

# JEONG WOOKYUNG, WEAVING TIME

A Painter's Life and Work, Seen from the Closest Distance · 1998-2026

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## **I Was Not Always the Husband I Am Today**

I have shared nearly thirty-six years of my life with Jeong Wookyung. We registered our marriage on December 10, 1990. By now, the years we have lived as husband and wife are far longer than the years when we were young.

During those years, I have not only lived beside my wife. I have also watched, from the closest possible distance, a painter struggling to discover a language that could truly be her own.

Today I work as her manager. I help with exhibitions and archives, travel with her when necessary, and think with her about how her work can be presented more fully to the world. Other artists sometimes tell my wife that she is fortunate to have a husband who supports her so actively. Some tell me that I work hard for her.

I feel a little embarrassed when I hear that, because I was not always the husband I am today.

We were not financially comfortable. I was busy making a living and had little time to spare. There were years when I disliked her coming home late because of art events. Meanwhile, she was raising our children, running the household, carrying financial worries, and trying to keep working as an artist.

She must have asked herself countless times, "Am I right to keep going down this road?" Yet she did not put down her brush.

## **1998-2007 | Looking at the World, and Arriving at Past, Present and...**

When I look back at the works from 1998 onward, they are very different from what she paints today. There are flowers and fruit, vases and landscapes, valleys and trees, roads and old houses. The paintings were still strongly rooted in figurative observation.

Yet something was already there. She was interested not only in describing form accurately, but also in accumulating small brushstrokes, bringing colors into contact, and creating a rhythm across the surface.

Roads appear often in her landscapes of the early 2000s. At the time they were simply roads within a landscape. More than twenty years later, however, the road would return transformed: a thread unwinding from a ball of yarn, becoming a path through life.

Around 2007, she began to think seriously about the title Past, Present and... . The Korean title, 과거 현재 그리고..., carries a double meaning. '그리고' can mean 'and,' connecting past and present to an open-ended future. But it can also mean 'to draw' or 'to paint.' The title can therefore also be heard as 'painting the past and the present.'

The question of time came before the knitting paintings. She did not end the title with the word 'future.' She left an ellipsis—space for time not yet lived, people not yet met, and paintings not yet made.

Today I feel that this is more than the title of a series. It describes the way she has approached painting itself.

## **2009-2012 | The First Crisis, and the Search for Her Own Painting**

As I remember it, the first major crisis came around 2009 and 2010. Until 2009 she studied in the studio of the Daejeon painter Lee Don-hee. From 2010 onward, she decided that she had to find her own way without depending on anyone else.

She painted figures, flowers, and abstractions. She repeated dots, scratched surfaces, built up thick paint, and tried almost every method she could think of. Looking back now, that confusion was necessary. The first crisis forced her to ask with urgency: 'What is my painting—not someone else's, but mine?'

From 2011, structures suggesting fabric, weaving, and interlocking forms became increasingly visible. By 2012, balls of yarn, knitting needles, mountains, trees, sky, and earth were being constructed through repeated stitch-like marks.

But she did not use actual yarn. She built these structures with paint on canvas.

At the origin of this language was a childhood memory of her mother knitting: one stitch leading to the next, time given patiently for someone else, an act of care made visible through repetition.

Eventually, a simple phrase came to define the emotional source of the work: Knitting is Love.

A single stitch cannot make a fabric. One stitch must connect to another. In that sense, knitting gradually became more than an image for her. It became a structure of relationship.

## **2013-2016 | The Second Crisis: Her Hardest Years, and Some of Her Strongest Paintings**

In my view, another of the most difficult periods in her life as an artist was from around 2013 to 2016.

To be frank, she did not even have a proper studio then. There was hardly a place where she could spread out substantial canvases and work without interruption. I still feel sorry that I could not provide her with a better working environment.

And yet there is an irony. In my eyes, some of her strongest paintings emerged precisely during those difficult years.

The knitting-style painting she had discovered around 2012 rapidly became her own language. She painted mountains and landscapes, but also people, currency, and historical figures. From a distance the works resolved into images; up close they dissolved into countless individual brushstrokes.

She also produced an extraordinary amount of work. I do not know whether she immersed herself in painting partly to keep difficult thoughts away, but once she began, she worked with remarkable concentration.

At one point she told me, "Sleeping feels like a waste of time." She was in her mid-forties then and physically stronger than she is today.

This is how I now understand those two crises: in the first, she found her painting; in the second, she made that painting fully her own.

## **2016-2019 | The First Nine-Meter Work, Earth — The Work I Treasure Most**

If I had to choose one work by my wife that I personally treasure above all others, I would not hesitate: the first nine-meter work, Earth, measuring 144.5 × 900.0 cm.

She began it in 2016 and completed it in 2019. One painting took three years.

I value it not simply because it is nine meters long. I watched those three years from beside her.

I saw one small brushstroke connect to the next, and countless repetitions slowly become an immense field. This was not a painting that could be completed through a few intense days of work. She painted while living her ordinary life, stopped, returned, and continued to add time to the surface.

When I look at Earth, I do not see only the completed nine-meter painting. I see the three years she spent in front of it.

Strangely, the work grows larger for me as time passes. I thought it was remarkable when it was completed, but now 'remarkable' no longer seems enough. At times I even feel something close to reverence.

For me, Earth is not simply one painting among many. It contains three years of my wife's lived time.

That is why, at least for me, it is not a work I could sell for money. This is not a question of price. I watched those three years. A price can be placed on an artwork, but I do not believe the time contained within it can be converted into money.

Perhaps I came to understand her knitting-style painting more deeply by watching this work take shape. Earth showed me more clearly than any other work that the repeated stitch is not merely a technique: it contains time actually lived by the artist.

## **Rejection, Making a Living, and Returning to the Canvas**

People who look only at her résumé today may first notice solo exhibitions, awards, and international shows. But I know at least some of what happened between those achievements.

She spent twelve years working toward becoming an invited artist of the Daejeon Metropolitan City Art Exhibition. There was even a year when she prepared two large 100-ho canvases and both were rejected.

To keep painting, she gave private lessons and operated an art teaching studio. And yet she kept trying.

When she was rejected, she painted again. When something did not work, she tried again. And when she was rejected once more, she returned to the canvas.

In a way, that too resembles knitting. A mistake in one stitch does not mean throwing away the entire piece. You unravel, begin again, and continue with the next stitch.

Around 2017 she also made small, friendly paintings of dogs and cats. There was a practical reason: we had to make a living. Yet, ironically, those modest works brought the heart motif and the knitted structure together very directly. Some of the paintings born from the most practical circumstances became among the clearest visual expressions of Knitting is Love.

## **2018-2025 | Relationship, Energy, Life, and the Road**

Over time, knitting moved beyond the memory of her mother. Historical figures and currency appeared, as did Mother Teresa and a child, family scenes, and images connected to contemporary society. The idea of relationship became increasingly visible: one person holding another, much as one stitch holds the next.

During the 2020 pandemic, she painted our daughter and young grandson wearing masks. The unfamiliar reality of even a young child having to wear a mask became both a memory of our own family and part of the shared memory of a generation living through the pandemic.

The question of connection became especially immediate in a time when people could not freely approach one another. At the same time, works such as Smiling Family showed laughter and play. Love, in her paintings, is not always solemn.

In the Energy series, repeated stitches began to spiral inward and create deep pictorial space. In 2021, with 3D Energy, the knitted structure moved beyond the flat surface and into actual space. The viewer could enter rather than simply stand in front of the work.

In 2023 and 2024, the knitted structure itself seemed to become flowers and plants, proliferating like living energy.

Then, in 2025, the road became important again. In the early landscapes it had been a literal road. Now the thread unwinding from a ball of yarn became the road itself.

If the ball of yarn is accumulated memory, the unwound thread may be the time already lived, while the thread still wound around the ball may be the time yet to come. The road, then, becomes a life.

## **I Changed Too**

My wife's paintings were not the only thing that changed. I changed as well.

I did not always understand or support her work as I do now. There were times when immediate practical concerns seemed more important to me than painting, and times when I resented her returning late from art events.

But after watching her for so many years, I gradually understood that painting was not a hobby for her. It was not something she could do when things went well and abandon when life became difficult. Painting was a way of living.

The man who once disliked her coming home late from art events eventually traveled with her to New York for an exhibition and spent entire days walking through museums and galleries.

At the Rockefeller Center observation deck, looking at the sunset beyond Manhattan, we said to each other, "Let us grow old beautifully like that."

Today I try to help her as much as I can. And perhaps it is not only that I have helped her painting. Her painting, over the past thirty-six years, has slowly changed me as well.

## **2026, and Back Again to Past, Present and...**

In 2026, different directions meet within the same artistic language: large blue and green all-over fields, cultural memory in The Smile of a Thousand Years, and The Pain of the Himalayas, which began from the tragedy of the Nepal floods.

The same stitch-like brushwork can express love and care, but it can also express the wound and upheaval of nature. Knitting is Love does not mean that only beautiful things are painted. Love can also be the reason one chooses to look at pain rather than turn away from it.

After thirty-six years together, and after looking again at the works from 1998 onward, the title Past, Present and... feels larger to me than ever.

The past does not disappear. It remains inside the present. The present soon becomes past, and the next stitch is placed beside it.

In Korean, 'and' in the title also carries the sound of 'drawing' or 'painting.' The title joins time while also describing the act of painting. Knitting does the same thing: one stitch connects to the next.

My wife has woven time, memory, relationships, and life. Now her painting can also hold moments when those connections are shaken or wounded.

And at the oldest point of origin remains the image of her mother's hands: placing one strand of yarn over another, making the next stitch, giving time to someone else.

Past, present, and...

The next stitch has not yet been painted.