

Synthesis of Visions in Su Kwak's Abstract Painting

This exhibition presents twenty paintings in Su Kwak's *Cosmic Light* series from 2013 to 2015. In her abstract paintings, this Korean-American artist based in Washington D.C. has consistently dealt with the theme of light in its physical and spiritual senses.

After immigrating to the United States in 1973 from Korea, Su Kwak studied art at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas and completed the MFA program at the University of Chicago in 1979 (Fig. 1). Since the mid-1980s, Su Kwak's abstract style has developed from semi-abstract landscapes that include the land, water and light, reflecting the state of her mind, to experimentation in the late 1990s with sculptural works using acrylic paints on paper collage and plaster (Fig. 2). The experimental works, inspired not only by the sunset at the Chincoteague Island in Virginia, but also by an American Abstract Expressionist, Barnett Newman's interpretation of Via Dolorosa in the *Station of the Cross* (1958-1966), gave a universal message of hope to the viewers (Fig. 3). After 2002, Su Kwak redefined light to convey a more spiritual meaning in her abstract painting by emphasizing light's healing power for weak and ailing bodies.¹ In her *Healing Light* series (2003-2006), the contrasts of primary colors and the cutouts on the canvas surface, revealing the supporting frames, became much bolder (Fig. 4). Before the *Cosmic Light* series of her current exhibition, Su Kwak's paintings on light and time from 2007 to 2012 continued to present quite dynamic, almost sculptural abstractions in which the spiritual light penetrates the open wounds of the canvas body.² By contrast, the *Cosmic Light* series (2013-2015) presents internalized light in Su Kwak's paintings. The general style of this series appears quieter and the compositions are stabilized with subdued hues, repeated cycles of lights, and relatively flat surfaces. In fact, the most recent series of *Light Within* (2016-2017) and of *Light Cycles* (2018) seems to exhale light from inside the canvas (Fig. 5). Therefore, Su Kwak's *Cosmic Light* series can be considered an act of incubation for embracing the inner healing light and preparing for external delivery of the light to be born as life in subsequent years.

In her 1979 MFA thesis, "Synthesis of Opposites in Painting," Su Kwak noted that her painting philosophy was inspired by the seventeenth-century Chinese painter Shitao (1642-1707, aka Zhu Ruoji, Daoji or Yuanji), whose ink paintings reflect his Buddhist and Daoist practices during the transitional period between the Ming and Qing dynasties (Fig. 6). Su Kwak adapted Shitao's idea of "one-stroke (or primordial line) theory," that is, being free from any boundaries and existing between substance and space, text and image, yin and yang, body and spirit, life and art, and individual and the universe. It is not surprising that Su Kwak found inspiration for her painting in Shitao's theory, considering that her thesis advisor was the influential Chinese art historian Harrie Vandestappen. Similarly, Jeffrey Wechsler, Alexander Munroe, and many others in the US during the mid-twentieth century increasingly recognized the importance of Asia in

¹ See Su Kwak's illustrated book, *Healing Words*, that she wrote from November 17, 2002 to June 19, 2011.

² See my catalog essay, "Incarnation of the Light," and detailed entries of thirty-one artworks from between 1996 and 2012 for her mid-career retrospective exhibition, *Light Journey: An Odyssey in Paint*, at the Brauer Museum of Art and Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art in 2012-2013.

development of Abstract Expressionism.³

In fact, Abstract Expressionism is closely related to East Asian ink painting traditions in its restricted color range, calligraphic imagery, aggressive and rapid brushwork, asymmetrical composition, and gestural methods of action painting. Moreover, the abstract art of Kandinsky (1866-1944) from his earlier period suggests his intimate association between the abstract and personal religious interest and spiritual experiences involving music and literature. While painting styles and aesthetics of Asian art and Abstract Expressionism show similarity and exchange, the shared spirituality in human thoughts and souls attests to art's universality as spiritual manifestation without regard to specific religions. However, the trend among American Abstract Expressionists and their critics was towards an intellectually male-oriented extension of modernism emphasizing the formal, self-referential quality of painting and eliminating literary contexts or personal narratives. As a result, explicit expression of the mystical dimension in abstract art has been forbidden and forgotten in the name of art for art's sake in Americanization of abstract art. Spirituality in modern art was understated and even concealed in twentieth-century American art.

Su Kwak's art differs from the unspoken metaphysical monumentality of monochrome paintings by her predecessors in abstract art such as Barnett Newman and Lucio Fontana (1899-1968), because she tries to reveal the painting motifs from nature, her spiritual motivations, life experiences and memories in colorful abstract painting honestly and positively. This approach retrieves and eventually renovates the original synthesis of Eastern and Western expressionism and that of spirituality and modernity in American art history.

Over the years, light in Su Kwak's painting has changed from the reflected sunlight on water through spiritual healing light, and eventually to cosmic light moving in time and space. The motif looks as though it has been lifted from this earth to the transcendent realm, yet depiction of light in the *Cosmic Light* series has its own visual characteristics. Unlike the decisive lines of the light sources and light beams in Su Kwak's earlier paintings, cosmic light is often represented through blurred, dispersed lines resembling collected particles. Away from the rigid frames of time and space, the cosmic light seems to exist ambiguously, evaporating between time and space. Each painting has one or more circular sources or reflectors of light, formed by repeatedly swirling lines. Multiple brushstrokes with diverse colors and broken lines are visible in the straightforward rays of light in perpendicular crossings and penetrating lines among the circles. The rhythmic repetitions and sudden ruptures of the lines of light suggest the concept of time projected in the continuous cycle of life and in the critical moment of velocity, interruption or dilation in the personal or spatial universe. With its relatively introverted, meditative abstractions, the *Cosmic Light* series seems peaceful and tranquil when viewed from a distance. However, such an immanent yet dynamic power of the future captures a glowing journey to the goal of light.

The *Cosmic Light* series reflects the artist's quest for the original source of light: its beginning, its emission, and its relationship to other cosmic entities. The source of the light in Su Kwak's painting usually comes from the Sun and its reflection on the moon. These sources are often described together in the same painting. From a human perspective on earth, the two

³ See Sandy Kita's "Shared Heritage: Su Kwak and the University of Chicago" in the exhibition catalog for *Light Journey: An Odyssey in Paint*.

sources of light are the sun in the daytime and the moon at night. Within Confucian and Daoist visions of the universe in East Asia, the sun is a representative element of yang energy and the moon stands for yin energy, along with five other elements in the universe.

Such a concept of the universe is obvious in royal screen painting used in traditional Korean palaces during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). Court painters employed primary colors to produce the multi-panel screens, called *Painting of the Sun, Moon and the Five Peaks*, to be displayed behind a king's throne (Fig. 7). These paintings declared that the king had the authority and the blessings of heaven as he was seated before the representation of yin, yang, and the five elements of everlasting order in Confucian principles and Daoist cosmology.

This same harmonious coexistence of opposing light sources in one painting is portrayed in Su Kwak's paintings on one, two, or four connected canvases. When they meet in her paintings, the sun and moon show an additive color synthesis of light moving toward white as the sum of all colors. The artist challenges the subtractive color synthesis resulting in lower chroma toward black, which is supposed to be the natural process of combining color pigments. Moreover, although a solar or lunar eclipse in nature blocks the light just as a cloud casts its shadow, Su Kwak's description of cosmic light does the opposite. When the sun and moon overlap or when clouds are overcast in Su Kwak's painting, brightness of light is intensified by the effect of refraction and dispersion.

Consistent with Su Kwak's earlier works, some paintings in the *Cosmic Light* series feature collages including Korean or English Bible pages among the repeated brushwork at the rims of the light circles (*Cosmic Light* #17, #28, #36, #37 and #39). The Bible page strips featured in the light's radiant aura reinforce the spiritual meaning of the descending light and are metaphorically transformed from the Word of God, creator of the light. The Bible pages are direct manifestations of the incarnated Logos, which holds the gravity of the cosmic light on earth.

The spiritual meaning of the artist's light is also obvious in *Cosmic Light* #35, where she painted the abstract image of candle flames and their reflections that she saw during the Holy Communion. She explains that the flame stands for the Holy Spirit working harmoniously with the Father and the Son. The explicitly religious meaning of the light continuously and flexibly expands to the universal macrocosm and deepens into the personal microcosm through Su Kwak's observation of materiality and imagination of spirituality.

Su Kwak also stimulates and accumulates stories and memories of her life in the creative action of painting. Most paintings in her *Cosmic Light* series feature uneven surfaces achieved through use of patched materials covered with thick paints. The artist cut out canvases of her earlier works into longish shapes and pasted the irregular pieces onto a new canvas before underpainting and during painting. The process of adding the older pieces brings out unexpected perspectives and reminiscent images that ultimately create a visual and textural depth in the new paintings. More and more, Su Kwak enjoys defying the fixed concept of completion and originality and burying the ephemerality of her signed work in the strata of memories under the new paint, eternally.

In this exhibition Su Kwak presents two more paintings that she painted entirely over previous works. *New River Series #1* (Fig.8), a landscape from 1985, serves as the bottom canvas of *Cosmic Light* #30 (2014) after being stored in a roll without a stretcher, which created vertical

wrinkles. The motif for the original landscape came from the Potomac River, which marks the border between Virginia and Washington D.C. This reminded Su Kwak of a hymn, often known in Korean by its chorus phrase “we will meet after crossing the Jordan River.” The same refrain in English is “we shall meet on that beautiful shore.” The English version refers to the water of life, whereas the Korean implies going to an eternal rest in heaven that is, ironically, death. Although the concept of separation and death in crossing a river is prevalent in many cultures, it is obvious that Su Kwak’s motif for the painting was closely related to her belief and practice in Korean Christianity. In fact, Su Kwak says this dynamic landscape was created to overcome her sorrow after enduring several miscarriages. Now, after about thirty years, she has transformed the rippled riverscape to a swirling movement of cosmic light in heaven, embracing rather than erasing the painful memory with warm contemplation of the cycle of life.

The other example of these recycled paintings in the exhibition is *Cosmic Light #2* (2016). In 2002, Su Kwak created the sculptural painting *Light #32* (Fig. 9) in which she expressed rays of light by folding and spreading sheets of Tyvek building material in a radial form and sewing it to the canvas with fishing line. In 2012 she removed the attached Tyvek from the experimental work and repainted it as the two-dimensional *Cosmic Light #2*, replacing the sculptural rays with a circle of light. She reworked it in 2013 (Fig. 10) and completed its fourth version in 2016, which shows a simpler and blazing sunset against a background of light-blue colored land or water. The noticeable trace of the previous attachment underneath the paint enhances the effect of light. At the same time, the explosive dispersion of sculptural light seems to converge and disappear into the “light hole” in the painting with the force of gravity, making contact with the earth.

The *Cosmic Light* series illuminates Su Kwak’s mature stage of synthesis in her art she has pursued over the last forty years since her first exploration of its meanings and methods. The Abstract Expressionism that inspired her was intrinsically a synthetic art derived from Eastern ink painting tradition and Western art trends. The light in her art signifies a synthesis of natural sunlight and spiritual energy that she observes, meditates on, and expresses while embracing a syncretic symbolism of Confucianism, Daoism, and Shamanism in Korean Christianity. She also envisions a synthesis of past and present along with temporality and eternity. In a suffering world with its deconstructive chaos and depressing uncertainty, Su Kwak’s paintings give us hope to see her continuing growth toward an ultimate synthesis that nullifies any conflicts, stereotypes, prejudices, or negativity while delivering harmony, magnanimity, affection, and vitality through the cosmic light beyond imagination.



Fig. 1. Su Kwak, *Two Islands*, 1979,
oil on canvas, 60 x 40 in.



Fig. 2. Su Kwak, *Divided Light #38*, 1996,
acrylic on linen, 54 x 78 in.



Fig. 3. Su Kwak, *Song of Light #1*, 1999,
acrylic on board, paper and plaster, 50 x 40 x 6 in, Brauer Museum of Art.



Fig. 4. Su Kwak, *Healing Light #22*, 2006,
acrylic on canvas, 72 x 90 x 2 in, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art.



Fig. 5. Su Kwak, *Light Cycle #3*, 2018,
acrylic on canvas, 38 x60 in.



Fig 6. Shitao, *Reminiscences of Qinhuai River*, Qing Dynasty, ca. 1695-1700.
Album of eight leaves, ink and color on paper, 25.5 x 20.2 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art.



Fig 7. Anonymous, *Painting of the Sun, Moon and the Five Peaks*, Chosŏn Dynasty,
19th - early 20th C., color on silk, 362.2 x 196.5 cm, National Palace Museum of Korea.



Fig. 8. Su Kwak, *New River Series #1*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 78 in.



Fig. 9. Su Kwak, *Light #32*, 2002, acrylic on Tyvek & canvas, 53 x 66 in.



Fig. 10. Su Kwak, *Cosmic Light #2*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 66 in.

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