

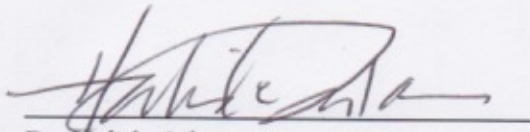
Painted Passage and Heritage

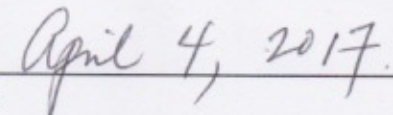
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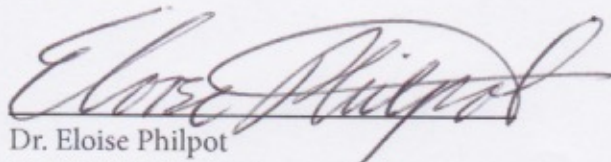
Chan Joong "Kevin" Kwon

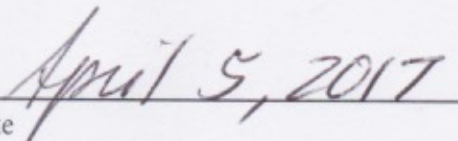
A Thesis
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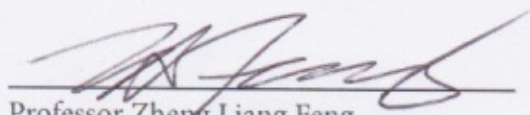
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Of the Requirements of the
Masters in Fine Arts Degree
Studio Art, Emphasis in painting

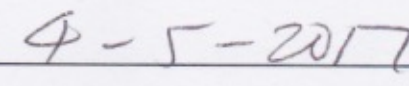

Dr. Malide Salam
Thesis Advisor


Date


Dr. Eloise Philpot
Committee Member


Date


Professor Zheng Liang Feng
Committee Member


Date

Painted Passage and Heritage

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Kevin Kwon

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Abstract

Korean folk art and traditions have been accented with bright vibrant colors that have created a mold for Korean culture. My work has been influenced aesthetically by both Korean folk art and my exposure to Western oil painting technique. The passage of a metaphorical journey from darkness to light is shown through the use of my colors. Each brush stroke created is coated with a vivid color. It is an external projection of how internally I am trying to find a piece of childhood memories from South Korea. Each contour line and form is the action of rewriting what I think is my memory, but recreated into a form that is living in the present day. There is a conflict, yet it does not feel vengeful, but more playful and euphoric. This painted contour represents the imaginary passages that create my ever-changing identity of being a Korean in America, a place where I have yet to adapt. If I could profess one attraction that is deeply engrained in me, it is my love of color.

Introduction

I still remember the first drawing I ever created. At the time, I was only five years old and my mother was pregnant with my younger sister. The moment I saw her in labor, I started drawing what I imagined my little sister would look like. After my sister was born, we were all amazed at the extent to how much my drawing resembled my newborn sister. This very first drawing of mine impressed my parents and, by gaining their support, I was able to pursue my passion for Art even to this day.

My father was in the Korean Air Force for twenty years and just like any child of those serving in the military, my childhood consisted of moving to different places in South Korea every one or two years. Wherever we moved, my mother always searched for a place for me to practice art after school, and I am truly blessed to have grown up in such a nurturing.

In a country as small as Korea, however, too many people are pursuing the same ambition that I desired to achieve. Everyone was competing against one another and I realized that I had to differentiate myself as we were all trying to walk down the same narrow path of studying art. By the time I entered high school, I felt the overwhelming pressure within me to do better than other people. I felt I was forced to act like a robot and be technically proficient rather than exploring my own feelings. I had to use specific techniques that were a trend among the students at the time. I was forced to follow that trend and no longer add my thought, emotions, or color into the piece. I had to blend into the crowd of students and I was deprived of my right to be unique. I was told that I would not be able to attend college unless I used the same techniques, because those were more appealing to the viewers' eyes than my own creations. My heart burst against those chains of restraints.

Then came the life-changing moment in my life: moving to America, a place so full of freedom and an environment perfectly suited for my love for art. I was allowed to pursue my own path. No one forced me to use a certain technique or style and I promised myself to never let what seems to be acceptable and desired in this world subdue my innate love and desire for art. This opportunity allowed me to escape from the plain and systematic way of producing art, and by investing more time into creating my own pieces, I was finally able to express what I held deep inside my heart.

Inspiration



Fig. 1 Gate

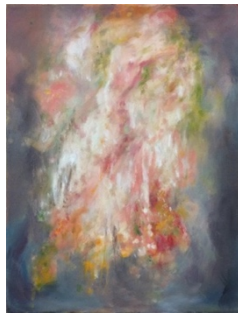


Fig. 2 Sketch



Fig. 3 Dream Garden

When I first came to Radford University in 2014, my color palette was basically high key tone with minimal push pull quality. The work lacked depth, and delivered a bland aura. I deliberately used vibrant colors to create an explosive effect, perhaps to hide my weak point (see fig. 1, 2, 3).

For several weeks since my life as a graduate student started, I was given a task to use neutralized tones in my artwork. As I was working with the neutralized tones, I realized that when tones blend together on the canvas, there is an overall atmosphere of darkness. Colors play the role of light, in such hopeless moments and I reminded myself to keep these dark tones from occupying the whole work.



Fig. 4 Nature- Mandala,
Sung-woo, Chung, 1966

The *Mandala* series (see fig. 4) created by the Korean artist Chung Sung-Woo stated that a pictorial diagram when explains the Buddhist philosophical system not only symbolizes the mysterious cosmology of the religion, but also expresses the artist's psychological landscape (Youngna, 1998). Expressing one's mind especially through colors is a sensitive tool that can be very spiritual and reflective of one's emotion regardless of race, background, culture, and religion.

The Neutral Period

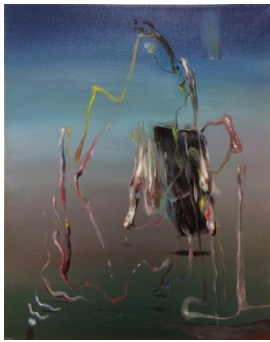


Fig. 5 Immigrant



Fig. 6 Immigrant #2



Fig. 7 Home



Fig. 8 Who am I

I must admit that many events in my life happen as if they were waiting for the right timing and moment. In 2015, I was having some personal problems, and when I think back, they were the gloomiest days of my life. I was emotionally aggressive and negative toward every single little thing that happened in my life. In fact, this negative emotional behavior was reflected in my work through the use of colors. For some reason I started to paint with the darkest choice of colors, such as Prussian blue or black as my first layer, or as the backspace of my painting. Even when I added a color onto it, the color was the lowest level of neutralized tones. I made pieces with colors that were muddy and lifeless (see fig. 5, 6, 7, 8). I was not sure what I was doing and where I was going with this new unwelcomed direction.

German-French Gestural abstract painter Hans Hartung stated,

For about seven years, from 1925 to 1932, I did studies; I made pictures in the style of van Gogh, I did Picassos, I made copies after Matisse, Goya, Hals, everybody. I wanted to understand each of the artists completely, because only by observing paintings created by them could I comprehend in their work that which had not been used up, and I wanted

to compare all this to what I thought my art might replace it with before I, in fact, made my own art.(1975)

Like Hartung, while I was training with the neutralized color tones in early 2015, I was studying to compress and absorb each characteristic and philosophy of many artists. I got inspiration from their philosophy, technique, and color scheme.

I was fascinated by the Surrealists, especially their philosophy. The Surrealists explored the world of dreams. They were the first artists who took much of their inspiration from the Austrian thinker Sigmund Freud. In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud showed how a psychiatrist could help people solve their problems by analyzing, or interpreting, their dreams. Freud believed dreams could reveal the unconscious mind.¹ Also, the Surrealists disliked much of the art of their time because they felt it was too cozy and comfortable. They wanted to shock and unsettle the people who looked at their work, forcing them to think rather than just look by placing objects in unusual combinations (Anderson, 2002).



Fig. 9 Yves Tanguy, *Slowly Toward the North*, 1942

My aim was not different than the Surrealist artists. During the Graduate Art Student's Show at Radford University, many professors and students remarked that my works looked Surrealistic. Two of my significant works during that time were *Who am I* and *Immigrant #2* (see fig. 6, 8). These are works produced after getting an inspiration of Yves Tanguy's painting *Slowly Toward the North* (see fig 9). In my painting *Who am I*, there is an unknown object standing that is facing the floor, a

dark shadow behind the object. However, there is a light in front of the object as if it was making

¹ Robert Anderson, *Artists in Their Time: Salvador Dali*, (London: Franklin Watts, 2002), 18.

eye contact with the unknown object. This painting unsettled my viewers and made them wonder about their work rather than just look and leave. It was a similar effect that Surrealists delivered to their viewers. I was happy that my work had a similar effect on my viewers as the Surrealists, but uncomfortable with the fact that I did not have my own distinctive concept.

The Beginning Series

God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

- Genesis 1:4 -

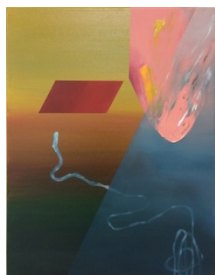


Fig. 10 Adaptation



*Fig. 11 The
Beginning Sketch
#1*



*Fig. 12 The
Beginning Sketch
#2*

We all have bad days and good days in our lives. The last two months of 2015 were the turning point for me as a young artist. In my new paintings (see fig. 10, 11, 12), the dark colors are no longer used from my Surrealist period. I started to use more vibrant colors, but still had elements that were studies of the Surrealist art (see fig. 10). In the new series *“In The Beginning”*, I was inspired by the Bible’s chapter on Genesis. Two verses impacted me in terms of how to reassess: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” had an impact on me in terms of how to reassess. This was a beginning to restart and reframe my visual concerns. Instead of illustrating the verse directly on the canvas, I experimented with this verse, creating my own story, moving from a rigid environment to a place of free thinking.



Fig. 13 Collection from the studio



Fig. 14 *In the Beginning #1*



Fig. 15 *In the Beginning #2*



Fig. 16 *In the Beginning #4*



Fig. 17 *In the Beginning #7*

After working on numerous paintings with this idea, I took a moment to observe all the works. What flashed in my mind was that I was a foreigner in a new place, adapting himself with his own cultural heritage (see fig. 13). With this new revelation, my ideas started to polish and guide me to enrich the color palette more strongly and symbolically by using the color palette of Korean folk art. The most successful outcome during this time was the “*In The Beginning*” series (see fig. 14 -17). It was a huge jump from the early works that I did. It was a new start, and it truly spoke about myself as well as my cultural heritage through the use of the colors I remembered from my childhood in Korea. The metaphorical journey from darkness to light had begun.

Two Cultures in One Life



Fig. 18 Festival, Doo Shik Lee



Fig. 19 Untitled 374, Hans Hartung



Fig. 20 School of Athens, Cy Twombly



Fig. 18b Untitled, Doo Shik Lee



Fig. 19b Untitled 656, Hans Hartung



Fig. 20b Ferragosto IV, Cy Twombly



Fig. 21 Shib jang sang do, Gyu Tae Song

I started to repeatedly have vague memories of my childhood in Korea and the colors from the Korean Folk Art, “Minhwa.” Minhwa (see fig. 21) commonly refers to a genre of Korean folk art from the late Choseon era (17th – 19th centuries). Such

paintings are seen donning the walls of traditional Korean homes, mainly houses where the working class lived. As the working class gained more money and time, they painted “Minhwa.” Minhwa paintings depict the mythology, religion, and views of the Korean people. They also represent the artistic expressions of individuals who created paintings to decorate palaces and

homes and to celebrate joyful family occasions, such as weddings and sixtieth birthdays. For subject matters, artists used symbols to express their feelings of happiness, anger, love, and delight in everyday life. It has been said that the tradition of folk paintings has lasted this long because Minhwa touched the soul of the Korean people (Hyun-chul, 2008).

I repeatedly had memories of my Korean childhood every time I subconsciously planned to work on my pieces and merge with my memories of my life in America. Additionally, I studied the paintings of Doo Shik Lee, combining his calligraphic brush strokes with the painting techniques of Hans Hartung and Cy Twombly (see fig. 18 – 20).

My Art Is...

My memories of Korea centered around Korean folk art. These colors are the ones that I saw in Korean folk art. In Korea, it is common that students of elementary school to high school go on a field trip to the historic sites. Those visits are some of the memories that have shaped my feeling for the greens, pinks, and blues that I use in my work.



Fig. 22 Dano Festival, Yoonbok Shin

It is known that in East Asia painting calligraphy is used as a method to practice meditation, and it is still being practiced by many people worldwide. I structure my paintings also in a meditative manner, and depict my feelings without any hesitation. I refine the forms of my vague memories

from South Korea through the use of lines, shapes, and mark makings. In traditional Korean art, there is a limited size of brush strokes (see fig. 22). However, in contemporary art in both Western and Eastern cultures, there is no limitation on the size or any specific definition of brush strokes. My own definition of the brush stroke is to have a variety of thickness and length of marks that consists of dots, lines, and forms. A good example of artists' style that supports my idea of brush mark is shown below (see fig. 23, 24, 25).



Fig. 53 Untitled 656, Hans Hartung



Fig 54 Ferragosto IV, Cy Twombly



Fig. 55 Untitled, Doo Shik Lee



Fig. 26 *The Beginning #3* (cropped view)



Fig. 27 *Haetam Nohwado*, Hongdo Kim

During the first stage of the paintings, brush strokes are covered by layers of colors. In the end it looks like a cake with a colorful decoration of frosting on top of it (see fig. 26). When I work, there is a fight in my mind to not let myself overwork with colors on a specific area. I let myself seize the moment while I work, and by seizing the moment while I paint, there is a joy and excitement that is indescribable. In Korea, traditional painting space is left untouched in order for the viewer to contemplate the composition (see fig. 27). I extracted this quality and inserted it into my own work as I found great joy in leaving open spaces in my compositions. This allowed me to express my own story and identity myself as a South Korean in United States.

Process & Technique



Fig. 28 *Rhythmic Play*

I first layer a color that dominates the entire work to function as the overall space, often either pink or blue to green. Instead of waiting until the first layer is dry enough to paint the next layer, I continue to work on top of it. Sometimes this method produces a result of unexpected colors (see fig. 28). After giving enough time to take a look at the color that is floating on the canvas, I use a color that acts as a contrast. The result is a new harmonious form that becomes the

main subject of the work. The painting *Rhythmic Play* is an example of this process that describes my work process clearly (see fig. 28). In *Rhythmic Play*, colors are complementary to each other, green – red, blue – orange, yellow, and darker lines next to bright opened field. Below I have attached (see fig. 29 and 30) how this complementary color system is used in my painting (fig 28). My color choice comes from many sources not excluding Korea folk art. They come subconsciously and spontaneously.



Fig. 29 *East and West*

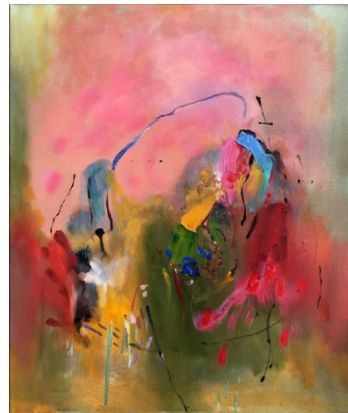


Fig. 30 *Dance in the Pink*

Colors that I use are personal metaphors. When pink is used dominantly or limitedly in the right area, it can be attractive and is used as a symbol of hope and love. The next biggest area that dominates the painting is green and blue, precisely French Ultra Marine and Viridian hue (blue-green). A mixture of blue and green symbolize mystery. I flew over the East Sea and Pacific Ocean twice in my life. It was a pure, deep blue that remained calm when seen from above. Hence, blue symbolizes calm. In my paintings such as *Rhythmic Play*, *East and West*, and *Dance in the Pink*, the sparks of brush marks that are floating represent moments of love, excitement, joy, ambition, and fear that I experienced flying over the calm and the calm and unknown of the water.

After discussing background colors and what they mean to me, I question the marks in my paintings that vary from lines to shapes. In my paintings these various elements exist to create a new form that can be likened to a galactic explosion. When an object with its own true originality lands in an area that it has never been before, transcendental things happen. A light and colors sparkle together and these small fragments become an object and become a story.

When I am in front of a blank canvas and before I begin to paint, I search for memories that pertain to my upbringing. A memory is vague in my imagination. Many stories from my memory overlay, but I prefer not to choose a specific memory. My painting background resembles a space that is often far away and unrecognizable. In order to balance this large bed of color in the composition, I use various shapes, lines, and brush marks in a structured and organic manner. The lines, shapes, and patterns are more calculated, but freely applied on the canvas in order to communicate with the organic lines. The organic lines, shapes, and patterns resemble a path that I have taken from place to place, and become a decorative pattern just like the patterns that were

used in the traditional Korean folk art. My ideas originate from a combination of my cultural experience of East and West. Instead of leaning to one side, I am searching for my own creative voice to create unique stories and holistic experiences. My distinctive cultural heritage speaks to my identity, defining my color palette, and providing me the inspiration to create paintings that are spiritual reflections of identity and feelings.

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