UNUSUAL VISUALIZATIONS OF OUR PLANET

Giacomo Costa, Plant, n.5, 2011
Italian architect Ettore Sottsass’s painting Another Utopia [1973] sends a strong message that warns of an arrogant, technology-driven civilization. The Working City by the British radical art collective Archigram [which represented the optimistic technoculture of the 1960s] has been destroyed and scattered along a desolate seashore, along with debris collected from high-rise buildings. The painting, resembling a devastated urban landscape that could have been swept by war or by a tsunami, depicts the downfall of a utopia that humans had once craved and juxtaposes it with an opposite dystopia resulting from human greed and a subtle quiver of nature.

There have been continuous efforts by artists to warn against the destructive effects of our civilization; as well as calls for a harmonious relationships with nature. The exhibition Imagine Earth was one such call. All the artists who participated in this exhibition displayed works full of charm that expressed reflection and compassion for the destroyed nature. One of the most interesting features of this exhibition was that most artists reconstructed their photographic works using the computer graphics program Photoshop, albeit at different levels of intensity.

Take for example the photographic works by Dutch artist Ruud van Empel: He creates photo-collages by meticulously stitching together fragments taken from an archive of thousands of images that the artist had photographed himself. Photoshop techniques are involved in this process. As a result, highly realistic graphic representations are created, detailing the exquisite and delicate nature which has been irrevocably damaged, just like the first paradise on Earth, reminding us of the regrettable reality. According to influential cultural critic Walter Benjamin, the acknowledgment of the irreversibility itself enhances the “symbolic values” of nature. Van Emple’s work, portraying a boy or a girl simply staring at a camera or nature, separated from a group of people, depicts a deep anxiety caused by the human alienation from nature. This psychological tension makes it difficult to describe this imaginative photo as just beautiful, as it contains a hint of grotesque, if sublime, beauty at its core.

Meanwhile, Costa’s futuristic urban landscapes also depict a virtual world. His photographic works, created by modeling of a virtual world through computer graphic 3D techniques and taken by an imaginative camera, portray a submerged city or ruins of urban scenes that could happen in the near future. However, the vivid depiction of trees or plants growing amidst the ruins signifies the recovering power of nature, which is also seen in Sottsass’s painting. Written by Kim Hyeon-seop
Professor at Korea University