

Chunji-Changjo (Heaven and Earth): The “Creation” Paintings of Hyunmee Lee

By Frank McEntire,

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My approach to painting is without restraint. I use color, shape and gesture to express human identity with the absence of figures. The freedom I have in my work reflects the freedom I also feel in my own life. – Hyunmee Lee

What once was considered avant-garde, even radical, had become a conventional way of art making by the time Hyunmee Lee, began to formulate her approach as an abstract painter. The ambitious artist, born in Seoul, Korea, in 1961, received her undergraduate degree at age 24 at the College of Fine Arts, Hong-Ik University in Seoul. She then studied for six years at the University of Sydney, completed two advanced degrees and returned to Korea in 1991 to teach at her alma mater. Lee has lived in the United States since 1997 and is an Assistant Professor of Art at Utah Valley State College in Orem, Utah.

Hyunmee Lee mentions the influence of Wassily Kandinsky, a pioneer of abstract art, who wrote about “inner necessity,” meaning that a painting, particularly a nonobjective one, needs to express an artist’s profound, perhaps unconscious, emotional or spiritual experiences and generate similar responses (or “vibrations of the spirit”) in the viewer.

Although the early abstractionists based their much of their work on an eclectic array of metaphysics and appropriated imagery from African, folk, and Oriental art, there was no need for Lee to invent a philosophical armature for the inner structure of her work. Her paintings are imbued with spiritual underpinnings derived from the traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Even some forms of ancient Korean calligraphy hint at the abstraction Lee incorporates into her work.

Zen Buddhism and its concept of “ch’i” (energy) is central to Lee’s work: “Thinking of formlessness, consider the idea that ‘the self in reality has no form.’ If we can do that, we are on the path to Zen . . . *Ch’i*, on the other hand, is about the spirit that animates and connects all things. *Ch’i* is the life force. Without *ch’i* I cannot breathe. Without *ch’i*, my painting cannot live.”

Formlessness is color, Lee says. “My tones are a mixture of earth and charcoal tones, which is too elusive to be a direct guide [to the meaning of a painting]. This makes the viewer think, form a personal interpretation, and know a deeper feeling.” It also forms the artist, as Lee intimates in a recent poem:

Wind grinding stones
Stones are moving
Creatures and unmoving things become unified
Wind and stone both dwell inside of me
Equally these things continue making me

The dozens of paintings exhibited for the first time in “when gesture finds its power” at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art are the culmination of Lee’s *Chunji-Changjo* (Heaven and Earth): Creation Series. They combine ancient Asian teachings about the formless self and *ch’i* with the metaphysical intentions of early Western nonobjective art. This assimilation of East/West energy generates an enchantment seldom experienced in today’s market-driven art world.

Hyunmee Lee usually begins her work by drawing on the canvas, then putting down layers of paint and scumbling and marking the wet surface — but soon shifts to the spiritual explorations that cajole her work into existence. “The repetition of making and erasing form is how I destruct the existing order to make formless space,” she says. “I try to keep the rhythm continuous. This is where I find the creation mind,” or, as Kandinsky might say, encounter the “vibrations of the spirit.”

The works exhibited in “when gesture finds its power” are the latest result of a theme Lee has been working with since 1986. Her paintings seem to be one continuous visual poem with stanzas marked by different year cycles and titles: *The Metaphysics of Being* (1986- 88); *First Face* (1989-92); *Objecthood-Intrinsic Space* (1993-95); *Seeing Through the Self* (1997-98); *Empathy Through the Window* (1998-2001); and *Mountain Armatures* (2001-02).

Each cycle has been an exercise in personal exploration and sacrifice, and preparation for *Chunji-Changjo*, Lee’s magnificent *Creation Series*, a body of work that, she says, relates “to the human’s inner mind,” that is a “balance of empowerment and meditation, without using recognizable symbols,” which “relies on pure gesture.”

At work in her studio, Hyunmee Lee says she seeks a harmony between the conscious and unconscious mind. During that interplay, she is most interested “in the immediacy of gesture,” especially the “moment when the gesture finds its own power.” Such pure gesture, the gesture her work relies upon, is surely an expression of what Kandinsky called “inner necessity,” or *ch’i*.

Frank McEntire, sculptor and independent curator, is the former art critic for *The Salt Lake Tribune* and *Salt Lake Magazine*. McEntire curated “when gesture finds its power” as a service of the Utah Arts Council when he was its Executive Director.