

**Essay by Ronny Cohen  
Art Critic in New York City**

**Su Kwak**

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For Su Kwak, if painting involves depicting the landscape of life, then abstraction is the way to mapping foursquare the geography of mind, heart and spirit. Making conceptual use of memory, and using it as a main screen in the filtering process by which she gains perspective, Kwak directs our attention beyond the veils of appearance to reality's sum and substance. Her art has been deeply compelled by her profound esteem for the special responsibility artists have been charged with in modern times, to be the people's risk-takers, society's pioneers, vying always to do the best they can as creators in the forefront of the search for meaning. For Su Kwak, the search necessarily begins with scrutinizing and ruminating about, with long stretches of routine and sharp moments of drama, the daily round of existence. It is grounded in the intense appreciation she has for art in the largest sense, around which the thrust of her college and graduate education in the United States was centered.

Kwak, who received B. A. and M.F.A. degrees in fine arts, respectively, from the University of St. Thomas, in Houston and University of Chicago, has made the studies she has done and knowledge she has acquired of Western and Asian art combined, the foundation of her approach to painting and abstraction. While Cezanne and Picasso were appealing to her as they were to the vast majority of students of modern painting taking courses in the 1970s, the concern about visual space that began also for her during these university years carried direct consequences for her individual development. From early 20th century Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich to American Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman and the leading Italian still life painter Giorgio Morandi, the variety of artists intriguing to her in this period helped her to explore different ideas and forms of visual space.

It seemed this also was much the case for the topic she chose to write on for her masters thesis, the philosophy of Tao-Chi, a celebrated 17th century Chinese painter, whose concepts of "endless space" and "primordial line" served to broaden the scope of her investigations, just as her activities in the studio did. The abstract paintings she did in the 1970s showed how she tended to mediate her response to the Minimalist and Postminimalist tendencies that so dominated this area while she was in graduate school through her developing interest in the structure and surface of visual space. Kwak mastered the analytical method of considering the phenomenology of painting that remains perhaps the greatest contribution of those tendencies without imbibing the more narrow and doctrinaire views also identified with them. It seemed for her that far from implying proscriptive limitations, the term "reductive qualities" related to essential conditions and to Taoist and Zen Buddhist concepts of void and empty space having origin in nature.

Kwak went back inside herself to the first deep and sustained contacts she had with

nature which took place in the impressive surroundings of Busan with its unforgettable vistas of ocean, mountains, lakes and lush fields and forests, and which were a part of growing up in Korea. Through the 1980s and now into the 1990s, Kwak has continued in painting to draw on the totality of her experiences of nature from the past and present, Korea and America. All the thinking and powerful feeling this process causes to release has been instrumental indeed in bringing forth the full poetic force of her vision.

Settling in the late 1980s on the subject of light as a main focus, Kwak has developed the synthesis and conjunction of abstract, natural and real elements on which the compositions are based. With each successive series, as Kwak reveals her talent for producing paintings that as images, as objects, and as statements are engaging on multiple levels, the complexity builds. Introduced in the first series inspired by her meditations on light and the wealth of connotations it possesses, the "Inner Light Series" she began in 1989, light's spiritual and religious associations are found to constitute a major recurrent subtext as well in "Mirror and Light," 1994, and the currently ongoing series also started in 1994, "Divided Light." Change is as central as continuity is to the expressive evolution of each of the different series.

A metaphor for heavenly illumination, the open and airy surfaces of the Inner Light paintings led to their physical opposite in the "Light Passages Series," in the dense and fragmented surfaces built up with dried flowers and papier mache, for which canvas fragments were woven together. In turn, ideas about objective nature, of light stimulating growth and casting into sharp relief the structural lineaments of earthly terrain, gave way to more interior and speculative concerns in the "Mirror and Light Series". Pieces of broken glass added to surfaces of these paintings beckon the audience, to look at yourself and experience in direct and personal terms the light of reflection. The pages taken from an Old Jerusalem Bible the paintings also contain can be read as a sign of the light of divine wisdom and faith.

In the "Divided Light Series," except for the bible pages, which have been embedded and mostly buried beneath the surfaces, the attachments have been removed, as the emphasis shifts to painting and the acute powers of suggestion contained in color and shape. With discerning insight, through contrasts of light and dark, Kwak examines the concept of opposites. The paintings in this series are emblematic of the enormously significant dynamic at issue in this essential concept, how from good and evil to pleasure and pain, it is necessary to know one in order to understand the other. In the Divided Light paintings Kwak offers her most powerful and moving expression of the mysteries and miracles of life