apart from others.

In this sense, desire is not about possessing the object, but about possessing a difference that confers uniqueness or status. As soon as desire is seemingly fulfilled, it moves on in search of a new object. Desire, therefore, is always bound up with **lack**, and by its very nature, it can never be fully satisfied.

Now entering his mature years, Ahn Changhong perceives that in a consumer capitalist society, human desire—though pursued by all—is ultimately an illusion, something like a phantom that can never truly be fulfilled. Through the vacant, hollow eyes of women adorned with glittering jewels and luxurious accessories, he visually renders the empty essence of desire.

In *Woman* (Figure 12), Ahn depicts a female figure with blazing eyes as a “monster of desire”—a being in relentless pursuit of an unattainable object. In contrast, his work *The Imoogi Setting Off on a Journey* (1992) (Figure 13) presents an allegorical image of desire’s vain and illusory trajectory.



Figure 13. *The Imoogi Setting Off on a Journey*, 1992, cut-and-paste on colored paper, 76 × 56 cm.

The imoogi—a mythical serpent adorned with all manner of jewels, designer goods, and heavy makeup—embarks on a journey, serving as a metaphor for the human subject in consumer capitalism, forever chasing after new desires.

Even upon reaching its destination, this human-like imoogi will never possess the ultimate object of its desire. Instead, it will continue to drift endlessly through the blue cosmos of desire, lost in the unceasing cycle of consumption and longing.

In this way, Ahn Changhong continued to produce works that expressed a critical awareness of consumer capitalism and, more broadly, of human civilization itself—taking a different path from many artists of the 1980s Minjung Art movement, who turned inward after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Eastern European socialist regimes, retreating from overt social commentary. This enduring critical stance can be attributed to Ahn's ability—evident since the 1970s and 1980s—to link his powerful, socially critical and resistant works to broader, universal perspectives on human civilization and world history.

Ahn Changhong now captures consumer capitalist society and its desires with even greater directness. This includes a pointed exploration of the sex industry and the consumption of sexual desire—both of which were actively encouraged during the early years of the Chun Doo-hwan military regime under the so-called "3S" policy (Sports, Sex, Screen). One of the most representative works from this period is *We, Too, Like Models 3* (1991) (Figure 14).



Figure 14. *We, Too, Like Models 3*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 90.9 × 72.7 cm.

In this painting, the explicit depiction of sexual acts and the direct gaze of the figures toward the viewer invite a voyeuristic mode of looking. At the same time, these intimate and private acts are staged as if they were public performances—pornographic spectacles rather than moments of genuine intimacy. Despite the overt physical engagement, the characters' eyes do not meet in mutual affection; instead, their gaze is turned outward, objectifying themselves for the viewer's consumption.

This objectification strips the figures of their personhood and reduces them to mere things. The viewer, in turn, is placed in the position of a voyeur, peering into their actions as if watching pornography—and the artist intentionally provokes this gaze. The acts depicted, though physically intimate, reveal no authenticity; they are rendered as mechanical, dehumanized performances. What emerges is a portrayal of sex not as an expression of genuine connection, but as a distorted and alienated form of physical indulgence—one shaped by the commodification of the body in consumer capitalist society. This is precisely what the artist intended, and Ahn himself has described this as the central aim of the work.

Yet Ahn Changhong's *We, Too, Like Models 3* (1991) goes beyond the artist's stated intentions. In Freud's framework, the subject seeks pleasure, but when that pleasure becomes threatening, it is restrained by the subject's internalized control mechanism. This is the balance between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. However, Jacques Lacan moves beyond this Freudian structure. He introduces the concept of *jouissance*—a form of pleasure rooted in desire that exceeds ordinary satisfaction. *Jouissance* is not simply pleasure; it is ecstasy, bliss, excess, even painful enjoyment—a force that defies the constraints of the reality principle.

This radical pleasure is so intense that it overrides self-preservation. A male honeybee dies immediately after mating with the queen, and male praying mantises are often devoured by the female during intercourse. The ecstasy of this union—*jouissance*—is incomparable, yet it leads directly to death. Here, Eros (the sexual drive) and Thanatos (the death drive) converge.

Jouissance lies dormant in the unconscious. To attain it, the subject breaks taboos established by law and symbolic order, and willingly risks punishment. This moment marks the splitting of the subject, yet the desire to fill the void caused by this split never ceases. The subject, then, is driven to destroy the Name-of-the-Father, the law of the symbolic Big Other. In this sense, surplus *jouissance* (or excessive *jouissance*) is the pursuit of *jouissance* unrestrained by the reality principle. Put simply, the subject moves toward extreme *jouissance*, even at the risk of self-destruction.

Ahn Changhong's *We, Too, Like Models 3* reveals that in a consumer capitalist society, enjoyment is not regulated by the reality principle. Rather, it becomes jouissance—a form of enjoyment that drives the subject toward self-ruin. Although the artist may not articulate this in theoretical terms, his visionary insight penetrates to the very essence of things and situations, capturing a deeper psychological and philosophical truth through his art.

Meanwhile, many of Ahn Changhong's works from the 1990s explicitly depict sexuality objectified through the body. These include images of men and women with exposed genitals, same-sex couples, cross-dressing figures, fashion shows, and the codes of sexual temptation that overflow in everyday life—depictions of selfish, alienated love reduced to a mere shell within fleeting sexual pleasure. In all of these, sex appears solely as a tool for momentary gratification. Even with couples engaged in sexual acts, love is externalized as something purely physical.

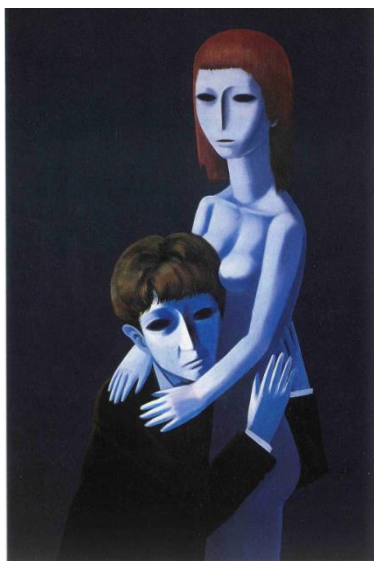


Figure 15. Grassleaf Love 1, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 89.4 × 103.3 cm.



Figure 16. Grassleaf Love 2, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 65.5 × 100 cm

Yet Ahn's paintings go beyond a merely didactic ethos that criticizes capitalism for turning love into a form of alienation. That is to say, while under capitalism love may indeed be alienated, and even lead to ruin, humans cannot help but continue to seek it. This is what lends his work a powerful pathos—the tragic recognition that even though love becomes a self-destructive form of *jouissance*, we remain drawn to it, unable to resist it.

It is this very duality that gives Ahn Changhong's paintings their compelling tension. The viewer is caught between repulsion and attraction, feeling a simultaneous urge to be drawn into the world of desire his paintings depict—even while knowing that this desire may lead to self-destruction. This is the paradoxical pull of *jouissance*: we desire it, even as we recognize it as the force that may destroy us.

3. The Concealed Self and the Revealed Self: Ahn Changhong's Mask Series and *Ghost Fashion*

Throughout his early paintings and subsequent photo-paintings, Ahn Changhong has consistently employed the motif of the mask to obscure the faces of his subjects. In these works, the masked face severs the referential link between the image and any specific individual, allowing the figure to attain universality through anonymity. This technique grants the depicted figures a broader symbolic resonance beyond individual identity.

In many of his critical depictions of figures within consumer capitalist society, the faces appear mask-like—even when not literally masked. Moreover, in works where there are no physical masks, such as the Meditation of the 49 series, in which all the figures have their eyes closed, or the Cyborg series, where the figures have artificial eyes, the faces still function as masks. These are no longer the real faces of real people, but mediated surfaces that conceal as much as they reveal—performing the same role as a mask by disrupting identification and emphasizing constructedness.

A human being, as a member of society, lives by forming relationships with others within various social groups, being assigned certain roles, and performing them accordingly. The more diverse these relationships become, the more varied the roles that are assigned or expected—and to fulfill these roles, the individual wears a **mask**. This mask may be a literal, outwardly visible one, or it may represent the **multiple facets of the self**.

Through such masks, individuals carry out the social duties and norms expected of them and form relationships with others, gradually adapting to the society they inhabit. In this way, a person often performs **various personas** that differ from their inner self—roles shaped to meet social expectations and obligations. These socially constructed and outwardly displayed identities are what Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) referred to as the **persona**: the external personality, or social mask, that mediates between the self and the world.

The concept of persona was already articulated by the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero in his work *De Officiis* (*On Duties*). According to **Cicero**, human beings possess multiple aspects, and the persona is the outward-facing mask that is most visible to others. Much like an actor in a play who becomes a character in order to perform a given role—and who takes on a different character when assigned a different part—the persona is not the individual's true self, but rather a **constructed identity**, performed in accordance with social roles.

However, the mask (persona) is inherently **dual in nature**. It conceals and reveals at the same time. The one who wears the mask hides their true identity behind it, while simultaneously projecting a different face to the world. Thus, the persona is both a form of **self-concealment** and a tool of **self-presentation**, embodying the fundamental tension between the inner self and the roles imposed by society.

Ahn Changhong's masks precisely capture this duality. Between 2016 and 2019, he created

a series of 49 masks (Figures 17–20), each of which explores the tension between concealment and revelation, the inner self and the outward persona.

The Mask series is a story about a world gone mad. It speaks of a dumbed-down public, of collective selfishness and violence, of the unconscious of crowds moving in perfect unison—like under hypnosis—toward duplicitous and contradictory goals. The bandages covering the eyes and the keyholes drilled into the foreheads symbolize a lost self and a suppressed unconscious. Though each mask is adorned with vibrant colors, upon closer inspection they reveal lives adrift like rootless duckweed—hollow and ghostlike.

Through these masks, I wanted to express something about all of us—both subjects and victims of desire—trapped in the intricate conspiracies of capital and power, driven to ruin either by private greed or by external forces. This is the dual reality I seek to portray.

(Artist's Note)



Figure 17. 49 Masks, 2016, mixed media on FRP, 155 × 110 × 50 cm.



Figure 18. 49 Masks, 2019, mixed media on FRP, 146 × 86 × 44 cm.

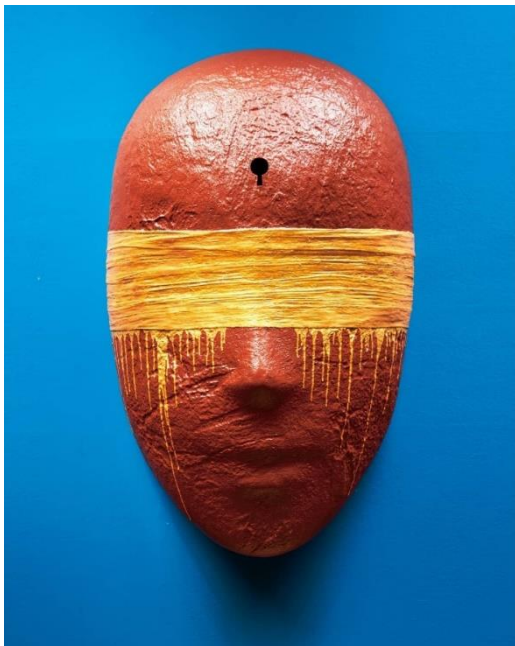


Figure 19. 49 Masks, 2018, mixed media on FRP, 146 × 86 × 44 cm.

In this *Mask* series, Ahn Changhong chooses a strategy of revelation rather than concealment. Here, the mask itself becomes a representation of the anonymous masses. At the same time, each of the 49 masks portrays an individual subject within modern society—each uniquely wounded, oppressed, and shaped by different forms of trauma.

The bandages covering the eyes evoke images of individuals being blindfolded and dragged away by state security forces, while the masks with sealed eyes and mouths seem to speak of a reality in which people are rendered unable to see or speak—a metaphor for a society where perception and expression are forcibly suppressed.



Figure 20. 49 Masks, 2018, mixed media on FRP, 146 × 86 × 44 cm

This series is a reflection on the masses still oppressed by power today—and even more disturbingly, on the **dumbed-down public** that is oppressed **without even recognizing** that they are being oppressed. It is a story of a populace stripped of individuality and dignity by the powers of the media, which blocks vision and hearing through manipulation, and by capital, which pursues extreme profit through ever more sophisticated mechanisms of control.

This is also the dystopian world foretold by **George Orwell** in his novel *1984*—a totalitarian system in which every action of the individual is monitored by **Big Brother**. The keyholes in the foreheads of the masks function as metaphors for the individual under surveillance by a vast, invisible system. Through these keyholes, the subject is watched—and in another sense, the keyhole is a **gateway**, a portal through which Big Brother penetrates the individual's consciousness.

Thus, 49 Masks becomes a report on the **anonymous, dumbed-down masses**, the **oppression inflicted by dominant powers**, and the terrifying **wounds** endured by individuals who not only fall victim to this control but also become complicit in it—destroying themselves and oppressing others in their pursuit of desire within consumer

capitalism.

Here, Ahn Changhong expands the theme he has pursued since his youth—the **disappearance of being and subjectivity** rooted in personal and national history—into a **civilizational critique** of modern society, now armed with consumer capitalism and advanced technological control.

The recent *Blind Ones* series can also be understood within this same thematic framework. Like the Mask series, it captures the condition of individuals in a society where perception is obstructed—whether by oppressive power, ideological manipulation, or the internalized logic of consumer capitalism. The “blindness” in these works symbolizes not only the literal inability to see, but a deeper **spiritual and cognitive blindness**: a refusal or inability to recognize the systems of control, exploitation, and self-destruction that shape modern life.

In this way, *The Blind Ones* continues Ahn Changhong’s long-standing engagement with themes of **alienation, loss of subjectivity, and the erasure of individuality** under the combined forces of power, ideology, and commodified desire. It is a powerful extension of his civilizational critique, rendered through stark and haunting imagery that invites reflection on what it means to see—and not to see—in an age of spectacle and control.

The year 2014 was a cruel one for me. The indiscriminate massacre of children in Afghanistan, the 259 lives lost in a passenger plane shot down, the civil war in Iraq, the endless wars and slaughter in the sorrowful, impoverished nations of Africa, and the more than 5,000 people who died from Ebola—are not all of these tragedies the result of a world driven mad by greed and ruled by a ruthless economic logic of the survival of the fittest, a logic that places profit above all other values?

And above all, the Sewol ferry disaster—a tragedy I fear may be forgotten.

The ***Blind Ones*** series (2016–2019) takes its title from *Blindness* (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*), the novel by Portuguese Nobel Prize laureate **José Saramago** (1922–2010), which offers a sharp critique of political and power structures within human society. Ahn Changhong began this series in **2014**, the year of the tragic Sewol ferry disaster—a moment that profoundly marked the artist and served as a catalyst for the series.

Blindness (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*) is a novel that allegorically depicts the rapid collapse of society in an unnamed city where nearly all of its inhabitants suddenly and inexplicably go blind, as if struck by a contagious epidemic. As blindness spreads, the city descends into chaos, eventually becoming a dystopian hellscape where violent gangs establish a regime of tyranny and control.

Although framed within the mode of "**fantastic realism**," the novel uses the mysterious epidemic of blindness as a metaphor for a deeper condition: the inability—or refusal—to see the world and the truth clearly. In this allegory, blindness represents a **moral and existential condition**, not merely a physical ailment. José Saramago portrays a world unraveling in the face of fear, where human selfishness, cruelty, and moral decay are laid bare under the pressure of collective crisis.

Drawing inspiration from this allegory, Ahn Changhong uses the metaphor of "**blindness**" to depict a humanity that has lost the ability—or the will—to see the truth of the world. In *The Blind Ones 3* (Figure 21), the artist portrays a world in which everything—even human beings themselves—has been reduced to barcodes, mere tools for profit and commodity exchange.



Figure 21. *The Blind Ones 3 (Blindness)*, 2016, acrylic synthetic resin, 213 × 117 × 110 cm.

On the front of a large sculpted head, Ahn inscribes a specific time: **2014416850**, the hour at which the Sewol ferry began to sink. He also engraves the dates of the deaths of **President Roh Moo-hyun** and **Baekbeom Kim Gu**, a revered Korean independence leader, two significant figures in Korea's modern democratic history. These are not arbitrary memorials—they recall the one person in *Blindness* who does not lose her sight: the doctor's wife. Like her, we who still "see" must remember. Ahn seems to suggest that such acts of remembrance—this **struggle against forgetting**—may be the only thing that can protect us from the epidemic of metaphorical blindness that afflicts our time.

Recently, Ahn Changhong has been deeply immersed in his *Ghost Fashion* series. These works begin as digital drawings created with a stylus on smartphone photos via mobile apps. The resulting images are then translated into oil paintings or FRP (fiber-reinforced plastic) sculptures. In this series, the human body—once clothed in these garments of "flesh and blood"—has completely disappeared. What remains are only the garments themselves, hollow shells drifting like ghosts through empty space.

These ghostly clothes ooze mucous-like liquid, as if about to dissolve. The fragments of flesh that are still visible seem to disintegrate and vanish. *Ghost Fashion* reveals a world of **simulation**, in which the real and the image have been entirely reversed—where reality itself has disappeared, and the image now stands as the only reality.

This series powerfully illustrates the phenomenon of **reification** (Verdinglichung), in which objects replace human beings at the center of existence. The human subject has vanished; in its place remain only empty garments, hollow shells that do not even attempt to hide their ghostly nature.

Ahn Changhong realizes this vision through what he calls his own unique style of "sensuous realism." In the *Ghost Fashion* series, he captures the flood of fashion images that saturate consumer capitalist society using smartphone photography. But within these images, he begins erasing the human subject—the figure that would traditionally be considered the "real" beneath the image. In doing so, Ahn visualizes how, in consumer capitalism, the human subject is reified, and the relationship between reality and image is inverted.

By removing the human presence from images of clothed bodies, he obliterates the subject and transforms it into an object. The clothing, once animated by a living body, becomes a mere shell—a luxury commodity within a society of desire, but one that is ultimately cheapened, hollow, and fully replaceable. This is the process of complete reification, the

transformation of the subject into an object, now stripped of uniqueness or substance.

To sensuously capture this process, Ahn employs vivid, often violent color. His sensuous realism is not static; it moves—ink drips like blood in some instances, or like grotesque, oozing fluids in others. Through this technique, even the erased body, the absent subject, is shown not as something missing but as something that never had a true substance to begin with. The image itself dissolves.

In this way, Ahn's sensuous realism reveals that everything perceptible in consumer society is marked by impermanence—*mujō*, the ephemeral nature of things. Consumer capitalism, as Nietzsche might say, is a world without any stable ground behind appearances: a world where images are everything, and there is no deeper reality beyond them. This is our reality.



Figure 22. Ghost Fashion, 2021, oil on canvas,
162 × 134 cm.



Figure 23. Ghost Fashion 2022'1, 2022, oil on canvas, 162 × 133 cm



Figure 24. Ghost Fashion, 2021, oil paint on canvas, 162 × 114 cm



Figure 25. Ghost Fashion, 2021, digital pen drawing on photograph using smartphone app.