

**Soo Kyoung Lee**

***How a presence forms on a surface***

Interview with Alain Coulange

*Picasso said, apparently without provocation, "I don't paint what I see, I paint what I think". If a painting is not the expression of what a painter sees, and if it is not strictly or only an expression of his thoughts, what is it about? What is yours?*

During the time of the pictorial experience, I face the virgin surface of the paper like I face the void, in a dead-end. Hours go by without anything happening; I see nothing, then, suddenly, something appears... During the process of working, thinking and acting are simultaneous. Thinking progressively unveils itself in the action of painting. The gap between thinking and seeing is very narrow. An action leads to another, colors confront themselves and harmonize in a movement that leads to the artwork.

*According to Pierre Bonnard, a work of art is a « stop in time ». Does painting offer the possibility of stopping, especially time?*

For me, the artwork does not interrupt time, it's our eyes which pause in front of the painting and give access to universal time. The time I spend organizing the artwork is particular; it becomes a substance in itself. I stroll through this time nourished with art history but also with my intuitions: breadcrumbs guide me. This time pushes me, upsets me, and guides me to unknown territories.

*Is the picture finished when painting stops? When — in which circumstances — does it stop? What constitutes the painting: is that what stops the painting and makes it visible? Or does it experience and take with it more than what the picture allows us to see?*

The picture starts when the painting stops. I finish it once it appears to my eyes, both obvious and intriguing. It breaks away from my pictorial experiences like an object of thought and becomes independent. The painting stops and the picture starts to unveil itself. Paul Klee compared the artist to a tree: the tree nourishes itself from its roots anchored in the soil: its sap begets fruits, the essences of all these processes. What interests me is the gap between what is a concrete substance, in the sense of the picture's texture, and what it allows us to see, guess, or become a breakthrough.

*Is it not in the "gap" which opens on an "breakthrough" that you can find the subject of the painting?*

I do not work with subjects. My painting does not carry a representative image. It is itself the subject in its making. It shows its own "reality", its own "face". The term "subject" is not relevant for my work. My concern is not to find an expression for the painting. Quite the opposite, in fact, I believe it's the viewer's gaze that gives it an expression.

*So, the "viewer's gaze" is what is at work on your painting and what the painting works on?*

What is at work in my painting, and what I work on, is the fact of knowing how a presence forms on the surface. You are right when you speak of a stop: my paintings work towards this tension between the terms you allude to: "to stop", "to hold" like breaths, eye movements and also signs of a new breath. They are present at each step and help me create a distance between action and expectation.

*How do you follow these steps in your studio?*

I start with a surface in a single color. Oddly, this first choice is a moment of freedom. This colored field is a territory I do not know yet, a territory I can explore totally. After that, I place a colored shape; a shape that is not yet sufficiently autonomous and that is not yet precise. It's there to be transformed by further gestures, gradually transcended.

*What is at stake is between color and drawing, like in a collage?*

I was able to give the impression that I was making some sort of collage of shapes on the canvas. This process came from seizing a moment in my everyday life: one day, I remembered my daughter playing with the magnets we had on the refrigerator. Each time she put them in her mouth, I took them away to put them back on the fridge. By doing this, I realized the surface was a real and tangible surface. The idea of hanging and sticking became the center of my questioning. In this work, shapes held onto the surface, what gives this vision of suspension, like a stopped moment.

*This process opened itself and opened to new transformations?*

This work integrated other artistic preoccupations: multiple shapes that occupied various spaces on the surface assembled themselves, centered or not, in a single shape, maybe two. They widen, superimpose, crisscross, accumulate. Once I have located a place, I grope around, modulating, turning over, coming back even in order to, maybe, locate a treasure.

*Simplicity, as for computers, does not precede complexity but follows it?*

Another plasticity appeared: I reintroduced the unique starting color like an active element, which now participates to the becoming of the shapes already outlined. The color comes back to sculpt, overcome, match or cover them. All these multiple actions create some sort of topography containing the experience of territories transformed by time and exterior impacts.

*Is this transformation linked to a different way for you to look at your painting? Degas said, when he spoke about drawing: "Drawing is not shape; it is the way of seeing shapes".*

Life, pictorial experiences, frustrations, confusions... All are good nourishment. The intelligence of the gaze enables to record very quickly the essential information, and to analyze it. We do not know why we understand faster with our eyes rather than by reasoning. My artistic progression is linked to all these perceptions that trouble my eyes and determine the choices to make in order to inscribe what I do not know yet. In this way, little by little, the painting transforms itself. My "way of seeing" gives me the freedom to affirm my own thinking, to accept the non-comprehension. This is a salutary mechanism for the evolution of my work.

*How do you go from a painting to another? "I can paint a painting because there must be a reason to oppose the previous one", says Helmut Federle. Is this the case for you?*

It is all a matter of temporality. What has been felt is no longer in the present, in the moment when I turn towards the unknown. According to Heraclitus: "You cannot step twice into the same river": only time allows me to go forward, even if what belongs to the previous painting is a step stone to the next one. I am not in the previous painting at the instant my eyes turn to another canvas: I am in the adventure and the discovery of a new *terra incognita*.

*Do you make a difference between light and color? Must we apprehend — and keep the memory of — the light or the color of the painting?*

The light in my paintings is the result of the color relationships I implement: the tension this relationship produces creates the light. It does not differ from the light, which is around me when I look at it. I am not in the “produced” lighting, theatrical, the light of effects like for classical or impressionist paintings. My concern is to set the colors down which, with their own qualities, will produce light. I am sensitive to light with no “special” effects: the painting is not a flashlight. It is the quality of the painting’s presence that must arouse the light.

*Would you say, like Olivier Mosset: “I simply try to paint, and to make paintings that are simply paintings”?*

I approve this radical position. When I consider a painting, I first think about its authenticity, its singularity. The challenge is to make something obvious appear each time, and this obviousness must arouse the difference between each painting. Each has “its own face”, its humor, its posture, its freedom, its independence, its territory; consequently its own relationship to others.