

SU KWAK: HEALING LIGHT

By Elisabeth Sussman
Curator, Whitney Museum of Art, New York

From the June Kelly Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, 2004

Su Kwak lives in the United States and has resided here most of the time since she came to the U.S. to attend college -- and later married and raised a daughter. But between 2000 and 2003, she lived in Korea, where she was born (in the port city of Pusan in 1949). When Kwak returned to Korea, the memories that she had carried in her head for all the years she had been in the West, were confronted with the realities of Korea of the present. Impressions -- the landscape, the city of her birth -- remained from her childhood. The changes that she observed could not drive away her early relationship to the Korea that still existed in her mind. Over the years, Kwak had never actually completely cut herself off from that Korea. Indeed, a deep respect for her mother, who lived with her for twenty years in America, kept Korea actively alive. When Kwak decided in the 1970s to seriously follow her interests in art and to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago, Korea and the art of China and Japan remained with her as expressive models, even as her education tipped her toward Western art's modernist aesthetics. Because she was in art school in the 70s, her professors spurred her on to let conditions related to process and materials help to determine the paintings she made. But though Kwak's studio practice and intellectual energies were consumed by the Western modernist canons of abstraction, (she studied the criticism of the great critic of post war art, Harold Rosenberg, who was also, briefly, her teacher) she also pursued a study of Chinese aesthetics.

Did her sojourn in Korea reinforce the Asian elements of Kwak's recent series of abstract paintings? Do these lively painted fields, choreographies of circles and arc shapes, these painterly surfaces and their astonishing clear palette -- shades of blue, light to dark, oranges and yellows, white and black -- do these paintings speak to us as work that was occasioned by a period of reacquaintance with the Asia of the painter's birth? I would say that at first glance the answer to that question would seem to be no. The vocabulary of Kwak's work seems most at home amongst the exuberant works of other contemporary abstract painters, such as, for instance, Elizabeth Murray or Mary Heilman. On closer examination of Kwak's paintings we begin to fathom the complexity of their construction. Quite strikingly, Kwak has often cut and stitched the surfaces of her canvases. There are positive and negative shapes of canvas, cut out and reapplied. A section of a form may be cut and folded back. Layers of canvas are applied to the back of a work for reinforcement. A cut to the back may reveal the structural support of the stretcher bars. The canvas is shredded by parallel horizontal and vertical cuts. And fish line stitching may suture pieces of the surface to one another. Again, these manipulations of Kwak's are not unknown in the history of Western modernism. We have only to think

of the precedents of the Italian artist, Lucio Fontana, whose punctured and slashed canvases of the 50s and 60s Kwak had seen.

However, Kwak's process driven abstractions take on spiritual connotations when we think of them within the category of her title "Healing Light," a title that she has given to all the works in her new exhibition at the June Kelly Gallery in SoHo. When Kwak uses the word "heal," she recognizes its Asian intentions, that true healing restores life to spiritual as well as physical health. Similarly she sees light in terms of its natural sources, the sun and the moon (the circles of her work), but, also, as a spiritual force, the basis of life's energy and, metaphorically, as the light of the world, a guiding spirit, a divine presence. Based in nature, memories of moon and water, waves and rainbows, the *Healing Light* series yields these metaphoric messages. The paintings are motivated by a response to nature, but they are not specifically about representing nature. And there is another, somewhat mystical dimension that Kwak conjures that is spatial. Her paintings embrace the potential, or the room for emptiness. This can be literally, a hole, or an actual absence, a cut, a gap. Such potential emptiness, which she chooses to represent, is a positive quality for Kwak, as it signifies readiness and the room for growth.

For me, the wonderful aspect of this series is the way that Kwak literalizes her ideas, drawing on processes that are commonsensical like paper folding or stitching or the recycling of pieces of cloth (as in patchwork) or the mending of wounds. In the wonderful blues of *Healing Light # 3* that recall the waters of Busan, Kwak has cut the right perimeter of the circle and then sewn it back to the surface with fishing line. Each element (materials themselves or their manipulation) is thought of as a part of nature, as indeed, natural.

In the end, Kwak believes in the vitalism of all of the paintings' elements. She believes in their ability to affect the spectator. These paintings, both in the acts of their making and in our acts of contemplating them, have the power to heal.