

Hyunmee Lee's *Contact-Sensation*: The Harmony of Opposites

By Courtney R. Davis
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Spontaneity and meditation are not irreconcilable opposites, at least not for artist Hyunmee Lee, whose work is showcased in *Contact-Sensation* at the Nüart Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Combining intuitive line, nonrepresentational forms, and monochromatic spaces, Lee's newest works are confident, eloquent, and purely Hyunmee Lee. Strong forms advance from buttery canvases like an abstract garden, while gauzy veils of paint hover like soft air against the ebony weight of matter. Light peeks through translucent shapes like sunlight illuminating through soft mist. Differing textures swirl and echo across the canvas as if carved by waves or eroded by the wind. The viewer, invited into a realm of contemplation and meditation, is surprised to look away and see the physical world existing in only three dimensions; but perhaps that is precisely the experience the artist would like the viewer to have.

At first glance, Lee's work appears to stem from the Abstract Expressionist tradition: strong black gestures stretch across the surface of large, minimalist canvases not unlike the black and white paintings of Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, or even Barnett Newman. But a closer examination of Lee's work reveals subtle layers of visual and philosophical dimension not always present in the aggressively emotive paintings of the Abstract Expressionists. Influenced by Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, the Korean-born artist draws from a rich artistic and philosophical heritage that bridges contrasting realms of abstraction.

Echoing the footsteps of her own personal journey, Hyunmee Lee's art blends elements of Korean modernism, Asian classicism, and western abstractionism. The unifying core of Lee's work is meditative gesture, a distinctive technique that accommodates two opposing energies: the meditative process, which is slow, deliberate, and akin to repetition, and gesture, which is painterly and spontaneous. Working with brushes and palette knives on a carefully prepared ground, paint is applied in layers, as washes or opaque blocks. Expressive lines are formed with china markers, oil sticks and oil pencils. The interplay of energy is revealed in such works as

Seraphic Stone No.33, in which rich, creamy background tones provide weight to counterbalance painterly impulses and sweeping gestures of black and gray.

Although her process is far from being impulsive or unpremeditated, Lee admits that sometimes nature bestows gifts, wherein the spontaneous gesture is complete in itself. Other times, however, the process is much more demanding, requiring hours of deliberation and contemplation. It is this balance between spontaneity and restraint, gesture and meditation that forms the heart of Lee's work.

Lee began her artistic journey in Korea, where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Hong-Ik University in Seoul. The artist then voyaged to Australia, where she earned two graduate degrees in visual art from the University of Sydney. In 1991, Lee returned to Seoul to teach at Hong-Ik, where she joined her mentor Park Seo-Bo, a leading Korean artist and founder of the Korean Monochrome movement. Park Seo-Bo encouraged Lee, who shared similar theoretical convictions, such as an interest in space, repetition, and transcendence. Lee took these interests with her to the United States, where she settled in Utah and continued her growth as a professional artist.

The harmony of opposites is key to understanding the energy of both Lee's life and work. This concord is most visibly reflected in Lee's works through the strong juxtaposition of black shapes against neutral planes of paint. Black, a unifying element in *Contact-Sensation*, reveals a bolder side to Lee, whose previous works have focused more on lyrical abstraction than hard geometric forms. *Seraphic Stone No.28* and *Infinite Surface No.2* both feature bold, nearly-rectilinear shapes of ebony that confront the viewer from imposing, six by six foot canvases. But Robert Motherwell's statement that "Black is death; white is life" cannot be applied to Lee's works. Instead, Lee's use of black is more about the presence of light than its absence. Far from being steeped in negativity or pessimism, Lee uses black to open a dimension outside of the physical world, a place of meditation where judgment is suspended so that the viewer can move into a realm of progression. In this respect, Lee's works function as verbs—invitations to a space of meditation created by the supreme balance of opposition.

Black has many dimensions for Lee. In addition to its visual and philosophical power, the use of black also reflects the artist's history with Asian calligraphy. Although her current work differs

greatly from the traditional technique of drawing characters with *sumi* ink on paper, the calligraphic form is echoed in Lee's work through the use of bold, black shapes against pale backgrounds. Because of her own connection with Asian calligraphy, Lee's use of calligraphic shapes take on a personal dimension missing from the works of *l'art informel* artists like Pierre Soulages and Georges Mathieu, who were interested in the pictorial quality of eastern characters, rather than their meaning. But that is not to say that Lee intends for her abstracted shapes to have a specific message. Lee focuses on eliciting emotion, rather than on creating symbolism. Indeed, the artist has asserted that the viewer can "find comfort" in the shapes she uses because they are familiar: "Many of my shapes originated from geometry and are common and expected things."

The transparent layers of dimension in Lee's work are also related to the familiar—the artist's experience with traditional Korean paper (*hanji*). In her earlier work, Lee used a collage technique to build physical layers of *hanji* for their visual effect. Although Lee has noted that her use of paper was not entirely divorced from its traditional context, "the more immediate reason was the attractiveness of the paper that embodies the Korean people's view of nature." Now, Lee creates similar layers of transparency, shape and texture with paint, not paper. These dimensional, monochromatic layers form the ideal backdrop for the artist's dominant black gestures and shapes.

Through her use of commanding forms and bold shapes, Hyunmee Lee's new work blazes toward artistic freedom. In Lee's words, her work was "inspired by a concept of 'freedom' from the world" and even from the artist's own mind. Lee's abstract style communicates to both the mind and the spirit. Her pictorial language, not limited to any one dialect or vernacular, speaks of contrast and harmony, contemplation and sentiment, emptiness and fullness. Lee's signature technique of uniting meditation and gesture separates her from traditional western expressionists and echoes the ancient principles of Tao:

To yield is to be preserved whole. To be bent is to become straight. To be empty is to be full. To be worn out is to be renewed. To have little is to possess. To have plenty is to be perplexed.¹

¹ From *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-Tzu (Translated by Wing-Tsit Chan, 1963), Chapter 22, http://home.pages.at/onkellotus/TTK/English_Chan_TTK.html