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## A Part of the Whole

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| Authors       | Choi, Namwon   |
| Citation      | Choi, Namwon. "A Part of the Whole." 2014. Thesis, Georgia State University. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/5520310">https://doi.org/10.57709/5520310</a> |
| DOI           | <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/5520310">https://doi.org/10.57709/5520310</a>  |
| Download date | 2026-06-18 13:55:33  |
| Link to Item  | <a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/786">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/786</a>  |

# A PART OF THE WHOLE

by

Namwon Choi

## ABSTRACT

My thesis exhibition, 'A PART OF THE WHOLE,' explores self-portraiture by assembling paintings of close-up images of my skin from underappreciated body parts. I paint the textures of my hands and feet as evidence of artistic labor striving for the continuation of artistic creativity. The thesis exhibition includes conventional paintings assembled paintings, installations, and items from the studio. The easels serve two purposes: presenting the paintings and functioning as metaphorical backbone supporting skin paintings. Lastly, a cast of my own face serves as a death mask that functions as an authentic seal of artistic authorship for my thesis exhibition.

INDEX WORDS: Parts, Whole Underappreciated, Skin, Artistic creativity, Continuation, Easel, Death mask, Seal, Authorship



I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil,  
this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and  
their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
hoping to cease not till death.

- Walt Whitman "Song of Myself"

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was like a child who dances at a word of encouragement.

You saw what I hadn't seen in me. I trusted you and followed.

Because my three years at Georgia State University have been so beautiful,  
the distance between the certainty of the past and the uncertainty of the future  
is at its widest. However, I walk on bravely with you and without you.

Joseph Peragine

Anthony Craig Drennen

Craig Dongoski

Pam Longobardi

Matthew Sugarman

Ralph Gillbert

Michael White

Jinman Kang

Adam Wagner

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Self-portraiture was a way of forming the character of my inner self by depicting the selective choices of my outer features. My thesis exhibition, 'A PART OF THE WHOLE,' explores self-portraiture by assembling paintings of magnified images of the skin from underappreciated parts of my body.

I used close-up shots, a full framed shot of my head, hands, and feet as the primary selection of my features. I looked carefully into my own face where all five senses were alive. The distinctive characteristics of five senses were the direct signifiers satisfying obvious expected reading of my features. I saw the dominance of facial features as having a correlation with the traditional role of the portrait being used to express power. Instead, I took an interest in the skin, the epidermis of the human body with its fine bumps and subtle distinctions as a form of personal resistance. The skin, the majority of my exterior body, allowed me to be intimately individual while being completely universal. In this exploration, I felt empowered and valuable. I discovered a large territory that is full of potentials for prosperity from the traces of oil of my skin that allow the endless movement of inhaling and exhaling, the basic characteristic of existence. On my skin, I saw the metaphorical self-portrait of a migrated artist hoping for prosperity. I painted the texture of my skin of the most used, yet underappreciated body parts, such as hands and feet, onto a primed and sanded canvas: another layer of my skin.

As the studio filled with my skin paintings, I noticed it was transforming into a spatial self-portrait. The environment of my studio became an installation piece and my stage to per-

form. The studio objects, like easels, music stand, light bulbs and light switch were naturally becoming a part of self-portrait also became the inspirations for further paintings.

Thus, my research for 'A PART OF THE WHOLE' became the exploration of my placement as a human being, as well as an artist, creating a concrete linkage between my different views of myself contrasting with the traditional expectations of portraiture. It was a process of reinforcing the idea of myself being a valuable part of the human race by painting my skin textures. I explored the environment of my studio as spatial self-portraiture while remaining within the tradition of painting to negotiate my placement in the world as an artist.

## 2 BACKGROUND OF ART

Each man's life represents a road toward himself, an attempt at such a road, the intimation of a path. No man has ever been entirely and completely himself. Yet each one strives to become that – one in an awkward, the other in a more intelligent way, each as best he can. We can understand one another; but each of us is able to interpret himself to himself alone.<sup>1</sup>

I was born and raised in Korea, a daughter of an ambitious impressionist landscape painter, who had to compromise his dream with his reality. His dream became mine and I have been pursuing our dream since I picked up a crayon to scribble.

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Demian*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 6.

However, there were times when I started to question myself whether I had been given a chance to agree on that partnership especially when I had failed to meet his expectations. Also, spending three years of high school, four years of undergraduate and another two years in a graduate program studying Korean traditional painting was long enough to repeat the stale formula of old masters that no longer expressed my artistic inner drive.

Since I left my native country, I have been relearning how to survive. Interestingly, out of all the relearned knowledge, painting was the only thing I was good at. It took a while for me to believe that I was born to be a painter, but my confidence in believing who I am is stronger than ever. Also, I am able to better appreciate my father who has shown unshakable belief in his daughter to become a successful painter. It is his belief in me and my self-confidence that have been my driving force as I endured three years of a mental and a physical marathon of graduate school at Georgia State University.

### 3 SELF AS A SUBJECT MATTER

There is the work of art, the image of the maker and the truth of what he or she sensed, imagined or believed about themselves and how they chose, as we all must choose, to present themselves.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Laura Cumming, *A face to the world on self-portraits*, (London: Harper Press, 2009), 9.

I have always had an interest in the human face. I read the human face not only as a QR code that contains the manufacturing information, but also holding the traces of emotional changes that have marked over time. My interest in the human face had led me to study Korean traditional court portraiture in the Joseon Dynasty throughout my undergraduate and graduate years in Korea. The Joseon Dynasty, 14<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century, was the period of flourishing in art when the Korean alphabet was created. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, portraits of a royalty and high officials were commissioned to honor their achievements and to pass on their legacy especially (Fig. 1).

During 18<sup>th</sup> century, the wise rulers King Yeongjo and King Jeongjo devoted themselves to serving the people to solidify their weak hold on the monarchy. The country was prosperous and a variety of culture developments ensured. The age is referred to as the Renaissance of the latter Joseon Dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

Even though court painters were highly skilled in painting, they were considered government employees who were not allowed to show their artistic voices. Also, portrait artists used their skill to glamorize high-ranking officials by painting their faces as social masks. Their skill and devotion to art were never fully appreciated in their time. However, these early Korean court painters never had the power to paint self-portraits, but I do. Therefore, painting myself as subject matter was one of my most important decisions (Fig. 2).

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<sup>3</sup> Ju-Seok Oh, *A Great Court Painter of 18<sup>th</sup> - Century Korea, The Art of Kim Hong-do*, (IL: Art Media Resources, Inc., 2005),18.

#### 4 MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Mirrors are essential object in self-portraiture. I solely became an object to paint in front of the mirror. The mirror turned my studio into a staged performance that was directed and performed by me. I learned that self-portraiture is created by an artist in action, suggesting a sense of movement. I never got bored in the attentive multi-tasking process that self-portraiture requires.

The mirror was like frozen quicksilver; it only presents the obvious and expected reading of my features. I thought the fluid of quicksilver used to make mirrors reflective needed to be taken out of the glass and allowed to flow. That was how my interest in the reflective Mylar began. Once the reflective Mylar was suspended on the wall, it became a flow of concave and convex mirrors making. It distorted images of me by reflecting the light outwards and inwards. This abundant reflecting made my studio even brighter (Fig. 3).

I found no reason to paint the reflected images of me. If I had, it would only make the flow of reflection freeze again. Instead, I wrapped canvases with reflective Mylar and stacked them on an easel as a part of my self-portrait. I also installed suspended Mylar itself along with my paintings.

## 5 LESS TRUE TO BE TRUE

My great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such variations, re-workings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well — lies if you will — but — truer than the literal truth. — Vincent Van Gogh<sup>4</sup>

Self-portraiture was not just a depiction of an artist's outer features. It was like writing an honest and personal letter to the audience sharing the feeling of being alone. It was also like a writing a fiction about the artist's hope. Therefore, self-portraiture permitted less accuracy as a reflection of the exterior but more accurate as a reflection of the interior.

Because self-portraiture was more than the realistic depiction of likeness, artists often referred to themselves in a variety of metaphorical ways. Caravaggio painted himself as a beheaded monster, Goliath, while Vincent Van Gogh painted himself as worn boots and Frida Kahlo painted herself as a wounded deer (Fig. 4). I painted a salmon head and tail on two oversized canvases to emphasize my hope of fighting against the current of reality as I continue to swim through and persevere. The light bulbs hung by butcher hooks on the ceiling referred my desire to win the war trophies of my continuous inner battle (Fig. 5).

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, (Connecticut: New York Graphical Society, 1993), 402.

## 6 FRAMING A CLOSE-UP

The close-up is a limited, magnified view of a character or an object in a scene. It is a shot usually emphasizes the face if the characters are involved and provided a principle method by which the filmmaker can achieve empathy for characters.<sup>5</sup>

Conventional portraiture was an image of the sitter's head and shoulders, called a medium close shot in a film term or a full figure. It focuses on the sitter's facial features with limited body movement to keep a distance from the audience. I used close-up shots, and full framed shots of my head to speak my personal narrative in a direct manner and to ask for audience's attention. I recognize the close-up as such an intimate shot of the details of my facial movements as expressive signifiers of my emotion. Dr. Eric R. Kandel, a Professor of brain science at Columbia University explained how the detail of faces can be read as emotional signifiers providing a sense of empathy.

"As we look at a portrait, our brain calls on several interacting systems to analyze contours, form a representation of the face and of the body, analyze the body's motion, experience emotion, and perhaps, empathy. Along with these instantaneous responses, we form a theory of the subject's state of mind. The brain's representation of faces is especially important to the beholder's response to portraiture. Our brain devotes more space to reading the details of faces than to any other object."<sup>6</sup>

I also used extreme close-up views, a detail shot of my five senses, such as the corners of my eyes, upper and lower lips, teeth, an ear, and even the texture of my skin to emphasize

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Eugene Beaver, *Dictionary of film terms*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Eric R Kandel, *The art of Insight, The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present*, (NewYork: Random House,2012),206.

the meaning of their functions instead of their owner. I especially took interest in the textures of the skin on my hands and feet where the traces of my living, the muscle movements, have been marked on the surface over time. I realized that I existed in the lines of my palm, and fingerprints, and in the texture of my rough and cracked feet (Fig. 6).

## 8 FORMATION OF IDEOGRAM

Painting is the analogical art par excellence. It is even the form through which analogy becomes a language, or finds its own language.<sup>7</sup>

Forming an ideogram, compounded symbols to suggest the idea, became my solution for how to assemble of my skin paintings. For example, Chinese character 休, means rest. This was the compound ideogram of 人 (man) + 木 (tree) = a man (人) leaning against a tree (木), or resting.

I learned to understand Chinese characters during my education in Korea. Among a thousand Chinese characters, pictographic characters were relatively easy to learn because they are symbolic visualization objects' forms. Once I learned the pictographic characters, I was able to understand the abstract meanings and concepts of ideograms because ideograms are the combinations of pictograms. The letter placement within the block of geometric shapes of Korean alphabet also inspired my compositional decision making for stacking my paintings.

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon The Logic of Sensation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 95.

Thus, through borrowing the formation of ideograms in Chinese, and the letter placement of Korean, I was able to create a metaphorical self-portraiture of me hoping to continue on my path of artistic creativity (Fig. 7, 8).

|   |   |   |   |   |   |            |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|------------|
|  | 山 | 山 | 山 | 山 | 山 | Mountain   |
|  | 水 | 水 | 水 | 水 | 水 | Water      |
|  | 雨 | 雨 | 雨 | 雨 | 雨 | Rain       |
|  | 木 | 木 | 木 | 木 | 木 | Wood       |
|  | 禾 | 禾 | 禾 | 禾 | 禾 | Rice Plant |
|  | 人 | 人 | 人 | 人 | 人 | Human      |

Table 1: Chinese Pictogram<sup>8</sup>

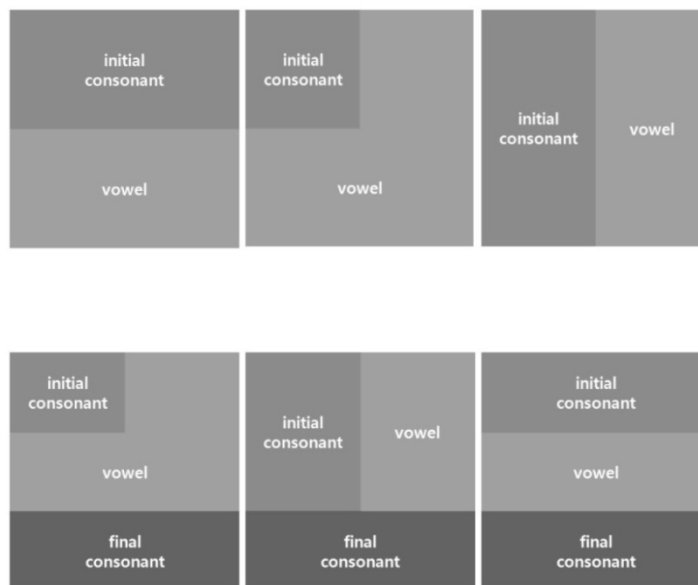


Table 1: Korean Letter Placement

<sup>8</sup> John Jing-Hua Yin, *Fundamentals of Chinese Characters*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 45.

## 9 THESIS EXHIBITION CURATORIAL DECISIONS

As I continued working, my studio became a spatial self-portrait as well as my stage for the performance of making art. I tried to empty my studio to make it look like a clean exhibition space but soon the space was filled with my skin paintings. I decided to use the environment of my studio in which my daily artistic practice took place as an installation piece along with my paintings.

My studio contained so many references of my daily artistic practice. The bright shining light taped on the wall near my desk illuminated scattered books and notes. The music stand held my photo references while paintings rested on easels and stretcher bars supported my laundry. Bags of plaster accumulated near casting molds and completed casts of my face. Shimmering reflective Mylar, suspended in the corner, reflected light onto an unattended but thriving plant. And below it all were the torn paintings scattered on the floor. All of these were the origin of my work as well as being artworks themselves.

For this exhibition in particular, the easels played a vital role in presenting the works. I found that the structural support the easels provided was similar to bones that support human flesh. Also, I was able to embody the nostalgic feeling of my youth by including easels as part of my work. Easels took me back to when I was a frequent little visitor to my father's studio. I remembered my father's vibrant landscape paintings on his old wooden easels, scattered books of French Impressionism, and the mixing smell of cigarettes and aging linseed oil. Presenting

paintings on easel showed my dedication to my father and an appreciation of my roots as a painter's daughter (Fig. 9).

## 10 CONCLUSIONS

My use of self-portraiture as a process of structuring or composing provided a new view of my self as seen through the lens of my artistic perceptions. As a result of this different perspective, the depictions were less accurate but much truer than reality. I felt that the expressions to be most free when the self-portraiture was not merely a literal depiction of outer features.

The assembled paintings of close-up images of my overlooked skin produced a cumulative self-portrait. I found the evidence of my existence, the characteristics of my artistic labor, in the small lines of my hands and feet. To more permanently possess this evidence I painted it on my other skin, the canvas.

As I stacked my skin paintings and studio items on easels, each painting, each idea-phrase, began to link to create whole sentences describing a fuller view of myself. I felt that a deeper representation of my self was achieved with this unconventional method without obvious representation of my surface features. Installing my own exhibition with metaphorical, assembled self-portrait expanded the space they filled and provided much more variety of perspective. This allowed to me experience my work as shifting between the flat surfaces of painting and the additional dimension of sculptural installation. This experimentation was able to remain focused within the established structure of the easels. These structures also referenced

my background of being part of the artistic tradition of my family, as well as being a part of the traditional of painting. Through this thesis exhibition, I felt the metaphorical self-portrait of my skin paintings on easels confirmed my place as a valuable part in both the human race and the tradition of painting.

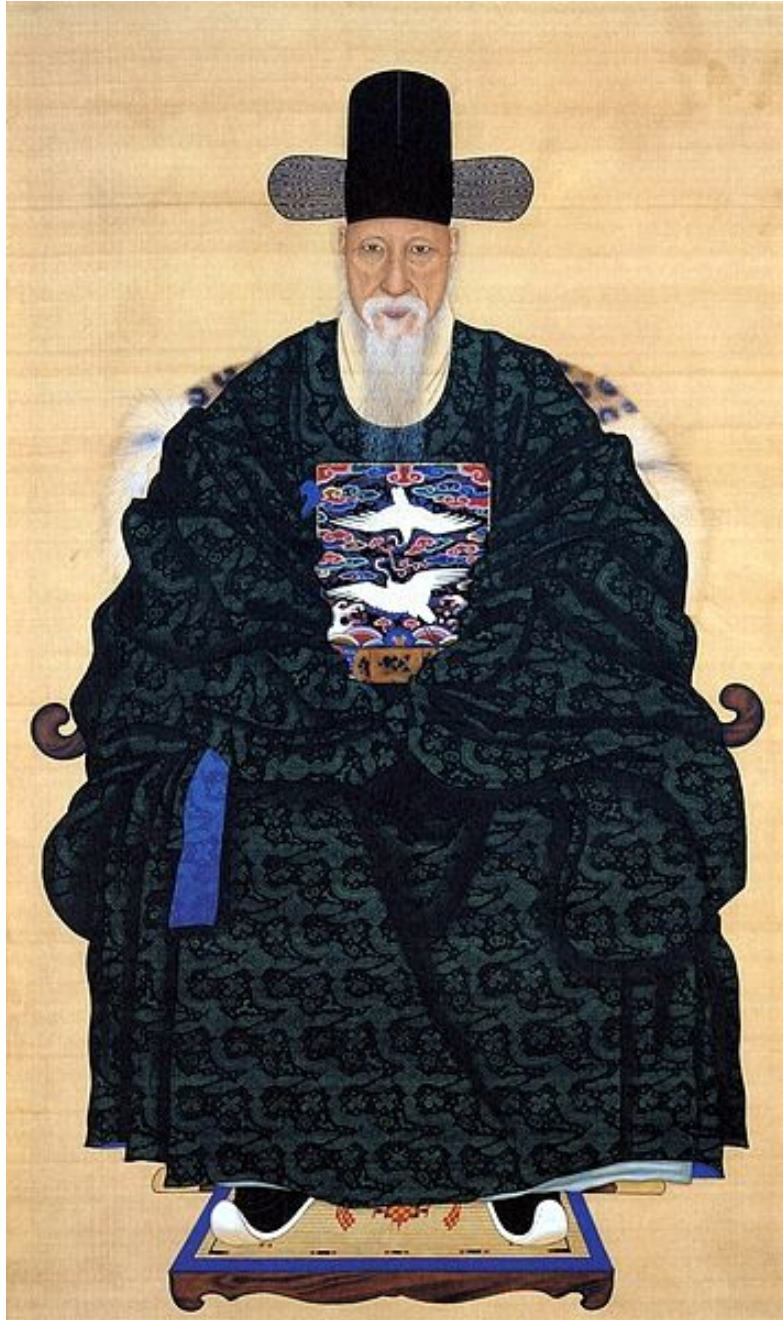


Figure 1. Myung-Gi Lee, *Portrait of O Jae-Sun*, 1727, water colors on silk, 82X39, LEEUM Samsung Museum of Art Collection, Seoul, Korea. From: LEEUM Samsung Museum of Art Collection <http://leeum.samsungfoundation.org> (accessed April 19, 2014)



Figure 2. Namwon Choi, *Zero Minus*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 48X48.



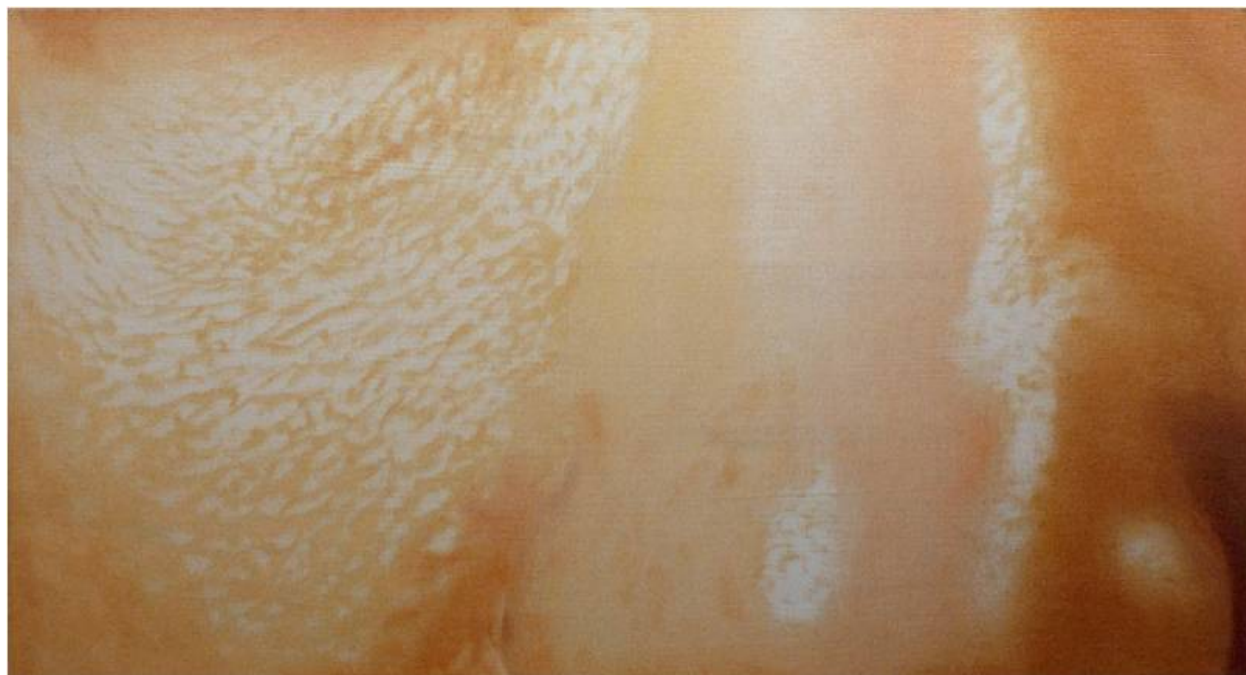
**Figure 3: Reflective Mylar on my studio wall.**



Figure 4: Vincent Van Gogh, A Pair of Shoes, 1886, Oil on canvas, 15X18. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Van Gogh Museum, <http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl> (accessed April 19, 2014)



Figure 5: Namwon Choi, *Tail bite*, 2014, Oil on canvas, light bulbs, hooks, cast mask, easel  
153X80, Oil on canvas.



**Figure 6: Namwon Choi, *Prosperous*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 12x24.**



Figure 7: Namwon Choi, *Self Portrait*, 2014, Oil on canvas on wooden easel, 48X74.



Figure 8: Namwon Choi, *Fountains that never run dry*, 2014, Oil on canvas, copper and panel, 40X64.



**Figure 9: Gallery mockup for my thesis exhibition, 2014.**



**Figure 10: Thesis exhibition view**



**Figure 11: Thesis exhibition view**



**Figure 12: Thesis exhibition view**



**Figure 63: Thesis exhibition view**



Figure 14: Thesis exhibition view



Figure 15: Thesis exhibition view



Figure 76: Thesis exhibition view



Figure 87: Thesis exhibition view



**Figure 9: Thesis exhibition view**

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