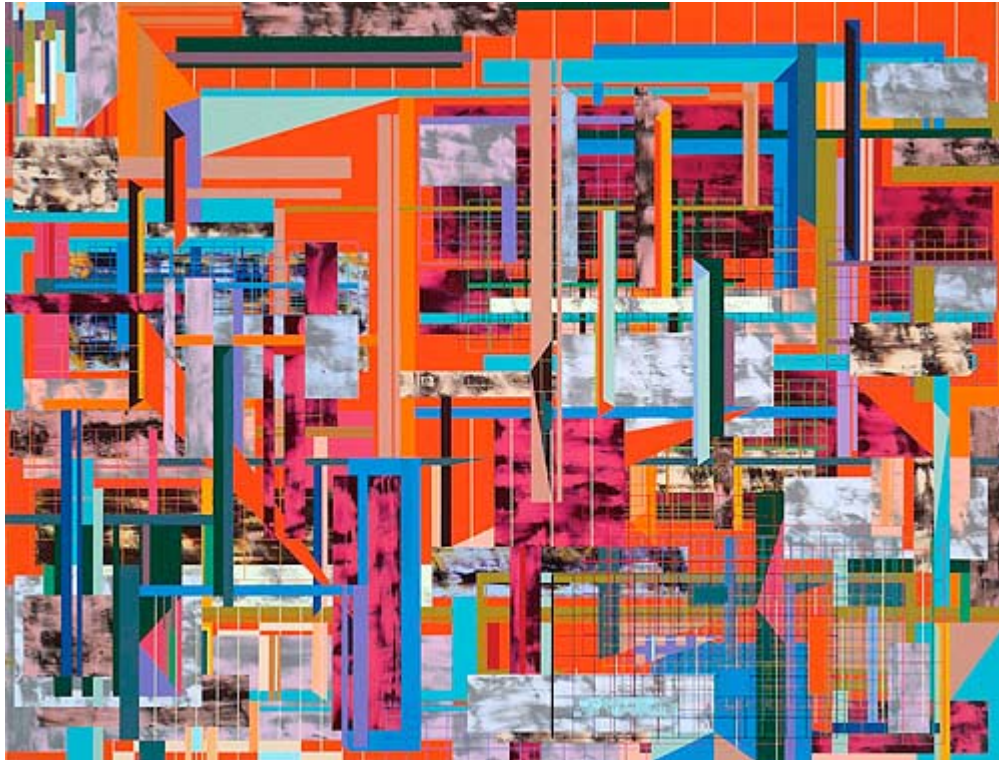


ASIAN ART

THE NEWSPAPER FOR COLLECTORS, DEALERS, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Changha Hwang



Body (2006), Changha Hwang, acrylic on canvas, 73 x 96 inches

Several years ago, Lee Bul appeared as the leader of a new wave of Korean artists. It seems that as this time numerous artists from China and Japan gained international recognition, contemporary art from Korea lost its momentum, and there were few artists that could credit their curriculum vitae with exhibitions in prominent galleries in the US or in Europe. Since 2002, however, a talented Korean artist has attracted increasing interest since graduating in 2002 - Changha Hwang (b. 1969) and presently based in New York. He is an unusual painter in the sense that he is a fervent defender of abstraction, a language that has been left aside by most young painters who prefer figurative work. His paintings have often been said to resemble a computer chip, represent a constant challenge to redefine abstraction. In this interview with Olivia Sand, he assesses his brief career, and discusses the

opportunities and limitations of abstraction.

Asian Art Newspaper: Very little has been published regarding your background. Under what circumstances did you go to the US, and what curriculum did you follow?

Changha Hwang: I came to the US in 1990. My parents divorced when I was very young. My mother remarried a Korean, who was also an American citizen. As she had already moved to the US, I stayed with my father in Korea. Unfortunately, he passed away when I was just twenty. Consequently, I had no family left in Korea, and I joined my mother in the US. At that point, I was not sure what I was going to do with my life. I had been drawing, but I never thought about becoming an artist. In order to communicate and learn the language, I first took an English class. Then, I attended college in Dallas, Texas, where they offered very basic drawing and design classes. I signed up for both of them, and from then on, I knew that this was what I wanted to do. I felt so much excitement and joy when I was drawing! In our art department, there was a small poster describing the classes at Parsons School of Design in New York. I decided to apply and was admitted. This marked the beginning of a more serious involvement with the arts. I attended Parsons, went to Hunter College for the credit programme, and on the graduation show of the Master's programme, I met Massimo Audiello, who gave me my first solo exhibition. From then on, everything happened very fast, with shows in Paris, Madrid, and Brussels.

AAN: Is your primary background drawing?

CH: Drawing was the starting point of my artistic interest, and drawing is what led me to painting. I had never thought about painting before, but I was very much drawn to colour, and wanted to further explore the possibilities of working with colour.

AAN: What does colour mean to you, and how do you explore it?

CH: Colour provides me with the complexity for which I longed, a complexity that is almost infinite. It has special connotations for me. When I was growing up, my parents had books on Western masters like Rubens, for example. There were numerous reproductions of rococo and baroque paintings, and I spent a lot of time looking at them. There were pictures of beautiful naked woman, and I admired the fleshtones and all the luscious colours. Looking back, I realise that the sexual aspect of the colours was speaking to me, and going further, I think that sexuality played an important role in my interest in colour, which is something I never realised until recently.

AAN : What is your approach towards selecting a colour? Do you rely on colourboards or computers?

CH: No, not at all. The process is very intuitive. The first mark of colour on the painting decides the rest. It is all about the relationship of one colour to

the other. The second mark is made in relation to the first one, and so it goes on.

AAN: If the first colour comes back in different parts of the painting, is this all applied during the first mark?

CH: Yes. The spatial dimension in painting is really one of my main interests. Whenever I put a colour and an image, and later on add another colour and image, it creates strange relationships. It breaks away from the classical rendering figure/background. I find it fascinating to play with this positive and negative space. By layering and layering, I am braking away from what is ground, what is figure, and that borderline is very interesting to me. By layering many colours and lines, I want to create and build up a visual tension. To me, visual tension is very much based on an evolution: when two separate items collide the tension builds up and this is when evolution starts. It is almost similar to a 'big bang' theory.

AAN: Would you consider yourself an 'architect of painting'?

CH: Yes, that is an accurate way to describe it. Architecture has been one of the key points in my work because it is about space, about the physical space, and when I paint, I have this confined canvas. I am constantly aware of this confinement of space. I want to break away from it, but at the same time, I want to deal with it. Space is an important part of my work, as is architecture.

AAN: Your work can be read in many different ways: as a labyrinth; as a painting exploring tension and opposites; or as a way to redefine abstraction. What interpretation do you favour?

CH: I am very much drawn to the notion of abstraction. Although my pieces are abstract, I see them as a self-portrait. I envision numerous possibilities with abstraction in connection to identity and self-portraiture. I realise that my work may be seen as computer-like imagery, but to me it is more about portrait imagery. However, in today's world, where everything is driven by technology - computers, and digital devices - I cannot avoid the fact that my work is often perceived as a reflection of our time.

AAN: Abstraction is rarely used among today's young generation of artists. What drew you towards abstraction?

CH: While at school, I was using a different language from abstraction. Before graduating in the US, I took part in an exchange scholarship to the Netherlands. I had the opportunity to spend the entire day in my studio and experiment, something I had never had a chance to do before. I was eager to try out all possible artistic languages (trace paintings, drip paintings, etc.), in order to find the appropriate language for me. Five months into the programme, I had to prepare some pieces for the graduation exhibition, and I did not know what to do. Considering all the languages I had accumulated, I decided to combine all these tools into one picture plane and look at the outcome. I made two paintings with lines, space division, colour differences

and something very unexpected happened: the tension I was longing for was suddenly there. Consequently, I further developed that direction, exploring the spatial connection, and increasing the format of my paintings while keeping the visual tension. As time went by, everything became clear, and I began to feel very comfortable with this new language.

AAN: Among your influences, there seems to be a strong inclination towards Pollock and Richter. Can you elaborate on that?

CH: I was aware of Richter's early figurative paintings. As he suddenly also completed abstract paintings, I was so impressed by the way he could create such a powerful abstract image, how simple these pieces were even though they were very complex! Richter's and Pollock's pieces made a very strong impression on me as I saw them for the first time. I admire both of these artists because I see their paintings as a distillation process, where everything happens by itself. The distillation of images goes through the filter without having the artist's ego involved. I wanted to emulate that aspect. I wanted to have a distillation process to make imagery, not just me making an image, but some other process taking place through a distillation filter. To clarify my point, I would compare it to the work of Roxy Paine, where there are the strangest machines involved in making a sculpture. Every machine does one part, but at the end, the artist has no control. I find this process fascinating, and in that respect, Richter and Pollock were exceptional. I consider them as 'liberating' artists, and both of them truly influenced my work.

AAN: During the past decade, there has been a strong return of painting. However, few young artists paint in abstraction, which seems to be a more difficult and radical language than figurative painting. What are your thoughts?

CH: To me, figurative painting still has that connotation of imagery making. It is not really about the object itself. That is one of the reasons I stick to abstract painting because it has the potential to be the object of the thing, and not necessarily about showing a sense of imagery in a confined space. Figurative painting simply does not reflect my character or interest. I am more drawn towards the possibilities and the potential of painting things different from an object, or an imagery. Surprisingly, many young students attending art school today are working in abstraction again. There even seems to be a return of all the abstract notions from the 1950s/60s, which is very interesting.

AAN: What is your relationship towards the medium of painting? Where does the concept of form fit in?

CH: I like the limitations of painting. Like Sarah Sze, for example. She sets as limitation for herself that her pieces never touch the ground, making incredible works on the wall, or on the ceiling. I wanted to have a limitation in space, but also in the form of my imagery. I wanted to have a very simple rectangular, or square shape, which in my opinion offers the most

possibilities. I see more options to be creative with a very simple form, and by extension a limitation of form. That is why I use a lot of these simple rectangular shapes.

AAN: An analogy that comes back frequently regarding your work is with Mondrian. Do you see some similarities or do you see yourself at the other extreme of the spectrum?

CH: There is clearly an analogy with plasticism, Russian Constructivism, and De Stijl that were instrumental in starting my interest in abstraction. I admired how they could make an imagery or a painting with a simple notion. Mondrian and all the Constructivist movement are fundamental, and I was strongly drawn to them.

AAN: What direction do you see your paintings taking in relation to the body of work you have produced so far?

CH: My ambition has always been to make a very simple, but solid painting like Brice Marden or Robert Ryman. The concept of 'solid painting' is essential to me although I cannot articulate it properly. I have an image in the back of my mind that I am trying to recreate on the canvas. By further developing that idea, by combining the spatial interest, the theory of color, and the notion of abstraction in a simple form, I hope I will be able to bring that image to life.

AAN: Are there any plans for an exhibition in Korea?

CH: I would like to show in Korea, my motherland. As I studied in the US and mainly exhibit in the US and in Europe, the audience in Korea does not know my work. I would be thrilled if an opportunity came up. My roots are in Korea, and I cannot avoid the fact that to a certain extent the aesthetics in my work come from my motherland. Perhaps the colour palette I am using in my paintings is a response to the environment in which I grew up? The time I spent in Korea as a child coincided with the time Korea was trying to achieve economical growth, and the building industry was booming. Facing all that concrete and cement, together with the constant grey environment encouraged me to add more colour to my pieces.

AAN: Have you been back to Korea since you came to the US in 1990?

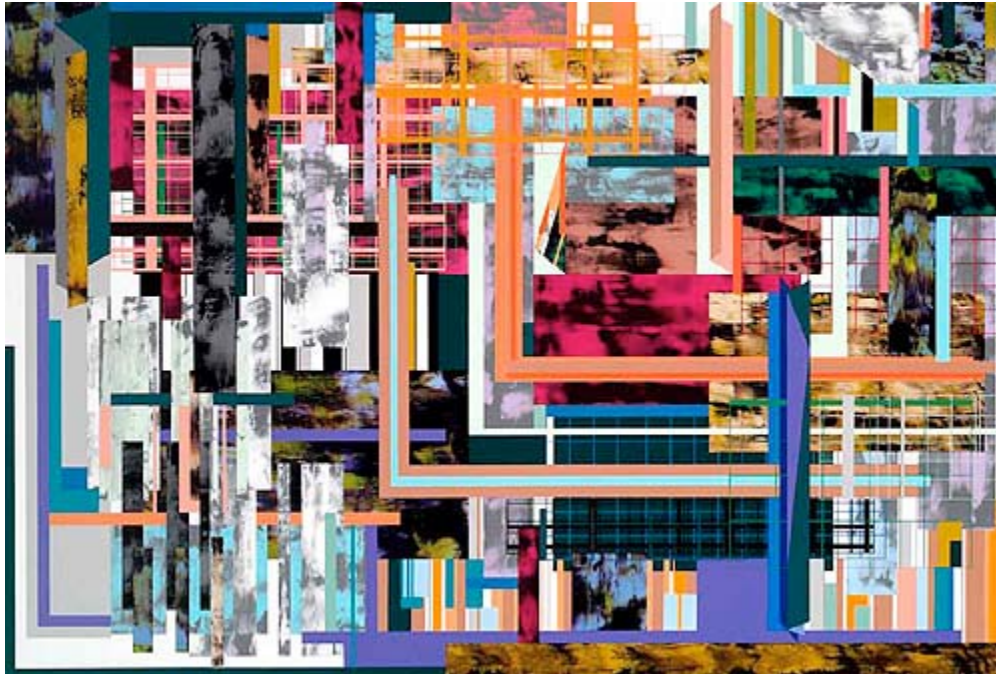
CH: Yes, last year, for the first time in 14 years. Strangely, it felt as if I had left yesterday. I was convinced I would be confronted with so many changes that I would not be able to cope with the new environment. Indeed, things have changed dramatically with numerous new buildings, economic improvements which are visible in daily life. For me, the time in Korea is similar to a clock that has been stopped while I was abroad, and started again once I was back home. It did not feel as if I had been away for a long time.

AAN: How did you find the contemporary art scene? Would you consider living there again?

CH: I would not mind living there part of the year. Although I only saw a few galleries during my stay, I felt a distance between Korean contemporary art and what I do in New York. I would tend to say that artists have a different approach making art in Korea and in the United States. It is striking how in America artists sometimes start a painting with a very simple idea. For example, they like rowing, consequently they will try to complete an artwork based on rowing. That approach has nothing to do with the history of art or with colour theory. They start a piece with whatever they are interested in or have a passion for, and make something out of it with the language of painting or sculpture. In Korea, artists start with a very complex, philosophical idea, and they try to make something out of it. Personally, I have reservations about that kind of approach because I believe that if an artist starts with something that is so complex, it is extremely difficult to go beyond that philosophical idea. That approach is very limited. In America, while using mundane, even silly things as a starting point, there is still the possibility to reach deeply into theory or philosophy. Perhaps, we have different approaches as to what art should be?

AAN: You brought up an interesting concept, in your opinion, what should art be?

CH: Art is about identity. It helps finding out who you are, not just yourself, but anyone. Frank Stella said that his paintings were not just about his identity, but about everybody else's identity. Art is a reflection of our time, of our environment, of our interests. Like life, art is complex, and infinite. As artists, we are trying to examine it, dissect it, and hopefully we will find out more about the world in which we live.



Mass (2006), Changha Hwang, acrylic on canvas, 57 x 84 inches



Grey, Black, White (2005-6), Changha Hwang, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 252 inches. All images courtesy of Massimo Audiello Gallery, New York