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The Paintings of Yun Hyong-Keun as ‘Emergent Blended Structures’

Simon Morley

How can two ideas be merged to produce a new structure, which shows the influence of both ancestor ideas without being a mere ‘cut-and-paste’ combination?

Mary Boden¹

1 Quoted by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities*, Basic Books, New York, 2002, p 17

The great image, that is, the image that contains all images (in the manner of the Tao) and manifests the source of things, is an un-imagined image, but it is not abstract (it does not refer to the level of essences): it has simply liberated its character of image from any anecdotal or specific aspect of its content; by retaining the indistinct, it remains open to plenitude.

2 François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, Sophie Hawkes, trans, Zone Books, New York, 2000, p 291

François Jullien²

3 This biographical information comes from Kate Lim, ‘The Life and Art of Yun Hyong-keun’, *Yun Hyong-Keun*, PKM Gallery, 2015, pp 208–214. Note that Koreans put their family name first. Furthermore, the hyphen (-) is not a component of the Korean original. So a more accurate Anglicised rendering of Yun’s name would be Hyongkeun Yun. Some Koreans use the hyphen, some do not, and normally the family name stays at the beginning. For example, Joan Kee (op cit below) transliterates Yun’s name as Yun Hyongkeun.

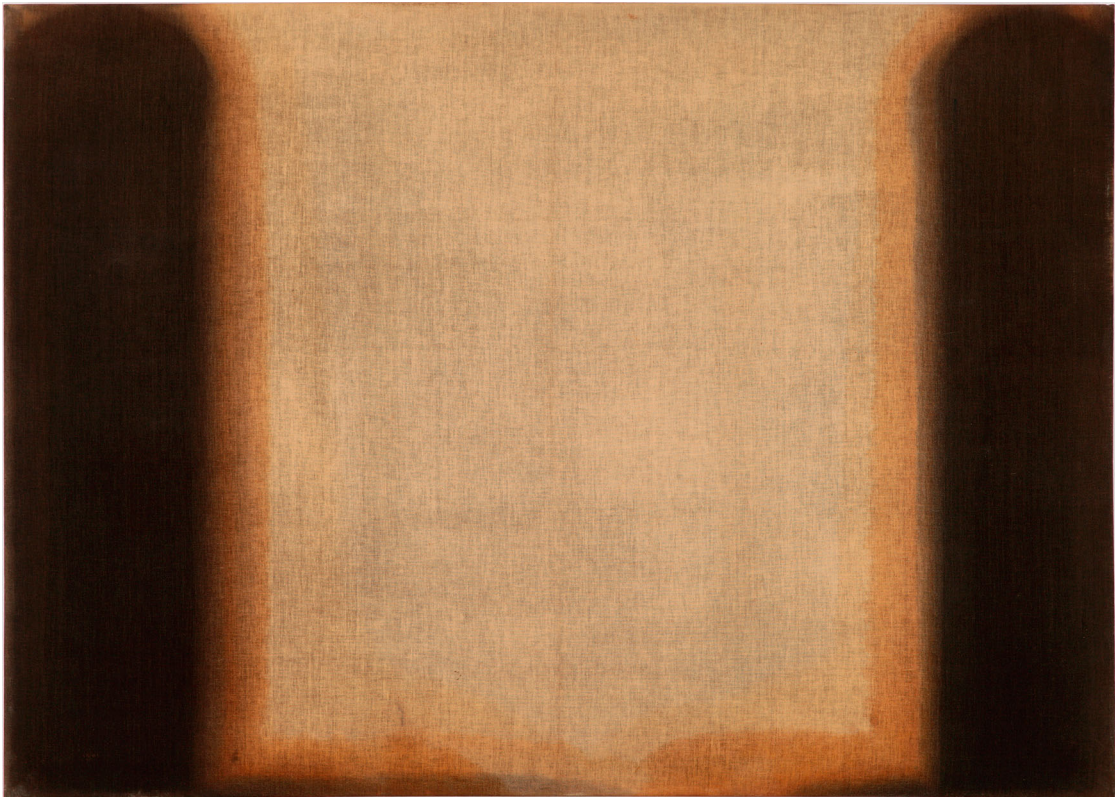
The Korean painter Yun Hyong-keun (1928–2007) was born during a period when Korea was enduring a repressive period of Japanese colonial rule.³ This had begun in 1910 with the fall of the 500-year-old Joseon Dynasty, and ended in 1945 with the defeat of Japan in the Pacific War. Yun was then seventeen years old. He now watched Korea being arbitrarily divided by the Russians and Americans along the thirty-eighth Parallel, an act which brought into existence two rival versions of ‘modern’ Korea – one lying under Soviet Communist control, the other under the United States and its allies. Yun was sympathetic to the political left, and in 1948 he was arrested and spent a period of time in prison. Then, at the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Yun was caught in the general round-up of potential Communist sympathisers, but fortuitously managed to escape the ensuing mass executions and to survive the war. He eventually continued his studies, and subsequently became an art teacher at high school, then a university professor in a faculty of Western Painting.⁴ The post-war period in which Yun forged his mature style was one of rapid economic development in the Republic of Korea, overseen by repressive military governments that successfully

- 4 It is worth noting that even today in Korean universities there are ‘Western’ painting and ‘Oriental’ painting schools, and commercial galleries and museums that cater for one or other convention.
- 5 There is very little in English specifically on Yun. For a recent exhibition catalogue see: *Yun Hyong-keun*, PKM Gallery, Seoul, 2015. References to Yun occur in, for example: *Working with Nature: Traditional Thought in Contemporary Art from Korea*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, Liverpool, 1992, (exhibition: 8 April 1992 – 21 June 1992); *Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting*, National Museum of Contemporary Art, exhibition catalogue, 2012, (exhibition: Gwacheon, 17 March – 13 May); *The Art*

led the nation towards hugely increased prosperity. In 1987, when Yun was sixty-one years old, a democratically elected government came to power for the first time. Economic growth continued apace, while across the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) that continues to divide the Peninsula, the rulers of the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea were leading their people towards economic disaster, famine, and regime stability imposed by brutal oppression and the threat of nuclear war.

Yun died in 2007, and today he is most closely allied with *Dansaekhwa* – Korean for ‘monochrome painting’ – a catch-all term for a group of artists who, beginning in the mid-1970s, practised what is usually considered an exclusively Western preoccupation: minimalistic abstract painting. *Dansaekhwa* paintings, as produced, for example, by Park Seo-bo (b 1931), Chung Sang-hwa (b 1932), Ha Cong-Hyun (b 1935), and Lee Dong-youb (b 1946), as well as by the now internationally well-known Korean but Japan-domiciled Lee Ufan (b 1936), are characterised by large-scale, simple all-over composition, seriality of technique and style, muted tonality, pronounced surface texture, repetitious procedures and the deictic traces of process.⁵

Yun displayed a persistent preoccupation with the deployment of burnt umber mixed with ultramarine blue stained into raw canvas, and used a limited repertoire of exclusively vertical and horizontal fuzzy-



Yun Hyong-keun, *Umber-Blue*, 1975, oil on cotton, 130 x 181.3 cm, image: courtesy of Yun Seong-ryeol and P K M Gallery

of *Dansaekhwa*, exhibition catalogue, Kukje Gallery, Seoul, 2014. For a theoretical approach to Korean monochrome painting see: Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013 (note: *Tansaekhwa* is another transliteration option for the Korean original, because the 'D' and 'T' sound are Anglicised renderings of the same Korean alphabetic letter). Chapter One of Kee's book discusses Yun in detail, drawing attention, for example, to his dialogue with the tradition of ink painting. Kee also emphasises how, in order to understand this period of Korean art, it is necessary to recognise the extent to which 'Western' art was encountered via Japan, and the additional ambivalence this presented to artists of the former colony. For more on *Dansaekhwa* in English see Simon Morley, 'Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting', *Third Text* 121, vol 27, no 2, March 2013, pp 189–207, reprinted in Beth Harland and Sunil Manghani, eds, *Painting: Critical and Primary Sources*, vol II, Bloomsbury, London and New York, 2015.

6 Yoon Jin-Sup, *Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting*, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Gwacheon, South Korea, 17 March – 13 May 2012, p 98

7 See, for example Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994; Avtar Brah and Annie E Coombes, eds, *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000; Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*, Rowman & Littlefield, Boulder, Colorado, 2004.

8 Quoted in Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, op cit

edged rectilinear forms. But his work also stands apart from the monochrome paintings produced by his compatriots – from whom he also often sought to distance himself. For example, while Yun's works are usually monochromatic, and depend on a narrow range of serial procedures, they are also clearly far more concerned with spatial illusion. Solid forms seem to be eaten away by the forces of dissolution, and eroded edges slip into elusive vagueness; they evince a strong awareness of loosely established figure-ground segregations and of a hazily ambient 'atmosphere'. In this sense, Yun's paintings are more 'traditional' than the other *Dansaekhwa* artists – or at least, they seem to be, to the eyes of this Western viewer.

In the catalogue for his exhibition of 2012, 'Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting' at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, the curator and critic Yoon Jin-sup invokes the Western concept of 'the Sublime' in relation to Yun, and then twelve lines later, at the end of the same paragraph, refers to 'the reason of yin and yang governed by Mother Nature', an East Asian concept that, as we shall see, is in many ways incompatible with the dualistic world-view within which the concept of the Sublime functions.⁶ Is it simply lazy art writing to cobble together the Sublime and *yin* and *yang*, as Yoon does? Or rather, is it, as I will argue, a case of being faithful to the paradoxical nature of Yun's work, as indeed, it is also, more broadly, being faithful to the paradoxical nature of much Korean art produced during the 1970s and 1980s?

CONCEPTUAL BLENDING

The concept of 'hybridity' is often applied in relation to 'postcolonial' works like Yun's in order to critique essentialism and to discuss the clashing and binding of cultural influences.⁷ In linguistics, a hybrid word signifies one derived etymologically from different languages (such as 'television' from the Greek *tēle* meaning 'far' and the Latin *visio* meaning 'act of seeing', from *vidēre* meaning 'to see'), and this seems to be the sense in which the term 'hybrid' is used in postcolonial theory. Hybridity implies a fracturing of the dominant culture's narratives through deliberate disjunctures of its formal and semantic structures introduced by the 'marginal' culture. The notion of visual hybridity certainly suggests much 'postmodern' appropriation art of the 1980s and 1990s, and examples of 'postcolonial' art today. The discourse of hybridity emphasises irredeemable difference, and assumes there will always be a fundamental absence of resemblance between the dissonant elements that comprise the work, indeed that this very dissonance is a key aspect of how a work can be potentially subversive. But as a result, such works risk remaining a 'mere cut-and-paste combination', as the cognitive scientist Margaret Boden describes it.⁸

I think the term 'hybrid' does not do justice to the subtle ways in which Yun's paintings function. In order to supplement this model I now turn to the 'conceptual blending' or 'conceptual integration' theory developed by the linguist Gilles Fauconnier and the philosopher Mark Turner, which offers a more useful heuristic. They explore indirect and obscure semantics, and how the integration of different kinds of inputs functions in non-

linguistic contexts. They thereby extend George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's influential work on conceptual metaphor through embracing representations that are understood to be ad hoc 'mental spaces' created from incompatible entities within fluid mental fields rather than discursively or linguistically formed domains.⁹ Conceptual integration, as Fauconnier and Turner write:

... involves setting up mental spaces, matching across spaces, projecting selectively to a blend, locating shared structures, projecting backwards to inputs, recruiting new structure to the inputs or the blend, and running various operations in the blend.¹⁰

A minimum of four 'mental spaces' is posited, which unlike metaphors are considered provisional, temporary and contingent, thereby preserving a greater degree of fluidity and creative vagueness. 'Mental spaces' are temporary conceptual coherences constructed to facilitate local understanding and action. 'The essence of the operation,' write Fauconnier and Turner, 'is to construct a partial match between two input mental spaces, to project selectively from those inputs into a novel "blended" mental space, which then dynamically develops emergent structure'.¹¹ First, there are at least two 'input spaces', which contribute semantic content. A correspondence or a correlation is established between these input spaces through which their structures are perceived as similar in some respects. To these 'input spaces' blending theory adds a 'generic space', which contains abstract schematic representation of elements that are shared by both input spaces. It leads back to core ahistorical and foundational schemata derived from memories of embodied experience, and can involve such basic experiences as location, centre/periphery, in/out, up/down, containers, paths, colour diversity, etc. Finally, there is the 'blended space'. This includes the output of the process, or the 'emergent structure', and is a combination of semantic content selectively projected from the input spaces and integrated into a coherent conceptual, synergic, whole. Importantly, the blend is not just the sum of the elements derived from the input spaces because the emergent structure attracts additional components that were not necessarily directly recruited from any of the inputs.¹²

Key aspects of the compression involved in creating a 'blended emergent structure' are 'composition', 'completion' and 'elaboration'.¹³ 'Composition' leads to the existence of elements in the blended space that do not exist in the separate input spaces that preceded it. 'Completion' involves the input of background knowledge and structure that informs the blend; as Fauconnier and Turner write: 'We see some parts of a familiar frame of meaning, and much more of the frame is recruited silently but effectively to the blend.'¹⁴ 'Elaboration' then occurs, precipitating simulations and 'running the blend' imaginatively in each new encounter.¹⁵ The different possible routes of such elaborations – some valuable, others not – signal the richness of the blended space.

A 'blended' work is a fluid and interstitial entity. It entails a more complex notion of 'difference' – one characterised by what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the 'translucence' rather than the 'transparency' of translation.¹⁶ As Chakrabarty writes:

9 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1980; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999

10 Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, op cit, p 44

11 Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, 'Conceptual Blending, Form and Meaning', *Recherches en communication* 19, 2003, pp 57–86; pp 57–58, <http://tecfa.unige.ch/tecfa/malt/cofor-1/textes/Fauconnier-Turner03.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2015. For a useful collection of essays applying 'conceptual blending theory' see Mark Turner, ed, *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

12 Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, op cit, pp 40–44

13 Ibid, pp 48–49

14 Ibid, p 48

15 Ibid

16 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2007, p 17

17 Ibid

18 Barbara Maria Stafford, *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and New York, 1999, p 9

19 Robert Rosenblum, 'The Abstract Sublime' [1961], reprinted in Ellen G Landau, ed, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Contexts and Critique*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2005, pp 273–278. Rosenblum develops this thesis in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, HarperCollins, New York, 1977. The word 'sublime' is notoriously imprecise. In common usage it means 'lofty', 'noble', 'grand', or 'awe-inspiring'. But in art theory, the Sublime – capitalised – signifies something far more complex and paradoxical.

... what translation produces out of seeming 'incommensurabilities' is neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call 'difference'.¹⁷

The concept of 'blending' thus recognises *analogy* as a key resource in creative work, for analogy spurs the imagination 'to discover similarities in dissimilarities', as Barbara Stafford writes, and is 'a metamorphic and metaphoric practice for weaving discordant particulars into a partial concordance'.¹⁸

'RUNNING THE BLEND' 1: THE KOREAN SUBLIME?

To a Westerner, Yun's paintings may bring to mind the work of Mark Rothko (1903–1970) (the fuzzy rectangles and 'inner' light), or Morris Louis (1912–1962) (the staining), and also, perhaps, Barnett Newman (1905–1970) (the vertical strips). Such stylistic similarities site Yun's paintings firmly within a modernist discourse, and also in a situation of belatedness. However, Greenbergian-style formalism soon seems an inadequate tool for interpreting the affective potency of Yun's works, especially in relation to their obsessive formal reductiveness and reiterative seriality. These qualities locate Yun's paintings more firmly within what Robert Rosenblum calls the discourse of the 'abstract sublime'.¹⁹ They can then also be approached within a much broader Western historical narrative that includes the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and JMW Turner (1775–1851) – a narrative that links



Yun Hyong-keun, *Umber*, 1988–1989, oil on linen, 205 x 333.5 cm, image: courtesy of Yun Seong-ryeol and PKM Gallery

formal properties to concepts, and is under-written especially by the eighteenth-century theories of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant relating to the Sublime, and by the more recent elaborations of Jean-François Lyotard concerning the ‘postmodern sublime’.²⁰ The discourse locates Yun’s practice *stylistically* in an evolution leading from the genre of landscape towards abstraction, *historically*, in a chronology that begins in the eighteenth century and continues to the present day where it is invoked in a variety of theoretical contexts, and *geographically* in a migration leading west from Europe towards the United States – and also, or so it seems, to the Republic of Korea.

The emergence of the concept of the Sublime was provoked by the need to find ways to address extreme subjective states that were unaccounted for within the horizon of the traditional world-view. It was a new way of talking about the unstable relationship between order and disorder, and was involved in exploring moments of extreme disruptions when reason falters, certainties crumble, thought comes to an end, and we are forced into an uncomfortable encounter with the ‘other’. What is ultimately at stake in the discourse of the Sublime is the fragile unity of the subject when poised on the threshold between being and nothingness, and it is therefore also often judged traumatic. The Sublime experience destroys the meaning of established narratives, but does not so much change a pre-given framework as annul the existing one, without replacing it with anything else. Ultimately, as Lyotard noted, the sublime addresses the ‘unpresentable’ – it is a confrontation with the unknowable and ineffable.

In relation to the arts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the sublime was used to describe the emotional impact of aspects of nature that install awe, wonder and terror, such as mountains, avalanches, waterfalls, stormy seas, the infinite vault of the sky. More recently, the source of the Sublime experience has shifted to the technological. Formally, a key visual index of the Sublime is formlessness, or the absence of form,²¹ and under the sway of the Sublime experience artists felt compelled to bring forth visual analogies for a dimension conceived as lying beyond the material and knowable realm – one fundamentally without shape, form or sense. In the process, they forged a new visual language based on negations, abbreviations, concealments, erasures, blanks and absences. JMW Turner abandoned bounded lines and stable compositional structures, creating works that evoked a chromatic vortex. Caspar David Friedrich conceived of his unprecedentedly empty canvases as a void harbouring the infinite and unrepresentable God, and the vacant vistas he conjured were intended to convey the closeness and inevitability of the nothingness within which it was possible to experience more strongly the redemptive power of the transcendent divine.

The Sublime landscape thus re-created the sensation of being at a threshold beyond which infinite nothingness looms, and it would eventually lead to the forging of an art that was divested of any lingering representational reference – abstraction. Thus, in the twentieth century, the ‘sublimity’ initially associated with landscape was transferred to the formal properties of the medium itself. Repudiation of the figurative image, largeness of scale, simplicity of format, lack of detail, preoccupation with colour, denial of the structuring possibilities of line, and pronounced planarity combined with the evocation of infinite depths were

20 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], Part II, Sections I–II; ed, Adam Phillips, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1990; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [1790], J C Meredith, trans, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1973

21 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, p 78. See also by Lyotard: ‘Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime’, Lisa Liebmann, trans, *Artforum*, April 1982, pp 64–69; ‘The Sublime and the Avant-garde’, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, trans, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991. Both are re-printed in Morley, *ibid*.

all ways of engendering a sense of the Sublime. In the works of Rothko, for example, the pursuit of the Sublime meant that specific formal properties were employed in order to challenge visual acuity and cognitive mastery, eroding the legibility of signs, the production of meaning, the possibility of knowing. When a viewer encounters the open field of blurs, gaps, overlaps and dissonances in a Rothko painting, lapses and perturbations of sense and meaning multiply vertiginously.

Yun Hyong-Keun's paintings seem to unfold within this broad context. First of all, they clearly suggest the experience of landscape by engendering memories of being vertically oriented in a location or environment.²² There is the entraining of the forms of the Sublime landscape *topos*. In particular, his paintings evoke memories of what it is like to view a distant land mass silhouetted against the sky. The large, blurred forms, through being anchored invariably to the bottom horizontal of the canvas rectangle, suggest mountains, ravines and waterfalls seen in the crepuscular light of dawn or dusk – of which there are many in Korea, a country that is seventy per cent mountainous – and the washes of paint and blurred transitions evoke atmospheric mist or haze caused by condensation in the air – a phenomenon that, not coincidentally, is a pronounced aspect of the Korean climate as it affects the succession of ridges and valleys that unfold towards the distant horizon.

Moreover, Yun's work can also be closely allied with the more 'abstract' version of the Western concept of Sublime: 'landscape' allusions recede and are replaced by considerations of how as in Rothko's work, say, formal elements within a painting can invoke the Sublime; loss of overall detail and blurring is often combined with the deliberate evacuation of the central area of the composition. The centre is where we would normally expect to focus our attention, and there is also a concomitant pushing of attention towards, and beyond, the edges of the canvas. As a result, we experience a heightened awareness of absence, combined with the recognition that the rectangle of the canvas does not seem to contain or restrain the totality of the image; it seems to bleed into the surrounding space.

In a specifically Korean historical context, Yun's version of the Sublime can be described as a subjective response to a traumatic period of rupture with the historically sanctioned. His discarding of traditional artistic styles and materials was motivated by his heightened awareness that the 'old ways' no longer spoke to the present. Social turmoil brought questions of Korean identity to the fore, staging it as recognition that traditional Korean culture no longer met present needs. But no correspondingly new one had or, perhaps, could, come into existence. In this reading, Yun was thus producing a kind of art that sought – through the indirection implied by high levels of de-figuring, negation, pictorial blankness, and the refusal to depict anything clearly – to draw attention to social crisis, and the abyssal ontological crisis set in train by the catastrophe of civil war and the submersion of traditional Korean society under the waves of ceaseless modernisation.

'RUNNING THE BLEND' 2: YUN AND SHANSHUI

But focusing solely on the relationship of Yun's painting to the Sublime suppresses its ambivalent relationship to another tradition of landscape

22 My goal in drawing attention to such nature-derived attributes is not to reduce Yun's works to the status of 'abstracted landscape'. Rather, I want to maintain the full range of richly analogical play his paintings set in motion. Such landscape references need not be consciously invoked, of course, and in relation to Yun himself, may well have simply existed at an unreflexive level.

painting. Memories of landscape art are also cued by Yun's use of basic structural elements of landscape paintings of the East Asian *literati* tradition.

Shanshui – literally, 'mountain and water' painting – became the pre-eminent subject of *literati* art in China, especially during the Song and Yuan period (960–1368 CE), and subsequently became the favoured topos in Korea and Japan. On the level of the representational motif, generic rather than specific landscapes were depicted, and these served as phenomenal analogues for the conceptualisation of ontological states. As Wucius Wong writes:

From his mind-heart he [the artist] selects mountains, which he can then rotate and reshape; directs water to wind as springs, jump as waterfalls, or flow as rivers along folds; plants trees and shrubs at choice locations; and combines these elements in a harmonious orchestration displaying vital breath. What results is the creative equivalent of nature.²³

As Wong continues:

In realizing nature in a painting, the artist strives not to re-create the appearances but to re-establish a vital breath in the forms, marks, textures, and spaces. This vital breath refers to a self-generating life force, which the Chinese call *ch'i*, the Chinese character literally meaning air. Showing the presence of a vital breath, a painting is no longer a dead thing, but has acquired a life of its own.²⁴

Artists juxtaposed in their paintings elements corresponding to the interconnected forces of *ch'i* – yin and yang. Broadly speaking, bounded structures signified permanence – mountains and rocks (yin) – animated by detail, relief, texture, the fluid forms or rivers and clouds, and luminosity (yang), but these were construed as aspects of holistic monism not as binary opposites. Yin and yang are situational correspondences bound together though sharing in a 'void', which is understood as being quite the contrary of a terrifying negative space, as it is in the Western thinking that gave rise to the concept of the Sublime. Rather, 'void', as François Cheng writes, 'is the nodal point where potentiality and becoming interweave, in which deficiency and plenitude, self-sameness and otherness, meet'.²⁵

Water, clouds, mists, smoke and moonlight, which to a high degree manifest traits of indistinctness and impermanence, were therefore especially important as they foregrounded an awareness of process and transitoriness. Paintings were often characterised by pronounced qualities of suggestive abbreviation and empty space, and by the juxtaposing of disparate, contrasting and imperfect elements which demanded that the viewer 'complete' the work.

Yun's paintings often have a close compositional correspondence with shanshui paintings. But in particular, they can be seen in relation to the work of Korea's most celebrated *literati* landscape painter, Jeong Seon (1676–1759). In fact, an interesting early case of cross-cultural transfer from the West to East Asia occurred in Jeong Seon's work, who drew on encounters with Western landscape painting made possible via contact with China, in order to forge a specifically Korean genre called 'true-view' painting. This style broke with the generic shanshui motifs of Chinese painting in order to celebrate the beauty of specific geographical locations throughout the Korean peninsula.²⁶ By so doing, Jeong

23 Wucius Wong, *The Tao of Chinese Landscape Painting: Principles and Methods*, Design Press, New York, 1991, p 29

24 *Ibid*, p 18

25 François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting*, Shambhala, Boulder, Colorado, 1994, p 13

26 See Yi Song-Mi, *Searching for Modernity: Western Influence and True-View Landscape in Korean Painting of the Late Choson Period*, Franklin D Murphy Lecture Series, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2014.



Jeong Seon, *Three Dragons Waterfalls at Mt. Naeyeon*, Joseon, early eighteenth century, ink and light colours on paper, 134.7 x 56.2 cm, image courtesy: Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul

Seon, to a much greater extent than in Chinese or Japanese art, sought to communicate the sensation of a tangible terrestrial scene. But Jeong Seon also incorporated several viewpoints into his compositions, and, as Ch'oe Wan-su emphasises, still conceived of his landscapes in terms of the traditional interaction of yin and yang elements.²⁷

In Yun's painting, the elements of shanshui painting are stripped down to a minimal level. No specific locational cues are given, while they still suggest that the viewer is located in some place. In relation to the topos of landscape, loss of detail equates with a sense of distance. As François Jullien writes of Chinese painting:

Distance thus not only makes it possible to take in a vaster landscape but also renders it more accessible to contemplation, for distance, as it were, rids the landscape of all the weight of inessentials and restores it to the simple movement that gives it form and existence.²⁸

In Yun's work absence of overall detail also implies the desire to be rid 'of all the weight of inessentials'. He thereby 'restores it to the simple movement that gives it form and existence'. Like the mists, clouds, and waterfalls of shanshui, the blurred boundaries Yun created through layers of thinned paint suggest a liquidity that mediates between opposites, thereby mitigating against apparent irreconcilables, and bringing about the harmony between yin and yang.

'RUNNING THE BLEND' 3: MEDIA AND TECHNIQUE

Like those of other East Asian artists of his generation, Yun's paintings are obviously very different from the ink on paper or silk hanging-rolls of his own tradition, and the adoption of the characteristically Western artistic medium of oil on canvas signals by dint of materials alone that Yun's paintings belong within the structure of what was at that time a *Western* narrative, defined in terms of the evolution of a material practice. Nowadays, media are trans-cultural, and regardless of geographical location artists consider oil on canvas or acrylic on canvas to be valid, ideologically neutral choices, but in Yun's formative years a medium carried a specific geo-cultural connotation: 'oil on canvas' signified 'Western' art. But, more generally, choice of medium is no small matter, because unlike a text or a piece of music, the meaning of a painting is inseparable from the materials with which it is made. While translation from one verbal language to another inevitably entails some semantic transformation, the physical substrate upon which words are inscribed, and the visual manner in which they are inscribed, has a minimum effect on the work's meaning. By contrast, a painting's meaning is braided with the materiality of the medium itself. It is not possible to interpret a painting without taking into account its formal properties, and so meaning cannot be extracted discursively without significant distortion.

But while Yun consciously eschewed the media of his native tradition and embraced those of the West, he did not simply end up mimicking the techniques of Western artists, although his methods intersect with Western artists, who were also seeking to push traditional media in new directions. Unlike Rothko, for example, Yun

27 Ch'oe Wan-su, *Korean True-View Landscape: Paintings of Chōng Sōn (1676–1759)*, Youngsook Pak and Roderick Whitfield, eds and trans, Saffron Books, London, 2005

28 François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: A History of Efficacy in China*, Janet Lloyd, trans, Zone Books, New York, 1999, p 95

29 For more on this, see, Joan Kee, *op cit*, chapter one.

30 The major exemplar in this context was the artist Kim Whanki (1913–1974), who was also Yun's father-in-law. Whanki moved to Paris in 1956 and lived there until 1959. In 1963 he arrived in New York, where he died. Whanki's shifting in cultural allegiance from Paris to New York reflects a broader cultural migration during this period, and for Whanki himself, relocation to the United States proved to be of profound artistic value, as it was in New York that he began producing the powerful all-over and mostly sky-blue coloured works for which he is today most admired. Whanki showed how it was possible to embrace Western Modernist conventions whilst projecting himself as also intrinsically 'Korean'. In particular, Whanki's conviction that lyrical, expressive abstraction was the most valid stylistic option for a Korean artist would have a profound influence on Yun's generation. There is a Whanki Museum in Seoul dedicated to his work that regularly publishes catalogues, but there are few serious texts in English on the artist. See for example, *Whanki: Chant for Eternity*, Whanki Museum, Seoul, 2013, published on the 100th anniversary of his birth. Also, Oh Kwang-su, *Kim Whanki: A Critical Biography*, Youl Hwa Dang, Seoul, 1998.

31 Jullien, *op cit*, 2000, p 291

32 For a polemical essay on these influences, and one of the few texts in English on the artist, see: Kai Hong, 'Yun Hyong-keun's Painting as an Embodiment of the Spirit of Daam', in *Yun Hyong-keun*, exhibition catalogue, PKM Gallery, 2015. Hong asserts that Yun's paintings should be understood as

used unprimed canvas, so that the diluted oil bled directly into the textile grain, and he laid down thin layers of diluted paint over often extended periods of time to create subtly translucent strata. While oil paint's specificity as a medium lies in its viscosity and ability to sustain glazes and impasto, Yun treated it as a fluid medium, forcing it to perform like a water-based medium by mixing it with turpentine.²⁹ Working flat, he avoided the overtly gravity-assisted effects exploited so deftly, for example, by Morris Louis (who, in contrast, was using the newly developed water-based acrylic paint rather than oil).

Yun considered that engagement in dialogue with Western art on the level of medium was a necessary part of becoming a *modern* Korean artist, but he also sought to translate the language of oil on canvas into a 'Korean' idiom, thereby continuing to make 'Korean' painting by methods and techniques unavailable within his native traditions.³⁰ Thus, we can construe Yun's choice of unprimed cotton and later linen canvas, and his use of deep brown–blue–black oil paint diluted with turpentine, as conscious echoes of the tonal range of Korean paintings executed on *hanji* paper – made from mulberry bark, and in ink made from the soot of the pine tree and animal glue.

One can relate Yun's painting to what Jullien calls the 'great image' of Chinese thought. The 'great image', Jullien writes, 'is not abstract (it does not refer to the level of essences)'. Thus, strictly speaking, a painting by Yun is an 'un-imagined image' that has 'simply liberated its character of image from any anecdotal or specific aspect of its content'.³¹ Thus 'abstract monochrome painting' did not signify for these Korean Dansaekhwa artists the repudiation or negation of Western realism and the lingering legacy of classicism. It did not involve the search for either a transcendental 'spiritual' art on the one hand, or a materialistic concrete or 'real' one on the other.³² Western abstract styles permitted Korean artists to forge a living connection with their own traditions. A monochromatic tonality is, for example, an inherent quality of East Asian ink painting. Yun also often drew attention to the importance for him of the calligraphy of the later Joseon period scholar-painter, Kim Jeonghui (1786–1856).³³

In the context of Korea in the 1970s, the concept of 'abstract' art, and 'abstract monochrome painting' in particular, therefore meant something very different from what it did to pioneer monochromists such as Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), or later, Yves Klein (1928–1962), Rothko, Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), and the same generation of Western artists as Yun, such as Robert Ryman (b 1930), who was born two years after Yun.

But assimilations by Korean artists were made easier by the fact that Western abstraction had in turn drawn upon, what was for Westerners, the heterodox formal qualities perceivable in East Asian art. Indeed, the intellectual and stylistic underpinnings of the kind of Western art with which Yun and other Korean artists of his generation are often compared were themselves derived in large measure from appropriations of East Asian culture. In particular, Western abstraction had taken inspiration from the calligraphic gesturalism characteristic of East Asian ink painting, and also from its extreme pictorial emptiness.³⁴ Yun was thus engaged in a complex dialogue in which not only were Western ideas

fundamentally different from the Western paintings they 'superficially' resemble. But Hong's position succumbs to the kind of 'reverse' essentialism flagged by Mersmann; he seeks to counter Western 'imperialistic' interpretations with his own 'East Asian' version, a strategy somewhat weakened by his dependence on the writing of a Westerner on China – François Jullien.

- 33 Using the pen-name Chusa, Kim Jeong-hui was renowned for his original style of calligraphic lettering, which was admired because it departed from the Chinese models, and through its combination of dynamism and powerful structural rigour was perceived as uniquely Korean. See: Kai Hong, 'Yun Hyong-keun's Painting as an Embodiment of the Spirit of Daam', *ibid.* As Hong writes: 'It would take no time for Yun to discover that Kim was actually making abstract paintings even when he was writing Chinese characters with an ink brush' (Hong, *ibid.*, p. 14). But Chusa was a role model not only in terms of his 'modern' style but also in the way he related this practice to a broader neo-Confucian philosophy which aimed to instil in man-made objects the directness and unaffectedness inherent in natural forms. A recent exhibition in Seoul juxtaposed calligraphic works by Chusa with the sculptures and calligraphy of a pioneer of modern Korean sculptor, Woosung Kim Chong Yung (1915–1982). Kim Chong Yung compared Chusa's emphasis on structure to Cézanne, thereby linking Korean ink painting to modernist oil painting, in *Chusa Kim Jeong-hui and Woosung Kim Chong Yung*, exhibition catalogue, Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul, 2015, p. 20.

and styles absorbed, but also procedures and concepts originally native to his own culture were re-inscribed via their appreciation and appropriation within modern Western art.

'RUNNING THE BLEND' 4: THE SUBJECT AT THE LIMIT

The 'generic space' of conceptual blending theory, linking the traditionally Western and Korean inputs of Yun's 'emergent blend', is furnished by the way they share in the ontological givens of the sensory-motor experience of the human subject's organism–environment interactions. Thus, for example, in order to make subjective sense of human ontogeny – the biological course of development – a universally applied strategy is to divide ourselves into a 'Subject' and a 'Self' – where the 'Self' is 'that part of a person that is not picked out by the Subject', as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write.³⁵ This Subject–Self metaphor schema is then conceptualised singularly or in plurality as a person, an object, or a location, using analogies derived from basic structures of sensory-motor experience.

Spatial metaphors used to evoke the Self, note Lakoff and Johnson, include 'part-whole, centre–periphery, link, cycle, iteration, contact, adjacency, force motion (eg, pushing, pulling, propelling), support balance, straight–curved, and near–far'.³⁶ But especially pervasive image schemas are *locational*. 'The control of Subject over Self is conceptualised as being in a normal location',³⁷ Lakoff and Johnson write. 'People typically feel in control in their normal surroundings and less in control in strange places.'³⁸ As a result, the Self is conceptualised as a container, or whatever defines familiar surroundings, or is described as being securely on the ground. In these ways, control is indicated through the Subject and the Self being located in the same place.

Culturally, however, the nature and degree of control of the object Self by the Subject that is sanctioned varies considerably. Thus, while control of the Self by the Subject is universally deemed a desirable state, non-control of the Self is also recognised to have positive implications in certain circumstances. The concept of the Sublime, in this context, signifies the exploration of the experience of a loss of such sovereignty and its implications. The Sublime, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

... is a feeling, and yet, more than a feeling in the banal sense, it is the emotion of the subject at the limit... The subject of the sublime, if there is one, is a subject who is moved.³⁹

The stable, located Subject position – 'being' – is threatened by nothingness, and the negating experience of 'limit' or 'movement' that is forced by the sublime experience is valued not for itself but rather for how it serves to permit the self to experience non-being, and so become more firmly fixed within boundaries. The displaced or scattered Self is thereby relocated securely under the control of the Subject.

The Sublime functions within a cultural paradigm in which the loss of the authority of the object Self by the Subject is usually judged terroristic or subversive, and the relationship between control and loss of control is schematised as an antagonistic dualism. By contrast, Asian cultures have been more centrally involved in conceptualising both the maintenance *and* the willing

- 34 See, for example, Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West*, Waanders, Zwolle and Cobra Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Amstelveen, 1996; Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 2005.
- 35 Lakoff and Johnson, op cit, 1980, p 269
- 36 Lakoff and Johnson, op cit, 1999, p 35
- 37 Ibid
- 38 Lakoff and Johnson, op cit, 1980, p 274
- 39 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Sublime Offering', in Jean-Francois Courtine, ed, *Of the Sublime Presence in Question*, Jeffrey S Librett, trans, Intersections Series, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, p 44
- 40 Ueda Shizuteru, 'Contributions to Dialogue with the Kyoto School', in Brett W Davis, Brian Schroeder and Jason M Wirth, *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2011, p 23
- 41 Edward Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p 33–34

relinquishment of control of the Self by the Subject, schematised within a non-dualistic holism. As the Japanese philosopher Ueda Shizuteru writes:

There are two orientations of thinking being and nothingness. On the one hand, there is the [Eastern] orientation of seeing nothingness as more than the negation of being, and of realizing the ultimate origin of nothingness in a higher level of negativity, namely that of neither being nor nothingness. On the other hand, there is the [Western] orientation of seeing the negativity of nothingness over against being in terms of non-being, and of subsuming the negativity of non-being into being so as to elevate being to the level of absolute being.⁴⁰

The non-dual status of 'neither being nor nothingness' was conceivable because, as noted in the discussion of shanshui, the natural world and human beings are understood to be intimately related aspects of the same principle. Priority is given to change, process and 'becoming'. There is no appeal made to a timeless, transcendental realm of 'essences' or 'absolute being'. As a consequence, the understanding of the subject within Eastern cultures involves recognition of a looser relationship between Self as a secure location and Self as permeable and boundless. While the experience of 'losing' one's Self – of being 'moved', 'uncontained', 'off the ground' – can indeed be frightening, East Asian traditions indicate that it also creates an experiential situation of openness, signalling the readiness of the subject to be less conditioned by the past and to be primed for creative, spontaneous processes outside conscious awareness.

The ability to sustain ambiguous states of mind without premature closure was thus recognised in East Asian culture as facilitating the embrace of alterity, the new and unknown, and the uncertain and unbounded. As Edward Slingerland writes: 'in texts such as *Laozi* or *Zhuangzi*, the container of the Self being rendered empty or tenuous (*xu*) allows the Subject to enjoy a state of effortlessness and unself-consciousness'.⁴¹ Through interiorisation and transformation, the decentring experience is understood to be inextricably connected with, and prior to, centredness, and a broader conception of normative consciousness is posited; one that incorporates areas of cognitive occlusion and ontological negation.

In this context, Yun's paintings describe a very different subject from the one figured by the discourse of the Sublime sketched above. Instead, the instability of determined positions or boundaries is staged as a process with material modalities, and the experience of ontological de-centring Yun expresses occurs within a culture that sees it as a dominant and benign experience, rather than as marginal, negative or exceptional. The erosion and blurring of contours, and the evacuation of the central zone of his compositions, in this context can be seen to undermine the security of firm boundary and location, suggesting the loss of control of the Self by the Subject. But this can be understood to manifest not so much a 'sublime' movement to the 'limit', but rather as a stage in a complementary process that characterises immersion in a dynamic reality.

While blurred and empty fields in paintings of the Sublime signify nothingness and the annulling of difference, in Yun's background

culture such formal and expressive devices mean that a painting ‘remains open to plenitude’.⁴² This reflects a world-view in which de-centring is understood to be the means through which the subject can be located within the greater flexibility of an expanded ontological field. It is then neither limited nor distinguished by an inviolable and bounded individuality. Integrity is relativised by prior recognition of a location within an enveloping field characterised by process and ‘becoming’ rather than by fixed essences and ‘being’.⁴³

42 Jullien, op cit, 2000, p 291

43 For an interesting discussion of this cultural difference in relation to visuality see Norman Bryson, ‘The Gaze in the Expanded Field’, in Hal Foster, ed, *Vision and Visuality*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1988, pp 87–108. For more detailed discussions of diverging concepts of the subject in Western and Chinese cultures, see David L Hall and Roger T Ames, op cit.

44 At auction, the price of Yun’s paintings has gone through the roof. Christie’s recently included him in its highly lucrative *Forming Nature: Dansaekhwa Korean Abstract Art*, on show in New York, 8–23 October 2015 and Hong Kong, 6 November–4 December 2015 – an indication of the rampant market interest in *Dansaekhwa* in general.

CONCLUSION

In Yun’s work the ‘generic’ flows into his ‘input spaces’ along different courses, intertwining and merging to produce a new ‘emergent blended space’ that, while carrying traces of the ancestor concepts – the ‘input spaces’ – is more than simply a ‘cut-and-paste combination’. Experiencing Yun’s paintings like this especially draws attention to their contextual and relational nature. The reading of his paintings as ‘Sublime’ is not a *misreading*. Rather, it is one focus of attention, one form of completion and elaboration, within the unbounded and inherently vague semantic range that comprises the field of the emergent blended structure.

Today, Yun is fast becoming an internationally known artist thanks to a global wave of interest in Korean *Dansaekhwa*.⁴⁴ This may be largely a market-driven phenomenon. Perhaps it is simply nostalgic – a lament for the road not taken. Yun and the other *Dansaekhwa* artists hoped to give expression to the vision of the future of modern Korea that co-joined Western influences with an appreciation of the continued validity of their inherited traditions, understood not as tokens enshrined within immobile traditions but rather as counter-cultural resources for the heterodox use of individuals or communities.

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