

Interview with Ji Yoon Yang

(Director of Corner Art Space, Seoul)

and Gregory Maass

(Director of Kim Kim Gallery)

About the Kim Kim Gallery show with Robert Estermann

Ji Yoon Yang: How did you meet Robert Estermann?

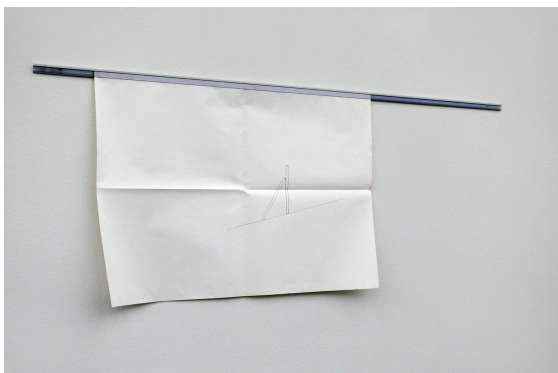
Gregory Maass: We met 20 years ago. Nayoungim, Robert and me studied together. So I know him quite closely and we became best friends.

JY: Let's talk about the work he shows here.

GM: Yes, for example *Modern Beach Design* is a theme worth exploring. It's a small sculpture he shows here in Corner Art Space. The theme is the inclined plane. I remember he already worked on this during our studies.

JY: In Paris?

GM: Yes, It's something he is working on for 20 years already. There's a lot in it. There's this going up, the inclination, the graph. The mathematical graph is rising. For Robert it's about time, it's about the future, and wait.. it's a line.



JY: A line of what?

GM: It's a line abstractly spoken. It's not a line signifying one thing, but it's a line indicating something like for example capitalism or economical growth, the flux of money. All this are positive things for Robert. It also signifies science, scientific representation like rising energy levels, air humidity you name it. It also never go backwards it always goes forwards. So it signifies future, a becoming of something. For him that's signifying life.

JY: How does this graph relate to the "Modern Beach Design" sculpture?

GM: The beach is a 3-dimensional graph for him. It's a plane, which is in this case inclined.

JY: What about the beach?

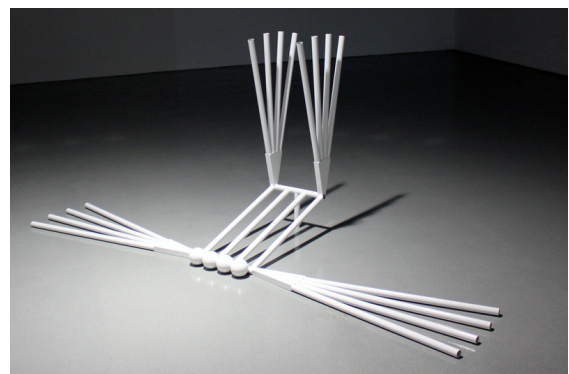
GM: The beach is significant and important to Robert, it's a hard to define space in-between the ocean and the land. He said that the beach is between the ocean and civilization. The sand is, representing for Robert, the remnants of something once solid, like a rock, totally ground down to the size of grains by the water. The beach is between the water and any kind of human construction. On one side of the beach you have the stones, rocks and the water and on the other side you find the city, the urbanism, civilisation. And people decide to spend their spare time there. It is a space that is known to permit things which are not allowed anywhere else. It's a freer than usual space, one might say.

JY: And what does the term Modern refer to?

GM: Robert believes in modernity or better super-modernity.

For him, one goal in life is to become super-modern. And not art-historically speaking, but spoken as an artist, which actually is the same, but not for Robert.

Super-modernity for him implies... . When Robert says super-modernity, he wants to say that he believes in science. He sees it as a belief system, but not in a spiritual way. He believes in trans-substantiation through science, meaning that science is able to change one thing into another. People can change the structure of matter itself. What he wants to express through super-modernity is that you can change yourself, and that very ground-breakingly. So that's his hope. Super-modernity for him is the hope of himself changing into something...



JY:...completely different?

GM: There you have to know Robert, there is no limit when he says this. To change into something which is better than I quote: "better than the best angel two thousand years ago".

That's the relation to the piece we showed in Daegu. The swimmer. That's the representation of the model for something you could change into it. It's something you could become, if you trans-substantiate into something better than yourself, something super-human, into an angel. In this case an angel with 4 heads, 8 arms, and 8 legs, which is floating on his back on water.

JY: I still don't understand how this relates...?

GM: It's about evolving. You are able to evolve. Human beings can evolve into super-modern beings.

JY: This tongue in the beach can also be the transformation of the beach itself?

GM: Yes. Swimming is for Robert an expression of high-leisure. The most relaxing moment you can have with your own body is to float in water. You lose the feeling of the body, or at least some of its weight. You just float. It's about bliss. This is the beach but there's nobody on the beach. Represented is a cut-out shape, like from a larger kind of beach cake, a piece of beach. He wanted me to say that for him the tongue on the beach situation, draws a parallel to Schrödinger's cat. You know this famous paradox. There is a cat in a hermetically sealed box and there is this cyanide gas mechanism which we cannot see which kills or does not kill the cat. But we cannot observe anything because the box is closed. Or the cat is dead, or the cat is alive. It refers to quantum physics and the problem about the observation of experiments in general. Robert's Modern Beach Design is an experiment we can observe. But there are no spectators on the beach and there is no reason logically why the beach shouldn't grow a tongue, why the super-modern beach wouldn't develop consciousness and form some kind of limb. In this case it's a tongue. But only when it is not observed. Robert doesn't necessarily refer to this limb as "tongue" though.



JY: It can be a limb, it can be arms, legs.

GM: But here it is a more like a tongue. So that's something very human. And somehow it doesn't come into being while we look at the beach, only when we don't look at it. Now I remember quite clearly.

He said the tongue is a modern form finding of a topographical representation of the beach.

JY: What does that mean?

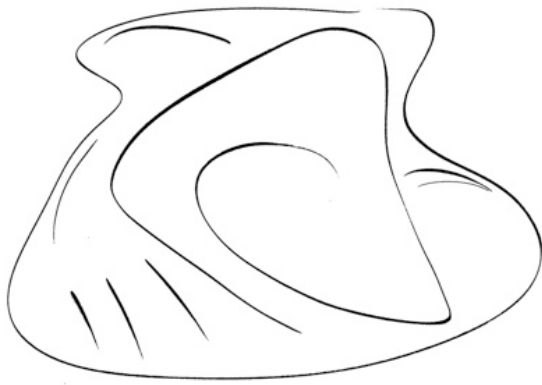
GM: The beach doesn't have a shape at all. It's shapeless. It's just ground sand. We don't really observe it, but for Robert it is a very hopeful space. There is no particular reason why, even if it's most unlikely, why the beach should not suddenly become conscious of itself. The first thing in this is to take and transform its very own shape because originally it's shapeless. It's just a beach. So the beach develops one form. This form is a tongue. That's a very important choice. It's not pure arbitrariness.

There we have to talk about something quite different, about speech. There lies the true importance for Robert, and I will try to relate it to his drawing, because drawing and speaking are very closely connected in Robert's work.



JY: Can you tell me how?

GM: Yes, but it's all not so easy to understand. It's not my work, and I don't consider myself an art historian, so if my reflections are incongruous, it's excusable because I'm neither an academic. There is something interesting to say about the subject of speech and drawing within Robert's work. The way he relates speech or language to his artwork, especially drawing, is most exceptional. Speech, not the spoken work, is an ensemble including his nervous speech-producing apparatus, his brain, the morphology of his body, his lungs, the breathings, his lips, his face and his hearing, and he is most acutely conscious of all this. There is great concentration on his own speaking. For the normal person it is not usual to concentrate so super-intensively on the process of speaking like Robert does.



JY: Why does he concentrate so hard on speaking?

GM: He has no choice. He has to think about it due to a speech impediment. That's how drawing for him has become an analogy of sound modulation.

All his drawings are abstract, but not in a symbolic way, does this make sense? But in a way that the line represents concepts. So through the line when we come to the inclined plain. The line is always in inclination.

We have to look at the drawing as something very classical, as something opposed to painting.

The line suggests exactitude and it needs Robert's strong will to draw these most exact lines. So when he draws, he tries to be the most exact, or even beyond exact as you see here in the topographical sculptures. For him it's like a Kung Fu exercise. He doesn't have to eat and doesn't drink, he doesn't sleep, he battles through it like a warrior because many things which are so easy for most people are very challenging for Robert. He has to develop a warrior attitude in order to function. And as lines go, he takes the drawing so serious that it's like drawing destinies and freedoms. He would insist on the plural.

JY: Why is it plural?

GM: Because it's not one destiny or one freedom. It's like freedoms for not only for him for other people too and different version of freedoms. There was this one very interesting thing he said. Here we have to use the German word "Verbrechen" meaning "Crime". He says "every line in a drawing has to be a Verbrechen, meaning a crime. It means he draws the line in order to change time itself. There is the time before the crime, and there is the time after the crime, and in-between is the line. That's the crime, there he relates to the much abused Marquis de Sade, where in his writing there is the time before ripping somebody, hurting somebody and the time

after.

JY: Why do you think Robert is a genius?

GM: Because of what I just said.

JY: What did you say?

GM: He is unique! Normally you go to art school, you somehow learn how to become an artist. Robert is an artist by nature.

And he is not a universal genius that's not what I mean. But he is a super-talented genius-like artist with very peculiar talents.

JY: Which are? He can draw a line? Why do you think he is unique or why do you think he's great?

GM: His genius show itself in a transfer from speech to art. That's what is ingenious about him. It's not simply the representation of something spoken transferred into art. It's the transfer of speech into art, into drawing, sculpture, performance, to art in general. He transforms his speaking apparatus into a concept. And this concept speaks about the form of a drawing.

JY: So shall we...

GM That's not the end of it. Is this boring?

JY: No...

GM: For him, the objects he produces, he turns them into clowns. Normally the artist is the clown, or being fair to the artists out there, very often. For him it's very different. He turns the artwork into the clown as you can see here or here. The beach or the tongue is the evidence of the clown.



JY: What's the artist's role if the artwork is the clown?

GM: As I mentioned before, in his case the artist's role is to be a real warrior.

JY: Can you tell us about *Clay Collection and Speculative Plane*? What does the title stand for?

GM: Again you find his inclination to believe in the future. It's the third representation of a work already done several times with his students, now for the first time he did all parts himself.

Very unnervingly, we as Kim Kim Gallery, me and Nayingim, had to wrestle him into doing

it. He was very reluctant, to put it lightly. But it went all quite well, don't you think?



The barrier here, he says, the barrier promotes, we have to say as a component of the installation the topographic objects on the other side of the barrier. The barrier is giving us a certain perspective on the work. At this point he likes to talk about Albrecht Dürer, representing something in correct perspective, as a dimensional row. The audience may have to pass around the barrier on the side, that should provoke, in Robert's opinion, a form of desire because you cannot access it directly. But one wants to, so evidently we have to go around it. The objects themselves on the ground are a mixture. All of these snail-like forms on the floor remind us of tongues, limbs and faces and mathematical topographical representations. But none of these too closely, you can not clearly distinguish a face or tongue. On the other hand, they are like mock-up mathematical topographies. Over there is a table customized to Robert's specifications. It had to be, his work has to be on the millimeter exact, at least. It has to have the right shape, the right texture. Everything, every little detail is important in Robert's works. There you have the plane which is totally flat, there's no inclination, it's a plane of exchange. It means: a counter. It talks to us about capitalism, the flux of money. Which he sees as something

very positive and real. He sees it as part of the universal calculator of Konrad Zuse, and it also appears in a different form in Ray Kurzweil's writings. The money that's one of the places in this universe where you can actually see numbers. That's very funny. Robert says capitalism is positive. He is not talking about poor people or rich people. He is just talking about money.

Here even the snails on the ground want to be on the table. And they want to be exchanged into something else. So there is potential in it. But they unluckily can't move.

The installation is called "Clay Collection and Speculative Plane". The show is called "Pièce unique" because we think that Robert's way of thinking and working is "one of a kind". It's a single piece, a single installation with three components. And yeah! It's true "tongue-in-cheek" would be an appropriate title for this piece because the clay is made of polyurethane. Funny, no?

JY: His work is loaded with a lot of meaning, metaphors or riddles. Each object has its own stories, its proper system. But in my opinion his performance in Daegu, "Sex with space", that's very different from all this heavily loaded meaning. It's very direct. What you see is what you get.

How does his performance usually differentiate from his drawing and installation?

GM: That's a super good question. But I don't have an answer to it.

But I can tell you an anecdote about a video production where I assisted Robert, not so long ago, which is called *Alex in Town*.



JY: Where was it?

GM: He wasn't happy with me. There is lot of tension between Robert and me, especially when we do something art-related together. I was just assisting. It was in Grenchen, Switzerland. Back then he lived in this for him horrible little town where they produce all the

Swatch watches out there and they have some skinheads and a bar and that's it. But the skinheads are very civilized, because it's Switzerland. Yeah? They stopped at a crossing even at 4 o'clock in the morning when the traffic light turns red. Anyway I helped him realize the performance/video which is called *Alex in town*. Alex was a huge white Cube 6 meters long, and about 2 by 2 meters. It was hollow, and I was inside driving it through Grenchen. It was Sunday morning when he was filming, I was pushing this block which was on small wheels through Grenchen. It was very noisy. That's *Alex in town*. Much later, maybe it was months, I dared to ask about who is this "Alex" by the way?, he said Alex like in Alexander the great, of course!

JY: You mean Alexander?

GM: Yes, Alexander the Great.

JY: You want to talk about Alex in town? Technology and science?

GM: I did already.

Let's see what else we can talk about.

Ah! For him, four things are important. Future means life for him. I'm not talking about myself. I'm talking about Robert. For him future is life. Life = Future. And very important for him is technique, youth, and art. For him, youth is important because it's a fundamental prerequisite of doing art.

Because when you are young, you doubt. You try to do the thing another way, not very seriously, destructively or not. People don't take things seriously when they're young. He takes youth very seriously. He gets a lot of pleasure out of youth.

JY: Like these boys in the book here? (pointing to "Modern Beach Design" the book)

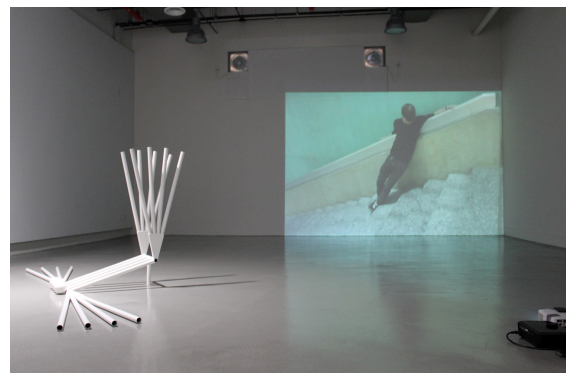
GM: That's one representation of youth. In the book 'Modern Beach Design' he made drawings which represent the thought of the models he photographed because it's the perspective of the youthful person which interests him. He is trying to get into the head of youth. To see the world like they see it. To imagine what they think. For him youth is not MTV or mass-media, or modern society of mass-consumerism. It's much more about provoking the establishment. Youth for him is the positively spoken anti-establishment. He wanted me to state this. We have to quote him here "Art = Youth, Technology = Future and Money = Sperm". That's why he says capitalism as a pattern is fascinating.



JY: Cause it's sperms?

GM: No-no-no. Money = Sperm.

He very positively sees sperm as life. It's about the future. It's about life going on and on, it's about evolving. Here we can talk about the *Sex with Space* the performative format. I don't know how to talk about sex in connection to art, sexual issues are very boring to me and I think they are very boring to Robert, too. He sees sex as a dimension between people. It's something in reach of humans, which provokes madness. That's him speaking. There are too many connotations to sexuality. But there is something very funny to quote. "The word 'sex' is sex in almost every language. Even if you go to the Philippines or somewhere in Africa, they use the word sex, not some other word." They don't have a proper word for it. It's a concept. It's a philosophical concept in the end. That's why it's called sex because its origin lies in Western thinking. I asked Robert why he is interested in sex? He said that the sexiness of sex is interesting to him, not sex itself. For him it's like a color. It's like something un-describable. But I think he wanted to say that it is somehow an invisibility. It's like a floating imaginary space or a drifting new or pattern in the space between people. And this pattern is provoking madness.



He says this is a pre-linguistic, a pre-spoken entity. It's like before there was speech, there was already this pattern in space between human beings, which is sex. That's why it's

interesting to him. Everything is related. That's very-very-very relevant in Robert's work. He said one remarkable thing concerning sex, he said it's an invisible anchor in space.

JY: Invisible anchor in space?

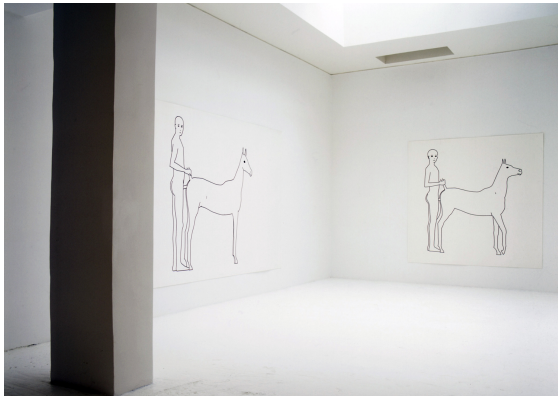
GM: He wants to make himself lighter through his art and he succeeds, I think.

JY: How about the sex in his 1996 work, *Four boys, Four horses*. That's about a sexual activity.

GM: But it is not just a sexual activity.

JY. No? What is it? Is it a drawing?

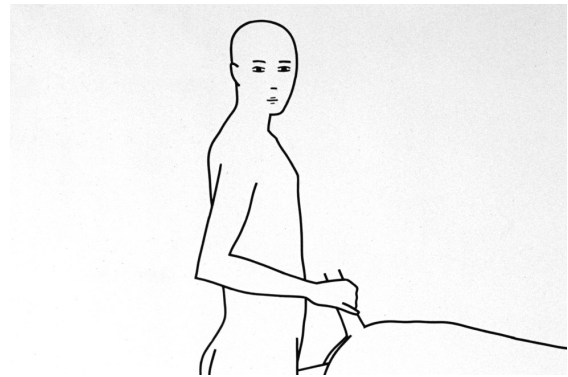
GM: Which drawing do you exactly mean? May I see?



JY: Yes. These here. It's his earlier work.

GM: There are a lot of misunderstandings surrounding these drawings and personally I think they are overrated.

Firstly these are 4 different works, hence the title: 4 Boys, 4 Horses. They all differ in some way. It's Robert's understanding of the term singular. Each of these drawings represent a singularity to him. The drawings themselves have different layers. They are not just drawings about a sexual preference, and similar motifs can be found on antique Greek vases, that is not in the center of interest for Robert. To Robert it is of utmost importance that he leaves the spectator no possibility to see the motif of the drawing as something morally abject, he must see it as something socially acceptable. If he succeeds in doing so is another question. For him the boy in the drawing is constructed like the Mona Lisa. See here, even the eyes seem to follow the spectator.



For Robert the horse represents something similar to the golden sun of James Lee Byars, some idol of Robert. I quote "The boy could be a young art student who sees James Lee Byars' work for the first time". He says that the work is about courage, courage to be alone. There are many misunderstandings concerning these wonderful drawings. It is not a kind of logo or brand.

JY: Yeah, shall we stop?

GM: Certainly!

JY: Gregory, thank you very much for giving this interview!

GM: You are most welcome.

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