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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Breath--Sound of Time and Space

By

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April, 2001

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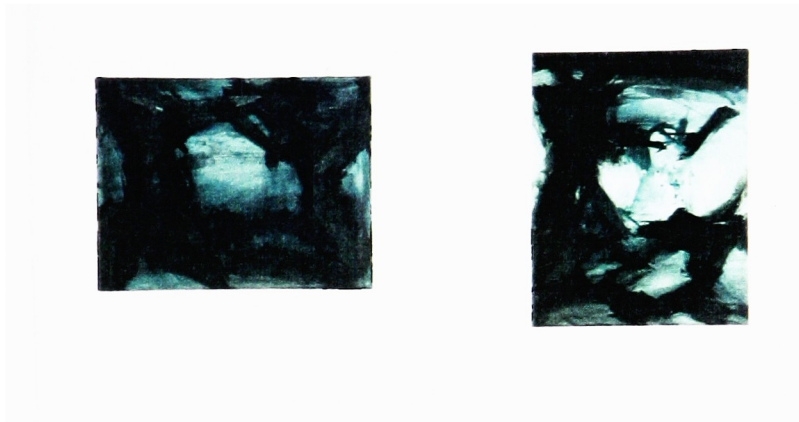
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Hypocrites says that “Life is short, art is long”

However, I think art can be long only when art is the life.

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Introduction

Thousands of times I have asked myself, "why do I draw?" Nobody asks me to paint and draw these things, but I am locked in my studio by myself and am drawing each day. Perhaps I draw in order to figure out why I draw.

Everyone may have this kind of experience. Since I became a "grown-up," I haven't played on a swing which I did quite often during my childhood. A few years ago, I found swings near my house. I tried to swing again but I couldn't do it well. It was hard to recall how to swing. Then one day, I did not worry about how to go high; I just sat down and moved my feet consistently and I started to feel the air and to enjoy that moment. While I was listening to the sound of the birds and trees, I realized that I was so high that I could almost reach the leaves of the big trees surrounding me. I still remember the joy of regaining something that I had forgotten.

This is the way I pursue my painting. I always want to feel the creative moment and to be aware of my presence. During that moment, I can remember something that I have forgotten, and I can forget something I have remembered

Most of my paintings and drawings are abstract, but also very realistic in the way that I express my emotions. I want my works of art to impact the viewer's inner-self, not merely satisfying with one glance of the eyes but also satisfying the viewer's mind and memory.

In this paper, I will present the correlation of image and sound, space and light, and analyze the meaning of lines.

Sound of Image, Image of Sound

Everyday I see images and I try to reach them until they absorb into my mind

because I know I may forget everything except the images

Image of sound, Image of time and space,

and Image of me

Everything has its own sound, whether we can hear it or not, and every sound has its image. One of the wonderful sounds I like to listen to is breath. Usually, I don't realize if I breathe because it is voiceless, but at the moment I almost feel that I am not breathing, I still breathe. The breath has no specific tone or note, but it is a consistent, natural, and real sound. I like the quality of breath which is reaching somewhere beyond limitation. I often can find the breath in the beginning and end of a recital or performance. I am attracted by its concentration and resonance. The breath is like a mediator that connects from here to there, from this dimension to that dimension, and connects this visible world and the unseen world.

My interest in sound has evolved over a long time. I grew up in a family of musicians, and have had many chances to attend rehearsals and performances. When I listen to the music, I am almost watching the music and feeling the space. I like to sense the reality of music, so I often enjoyed those rehearsals more than actual performances. This interest in process has been applied to my works of art.

If I have an object in my painting, it is the realization of the breath. The process I create a work of art is like the process of composing music where I use my own instruments,

brushes, sticks, and my fingers. With rhythmical elements and spontaneity, my paintings continue to delve into my basic unconscious inner state.

The improvisational “Untitled” works are stained by the neutral earth tone colors of acrylic paint, mostly blues, browns, and greens. These expressionistic abstract paintings, featuring dynamic lines, flowing images and subtle tones, began to emerge in 1999 after I tried using watercolor with soaked paper. Soaked paper or canvas stimulates my flexibility so that I can make something that I could not totally predict. As the image developed, I became more interested in the subtle nuances that occurred through the layering of marks and transparency. With the transparency effect, I enjoy seeing the surface of the raw canvas and often consciously try to keep the existing color of the canvas.

Compared to my early watercolors, these larger pieces seem to allow me more freedom with the space. These soft, peaceful, and silent spaces are interrupted by dynamic strokes, which create tension and also a sense of space. The intense marks are very strong and powerful, even aggressive, so that people may see them first. However, the marks are not distracting to the viewer because these heavy color tones, like the bass in the orchestra, are interwoven naturally with other sounds of brush strokes and colors. The special characteristics of these pieces are lone washed, airy lines that provide relief from the ponderous silence. These lines intersect at some point but do not obstruct the other lines. They also add more sense of depth and space.

I have worked with many kinds of media, including acrylic, watercolor, printmaking, mixed media, and video. In fact, the material itself doesn't matter to me and it cannot control my intention to draw. However, from the beginning of a drawing, the material starts to affect my image. For example, while I do video work, my senses become more

concentrated on the relationship between sound and image. Printmaking is more a physical and instrumental method, so somehow the space in printmaking can be more direct and flat. I like the special and strong characteristics of printmaking processes, such as developing, pressing, and inking. I can really improvise with this fertile instrument.

My relationship to the sound of images, and space and light engages all different media with different reactions. All materials become my breath and that breath is, of course, always related to space.



Untitled, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 56"x49"



Untitled-B, 2000, wash-drawing intaglio type, 32"x24"

In the Space I breathe

*In that empty space, even I am not there,
there is breath.*

Since I started to paint from an early age, there is no doubt that many artists have influenced me. However, it is hard to tell which trend directly impacted me. I was interested in Rembrandt van Rijn's light, Antoni Tapies' timeless sense of continuity and nebulous traces, Robert Irwin's sense of experience, and Bill Viola's suspended time. I like Viola's works because they suggest subconscious dreams, memories, and human experience. I especially relate to Viola's poetic articulation of visionary transcendence (1). Also, when I saw Irwin's installation, "Prologue," the chambers made of scrim and fluorescent lights, I felt a very different sense of gravity because of the transparent walls and the subtle electric sound of lights which gently vibrate even inside my bones. All of the pieces that I remember have a commonality. No matter what kind of style the artists use, their works are related to the reality of life and experience. Those works often make me aware of a sense of space and time.

Whenever I look at empty paper or canvas, whether it's big or small, I feel unlimited space. The space is never limited by the edge of the paper or canvas. People may assume that I create the space with my imagination, but my space is not related to the manipulation of space which has been considered as an essence of painting in art history. For me, the space is a real environment which can hold my physical and emotional needs. I don't necessarily need to make a space because the space already exists. What I need to do with

my paintings is move toward an experience within the space. Everyday, I accept the invitation and begin to express my feelings and emphasize certain moments through my strokes.

One of my pieces, "Yellow Day," definitively captures this special relationship, sense of space, or perception of space. The space cannot merely be explained by the contrast of bright yellow and black marks. Somehow, the layers of black, by themselves, create more deep space. All my momentary experiences in this painting have been buried under the layers of black which exude sensations of time. I don't know why I use black to paint over already marked areas, obliterating all my other marks. Perhaps I want to cover the chaos of vision or to mitigate the tension of bright color. In this sense, the black is used as an element of light, just as Matisse used pure black as a color of light (2). This is same as the paradoxical statement of Sam Francis: "an increase in light gives an increase in darkness" (3). However, covering with black doesn't mean erasing. The action is closer to touching or keeping. It is like writing a letter and putting it inside an envelope and sealing it to keep it unseen until it reaches its recipient.

I often restrict the color palette to black, blue, or brown and explore delicate changes in one pigment. Recently I have been using more black compared to other colors. In fact, black was a forbidden color for me for academic and cultural reasons. Black has been used in many tragic themes of art--for example, Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" and Barnett Newman's "The Stations of the Cross" (4). It takes courage to accept black as pure color because often others react to me as if I were depressed because I use black. However, my black implies neither depression nor non-being. I don't refuse the serious, dramatic, or tragic feelings that black often conveys, but it is part of being. The color of black is

profound, elusive, unreal, but exceedingly real. Black has a very attractive space that no other color has. If the space of white is void, the space of black is deep.

Black of the burial cloths:

the sleep of my woven eternity

will not outlive

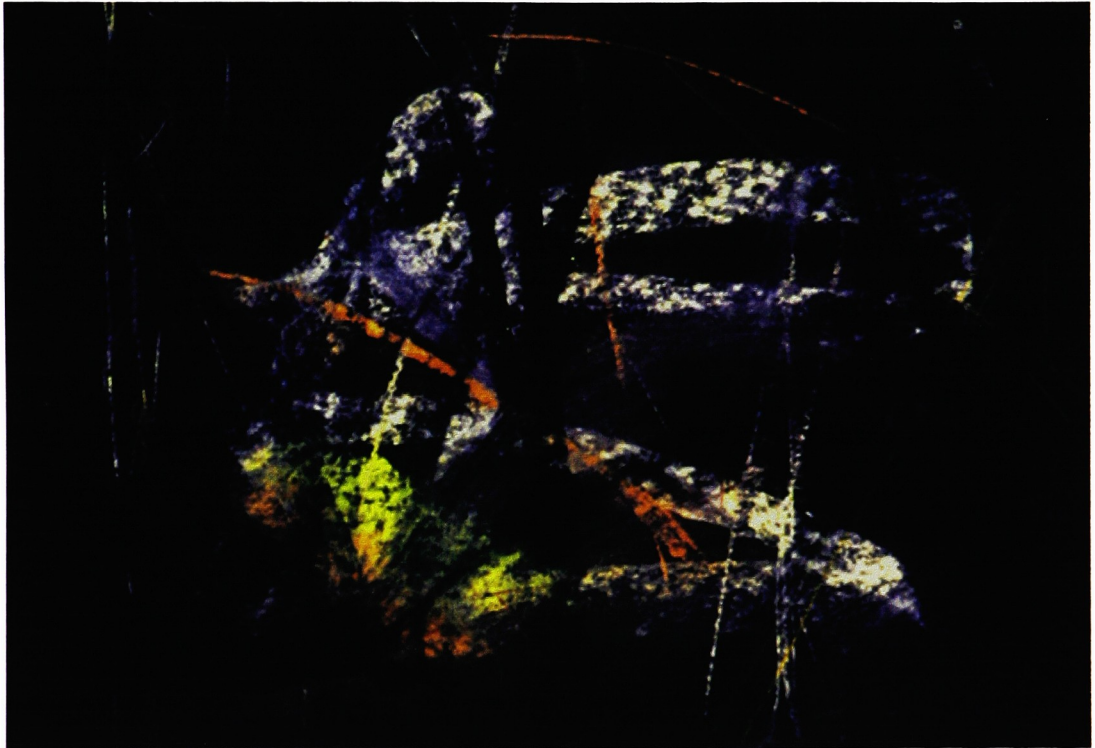
the yellowing horn of bones

-- Rafael Alberti, Selected Poems (5)

Later on, I experimented with the small black papers called "Darkness is Light to Me," which used both wet and dry media. The difference in feeling of the pieces is comparable to changing tone from major to minor in musical notes. The special character in this drawing is wet black lines which are not recognizable in that black background. I like this quality of black marks on black paper, unseen but existing. That is the substance of life. The lines can be seen only when they meet bright pastel marks, and those black lines have the effect of holding those fragile pastel marks in the space. Moreover, they create another ambiguous dimension; the marks almost become background or the background almost becomes foreground, and all my images can be both spatial and flat. While I do printmaking, I realize more fully that the space is just a flat surface. My senses pay more attention to the smooth surface of mylar or plate. All my art works are crossing the space between surface and space, reality and ideal, soul and matter, conscious and subconscious, energy and vulnerability. In the space between, there are lines which have their own sound and space.



Yellow Day, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 48"x36"



Darkness is Light to Me-1, 2000, mixed media, 9"x12"

Within Line

The widest space is in the line.

Line is an essential element which I use to express my feelings, hoping, longing, etc. Line is an extraordinary language that everyone can read, which is not restricted by culture or nationality. It is a matter of how much each viewer's mind is open to receive. Whenever I go into my studio, I sit in front of my paintings for a while and listen to the sound of the lines. We--the line and me-- begin to dialogue.

Since I began my studies here in the US, I have been more affected by the Abstract Expressionists, including Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko, and Sam Francis. I accept the processes of the unconscious and the importance of my physical act of painting, and the action is alive within my paintings. In the past, I used to eliminate many elements of chance which occurred by my action or my materials, but now I admit the chances and spontaneity which make my painting alive.

I like to create marks which are characterized by boldness and energy such as Franz Kline's energy and thickness of marks, and Robert Motherwell's symbolic marks. However, in my paintings, there are more lines which are not recognizable, even though they are still there within the thin pigment of the surface. I like to draw faint and vague lines which create subtle tensions and represent traces of life. Sometimes those soft lines are more powerful than bold brush strokes.

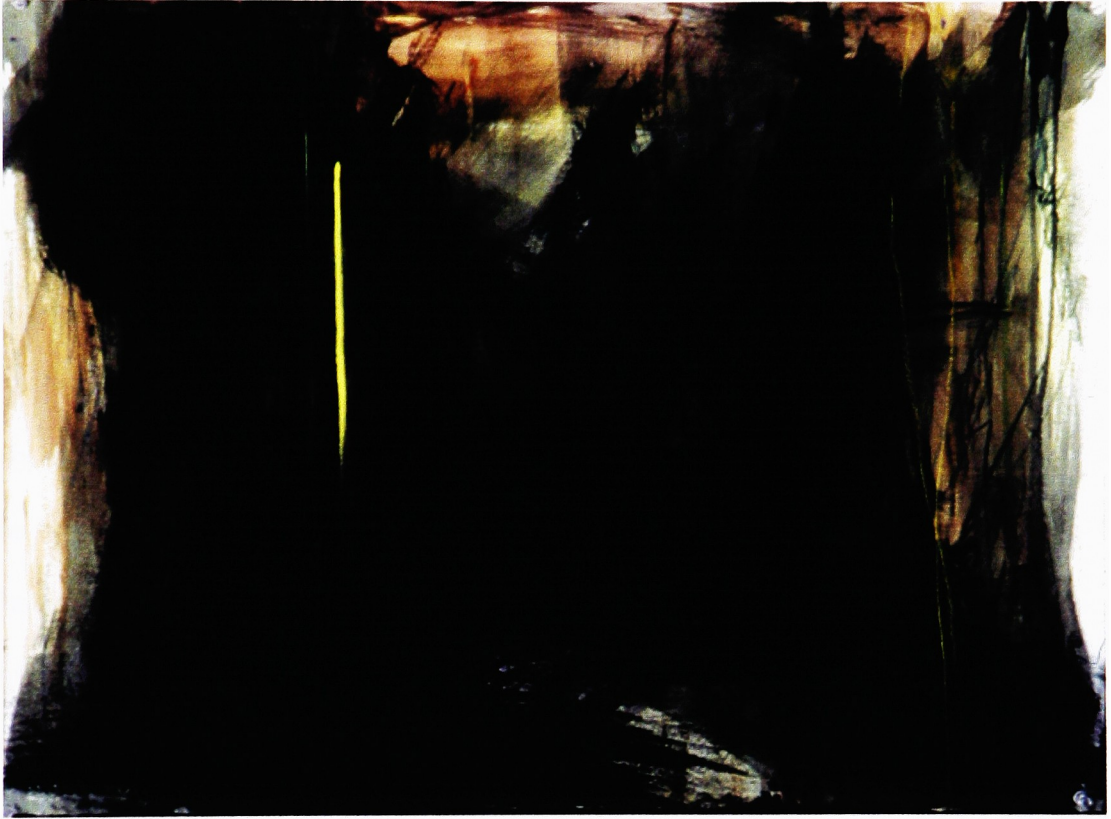
The space of "Green Home," which is drawn on translucent paper, is revealed with the dust of pastels which give some sensual pleasure. Many of my ceaseless lines are almost

fading into the empty paper. Only when one takes time, he or she can see those tangible lines which are hidden in the paper. The reason that I mark such thin lines is that I believe they may penetrate the surface of my drawing. They go beyond the edge of the paper and flow over me. I am almost breathing and floating with the lines. The space is expanded by lines. Compared to the soft line, some dark scribbled lines, not drawn but pressed, are more physically appealing. The image of those marks is like a deep memory in the stage of oblivion, which is ambiguous, but impressive and not erasable. Personally, I like to watch this void, silent drawing because I feel endless resonance. Space bounces back and forth between me and the drawing.

Every single line has a space that can be amazingly extended. I often cover the first layer of marks using a wide stroke. One wide line can cover thousands of thin lines but it is still one line. My recent drawing, "One Impulse," has the same kind of wide lines--black brush strokes, which cover other lines. Moreover, the distinctive characteristic of this piece is the slowly drawn, one vertical line, placed on top of the black strokes. This irrelevant line may sharply hit the viewer's sensory system because it is so bright. I don't know where the projection comes from. Is it from outside or inside? It's mysterious like the penetrating light in Rembrandt van Rijn's paintings. Actually, drawing this bright line on the dark area was the most painful process. It was like a surgery. It needs to be drawn in the right place, with the right color and the right amount; otherwise I could ruin everything I had done. That moment, I was standing at the edge of the space and the boundary of time. It still remains a question. Why one line? Why one touch? But, it was needed. That was the only thing I wanted to draw and only thing I could draw in that moment. This sense of urgency was knocking on my mind.



Green Home, 2000, pastel on paper, 34"x22"



One Impulse, 2000, mixed media, 22"x30"

Conclusion

Believe it or not, when I start to draw, I need a great deal of confidence, more than people could ever guess, and I need more courage when I stop. Usually, I stop marking when I feel both balance and tension, and I allow respiration time for my paintings. The waiting time can be a day, a month, or a year. During that time, my images are growing by themselves, and I am learning how to endure and how to let them go.

My work tends to have the freshness, openness, and sense of absence so that the viewer and I can breathe and imagine the other parts of the painting. However, I no longer wonder when I need to finish as much as I used to do, because there is no meaning for me. My goal is not in making incredible, perfect, extraordinary paintings but in accepting both the beauty and ugliness of my paintings. I want to grow with my drawings. Likewise, Barnett Newman mentioned, "I have been captivated by the things that happen in playing this instrument" (6). Many of my drawings were born when I had absolutely no energy to draw. When I feel as if I cannot draw any more, my drawings come into being by themselves. They become something out of nothing and even they lead me to draw. Right now, I need to draw to be alive and that is reason enough. I may understand further reasons at some future time.

Even though all of my paintings shown here are very abstract and ambiguous, people may feel attached to the paintings because they have natural atmospheric space, which is open to everyone. Here, the viewer can feel the nature of space, water, ocean, light, wind, sky, and emotions through my paintings. What is valuable in my paintings is the integrity and coherence of the pieces and the balanced arrangement of all the elements of the

composition--color, form, line, volume, and space. Especially, the harmony between consciousness and unconsciousness may stimulate the viewer's emotions in a natural way and allow people to look more slowly and deeply at these pieces.

However, what people see through my painting isn't as important as what they cannot see. Those invisible things, which are very difficult to express in words, slowly are associated with the human mind and may inspire people. I hope they themselves reconcile the image with their own presence of being human.

The action, as I record the sound of images and the sound of my presence, will deliberately continue through the variety of interests relating to my passions, including the influence of natural space on emotional states.

We are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.

-- Barnett Newman (7)

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