

The Life and Work of a Painter, Seen Up Close

By Chun Byungphil

I have lived with Jeong Wookyung for nearly 36 years.

We registered our marriage on December 10, 1990, so the time we have lived as husband and wife is now far longer than the years before we knew each other existed.

Through all those years, I have shared my life with my wife, but I have also been the person closest to a painter as she searched for a painting language of her own.

Today I act as her manager, helping with exhibitions and records of her work, travelling abroad with her when needed, and thinking with her about how to introduce Jeong Wookyung as an artist in a way that does her justice.

She tells me that other artists say she is fortunate to have a husband who helps her so much. Some people also tell me how much effort I put in.

Whenever I hear that, I still give an awkward smile.

I was not always the husband I am today.

Money was tight from the early years of our marriage. I, too, was struggling to make a living and had little time to spare. There were times when I disliked her coming home late from art events. I did not understand, as I do now, how important exhibitions and meeting people are to a painter.

That does not mean we were always on opposite sides when it came to painting.

Even when raising a child left her physically and emotionally exhausted, we talked a great deal. She told me how deeply she wanted to keep painting, and together we looked for ways I could help her take up her brushes again within our means.

Looking back, neither of us had the answers from the beginning.

We clashed, talked, came to understand each other, and kept living. That is how we reached this point.

Through it all, she raised our children, kept the household going, and painted as well.

She had to carry the demands of children and housework, financial pressures, and an uncertain future as an artist all at once. The emotional strain must have been considerable.

She must have asked herself countless times.

Am I right to keep following this path.

Even in those circumstances, she never let painting slip from her hands.

At First, She Painted the World Before Her

When I took out her works from 1998 onwards and looked through them year by year, they were very different from her paintings today.

She painted flowers and fruit, vases and landscapes, valleys and trees, roads and old houses. Her work then was largely figurative, grounded in observing and painting what she saw.

But there is something interesting about looking at those early paintings now.

She was as interested in building up small brushstrokes, bringing colours together, and creating a rhythm across the surface as she was in depicting forms accurately.

Roads often appear in her landscapes from the early 2000s.

At the time, they were probably just roads in a landscape.

Yet when I see those roads return more than 20 years later, meeting a strand unwound from a ball of yarn and becoming paths with an entirely different meaning, I am struck by the strange ways in which paintings develop.

Something even the artist did not recognise at the time reappears many years later.

Past, Present and...

Around 2007, she began thinking of using the title Past, Present and... for her work.

The title has a double meaning.

One is the meaning we normally read.

Past, present, and...

There is a past and a present, and the time that follows remains open.

She did not end it with the word future.

She left an ellipsis.

Perhaps that is because there is still time she has not lived, people she has not met, and paintings she has not yet made.

But she told me of another meaning as well.

Painting the past and the present.

In Korean, geurigo connects what comes before and after, meaning and, while also carrying the sense of painting something.

I think I understand the title better now than when I first heard her explain it.

Because that is how she has actually lived.

She painted memories of childhood,
the life she was living,
the society we live in,
people,
nature,
and sometimes the pain of the world.
She painted the past anew with the hands of the present.

And as time passes, the painting of today becomes part of the past.
Then, in the present once again, she carries on with the next painting.
That is why I now think Past, Present and... is more than a title. It expresses the very way she approaches painting.

The First Crisis, Setting Out to Find Her Own Painting

As I remember it, the first major crisis she faced came around 2009 and 2010.
Until 2009, she studied in the studio of Lee Donhee, a painter in the Western tradition based in Daejeon.

Looking at her work from that period, I can see her experimenting in many ways while still painting recognisable landscapes and flowers. She scratched the surface, covered it over, repainted it, and repeated dots and symbols.

But in the end, I think she came up against one question.
What is my own painting.

From 2010, she decided to find a painting language of her own through her own efforts, without depending on anyone else.

She painted the human figure, flowers, and abstract works. She made dots, scratched surfaces, applied thick paint, and tried all sorts of methods.

At the time, she may have seemed to be wandering without a clear direction.
But looking back now over the works she has painted for nearly 30 years, I can see that this period was necessary.
The first crisis did not make her give up painting. Instead, it gave her an urgent need to find her own painting, rather than follow the work of others.

Then She Found Knitting

Structures suggesting fabric and woven patterns began to appear in her work in 2011. By 2012, the change was unmistakable.

Balls of yarn and knitting needles appeared.

Mountains became knitting, trees became knitting, and even the sky and earth were made from repeated stitches.

But she did not use actual yarn.

She made these images with paint on canvas.

I think that matters.

She did not want to make knitted objects. She wanted to turn the memories and time held in knitting into painting.

It began with her childhood memories of her mother knitting.

The hands of her mother, making one stitch and then the next.

The time spent making something another person needs.

There is patience in that act, and devotion, and care.

In time, she found a very simple way to describe her work.

뜨개는 사랑이다.

Knitting is Love.

I do not think of this merely as a warm and beautiful phrase.

Because that is how knitting itself is structured.

A single stitch cannot make anything on its own.

One stitch must connect to the next, and then to another, before a fabric can form.

Are people not much the same.

Even when we seem to live alone, we live through our connections with others.

The Second Crisis, The Hardest Years and Her Most Intense Painting

To my mind, another of the hardest periods of her life as an artist was around 2013 to 2016.

To be honest, she did not even have a proper studio then.

There was not enough room to lay out a substantial work and paint it at ease.

Wanting to paint is not enough on its own.

You need somewhere to set out a canvas and your paints, a space where you can return to the work for days at a time. That is even more true of a large painting.

I was unable to provide her with those conditions properly.

Even now, thinking of those days leaves a raw ache in my heart.

And yet there is a real irony in it.

To my eyes, her paintings became their strongest during this most difficult period.

The knitting style of painting she found around 2012 quickly became a language of her own from 2013 onwards.

She painted not only mountains and landscapes, but people, currency, and historical figures.

A surface distinctively her own began to emerge. From a distance, it was a figure or landscape. Up close, it dissolved into countless small brushstrokes.

It was also one of her most productive periods.

I cannot say for certain whether she painted so much to keep her mind off the difficulties of daily life.

But once she entered the studio, she truly immersed herself in painting.

At one point she said something to me.

My head is overflowing with ideas. Sleeping feels like a waste of time.

I still remember those words.

She was in her mid forties then, with more physical stamina than she has now.

She did not paint so much because she had a good studio.

She painted and painted despite not even having enough space to work at ease.

So this is how I think of those two crises.

If she found her own painting in the first,

in the second, she made that painting truly her own...

The Life She Wanted Our Children to See

But there was another reason she gritted her teeth and refused to put down her brushes, one I saw from beside her.

Our children.

She did not want our financial difficulties to narrow their futures as well.

When they grew up and came to build families of their own, she wanted above all to prevent them from hesitating or giving up on marrying someone they loved because of the social standing or financial circumstances of their parents.

I feel such admiration and gratitude for that wish.

It was not simply a matter of wanting to earn more money or become well known.

Beneath that was a deeper wish to show them parents who did not give up on their own lives. She wanted them to grow up watching a mother and father who kept doing the work they had chosen despite hardship, who got up again after falling, and who moved forward little by little. In her own writing later, she said that one of the main reasons she took up her brushes again was that she wanted her children to grow up seeing not only a good mother, but someone who set goals, took on challenges, and worked towards them.

Looking back now, I do not think she held on to painting only for the sake of her own dream. Painting was her own life, but it was also an attitude towards life that she wanted our children to see.

Instead of telling them not to give up, she tried to show them what it meant by refusing to give up herself.

She Kept Painting Even After Rejection

People looking only at her record today will first see the results, solo exhibitions, awards, and exhibitions abroad.

But I know most of what happened between those entries.

There were many rejections.

She kept entering the Daejeon Metropolitan City Art Exhibition for 12 years before becoming an invited artist.

Once, she struggled to prepare two large canvases in size 100, only to have both rejected.

To keep painting, she also worked as a teacher for an art workbook programme and ran an art teaching studio.

It was not an age when you could take hundreds of photographs with a mobile phone. She sometimes used several rolls of film to gather reference material for her paintings.

She later recorded these memories herself. Looking back on 12 years of attempts and rejections, the rejection of both size 100 paintings, and the years when she painted while teaching through a workbook programme and running an art studio, she wrote that those experiences had become her own history.

When she was rejected, she painted again.
When things did not work out, she tried again.
And when she was rejected once more, she sat down in front of the canvas again.

Thinking about it, this resembles knitting too.
You do not throw away the whole piece because one stitch has gone wrong.
You unravel it, take it up again, and carry on with the next stitch.

We Still Had to Make a Living

Around 2017, she also painted many small, endearing pictures of dogs and cats.
I do not know how she feels about it, but I do not want to hide this part of the story.
We still had to make a living.
Being an artist does not free you from everyday realities.

What is interesting, though, is that hearts and knitting began to come together very directly in those small works she had started with a livelihood in mind.
There is a knitted heart, with a dog or cat below it, and a strand of yarn connecting them.
Perhaps work begun for the most practical of reasons became the clearest way of showing what she meant by knitting is love.

From Personal Memory to People and Society

As time passed, knitting no longer remained only within memories of her mother.
Historical figures and currency entered her work, as did Mother Teresa and a child, social events, and images of family.

When I look at her 2016 painting of Mother Teresa and a child, I notice the relationship between them before their faces.
One person looks at another, holds them, and cares for them.
People hold on to one another as one stitch holds the next.

During the pandemic in 2020, a mother and child wearing masks appeared.
It was a time when we could not draw close to each other.
And yet we could only go on living through our connections with others.

She also painted families laughing so broadly that they look almost comical, as in Smiling Family.

Love is not always solemn.

Laughing together, fooling around, and sometimes quarrelling, yet carrying on with life together, are also forms of love.

Three Years Beside Nine Metres of Time

In 2016, she began working on a scale unlike anything she had attempted before.

144.5 by 900.0 cm. It was her first major work measuring nine metres, Past, Present and... Be Faithful to the Earth.

It took three years to complete.

I spent most of that long time watching from beside her.

Those nine metres did not come into being overnight.

With repeated cycles of drying and painting, she slowly filled that enormous surface with countless small brushstrokes.

Months passed, seasons changed, and one year became the next, but the work continued.

At first, I may have thought of it simply as a large painting.

But as time went on, my thoughts changed.

Now, when I look at it, I sometimes feel something beyond admiration for the achievement. I feel a deep respect for her.

Because I saw with my own eyes one person endure and repeat the work before a single painting for three years.

That is why it is the painting I personally treasure most.

Having watched those three long years, I feel that this painting, at least, is not one I could sell for money.

Her work on the earth continued, and eventually there were three paintings measuring nine metres.

In 2024, at her 34th solo exhibition, she presented all three works from the Earth series together in one space. She herself wrote that nine years of time were held within them.

Looking at the three paintings together, I found myself thinking again.

Perhaps, for an artist, time is not the numbers on a calendar, but the traces left on a painted surface...

A single brushstroke is small, but repeated thousands or tens of thousands of times, it becomes an enormous painting.

A day is short, but days accumulate into years.

That, too, resembles knitting.

As one stitch follows another, a large expanse of fabric takes shape.

That is how she painted time.

Knitting Becomes Energy and Space

After 2020, another change appeared in her work.

The repeated stitches began to swirl.

This was the Energy series.

Until then, knitting had formed the surfaces of mountains, people, flowers, and objects. Now the knitted structure itself began to move.

Countless stitches seem to be drawn towards a centre, or, conversely, to burst out beyond the canvas.

From a distance, the painting looks like a great mass of energy. As you come closer, you see that this energy is made, after all, from individual small brushstrokes.

I think this resembles her life as well.

It is not a single extraordinary moment that makes a person, but seemingly unremarkable days accumulating into the time of a life.

In 2021, that energy began to emerge physically from the surface.

This was 3D Energy.

The once flat surfaces overlapped, folded, curved, and projected outwards.

The viewer no longer simply looks at the painting from the front.

You have to move to the side, and sometimes peer inside the work.

Its expression changes with the direction of the light.

Knitting to be looked at had become knitting to be experienced.

Painting expanded beyond the plane into space, but its starting point remained the same.

One small brushstroke still meets the next, and one stitch meets another, forming a whole.

The form had changed, but the story she had been telling for so long remained.

Life Grows and Becomes a Path

In 2023 and 2024, flowers and plants became much more abundant in her work. But look closely, and you see that she has not simply laid a knitted pattern over a flower. The knitted structure itself becomes the flower. One stitch leads to another, multiplying into petals and stems, forests and gardens.

That is why I do not think of these works as simply flower paintings. They are closer to the brightest and most abundant expression of the life energy she has spoken of for so long. Knitting that began in the hands of her mother has passed through people and society, become energy, and now blossoms once more as life.

Then, in 2025, paths reappear. There were many roads in her early landscapes too. But these paths are entirely different. A strand unwinding from a ball of yarn becomes a path. It crosses mountains and fields, continuing beyond the picture.

If the ball of yarn holds the memories of a life already lived, the unwound strand may be the time that has passed, and the yarn still wound up may be the time still to come. Then that path is, in the end, the life of a person.

Looking at these works, I sometimes think the ellipsis in Past, Present and..., the title she has used since 2007, has finally taken the shape of a path after all these years. No one knew what would follow that ellipsis. She probably did not know herself. But she kept painting, time carried on, and at some point that unfinished sentence became a path in a painting, moving forward once again.

In New York, We Changed a Little

In October 2019, we went to New York together.

It was her third visit to the United States, after Miami in 2012 and Seattle in 2013. Six years later, she had another chance to show her work there. In the days before departure, we put our heads together and planned our routes between museums and galleries.

The trip lasted eleven days and nine nights.

We took an early bus from New Jersey into Manhattan, walked all day, and returned to our accommodation at night.

Looking back, we covered a lot of ground.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we came face to face with works we had only seen in books and reproductions.

She was especially thrilled to see the thick brushstrokes of Van Gogh close up. Her whole body seemed to respond. She later wrote that even her hand moved, following the direction of his brush.

At the Guggenheim, when she spotted a painting by Francis Bacon, she stopped me as I was about to walk on and insisted that we take a photograph there.

On the other hand, when we paid a great deal for premium seats at the Broadway musical Aladdin, she was tired and kept dozing off.

After what we paid for this musical... how can you be falling asleep.

She even put that into her writing later.

That was what our trip was like.

It was not all lofty talk about art.

We lost our way, grew tired, bickered, laughed, and went on to the next museum.

Then one day we went up to the observation deck at Rockefeller Center.

The sunset was glowing red beyond Manhattan and the Hudson River.

Even after days of rushing about, we stood still at that moment and looked at the view.

And we said.

Let us grow old as beautifully as that.

In her account, she wrote that we tightened our clasped hands, our fingers interlaced.

I love that scene.

When I was younger, I used to get irritated when she came home late from art events. And there I was, years later, all the way in New York with her, spending entire days going from museum to gallery...

A person really can change a great deal.

Paris, and Looking at Paintings Together

In 2022, we went to Paris.

International travel was beginning to open up again after the restrictions of COVID 19.

She took part in an art fair at the Carrousel du Louvre, and we stayed near the venue.

It was not a good hotel.

The building was old, with neither a lift nor air conditioning.

We had to get through the Paris summer with just one fan. She later wrote quite openly that she resented me for a while because of it.

But once the exhibition was over, we headed for the museums again.

We saw Water Lilies by Monet at the Orangerie, explored the Louvre, and took in Paris along the Seine.

Writing about that trip, she thanked her beloved husband, a precious companion as well as a friend, who was always beside her and gave her his wholehearted support so that she could see so many masterpieces in person.

When I first read those words, tears came before I knew it.

Because I knew better than anyone that I had not always been that kind of husband.

That made me all the more grateful.

It must mean that both of us have changed, little by little...

What It Means to Keep Painting

Her record first tells you how many solo and group exhibitions she has held or joined, which museums have shown her work, and which awards she has received.

Of course, those things matter too.

But I remember more of the time between those numbers.

The days she came home dejected after a rejection.

The days she wondered where she could lay out a painting.

The days she worried about the cost of materials.

The days she sat down at the canvas again after caring for the children.

The days we calculated the cost of an exhibition abroad and wondered whether to go.

And the days we finally decided to try again.

After her New York exhibition in 2019, she wrote that although the gap between reality and her ideals had sometimes left her discouraged, the encouragement of family and those around her had given her the strength to keep moving forward. She said she was glad she had boldly decided to go to the United States despite our financial limitations.

After all those years, she received the Special Prize of the 22nd Lee Donghoon Art Award in 2024, and the following year held an exhibition as an award recipient at Daejeon Museum of Art.

I do not think those results arrived suddenly one day.

Before them came countless small choices, repeated again and again.

Will I paint today as well.

Will I apply again this time.

I was rejected, but will I try once more.

Will I take my work out into the world, even though it costs money.

Faced with those questions, she usually chose painting again.

Those small choices accumulated to make the Jeong Wookyung of today.

2026, A Sentence Still Unfinished

In 2026, she is still painting.

She held a solo exhibition in Paris and made new work again.

Among her recent paintings is Past, Present and... The Pain of the Himalayas.

Knitting no longer speaks only of childhood memories of her mother.

It began in personal memory, but has become a language that looks out towards a wider world, passing through people and family, society and nature.

That does not mean its starting point has disappeared.

However large the canvas becomes, however far the flat surface extends into space, and however widely the subjects range, it all begins with one small brushstroke.

She makes a stroke, then another beside it.

And then another.

I think this is what has changed least in her painting.

There were small brushstrokes in the landscapes of 1998, in the knitting paintings of 2012, in the works measuring nine metres, and in the paintings she makes now.

Repeating one small thing until a world of her own takes shape.

Perhaps that is how Jeong Wookyung has painted through all these years, and how she has lived.

I Have Changed Too

Her paintings are not the only things that have changed.

I have changed too.

I did not always understand and support her work as I do now. There were times when I thought making ends meet mattered more than painting, and many occasions when I was unhappy about her coming home late.

But she did not sit quietly and wait for me to understand.

She told me what she wanted to do.

We clashed too.

And we kept talking.

In her own writing, she recalled that during the difficult years, we talked a great deal, comforted and encouraged each other, and that she found her direction by actively expressing the path she wanted to follow.

And now, after all these years, that same man spends whole days with her visiting renowned museums and galleries abroad.

Today we prepare for the next exhibition together, organise works and records, look through the website, share ideas for paintings, and think together about what needs to be done.

But another thought now occurs to me.

Perhaps she has not been the only one painting over the past 36 years...

As she built her paintings, joining brushstroke to brushstroke like stitches, the children and I were also joining our days together, making a stretch of time our own.

The memory of love that began with her mother knitting became her paintings. Then, as a mother herself, she passed love on to our children through a life that refused to give up those paintings.

And beside her, I changed little by little too.

I think I understand a little now of what I did not know when I was younger.
Loving another person may not always be a grand gesture.

Being there beside them.
Listening to what they have to say.
Talking again, even after a clash.
Holding them steady in difficult times so they can make the next stitch.
And after many years, looking back to discover that all those small moments have become connected.

She showed me that through painting.
Knitting is love.
I think I understand those words a little better now than I once did.

Perhaps it was not only I who helped her painting.
Her painting, too, has changed me little by little over the past 36 years.

By Chun Byungphil

Husband and manager of the artist Jeong Wookyung