

A CONVERSATION WITH LIGHT: A NEW SERIES OF PAINTINGS BY SU KWAK ENTITLED, "LIGHT"

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(from the Jean Art Gallery Exhibition Catalogue)

The paintings currently on display at the Jean Art Center are works that Su Kwak painted in Korea after returning two years ago from America where she lived for the last 27 years. The paintings that she has shown in Korea previously, "Beyond Light," "Song of Light" (at the Murphy Gallery) and "Divided Light" (at the Sun Gallery) were all painted in America.

Su Kwak first became interested in light ten years after she graduated college in 1987. She came across an article in a newspaper that explained the process by which trees receive sunlight. The article explained that the trees that receive more light remain greener for longer and that the trees in shaded areas tend to change colors faster. She was fascinated by this process. She thought that if she could somehow capture light in her paintings -- light in the form of peace and hope -- she would be able to offer a similar sort of sustenance to her viewers.

Though this story may explain the beginning of Kwak's interest in light, it does not explain her sustained interest. Perhaps we can understand this interest better by examining her personal history. Kwak left Korea at the age of twenty three after her father lost their family fortune in a series of political campaigns. She escaped this poverty by emigrating to America by herself where she worked her way through college. As a foreigner, Kwak was forced to face many obstacles both as an individual and artist. Perhaps it is this suffering and her overcoming of hardship that created her interest in showing light in her work. Kwak began this search for light 15 years ago and the works she created in this pursuit have been shown in numerous solo and group shows.

Previously, while living in America, many elements in Kwak's painting stemmed from her memories of Korea's landscapes. (Kwak said in an interview in 1996 in the Dong-a Ilbo Newspaper, "The mountains and rice fields where I grew up and the sound of the waves at the Pusan beach haunt my canvases.") Since moving back to Korea, however, Kwak has once again come face to face with the landscapes of the country of her birth. These works show a new integrated understanding of Korea and its history and they deserve close examination.

In order to understand Kwak's new series, "Light" it is important to understand her definition of light. This definition has undergone many changes during her art career. In 1987, Kwak was mostly interested in the physical characteristics of natural light and the way it functions in the world. From the early 1990's until 1996 light took on a more

symbolic role in her paintings. (Kwak said in an interview at the time, “Light symbolizes the peace and hope that people experience when they are searching for truth in times of hardship.”) This new symbolism shared some similarities with that found in Christian rituals such as the Eucharist.

In the paintings that Kwak created from 1997-2001 (which she showed at the Murphy Gallery in 2001) Kwak revealed a new understanding of this motif. Her new series entitled, “Beyond Light” explored light as a metaphysical phenomenon as opposed to a physical one. In these works she explored the light that can be found within an individual. This theme has preoccupied her until now.

Kwak writes in the last chapter of her recently published memoir, “Light in the Heart: A Story of Art and Love” (Dana Gi Hoek 2002,) “One day I was walking in front of the City Hall when I saw a blind man walking with a stick. I thought that although this man could not see physical light, he could experience light internally. I wanted to express this internal light, this light in his heart. I started making wall relief paintings using new materials that my daughter Lisa suggested, to express this inner light.” She also writes: “Some days it is cloudy, some days it rains or snows, sometimes there is no moon and the mountain roads are very dark. But by following inner light--the shepherd's staff--I will reach the sunshine land.” Here the shepherd's staff that Kwak refers to shows that this light is of a spiritual nature. The vertical lines of this kind as well as the circular forms in Kwak’s work recall medieval iconography.

Although Kwak shifted the emphasis of her work from the natural world to the spiritual world, natural physical light still plays an underlying role in her new works. (Kwak writes in her memoir, “While on vacation at Chincoteague island, I saw a very beautiful sunset. For a moment, the sunlight seemed to overcome the quickly approaching darkness. After the sun had finally set, I yearned for that light to return. This experience made me want to recreate that light in my paintings.”) For Kwak, spiritual light is the courage and hope that it takes to overcome the darkness in life. Her paintings encompass the themes of death, resurrection and ascension.

Her paintings, however, do not abandon the concrete world altogether. She uses images of waterfalls, the ocean and the sun to express more intangible ideas such as the tension between life and death, and the relationship between people and God. For example, her painting of a waterfall, “Light #27,” expresses the power of water and light and the difficulties that sometimes occur in life. In “Light #23” Kwak was inspired by a landscape she saw from an airplane. She saw below her the sun reflected in a river. She felt that this was similar to the way that spiritual light comes from God and is reflected in the heart. In “Light #29,” Kwak painted a sunset as a metaphor for life after death. Through her paintings, Kwak transforms her real life experiences into metaphors for spiritual experience. Kwak’s paintings can be understood as her conversation with light. In some cases this conversation is with God and in others it is a conversation with nature and true life experience.

She creates these multiple levels of meaning by constructing works that blur the distinctions between painting and sculpture. She slashes and layers the canvas, and adds silk and Tyvek in order to create a three dimensional surface that powerfully interacts with the viewer. Tyvek is a new material that Kwak is using in her paintings. It has both the flexibility and lightness of paper and the durability of plastic. She feels that this new material allows her to create new forms that better express her ideas about life and light. In “Light #30,” Kwak uses folded Tyvek to suggest the way that separate individuals can become connected through light.

In “Light #28 and #29” she slashes the canvas and attaches a second canvas behind it. In these paintings she creates smaller circles that rest within larger ones. The lower sections are darker than the upper sections. She works these canvas to express life after death and to show hope in times of distress.

Kwak’s new work is a culmination of her previous explorations in art. During her college and graduate school years, she was very interested in the way space is expressed, especially in cubist and traditional Chinese paintings. She was also intrigued by the Asian concept of “one stroke”: the idea that in artwork there should be one powerful statement. In addition, one can see the influences of post-minimalism and deconstruction in Kwak’s work. In the mid-80’s her spirituality became the driving force behind her work. Critic Ku-Yeol Lee described Kwak’s unique style in the mid 90’s: “Although Kwak’s art process involves many different materials and techniques, her colors and forms are simple. Furthermore, by examining the surface of her paintings, one can see her actual process. This idea follows Asian aesthetics and philosophy.”

Su Kwak’s current work marks a culmination of her efforts to engage in a discourse with light and her search for a unique way of expressing visual space. Her works also deal with issues of memory and how we make sense of our own personal experience. She says in her artist’s statement, “When experience is filtered through memory, everything but the essential falls away. The forms and colors of my paintings are simple for this same reason. They are the essence of my experience. By using essential, simplified forms, I try to express a universal meaning that transcends specifics of culture and time.”

Translated by Lisa Gross