

Meditative Gesture

The Contemplative Allure of Hyunmee Lee's Paintings

By Bruce Adams
(Art Historian/ Art Critic. Sydney. 2008)

I think the meditative gesture is one of the individualities in my work. The two words are contradictory: the meditative seems like a slower process and needs repetition, whereas gesture sounds spontaneous and quick. I like to have the two feelings combined.
(Hyunmee Lee, artist's notes, 2008)

By the artist's own admission, the very notion of a "meditative gesture," or action in stillness, is a paradox. It provokes us to consider how spontaneity, in the form of a quickly executed line or brushstroke, can be invested with such an intensity of purpose that it becomes the summation of a longer process of steady deliberation. Yet in urging us to focus on the quixotic essence of her mark, Hyunmee Lee is asking us to join with her in the very arena of her painting. Whether it is through the perusal of a solitary calligraphic curve, a broad slash of clean black, or the barely visible spatial maneuvers between the pale tonal planes that support those other elements, the viewer is drawn into the dynamics of the artist's own "abstract gaze." Through the intercession of a concentrated gesture, the complementary roles of artist and viewer come together in an encircling arch of esthetic meditation.

In writing about the contemplative allure of Hyunmee Lee's art, I feel I must dispense with many of the assumptions of formal disinterest that normally frame the perspectives of an art historian, curator or critic. My early acquaintance with the artist has privileged my particular view of her art. For this reason I want to preface my commentary with an acknowledgment of the ongoing correspondence that has kept me in contact with this Korean-born painter throughout the years we have lived on different continents. While I consider my own role in her development to be marginal, I know the gratitude she feels to all those who, independently of each other, have nurtured and supported her faith in her own creative destiny. Given the autobiographical implications of her art, it is hard to separate my understanding of the artist herself from the feelings I attribute to her language of gesture.

It says a lot about Lee's convictions that, while she has expanded into new territories of the imagination during her adopted life in America, she has remained conceptually loyal to her foundations as an Asian-Pacific artist. For her, the past is a living spirit, and the residues of personal and cultural histories continue to inform the content of her work. How the viewer in turn articulates that content is one of the teasing but rewarding problematics of her work.

Art can be a demanding obsession that produces sociable loners, and Hyunmee Lee is one of the most driven, hard-working artists I know. Her work is both a retreat from the world and a busy engagement in it. Of necessity the painter's studio is a solitary space, but in a metaphysical sense it is never unpopulated. Every time the process of artmaking is restarted, the space is activated by the personas of different ideas, thoughts and memories, all of which add pressure and variety to the movement of the artist's brush. In much the same way as a writer at the keyboard might converse mentally with a perceived reader, for an artist like Lee the process of painting is a silent dialogue with another presence: the eventual viewer who completes the creative cycle. Like the signatures that scroll so gently across her work, the compositions themselves are a calligraphic narrative abstracted to the point of grace. With a syntax of half-remembered shapes or partial signs at her disposal, her art is a dialectical engagement with the poetics of a practice that straddles multiple opposites: East and West, spirit and matter, tradition and innovation.

Intimacy, with all of its connotations of trust, is a term that has often been used to describe the tactile immediacy of Lee's gestural abstraction. But for all its apparent ease and seduction, the meditateness that is the abiding mood in her art is borne out of years of personal discipline—a rigorous “emptying out,” or dissociation of the mind, aimed at facilitating a pictorial engagement that hovers beyond (or perhaps before) other, more functional realms of language. In my own memories of the artist at work, the physical demands and mental challenges she placed on herself certainly come to the fore.

Though it was many years ago, I vividly recall the perplexities and awkward silences when Hyunmee Lee and I first tried to engage together with her work. Heightening our mutual reticence was the competitive college environment we were both in, an intensive, self-analytical program of studio research that put great store on the language of critical discussion. Contemporary art colleges can be tough places for reserved people—especially so for international students trying to bridge cultural divides. Our first conversations in her studio were a hesitant, stop-start affair: like two figures in the dark we stumbled about for the words that seemed most apposite to her task. But tenacity is one of

Lee's distinguishing traits, and neither of us gave up on each other. Prompted by the large, ambitious paintings that even then proliferated around her, we spoke of many different frameworks of abstraction—both Eastern and Western—before recognizing that we shared a common intuition about art. What unified our separate perspectives, then as now, was our belief in the transcending capacity of art as felt experience. Context alone never seems enough to explain the affective qualities of a work of art, and silence can be of the most powerful responses that art can elicit. For me, the pauses between our words were the openings that gave me access to Hyunmee Lee's painting.

From the beginning what struck me about her work was its commanding presence and self-assurance. Her output was quite physical. Rather beguilingly, her paintings were of an expansive scale that contrasted with her own delicate, diminutive stature. As exercises in gestural abstraction, the elusive, almost self-concealing content of her compositions masked a genuine technical facility, evident in the confident handling of the malleable, viscous surfaces of her work. Often reliant on dominant, thick gestures of black, her paintings were almost monochrome in effect: low-key without being cool, emotive but never flash. They seemed to eschew color, yet beneath the scumbled surfaces were changing hues and splinters of light, the *pentimenti* of earlier layers of activity. Evoking things that were never quite there, the Oriental pictographs and other visual cues in her work alluded to an unseen level of interiority. As in the art of Cy Twombly and many other modern painters similarly fascinated by layered walls and ciphers, Lee's thick impastos supported a fine *écriture*, a skein of inscriptions reminiscent of automatic writing. In Lee's case though, this markmaking had the authenticity of a hand trained in the rigors of Asian calligraphy.

Trying to read Lee's work from my own vantage point in Western art, I was struck by the links between her painterly vision and the rich seam of modernism that extends from the 19th century romantic sublime into 20th century transcendental abstraction. Certainly Lee was aware of the significant benchmarks within that artistic lineage—our studio talks ranged from Kandinsky's "inner necessity" to the liquid blacks of Pierre Soulages, and on through the whole postwar generation in American art. Without underestimating the importance of that history for her, it was obvious that her painting sought its strength from a different authority—a stylistic sensibility steeped in Korean values. Coming from a North Asian industrialized society that is fully part of the global economy, Lee's awareness of international modernity has always been highly refined, but behind her cosmopolitanism lies a much deeper communal relationship to Asia's ancient philosophical roots. In Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism one can find the concepts that are truly significant to her practice. Lee also had an important connection to one of the significant trends in postwar Korean painting—the Monochrome movement founded in the 1970s, whose key exponent is the painter

Park Seo Bo. He had been Lee's first and most important artistic mentor in Seoul, and it is a reflection of her close allegiance to him that Korea's foremost abstractionist has been acknowledged in the writings that have come out of Lee's American exhibitions.

One of the qualities that attracted me to Lee's Korean inheritance was the way she viewed her individual responsibility in the studio. Her demeanor attested to the humility that is the Asian precondition for art. As Lee said in Salt Lake City in 2006: "All [my] paintings are very connected to exploring myself ... I am honest with my work, and once I'm finished, those paintings can be my teacher."¹ If the artist is an apprentice of her own painting, the practice itself requires a constant attitude of self-examination and correction. Looking back over some of the statements Lee recorded in her Sydney notebook—which have since reappeared in several catalogues—I have often paused over one entry that poignantly describes the self-isolating situation of the painter seriously alone with her art:

I have been searching for myself for a long time. I always think of myself as part of the world, but never wholly belonging to it. "Everything becomes nothing." I know that is impossible to achieve. I am exercising to get freedom from my body and mind by gesture.
(1990)

In the West we might be tempted to link such remarks to an almost autistic state of individuation, a separation of the self from the ambient social world. But like a religious ascetic in spiritual retreat, Lee was looking for ways to pass beyond her actual constraints into a state of free consciousness where gesture finds its own autonomy. Far from being a nihilistic form of withdrawal, her search for a reductive, meditative visual practice was founded on a belief in liberating transcendence. The catalogue essayist Jim Edwards has recently compared Lee's sensibility to a statement her teacher Park Seo Bo made in 1977: "My biggest interest is to live by pure action for nothingness. Like memorizing a chant or meditating, entering a transcendent state through repetition, or repeating the act of emptying myself."² Contemplating the void may be an aspiration towards the sublime, but it carries the profound risk of loss. Confronted by this dilemma, the creative consciousness might equivocate back and forth, a conflict that it tries to resolve by yearning for completeness. In Lee's case, this was expressed in her desire for a pre-conscious sense of self. In the words of a quotation that inspired the title of her 1990 exhibition *First Face*:

When your mind is not dwelling on good or evil,

What is the original face before you were born?

Lee's thought about origins was equally a quest for the life force within. A recurring point of reference in her studio conversations was the Taoist idea of *ch'i*, the ethereal "breath" or "force" that is the animating power passing through all matter. For Lee, this is both the catalytic flux and the oxygen her artwork needs. As the artist has written: "Without *ch'i* I cannot breathe. Without *ch'i*, my painting cannot live." While this Eastern idea of an implicit energy flow has more balance than similar vitalist notions in Western philosophy, one can appreciate its importance for Lee's art by comparing it to the European avant-garde's embrace of the *élan vital* spoken of by Henri Bergson. Like his ideas of intuition, duration and consciousness, Bergson's theories of a creative, vital impetus profoundly influenced the non-linear simultaneism and rhythms that helped to free modern painting from the static window of representation.

Comparing Lee's early thoughts in Australia to the themes she has explored in the United States, it is possible to discern in her shift of national context a renewed interest in the sublime. Since her arrival in America this has been given stronger expression by her exposure to the pictorial traditions of the American landscape, but especially by her actual location in the dry, open atmosphere and rocky spaces of the American West—an environment so different from the humid coastal zones she had lived in before. In 2001-2002 Lee worked on a series that became known as *Mountain Armatures*—her most conventionally representational phase to date. Exhibited at Orem in Utah in 2002, *Mountain Armatures* had a black, almost apocalyptic quality. Knowing the changes that had happened in her life, these works to me spoke of her personal struggle to overcome dislocation. I therefore felt they were a critical psychological moment for the artist. The gaunt, vertical profiles of desert mesas were recorded by her in sketches, then transformed in her paintings into thick rigs and ravines of paint; time-ravaged structures that seem to survive like sentries in nature. These pre-human, architectonic constructions were like mysterious gateways into a sublimely different nature: an archetypal, monumental America. The act of reinscribing these geological portals therefore became a rite of passage that helped to hybridize her Oriental identity into this new structure.

It is evident from the above that Hyunmee Lee has not shied away from absolutes, or the epic implications of her themes. The curator Frank McEntire noted this when writing about her *Creation* series, which he presented to the public in the exhibition *Chunji-Chanjo (Heaven and Earth)*, at Utah State University in 2005. On that occasion McEntire likened Lee's whole oeuvre since 1986 to "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).”³

Intimacy without Restraint, an exhibition that was again curated by McEntire and shown in the Great Hall of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in 2006, marked a new plateau of achievement for Hyunmee Lee. This exhibition juxtaposed a suite of her typically large works with several grid-like matrices of one-foot square paintings, each of which was a composition complete in itself. Titled *Forces of Nature*, the 120 small works that were geometrically grouped together in the show were, as Edwards has noted, “counterpoints in the balance between action and rest.”⁴ The large compositions in *Intimacy without Restraint* belonged to the series *Outside Sight*, which according to the artist referred to the Asian esthetic of “bringing the outside in to the centered self.”⁵ This she contrasted to Western romanticism’s projection of the self outwards into nature. Like *Mountain Armatures*, Lee’s *Outside Sight* demonstrated her ongoing engagement with the East-West dialectics of representation. *Intimacy without Restraint* also saw the artist change towards a quieter, more reflective mood. She said at the time that her new paintings were “subtler, calmer and more meditative than her previous works.”⁶

What then, of the large square paintings that Hyunmee Lee has been producing in 2008? My own impression is that they are the most liberated, air-filled works she has ever done. The new work has been developed into several concurrent series, with titles that are juxtapositions within themselves, such as *Inland Island*, *Contact-Sensation*, and *Appearing-Disappearing*.

With their open planes of luminous yellow, the *Inland Island* series lifts the extended metaphor of Lee’s personal journey to a more vibrant and lyrical level. The subject further alludes to her current physical environment, but now there is a life-enabling purity and lightness of touch that contrasts remarkably with the heavily grounded *Mountain Armatures* of six years before. The contradictory space of the dry desert sea is not set in time. Instead it is energized by a very real presence—the powerful blacks that read like close-up fragments of larger calligraphic forms. Other, more fugitive lines seek out the contours of a floating array of shapes—a lexicon of arcs, triangles and lozenges, into which one might read the hulls, fins or rudders of vessels and natural marine organisms. A potent archetype in its own right, the vessel, or ark, is an apt metaphor for the buoyant, arching fluidity of Lee’s present painterly style. It matters little if the imaginary vessel’s final resting point is unknown, for it is in the actual voyage—the movement of the body into the liquid substance of the gesture—that the image finds its full expression.

Courtney Davis, an art historian and colleague of the artist, has beautifully evoked the sensual lyricism of Hyunmee Lee's new paintings. In reference to works with titles like *Dimensional Poetics*, Davis builds a word-picture that delightfully affirms an unexpected lesson to be had from the spectator's immersion in the image:

Rich forms advance from buttery canvases like an abstract garden. Gauzy veils of paint hover like soft air against the ebony weight of matter. Light peeks through translucent shapes like sunlight illuminating soft mist. Texture swirls and echoes 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.⁷

The empathetic, insightful quality of Davis's writing highlights the gift that is being exchanged in the viewing experience—the joy of a subliminal, oceanic movement into a space that is indeed a “realm.” In her compassionate embrace of opposites, Lee has succeeded in synthesizing a union of esthetic experiences that is free unto itself. As Davis puts it, her gestures “open a dimension outside of the physical world, a place of meditation where judgment is suspended.”⁸

Dr Bruce Adams is the author of *Rustic Cubism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2004). He was a supervisor of Hyunmee Lee's postgraduate studies at the Sydney College of the Arts in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

¹ Hyunmee Lee quoted in Brandon Griggs, "Painting without restraint: Hyunmee Lee reveals herself through deceptively simple art," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, November 3, 2006.

² Park Seo-bo, a statement from 1977 quoted by Jim Edwards in *Intimacy without Restraint: The Gesture Paintings of Hyunmee Lee*, Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, March-July 2006, p. 10.

³ Frank McEntire, *Chunji-Chanjo (Heaven and Earth): The 'Creation' Paintings of Yona (Hyunmee Lee)*, Logan: Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, March-April 2005.

⁴ Edwards, op. cit., p. 11.

⁵ Lee, quoted in Griggs, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Courtney Davis, "Hyunmee Lee's Touch: Meditation Joins Gesture," catalogue essay for *Touch*, Salt Lake City: Phillips Gallery, October 2008.

⁸ Ibid.