

Essay by Sandy Kita

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Shared Heritage: Su Kwak and the University of Chicago

Introduction

Many historians and critics of art across this country have written about Su Kwak. Even within this volume, we have the voices of New York art critic Lily Wei and Los Angeles historian of modern Korean art Jung-sil Lee. What can a Japanese art historian such as myself contribute to understanding Kwak's paintings that cannot be provided by Ms. Lee, Ms. Wei and so many others with credentials so much more relevant than my own? And yet, there is, perhaps, one respect in which I am uniquely qualified to speak on Kwak and her art for I share with her a beloved mentor who did much to shape who we became, not just as professionals, but also as people. Kwak, like me, was a student of the late Harrie Vanderstappen (1921-2007).

Father Vanderstappen was a Catholic Priest of the Society of the Divine Word who became Professor of Chinese Art History at the University of Chicago. Kwak has her M.F. A. from the University of Chicago where she wrote a thesis on Chinese painting under Father Vanderstappen's supervision. Although a specialist in the study of China, Father Vanderstappen was also interested in Japan. Thus, if among the 20 students of Father Vanderstappen who hold academic positions, Katherine R. Tsiang of the University of Chicago, Martin J. Powers of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and Robert Poor, formerly of the University of Minnesota, now retired, are among this region's China specialists, Judith A. Stubbs of Indiana University and the Indiana

University Museum of Art, myself, and Michael Cummingham, formerly of the Cleveland Museum of Art, now retired, can be counted among the area's Japan scholars.

When Father Vanderstappen won the College Art Association's award for the Distinguished Teaching of Art History in 1985, his students gathered together to give talks in his honor. A *festschrift* issue of *Monumenta Serica* followed.¹ Upon Father Vanderstappen's death, a second student gathering occurred along with another publication: *Looking at Asian art*, issued this year from the University of Chicago.² These meetings and publications have done much to make me aware of my intellectual debt to Father Vanderstappen. Even more, they have shown me how much I am part of his tradition of thought. What I have found most surprising about the art of Su Kwak is that, until I saw her paintings, I did not realize that Father Vanderstappen's intellectual heritage could be manifested as fully in objects of art as in writings about art. This essay considers some ways in which this is so.

Father Harrie Vanderstappen

If Father Vanderstappen influenced many, his teachers at the University of Chicago influenced him no less. Among these, key was Ludwig Bachhofer (1922-1968), in turn, the student of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1845). As Wen Fong noted, Wölfflin is best known for how he "stressed study of the basic language of art," stating in his 1915 *Principles of Art History* that "there is no objective vision."³ Vision is subjective in the sense that the eye may physically function the same in all people, but what the mind

¹ *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. 45, 1997

² Katherine R. Tsiang and Martin J. Powers, ed. *Looking at Asian Art*, Center for the Art of East Asia Symposia, University of Chicago, 2012.

³ Wen Fong, "The Study of Chinese Bronze Age Arts: Methods and Approaches," in Wen Fong, ed., *The Great Bronze Age of China*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Alfred K. Knopf, Inc., New York: 1981, p. 24.

understands of what the eye sees can differ in different people. Insofar as one has to be able to conceive of something in order to make it, the material objects of a culture can reveal the minds of their makers. Thus, the difference in vision of which Wölfflin spoke should be manifest in the material objects of a culture; so that, art becomes a means of insight into what characterizes a given people, place or time. As Wölfflin put it, “Vision itself has a history and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the principal task of art history.”⁴

The above had special significance in Bachhofer’s time when the study of Asian art was just beginning in this country. In Asia, the arts had been studied for centuries so that a large and rich body of vernacular literature existed on them. Reading these Asian writings on Asian art was clearly important but no less obvious was that, if the American study of Asian art depended unduly on a mastery of Asian languages, native speakers of those tongues would have an insurmountable advantage over those not so blessed. This was a particular problem in Bachhofer’s day when so few American institutions of higher learning offered training in Asian languages.

The significance of Wölfflin’s work in this regard was in how a careful, trained, and experienced looking at objects of art offered, in providing insights into a culture, an alternative to language-based methods of study. Looking, of course, would not eliminate the need to master Asian languages, which would remain an important tool for gathering information on and insight into those cultures, but it would help level the playing field between native and non-native speakers of Asian languages in the study of Asian arts.

⁴ Ibid.

Not surprisingly, therefore, an important part of the tradition of scholarship that Father Vanderstappen inherited from Bachhofer was an emphasis on visual analysis, aesthetics, and the study of style. And yet, if Father Vanderstappen continued his teacher's intellectual heritage, he also changed and developed it. For one thing, Father Vanderstappen understood that to rely on looking was to rely on a personal, and therefore, subjective reaction to art. Father Vanderstappen sought to make his work more objective, for one thing by how he described the object of art.

For Father Vanderstappen, a proper description had to be factual. That is, it had to give those relevant features of an object that all could agree were present and which none could say were merely a matter of opinion. This tended to work best on questions of authenticity, but even there, the inadequacy of language to state all that we can feel or sense was a problem. Speaking English, German, French, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean as well as his native Dutch, Father Vanderstappen understood how one language is able to express what another cannot. It may be that this was why he stressed learning Asian languages.

Today, Father Vanderstappen is remembered as one of the first American scholars of Asian arts to “look beyond [style and aesthetics],”⁵ but this should not be taken to imply that he rejected what he had learned from his teachers. Quite the contrary, Father Vanderstappen acknowledged his debt to Bachhofer in his acceptance speech upon winning the Distinguished Teaching of Art History Award. He also saw much of the value of his work to lie in how it contributed to the larger tradition of thought that he had

⁵ Wu Hung describes him this way in a quote in “Father Vanderstappen Dies at 86,” University of Chicago News Office, Feb. 2, 2007.

received at the University of Chicago, often commenting that, for him, “scholarship was like adding dust to a mountain.”

One can see humility in this statement of Father Vanderstappen, a quality that characterized him as a person. Fond of talking about his farmer origins, Father Vanderstappen saw value not only in fine art but also in common utilitarian objects. His hobby was collecting antique hand-made tools. Moreover, when discussing a particularly fine hammer one time, Father Vanderstappen noted how its excellence went beyond matters of craftsmanship, skill, and experience in making. What that higher plane of achievement was, Father Vanderstappen did not say. This reticence was also characteristic of him, Father Vanderstappen accepting that there are things that go beyond our ability to explain and whose mystery we must respect.

However, if Father Vanderstappen was suspicious of final, absolute statements on such “big questions” as the nature of Art, this did not mean that he thought these matters were not worth thinking about or assumed that they could not be understood, taught, and learned. It was just that he considered them to yield only to close, prolonged discussion. Father Vanderstappen’s preferred method of teaching was, therefore, the tutorial and in many ways, he was pedagogically close to those Japanese Zen masters who felt that the only proper way to transmit the doctrine was one-to-one.

Also like a Zen master, Father Vanderstappen could be passionate about what he wanted his students to learn. He once said that one should teach not just what one knew, but what one believed. And yet, Father Vanderstappen always respected the possibility of alternate interpretations. If it was clear that he was the teacher and we were the students, he never forced his opinions on us but quite the opposite, listened to us.

Finally, in valuing his tradition of thought yet being willing to change it, in making the subjective act of looking basic to his study of art but stressing the importance of providing objective evidence for the insights gained by eye, and in striving to understand and explain art but respecting its mystery, Father Vanderstappen was past master at negotiating contradictions. One suspects that such was necessary for a priest in the intellectually critical environment of the secular University of Chicago. Fittingly, there is now a Vanderstappen Chair of Chinese Art History at the University of Chicago, but the man himself lies buried with his brothers of the Society of the Divine Word in their little cemetery in Techny, Illinois.

Su Kwak

Su Kwak has said that what she learned at the Midway studios of the University of Chicago was that painting is not the representation of reality but the manifestation of the immaterial in material form. What fascinated Kwak at first was a question that is said to underlie the work of no less than Albert Einstein: “What is light?” Thus, Kwak painted water for, as she has said, what you see when looking at water is not the material liquid but the immaterial light reflected from it. These works were followed by paintings that gave physical form to Kwak’s memories of a sunset, her feelings on seeing the sea from an airplane, and other events and things personally important to her. A series of tragedies subsequently occurred in Kwak’s life and with them, an increasing spirituality in her art. Kwak’s subject changed from physical to spiritual light. Kwak was cutting her canvases at this time and as they opened, they revealed the wooden cross that had

always been there as an underlying support. Today, her work continues to evolve, becoming ever more cosmic.

If Kwak's subject matter has changed over time, her effort to manifest the immaterial in material form has not. In this constant element in her art, the work of Kwak perfectly complements that of Father Vanderstappen for she produces paintings which contain a concept of light, an understanding of religion, and other such things of just the sort that he would have wanted most to learn from his looking. Even more, Kwak and Father Vanderstappen work in much the same way. Both confront something that fascinates them but which they do not understand, explore and consider it until they gain an insight into it, and then seek to convey that perception to others. It is out of their effort to communicate that their product -- scholarship in the case of Father Vanderstappen and art in that of Kwak -- emerges.

In addition, communicating effectively for Kwak no less than for Father Vanderstappen requires mitigating the subjective nature of the personal reaction that is at the basis of their insight. One way that Father Vanderstappen sought to do this was through his careful description of the object of art. Kwak's solution does not involve words, but it does use language -- the language of art. What Kwak does is familiarize herself with our modern culture so well that her work is automatically couched in terms that critics, collectors, and scholars of modern art recognize, accept, and approve. Not surprisingly, Kwak is a constant visitor to New York although living in Georgetown near Washington, D.C.

The above method of working means that Kwak's paintings, if informed by current cultural trends and fashions is never a slave to them for it is not ever really about

them. Rather, Kwak's art is better understood in terms of self-expression, although here one should note that she is not one of those artists who believe that they can dominate every aspect of their art. For example, consider how Kwak incorporates pages from a Korean bible into her paintings. Asked if she deliberately picks out meaningful lines of text, Kwak says that she does not, but if then asked to read the passage in question, she inevitably finds it meaningful.

Kwak's genuine surprise on such occasions testifies to more than a willingness to relinquish control over parts of her artistic process. It suggests that Kwak trusts her instincts. More, it implies that she is one with Father Vanderstappen in believing that we can feel and sense far more than our conscious minds can define or otherwise articulate.

In Father Vanderstappen, one way in which this respect for that which lies beyond us manifested itself was in his dissatisfaction with final, absolute statements on art. The same may be true of Kwak as well, especially given her unusual working method. Kwak never stops developing a painting. Indeed, she says that she will continue to work on it unless she sells it or is otherwise unable to gain access to it.

Father Vanderstappen's humility in the face of the unknowable also meant that he was, if a passionate advocate of ideas, not one of those aggressive intellectuals who brook no contradiction and who must always have their way. There is something similar in Kwak's style of painting. Consider how she cuts her canvases.

These cuts are now quite large but started much smaller. Kwak would slit the cloth carefully and then apply gesso to it so that the cuts naturally opened as the gesso dried. The gesso also allowed Kwak to fix the canvas into various sculptural shapes. As she did so, the openings reached their present size.

Cutting a painting makes it clear that it does not give us reality and is no more than paint on canvas or some other support. Because Kwak's cuts are so big, this exposure of the artifice of art in her work is a strong one. Carol Duncan once said that modern art is where men say what they cannot, with political correctness, say elsewhere. The cuts in Kwak's paintings, even at their largest, are the antithesis of the penetrative rip. Indeed, Kwak sometimes sutures her cuts closed, so that the effect is one of healing, a word that appears in the titles of a number of her works. Thus, if we may say that the exposure of the artifice of art in Kwak's cut paintings is a strong one, it is hard to describe it as aggressive.

This powerful but gentle style can also be seen in Kwak's use of color, her compositions, and other aspects of her work. It is responsible, I believe, for why her paintings are so difficult to photograph. The simplicity of the geometry of Kwak's compositions that is so impressive full-size, for instance, loses its impact when reduced in scale in a photograph. Similarly, photographs flatten the three-dimensionality of Kwak's paintings/sculptures. When we see Kwak's paintings in person, we can sense beneath their surfaces the layers upon layers of work that she has built up over long periods of time. No reproduction can convey adequately this deeper complexity. Finally, Kwak's work changes under different light conditions, so that the bright summer sun brings out the warmth of her colors or a fall overcast, their coolness. Like the teaching of Father Vanderstappen, consequently, the art of Su Kwak would seem best experienced one-on-one.

Conclusion

Insofar as Kwak's paintings are all works in progress, we might read them as challenging the production mentality in modern art that sees "success" as selling work after work in the same signature style. Likewise, Kwak's incorporation of pages from a Bible written in Korean into her paintings could be interpreted as questioning any assumption that modern art can be equated with western art. Finally, we could read Su Kwak's method of cutting the canvas in feminist terms.

However, if such issues from the secular world of modern art inform Kwak's art, Jung sil Lee shows how religious it is as well. Kwak's painting cannot be described, then, either as simply secular or only religious, for they bridge the two. When Kwak began to do this is hard to say but in Father Vanderstappen, she certainly had a model for how to balance church and academe back to her student days at the University of Chicago. Indeed, in Father Vanderstappen's tradition of scholarship, intellectuality, far from being antithetical to faith, could lead to it just as Lee contends it does in Kwak's paintings. What we learn from considering Kwak in context of Father Vandertappen, therefore, is how richly complex her art is, how very deep its roots may be, and how much it is part of a tradition of thought at one of this region's great universities.