

The physicality of painting for Soo Kyoung Lee

"Phaedra told me [Eupalinos], the more I meditate on my art, the more I make it; the more I think and accomplish, the more I suffer and rejoice as an architect; - and the more I feel myself, with an ever more certain sensual pleasure and limpidity. I lose myself in my long expectancies: I find myself through the surprises I provoke; and by means of these successive levels of my own silence, I advance in my own building; and I come closer to a correspondence between my wishes and my powers that is so exact, that it seems that I have made of the existence that was given to me a kind of human work. By dint of constructing, he told me smiling; I think I have constructed myself."

Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos or the architect*

Painting, for Soo Kyoung Lee, is perhaps inscribing a gesture on canvas. But perhaps it is mostly about inscribing oneself, with gesture, in the field of the canvas, confronting it. Face to face, in a game of blind mirrors. Not to seek in it an image or an echo, but rather to discover adverseness. To make appear a physicality of painting in a state of openness to what makes its specific entity. When Vito Acconci fights with his shadow in the video *Shadow-Play*, the projections on the wall are not just reflections of his movements but also abstract and shapeless figures, strange masses detaching themselves from the body and unfolding their ghostly presence. There is no equivalence here between the body and its shadow, as if it was a mysterious and distinct negative, being simultaneously connected and separated from the body – its obscure side, impalpable but real. In such a way, that this is not the reflection of the body that is seen, but the reality of a shadow.

In her struggle with the canvas, involving the body and its scale, Soo Kyoung Lee attempts to let the physicality of paint appear. A tangible physicality: represented by the painting, its size embracing the body in movement. The paintings are about adverseness – in the sense that adverseness is *what is opposite to oneself*. They receive painterly blows but also resist, making each gesture the inscription of a decision, of a desire while thwarting control to orient the game and leave space for chance. Every gesture is a discovery as well as a statement. Every gesture organizes the painting, creating surprise as it is formed. It is the corporality of the painting that the artist attempts to discover. She shapes this corporality using a multitude of layers covering, superimposing the canvas. Unveiling and veiling, revealing and burying, choosing and letting go, these painterly imprints seem simultaneously appended and dug, accumulated and deepened – proposed and received, sign of an incessant coming and going between the body and the painting. Between the body and the painting – in this adverse relationship – the space of the studio grants a temporality for creation, defines a territory for the act of painting, enabling its activation as well as its respirations, its expectations, its interruptions.

For each painting, the gesture inscribes itself by digging the canvas on a background defined as groundwork. Painting is a process, it results of a series of steps in space and time led by a body in movement. The first color being spread uncloses a place for painting.

It is an announcement. The space is prepared – the surface oriented, the plot delimited, the tonality given. It is the space for expanse, smooth and stretched, a screen, even a jewel case, which sets off the work to come. As soon as it is laid – laid down – the color of the first layer informs that the painting can start. Not to append shapes on it, but to make happen the result of a series of successively accomplished gestures in front of the canvas, but also *in* the canvas – condensed in its frame, concentrated in action zones. The background is ajar, questioned in its depth by these gestures that come to extract its substance. As if it came from a space behind, hidden, far away and that it was about bringing it back to the surface,

to the gaze. It is about a constructed substance – built up. Inflated or airy, brought near or far, they attest of the diversity of approaches, of rhythms, and of a disposition towards balance in tension. Each form possesses a particular content, determined in relation to others in a movement resulting from visual confrontation.

Created together, one in relation to the others – from one to another – these block-shapes confronted in this way create a climate rather than a composition. A climate per painting, changing according to the nature of colored contrasts, to the occupation of forms in space, to their *bulkiness* and the intensity of their vibration. Determined by the level of color stratification, this intensity also depends on the amplitude of gestures, their number, their type, their potential to provoke gaps with previous gestures. If they repeat themselves from one painting to another, as if to be experienced again in space and time, modulations appear. Beyond leitmotifs – preparing the field to be painted on, attacking the background in its bosom, by fragments, changing the purity of colors, mixtures, one-of-a-kind brushstrokes and complex itineraries, making forms fall while others stay suspended, sculpting, structuring lines – the paintings differ.

New ways of investing the canvas and organizing the block-shapes are discovered – in the center, diagonally, on the sides, by groups of three, four, five or more, by cohabitation or collision – and of making these shapes emerge, of leaving empty breathing spaces in relation to the background and mostly of creating dissonance. As years go by, the stratification becomes more dense, leaving the imprint of the act of painting appear in its length, leaving a time to drain all the possibilities of the painting, in a quest for its outcome – not a goal in itself, but the formation of a limit from which any painting can start to exist, a limit as a threshold. “The limit is not where something stops, but rather (..) where something starts to be” underlines Heidegger.

Soo Kyoung Lee seeks in the finiteness of the painting and in the creation of tension between shapes to multiply perceptions, and possibilities of approach. She makes out of the painting a world of monads engendering an atmosphere – something that emerges and surrounds, that touches while keeping its mystery. A painterly scale with endless interpretations. Because painting cannot be told. Cannot be decoded. Does not represent. It is a secret palimpsest. That affirms itself and is evasive. As soon as shaped, the painting exteriorizes itself, it becomes an entity. It materializes what is at stake. It contains it. The construction of the painting and the construction of self are elaborated together, in adversity. The physicality of painting constructs what is here and now in existence. Constructs itself here and now. The painting is not the representation of another existence – ideal or dreamt– nor the symbol of some other place. Adverseness is close.

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