

DANCES AT THE SOURCE

Thoughts on the roots of Soo Kyoung Lee's paintings

In the genesis of abstraction, Picabia's *The roots* and *Dances at the root I and II* have had a decisive influence. They are the ones who allowed to drive away, in France, the principle of deconstruction, proper to cubism, at a time when most of the other artists remained tied to Picasso and Braque's "roped party". For Picabia, the period from 1911 to 1913 – year of *Udnie* and *Edtaonisl's* creation – when the painter returned from New York – is marked by the company of Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp, and all the artists the three brothers invite in Puteaux. Picabia's wife, Gabrielle Buffet, had a major role and seems to have been the emotional and artistic catalyst for some of them – this can be assessed by Picabia's mechanical drawings, like the *Cycle of the Bride* that Marcel Duchamp started at that time.

The emulation Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia holds with her husband's companions does not rely solely on an especially penetrating intelligence, or on the power of her sex-appeal (a word originated in the roaring twenties), but also on the fact that, through her, music can enter the game like an ideal abstract inaccessible for the painters and sculptors. One can perceive a what point a comparison with avant-garde music constitutes a potential sting, even more intense when it is impersonated by a woman – almost the only one in the Puteaux group. This double, if not triple nature of Gabrielle, modern muse, intellectual and musician, imparts her a driving power at least equivalent to that of men. Is it her dancing near the source? No. She's only the one by who the dancing theme steps in, through music and modern ballets – and another dancer will soon follow, a real one this time, a rival discovered on a transatlantic cruise.

Until *Udnie*, the use Picabia made of titles – this "other dimension of the painting" according to Marcel Duchamp's formula – constitutes practically the only element of realism. That way, it remains in the tracks of cubists and, more widely, of all painters who, faithful to the tradition, choose a descriptive title to their paintings. *Udnie*, however, does not reveal its subject. Picabia renewed with usage when, between 1915 and 1922, his work relied in majority on mechanical models, or was inspired by ancient scientific illustrations such as one of the founders of the Société Française de Photographie's photo-micrographs, Auguste Adolphe Bertsch. This way, Picabia produced one of the most important abstract pieces of art of the period, borrowing from Bertsch the name of *La Volucelle* that he had photographed, as well as the contours of cells present in other photographs. Naturally, the choice of names, even when they are intelligible unlike "Udnie" or "Edtaonisl", keeps a large part of arbitrary. As early as in 1925, Magritte inspired himself from that, when he implemented his coded system, for which an explanation was given for the first time in 1929, in the last issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* under the name "Words and Images".

Words and images

Using the word “abstraction” can be difficult in French. One can read two things, opposed one to another: either the movement of cutting off, deleting any specific content to a word, a sound, a piece of text, a piece of music or an image – going from particular to general – or the result of that action designing concepts, phonemes, images or music sheets that they result in. The notion of a “world without object”, chosen by Malévitch, is in that a lot clearer – it is also a lot more restrictive.

In our recent exchanges, Soo Kyoung Lee said, with a glimpse of surprise, that she could recognize some kind of relationship with the works of Lee Ufan that I had incidentally mentioned, almost for lack of anything better, by ignorance of her country’s art, for a Korean artist residing in Paris, this confession sounding more like excuses: what would be more expected because, viewed from Europe, Lee Ufan is the most renowned artist alongside Nam June Paik? Accepting the comparison however has three unfortunate consequences: some part of immodesty inevitably blends, while the reference to a master who reached fame early obliges to ignore the artist-speaker if he tried to give an overview of his artistic position; finally, this engraves immediately all the named artists in a doubtful relationship linked to national origin, relegating to the background any purely artistic criteria.

For all that, one cannot exclude to see – beyond the only Lee Ufan – in the simplicity searched for in the gesture, in the unaffected upstrokes, and in the progressive covering up methods on a painting, something that would look like the trace of some ancient impregnation. These forms belong to Soo Kyoung Lee’s soul, as seen in museums or galleries, and, before even knowing what to paint or how to paint it, they naturally carve themselves in the repertoire of possible shapes, alongside those she borrows from the “imaginary museum” that any artist composes for his personal usage.

We should, if we wanted to be exhaustive, mention the names of Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, and Ellsworth Kelly... and moreover of Barnett Newman to relate to Soo Kyoung Lee’s work. It’s Barnett Newman, more than any other, whose formal interventions continue to express themselves in Soo Kyoung Lee’s work. The vertical cuts in the canvas, sometimes, or the polyptych constructions more and more frequent in her work, are obviously linked to Newman’s universe – but it is not simple, despite an apparently obvious comparison. One needs to patronize both painters’ works, especially when one is as famous, in order to precisely abstract all tentative imitation. Diverting after becoming closer. It’s at this moment when you are close to the master, when you are able to see him like an illusion, when you can almost speak that he slips away, like some ghost; he leaves you at your duty, with the consciousness of having nothing to say anymore.

In the oriental tradition, reproduction is essential – in fact, that principle is much more common, thus more recognized, even though we have lost contact slowly since the

Renaissance. Only some artisanal situations maintain these reflexes acquired by repetition: on the work on wood, glass or stone – but house painting experienced a strong decline after the generalization of modernist building and layout models. In the interwar Paris, an apprentice learned how to reproduce faux wood and faux marble, as it was usual in Haussmann style apartments. These techniques have practically disappeared today. Recent examples of restorations, including those of historical buildings, demonstrated how the savoir-faire has gradually disappeared in the last fifty years. This technique was nowhere distinct to the one that ensured the transmitting, from the XIth to the XXth century, of certain codes of scenery representations, in these vast regions touched only recently by occidental figurative art and where the traditional technique has maintained in parallel to the occidental influence.

The sky's blue

Paint is not pure. It's a sticky material. It resists. It's something in which you get quickly stuck; anyone who touched a paintbrush one day know you cannot easily fight with paint – even with acrylic so close to gouache? Paint sticks, paint resists, paint can drip, paint can disgust. Gérard Gasiorowski knew it well, he who one day pushed the limits by using excrements. Certainly because of that, and because of his continuing turnarounds, Gasiorowski remains largely unknown in France despite numerous retrospectives before and after his death. Beginning with hyperrealism, he separated from all common practice for many years. The market, that distorting mirror, witnesses that. Nonetheless, following Georges Bataille's example, it is because he circled close to the limits that he came back victorious and we can now see in him one of the most extraordinary artists of the second half of the twentieth century. If he had wanted to illustrate literally *Le Bleu du Ciel* [The Sky's Blue], he could have found in the one Bataille named Lazare some Simone Weil not very far from the Indian Kiga, a double of the painter when paraphrenia was at its strongest.

Soo Kyoung Lee did no go that far – where Gasiorowski remained from 1974 to 1983 (time of his retrospective at the ARC and the rebirth of his painting). At least, that is what we believe; but she has acquired knowledge which surprises those would still be influenced by real age.

One tends to forget the one we are speaking about is Monkey, and, like all signs, hers obeys to a rotation made of multiples of number 12. Under this light, we all seem to be older. Picaba, also, went down – and came back up at the time Lausanne appeared, in 1918, the Poems and Drawings of the lady born with no mother.

He also went through, before Soo Kyoung Lee, the intensive reading of Nietzsche until imitation ... in electric aphorisms. One who says he saw Dancing at the Source cannot travel back home unharmed. In the old days, it was difficult to consider experiments like the ones of Henri Michaux with psychoactive drugs as literary or plastic works of art – as if the lesson learned by *Paradis artificiels* – had to follow all the art rules to be receivable. It was necessary for Baudelaire to draw some works for his inspiration giving drugs to disappear behind them.

Literary studies, like all art history, do not like diverging categories. Nonetheless, we think the perception of some, around 1912, of fundamental principles of abstract art – Picabia, Kandinsky, Kupka, a list give away from all pretended anteriority or precedence – can resemble, in all credibility, to an hallucinatory phenomenon (which Kandinsky describes later in *Looks of the past*).

This exercise, implying deep diving, does not necessarily operate with chemical means. Any individual capable of abstracting himself of contingent circumstances quite easily manages to reach a state that shamans would probably not object to consider theirs. Soo Kyoung Lee's paintings belong to this category. Maybe that's the reason why she seems to navigate between ages, between influences, without putting roots down in any, but keeping their marks. The "dances at the source", in which numerous symbolist myths seemed discernable at Picabia's time, were also a dance of origins, a repeated jump in which the enlightened of both genders knew how to place themselves at the center of the universe. Is that the reason why the lines dance and interfere in many paintings of the Parisian artist? Parisian because, even though she still exhibits in Korea, she is no more Korean today that Picabia was Spanish or Cuban or – even though Picasso was classified in French museums until 1945 in the Spanish Modernist category. When we assess here that the adoption nationality takes over the origin, it's because the artistic environment in which an artist evolves takes over its primary sources. Nevertheless, that dance that this painting is for Soo Kyoung Lee participates also is a quest of origins, more precisely a search for this point of unity where, suddenly, all categories, past & present, East & West, North & South, would be suppressed - any resemblance to existing formulas is purely coincidental a naturally beyond our control.

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