

# **SYNTHESIS OF OPPOSITES IN PAINTING**

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Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak)  
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“Each artist thinks in the way that is best suited to his temperament, his training, his cultural situation; if he doesn’t find the way that is best for him, he fails as an artist.”

---Harold Rosenberg, “Art as Thinking.”<sup>1</sup>

“But if the work does truly issue from the depths of his being, with the richness of musical harmony, then we need have no fear: it will be refracted in the minds of those upon whom it falls, to form a rainbow of light. More primordial than any idea, beauty will be manifest as the herald and generator of ideas.

Through its power of symbolic expression, art thus gives the spiritual energy that is being produced on earth its first body and its first face.”

---Pierre Teilhard de Chardin <sup>2</sup>

In contemplating what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said in the passage

Quoted above, I have found an interesting relationship between ideas and

works of art. The artist conceives an idea and makes the work of art;

then the work of art generates another idea, thus creating a different work of

art. In this paper, I am going to speculate about this activity of the artist, as

seen through my own process of artistic creation.

My first systematic paintings began with my own conception of the

Universe. I viewed the world as an orderly place: God was unchanging truth, the principal encompassing Spirit; then there was nature, the visible changing world. Inside of nature there was man and woman sharing the spiritual quality of God and the physical quality of nature. In my paintings, I set the format of the outside rectangle to represent unchanging truth, the middle rectangle to represent nature, and the very inside of the rectangles to represent man and woman (fig. 1). The relational problems of these rectangles represented the very relationship of man and woman in the universe.

The more I painted according to this format, the more I realized the ambiguity of the boundaries between these rectangles. Man seeks unifying forces and harmony. There are no rigid boundaries between different dimensions of reality. After six months, one day while I was painting, I suddenly realized that, for me, rigid boundaries represented death, and there are no distinct boundaries in living spirit.

I then changed my attitude toward painting. Instead of imposing my ideas into forms, I tried to go back to nature to find forms, which had spiritual energy and symbolic meanings, which could be accessible to everybody. In this beginning of a new direction, my reading of the art treatise written by Tao-Chi, a seventeenth century Chinese painter, gave me new insight about how to express my philosophy of life in the form of landscape painting.

In his youth, Tao-Chi was a Zen Buddhist monk and in his old age he became a Taoist priest. He actually applied Zen and Taoist philosophy in his art theory of the “one-stroke method”.

“The Remote Antiquity was without law; the primordial substance (Tai-Pu) remained undispersed. Once the primordial substance was dispersed, the laws were thereby established. Whereupon is the law established? It is established upon the I-hua, the primordial line.”  
3

As I saw it, the I-hua (一畫), which is best translated as the primordial line or “one-stroke,” was his inner principle, representing the oneness of truth and the fundamental reality.

I observed Tao-Chi’s I-hua principle in his compositional devices and the texture of the paintings. Each painting has continuous movement of

lands (fig.2). In his painting (fig.2), the big mass area and empty mist area achieve balance in the picture, thus expressing the unifying force of nature. Each painting has a unifying brush stroke and ink wash method, thus achieving a unity of textural expression (compare fig.3 and fig.4). So many of his paintings have different textures in each of them. In my view, his free method enabled him to explore the spirit of brush and ink, thus expressing different moments of his state of mind corresponding to different aspects of nature.

The constant change of seasons and change of nature is well portrayed through his method of creating mist and half depiction of man. Half of the scenes are concealed and non-differentiated, thus expressing the state of constant change. In this painting (fig.2), the mass area and empty mist area are not divided; they are harmonized. As I interpreted this painting, the harmony, which is achieved by concealment and non-differentiation, expressed the one substance in nature. Tao-Chi thereby achieved the effect of showing unity out of multiplicity and also revealing spiritual sublimity, both of which were the core of Taoist philosophy.

Once I had the insight that a human being is not composed of body and soul, but of one substance. Body and soul are not separable entities. They are one. This insight gave me a sense of enlightenment, which defied

intellectual analysis. I wanted to create works of art, which showed the unity

of opposite qualities. I perceived in nature, on the one hand, that an endless sky and a calm but powerful sea or river have spiritual qualities. On the other hand, I saw that mountains, hills or rocks have dense material or earthy qualities. Yet in nature, these two opposite qualities always co-exist in the same space with equal importance. Therefore, I tried to create one continuous immanent space, which embraced all opposite characteristics of nature.

I have often reflected on a passage in The Book of Changes, a classic of Chinese thought, where it is written that man has innate qualities that resemble the qualities of heaven and earth that man is a microcosm of nature. Therefore, by knowing and learning the secrets of nature, it is written, man can shape his own nature to its completion (i.e. He can realize all his possibilities and inborn potentialities).<sup>4</sup> For me, when I am painting, the painting itself becomes a microcosm of nature. The problems of boundary or balance within the rectangular canvas become a way to re-enact the real metaphysical problems of life. Thus, when I have at times solved problems within my paintings, that solution gave me new insight into the metaphysical aspects of life.

My method of painting is closely related to my mode of experiencing

reality. I do not draw preliminary sketches for my paintings. Most of the time, I start by painting large areas with paint wash, then at a certain moment, the canvas images suggest to me a familiar scene. Then I make the scene come to its full being out of patches of color and strokes. During the actual process of painting, even brushes hinder my energy and a direct confrontation with the canvas. So, many times I used my fingers, palms, or paper towels to smear and to press paints onto the canvas. After a long time of struggle to make forms appear in the canvas, I felt suddenly an unplanned surge of energy through my big brush strokes or through throwing paint wash over the painting. This last effort gave a new look to the painting and then I knew the painting was finished.

In my paintings, mountain or mass area and water or empty area co-exist and the continuum of space unifies the two area (fig. 5). The lower space of water or land continues and becomes upper space of sky (fig. 6). The horizontal space of land or water becomes vertical space of mountains or hills (fig. 7). The space from the sea expands and grows continuously towards the sky (fig. 8 ). The air in the picture gives the feeling of the presence of spirit (fig. 9).

The horizon is not a fixed line but is in constant movement. The movement of clouds changes the horizon. In my painting (fig. 10), at first

glance the horizon is in a horizontal line but when one looks at it carefully, the horizon could exist at the left-side vertical line. The upper cloud echoes the vertical horizon. This ambiguity of space represents the world of constant change and motion.

In another painting (fig. 11), the jutting rocks represented at the bottom, form a structural basis within the rectangular canvas; the contrast of light and dark or color between the rocks and the sky establishes a relation between these two different areas, and suggests a continuous space between these two different areas, and suggests a continuous space between them.

Matisse achieved this unity of space in painting with color harmony. In his painting “Harmony in Red” (fig. 12), he treated the surface of the table and the perpendicular wall with the same red color and in a similar continuous fashion. In his “Red Studio” (fig. 13), he painted the wall and the floor with the same red color. The spatial relationships are only suggested by the perspective of tables and articles inside of the room. Matisse’s method suggests another way to create a continuum of space. But I think space itself is not definable, for only man classifies and defines space. D.T. Suzuki once said the “in the spiritual realm there is nether space nor time, for all is one.”<sup>5</sup> This statement suggests that the true perception of space comes not from analytic knowledge but from spiritual enlightenment.



### Footnotes

1. Rosenberg, Harold, Art works and Packages: Art as Thinking, p.50.
2. De Chardin, Pierre Teilhard, “The Function of Art as an Expression of Human Energy, in Toward the Future, p. 90.
3. Tao-Chi, Hua-yu-lu, p. 108.
4. The I Ching or Book of Changes, p. 295
5. Suzuki, D.T., The Field of Zen, p. 18.

### Bibliography

1. De Chardin, Pierre Teilhard, Toward the Future, Translated by Rene Hague, London: Collins, 1975
2. Chou, Ju-His, In Quest of the Primordial Line: The Genesis and Content of Tao-Chi's Hua-Yu-Lu, Cichigan: University Microfilms, 1970.
3. Coleman, Earle J., Philosophy of Painting by Shih Tao, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978.
4. Edwards, Richard, The Painting of Tao-Chi: Catalogue of an Exhibition, Aug. 13 to Sept. 17, 1967, New Haven, Conn.: Eastern Press Inc., 1967.
5. The I Ching or Book of Changes, translated by Richard Wilhelm, New Jersey: Bollingen Foundation Inc., 1978.

6. Jacobus, John, Matisse, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1973.
7. Rosenberg, Harold, Art Works and Packages: Art as Thinking, New York: Horizon Press, 1969.
8. Suzuki, D.T., The Field of Zen, edited by Christmas Humphreys, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1970.

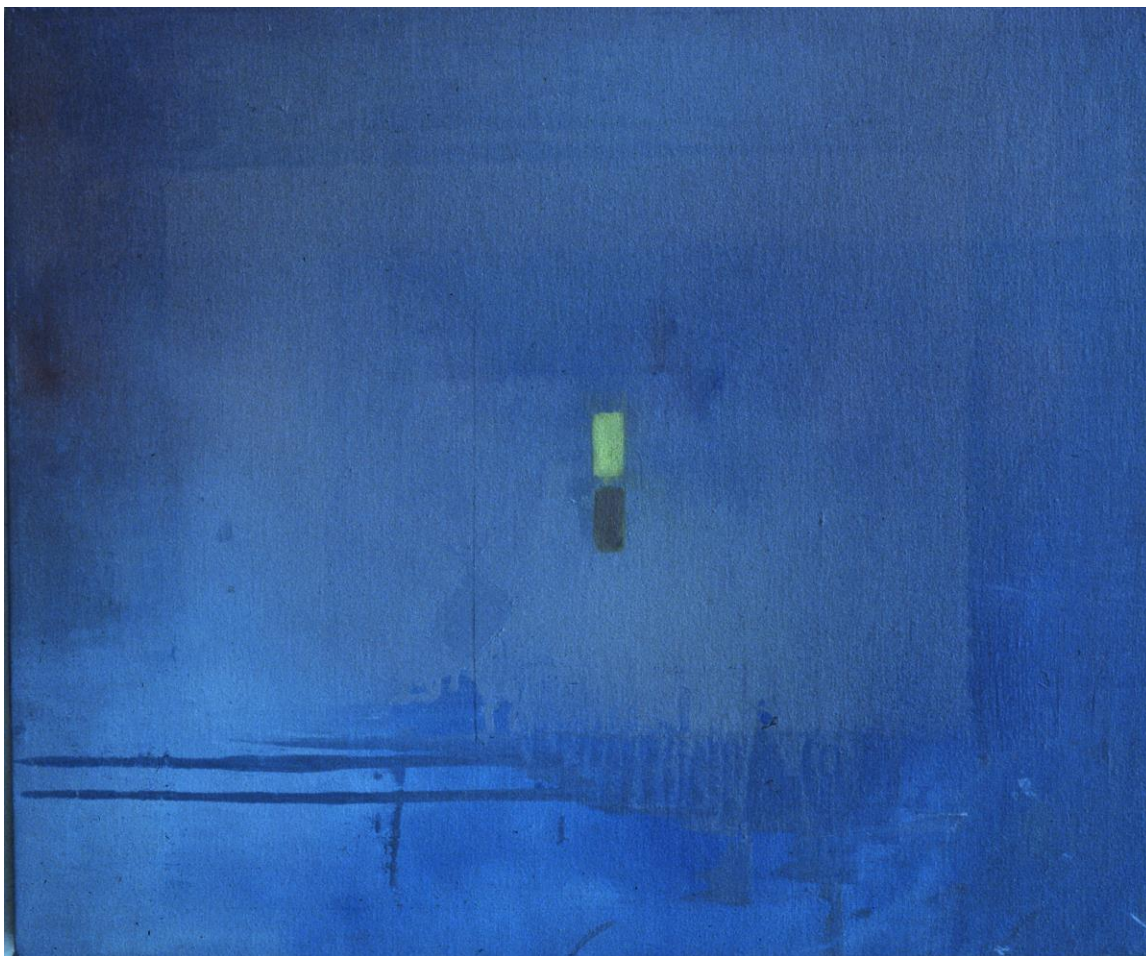


Fig. 1. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The Private World # 10*, 1979, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches.



Fig. 5. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The Riverside*, 1979, oil on canvas, 40 x60 inches.

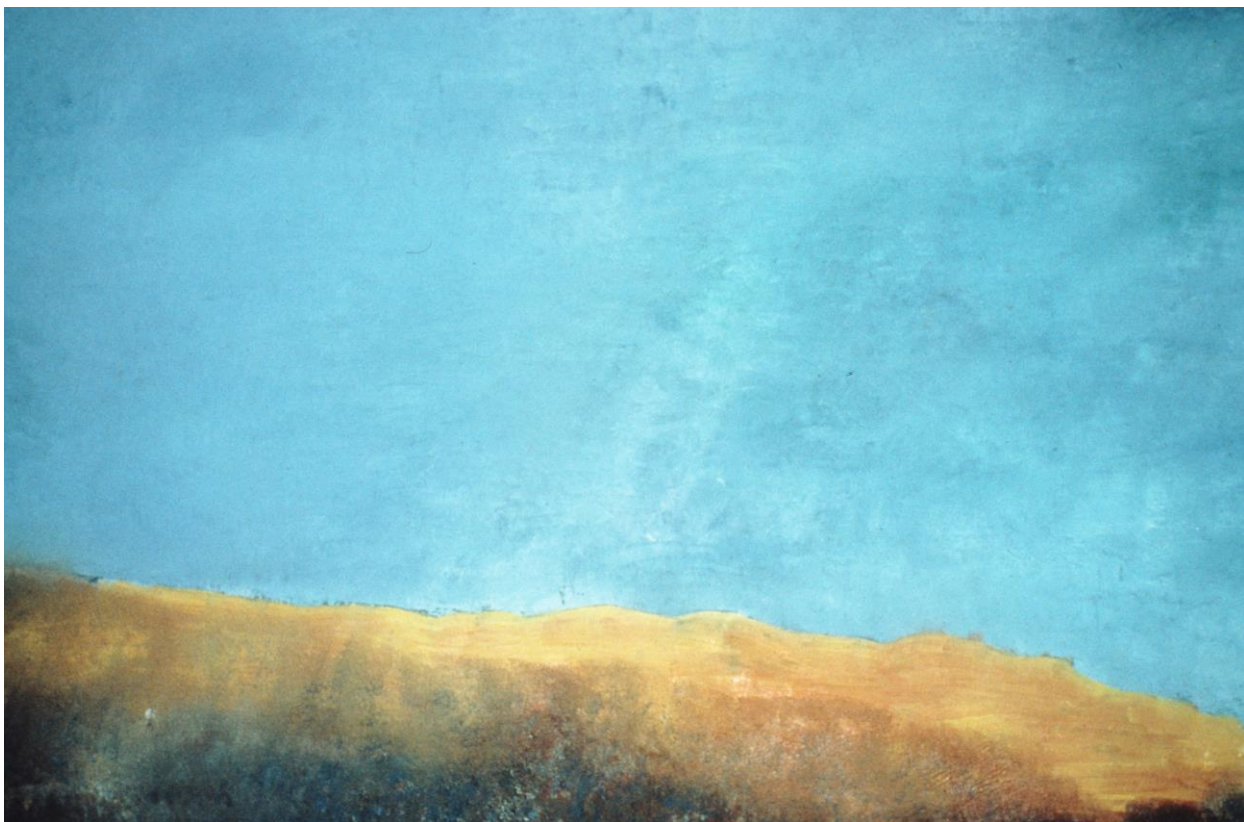


Fig. 6. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The Land near the River*, 1979, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.





Fig. 7. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The View of Lake*, 1979, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.



Fig. 8. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The Long Island*, 1979, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.





Fig. 9. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The Three Clouds in the Sea*, 1979, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.

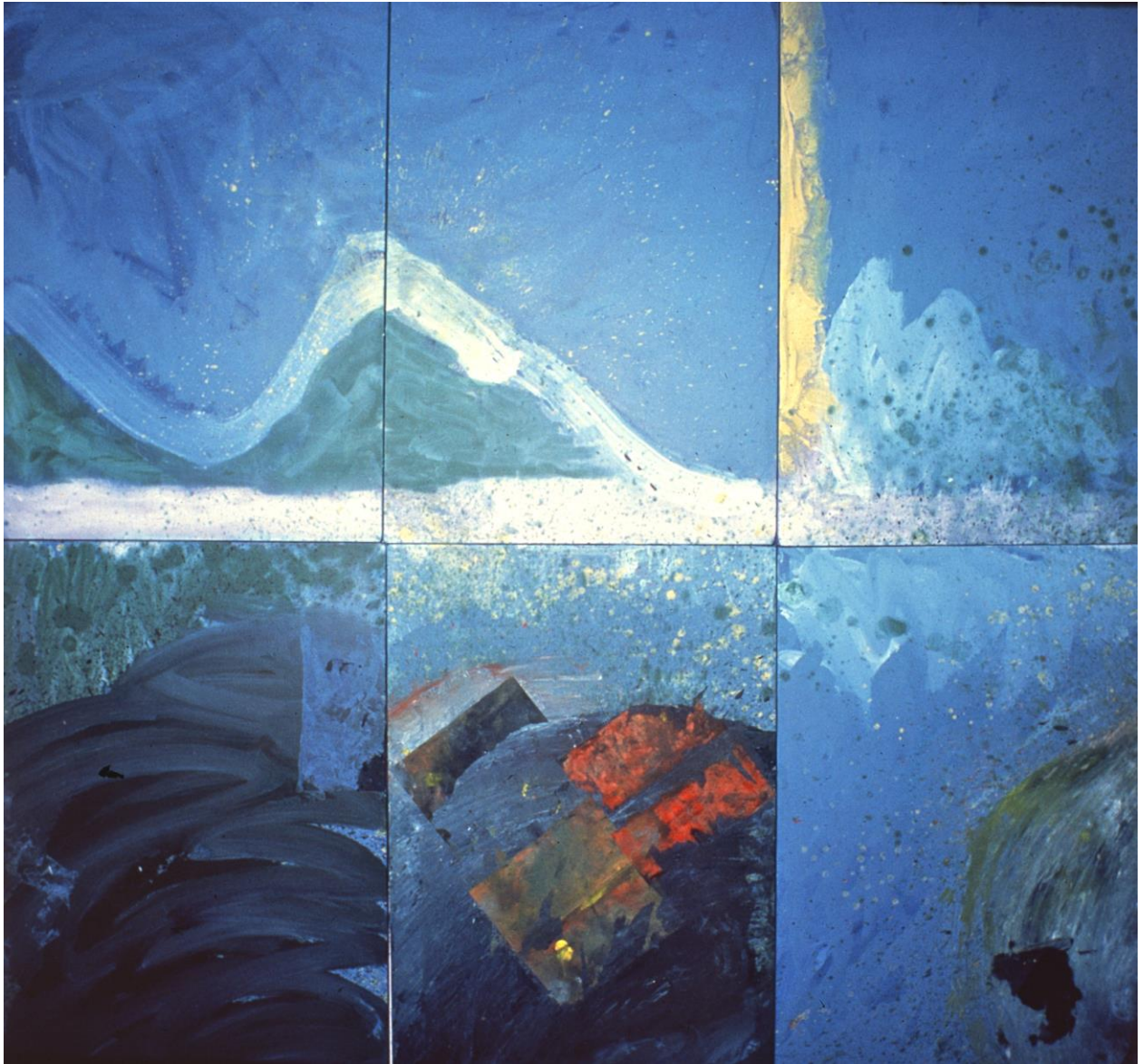


Fig. 10. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *The Two Islands*, 1979, oil on canvas, 60 x 40 inches.





Fig. 11. By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), *Point Lobos*, 1979, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches.



By Hae Suk Kwak (Su Kwak), Energy of the Sea, 1979, oil on canvas,  
72 x 72 inches