

Innovating Tradition

Remarks on the new works of Tschoon Su Kim

by Gerhard Charles Rump

Tradition usually is comfortable, because it provides a solid ground to stand on. But tradition is more than the conservation of relics. It is the continuation of lifelines, also in the realm of the aesthetic. Abstraction in the sense of the non-representational, the self-sufficient or even autonomous mode of painting, has a long tradition in art. One of its origins lies in the background of mediaeval paintings, it started to really come to life in J. M. W. Turners paintings of the 1840s, and entered the stage to play a leading role in 1910 with Kandinsky, František Kupka and Hilla Rebay supporting.

Although figurative painting leads the way at the moment, there is a very strong faction of abstract painters. Gerhard Richter re-invented abstract expressionism in Germany, Michael Burges is one of the most important German abstract artists, Bernard Frize holds this position in France – the voice of the abstract makes itself heard internationally.

It seems natural that abstraction is also strong in Korea. The non-representational character of abstract art lends itself to a meditative access in its appreciation. A leading role on Korea's stage of painting – which means, at the same time, the international one, as there isn't any truly "national" art scene anywhere anymore – is played by Tschoon Su Kim. His works are easy to recognize, as Tschoon Su Kim paints in blue, exclusively (which would still hold true even if you found the odd one in a different colour).

That, of course, links his work with yet another tradition, as the colour blue enjoys, in international art, a very good reputation and distinction, linked to, among others, Yves Klein and Damien Hirst.

But although Tschoon Su Kim's work is firmly connected to two legs of tradition, it is, at the same time, highly innovative. It represents a new interpretation, a new application, a new aesthetic to abstract painting and to blue as a colour's aesthetical contribution.

First the abstract tradition. We know of lyrical, expressionist, geometrical, and gestural abstraction, to name only the most important sectors. Tschoon Su Kim's work belongs to gestural abstraction, but his paintings aren't arrays of expressive gestural explosions telling the viewer about the state of a tormented soul in transports, rather they show short and energetic brushstrokes, combining expression and restraint. The repetition of the strokes

wandering over the paintings' surfaces imports a serial character. Thus form rules over emotion, without extraditing it.

The resulting "all-over" patterns, in cooperation with the white of the background (usually found in watercolours!), do not, however, form regular patterns like to be seen in pattern painting. The elements align but not in a straight way, rather they meander about, sometimes with a stronger pull on the reins, sometimes a little more freely.

As a result, we get three main types of images: a) those with a stronger or a weaker, and b) those with no figurative associations at all. On top of that c), those with an autonomous superimposed pattern.

There are images which will, inevitably, remind the viewer of leaves hanging from the branches of a willow tree, or of the nervous up and down of short waves on the surface of the sea or a lake. This doesn't mean that leaves or waves are the subject of the paintings – in that case Tschoon Su Kim would have painted leaves or waves. It is just that the one of the subjects of the painting, distributed form, coincides structurally with the structural skeleton of leaves or waves.

Mainly we are confronted with large blue and white paintings which gain their fascination from the intricate interplay of applied colour, white background, the form of the serial brushstrokes (which will vary, of course) and the superstructures they call into being. Many abstract paintings have such elements, but mostly they are painted on the surface. In Tschoon Su Kim's images they emerge out of the painting, like particles from the void. The particles, however, disappear again in no time. But Tschoon Su Kim's images are here to stay.

The other line of tradition is the use of the colour blue. There hasn't ever been an artist to make such exclusive and extensive use of blue. Blue is a colour of comfort. It is the colour of the sky in daytime, it is, partly at least, the colour of the sea, it is undoubtedly visually present but doesn't get at the viewer like red, red-orange or neon-green. Blue can be seen as the epitome of colour, pointing at colour as such, and, at the same time, at itself.

The exclusive use of blue gives blue as a colour a new meaning, exceeding and transcending everything done with it in the past. There isn't any painting unless it is blue, which goes to say: Blue stands for painting, so there isn't any painting unless it is painted. And that, again, means that Tschoon Su Kim's images are not only about distributed form, but also about painting itself. So they constitute an innovation of tradition, which makes them important, and of great import on contemporary art.