

## EUNSAE LEE: CHARCAS

Bodies of water have historically been conceived as a limit, an obstacle to a means, and a dangerous element of detachment. In contemporary island and ocean studies there has been a shift in the understanding of water from a relational perspective, acknowledging the connecting quality of it. At the end of the day, for better or worse, water offers a nurturing environment to many life forms and keeps portions of earth linked.

In her book “Bodies of Water” Astrida Neimanis invites readers to question the way we live as bodies: “If our bodies are mostly water, where does this water come from? Where does it go, and what does it make possible? How does our wateriness condition how we live as bodies, and how we become implicated in the bodies of others? To ask these questions, much less answer them, we need to divest from the idea of bodies as only human, as contained within our skin, as beginning and ending in the ‘I’.”<sup>1</sup>

These reflections are framed in the fluid and collective understanding of embodiment, an expansion from the idea that bodies of water are simply stagnated units. They leak and flow, they are “both nature and culture, both science and soul, both matter and meaning”<sup>2</sup>.

The different ways to contain or not contain water have been the conduit of Eunsae Lee’s (b.1987, Seoul) recent research and the focus of her residency with L21 in Mallorca. During her time on the island she has collected photos of jars, vases and fountains, has visited caves and discovered the parallels between Korean and Mallorquin storytelling. She has taken all these elements to the studio to create the project “Charcas”.

Ahead of her trip to Palma, Lee had been reviewing Korean traditional tales, in particular the history of Korean philosopher Wonhyo (617 – 686). In an attempt to summarise the figure and philosophy of this leading Buddhist thinker and highlight its relevance for Eunsae Lee’s project, the account of his failed trip to Tang China<sup>3</sup> can serve as an introduction.

During his journey, bad weather forced Wonhyo to find refuge in a cave overnight, only to realise in the morning that it was a burial site. Forced to stay sheltered despite the revelation, he experienced visions and sounds that lead to a great awakening. The most famous version of the story recounts that the monk felt thirsty during the night and drank water from an object he could not see in the dark, but that brought his calm back. Discovering that the object was a skull and the water was alive and full of maggots made him feel nauseous and dirty. This experience led to the epiphany that “The dirtiness or the cleanliness of an object does not reside in the object itself, but rather depends on the discrimination within our mind. Now, therefore, I realize that everything is created by the

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<sup>1</sup> Neimanis, Astrida, "How to think (about) a body of water: Posthuman phenomenology between Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze " *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 40-48

<sup>2</sup> Neimanis, Astrida, "How to think (about) a body of water: Posthuman phenomenology between Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze " *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 27-64

<sup>3</sup> China under the Tang dynasty (618 to 906 A.D.).

mind”<sup>4</sup>. He no longer needed to travel abroad to continue his journey, as his motto began with the idea that truth is an inner element not to be found outside oneself.

Drinking, the fact of fluid flowing inside our bodies, can be both intoxicating and revelatory. There have been occasions in which Eunsae has evoked this tale in her daily life: painting in the studio, taking photos on the street, drinking water in the darkness of the night and dreaming of-remembering Wonhyo. In recent trips she got to realise that while her surroundings were new and foreign, the interior of her skin was the same, her identity and inner thoughts were there, contained.

During her residency in Mallorca she got to know the parallels between Wonhyo and Mallorquin philosopher, theologian and writer Ramon Llull (1232-1316). Two humanists, born seven centuries and thousands of kilometres apart, but with similar processes of knowledge production.

Randa’s peak in Mallorca, one of the places where Ramon Llull received a divine enlightenment, is still today a sacred site and regarded as a place for contemplation. There, Llull had the revelation of his future philosophical doctrine that constituted the basis of Lullian thinking and his fundamental writings. After this episode and prior to many travels, he lived in a cave for months, establishing the importance he gave to anchoritic life as a means to true perfection.

The cave is regarded again as a gate to self-consciousness and latent thoughts. The knowledge born in the cave - both a symbolic cave or a more literal one in the case of Llull and Wonhyo - travels from and beyond the rock shelter through water, words and religion. From the water in the skull to the one used to clean the brushes in the studio, the liquid form is an element to understand the propagation and hybridisation of ideas.

A “charca” (pond in Spanish) then is not isolated, it is just a temporary container of water. Just like a flower vase, a dripping stalagmite, a plastic bottle or a body. Water is knowledge and life, a portal. It is the surface of a blank canvas, from where ideas, concepts and forms overflow, filling exhibition room 4, but also soaking the eyes of those who have visited the gallery and left, the minds of the readers of this text, the studio, Eunsae’s hands.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeong, Byeong-Jo, Master Wonhyo. An Overview of His Life and Teachings. Seoul: Kim, Jae-Woong/Diamond Sutra Recitation Group, 2010, p. 22