

Creativity in Personal Time and Space

The current insatiable trend for novel objects/ideas reveals a troublesome light in our perception of art, as our superabundant access to materials and methods imposes a daunting task in choosing ways to express ourselves. I have often asked myself, "How do I create work that would ideally fulfill my aesthetic sensibilities and meet my emotional and intellectual needs as well as making art in the context of this time and in this particular post-contemporary arena with the consumerist impulses and tendencies? I have in some ways, through completion of each body of work, come to better understand my own sensibilities and have come to accept an inclination for certain visual and conceptual ideas. However, there are many unrealized ideas that persistently gnaw at my consciousness. Even now, as I am writing this essay, after two decades of experimentation with different methods and materials and have had completed several large bodies of work, I am still in the midst of trying to clarify my ideas and have been feeling quite hesitant about my uncertain road ahead. Taking advantage of being in NYC, I am once again, taking my time out to seek out the work of artists with the intention of clarifying my own ideas and thoughts.

This short essay consists of my personal reflections on some contemporary NYC artists. I describe their influence on my development of ideas as well as my thoughts on their recent exhibitions. Since the early 1990's in NYC, I have observed many established and emerging artists transitioning through various market trends and surviving through various bumpy economic times. In actuality, there are innumerable numbers of artists who have been part of my NYC experience, however, it would be impossible for me to include them all in this brief essay. In the past two decades, I have observed many artists and peers experimenting with digital media as well as being fascinated by artists resorting to the traditional art medium, cleverly transforming their work through their innovative methods. And along side of these artists, in my own space and time, I have been experimenting with drawings, painting, and using digital imaging in exercising my possible possibilities.

Painters; Brice Marden, David Reed, Jonathan Lasker, Lee Ufan

"How does one start the process of making art after having spent most of her childhood drawing pictures for herself and then spending another decade in an art institution intending to fulfill your artistic goals?" In early 1992, I was determined to move away from my learned and acquired habits in thinking and creating work in order to avoid the recycling of familiar images (representational and abstract images). I came up with a specific plan/rule of limiting my composition to straight hand drawn vertical and horizontal lines using only black and white oil paint. This deliberate decision was in the hope of starting the process of painting from a clear or simplest possible ground where I could start my own history of painting/ making art anew. This process was the result of my four-month travel to Europe alone. In

contrast to experiencing the historical art on flat screens for years to being physically present in front of a great master piece like Velazquez' painting, "Les Meninas" at the Prado Museum, was a life changing experience. I had gained a deeper and broader perspective and understanding for the past, but seeing so much history of great masterpieces gave me an overwhelming weight of uncertainty toward my own future. My own question was, "how can I possibly add or make even the slightest difference in the history of art making?"

In early 90's, I had often turned to Brice Marden's paintings for guidance and for inspiration. He studied at the Boston University School of Fine Arts like myself and had the traditional academic background in art making. I was curious about his transitions from minimalistic encaustic paintings and to his well known, "Cold Mountain" series influenced from the Chinese calligraphy. I have always found much solace in his solid one tone encaustic paintings that are beautifully and skillfully built up through multiple layers of undertones giving the richness to his surface, as well as in his "Cold Mountain" series that is known to be his personal signature style of elegantly painted compositions consisting of continuous brush lines and strokes. Unfortunately, I came to a realization that my black and white linear paintings were very much like Brice Marden's in that the images were very much about creating the illusion of space using figure/ ground relationship. It was unsettling for me to come to such point of circling back to where I had started after initially trying to move away from things I have already had done in art schools. And thus, I decided to stop painting altogether and started a series of drawings on rice paper. Brice Marden's passion for Asian Art inspired me to think differently about using rice paper and lead me back to reexamining the works of Asian art in the Metropolitan Museum. And there in the Asian Wing of the Metropolitan Museum, I spent long spans of time looking and thinking about how to proceed to my next step.

Aside from closely following the works by Brice Marden, I've spent a lot of time looking at David Reed, Jonathan Lasker, and Lee Ufan's paintings. Being a painter myself and loving this medium, I am curious and interested in how contemporary painters are making attempts in expanding and redefining the language of abstraction. And in the work of these three painters, there is an overall mood of lightness and playfulness conveyed by the brush strokes taking the center stage in their compositions. In fact, their compositions are all about shapes and lines created by slow and elegantly drawn brush strokes. The mood that is entirely different in the paintings by the first generation of abstract expressionists, which dealt with layers of history through layers of brush strokes that seem to reflect their state of uncertainty and angst. In my view, each of these painters have redefined the language of abstraction through their dedicated innovations and have brought this style to a different level of visual purity.

David Reed's paintings are seductive in his usage of colors and in his systematically controlled method of layering his brush strokes with almost transparent like thinness. Even more alluring is the preparation of his canvas surface that has a glass like smoothness. His last exhibition of his sketches and

notes were very insightful in conveying the processes involved in his work. There was an intimacy in reading his articulate and methodically hand written notes and well as assortment of color combination sketches of possible paintings that were painted directly onto the unprepared paper with oil paint.

Jonathan Lasker's whimsical brush marks appear as if done with magic markers or crayons. My fascination with his work has been with his innovative combinations and variations of thick and childlike brush strokes. I could only guess that any one of variable tools such as palette knives, brushes, sticks or even hands and fingers could easily have been part of his extended mark making application in coming up with such unique and playful forms and lines. The appearance of his compositions consist of variations of scribbled marks in conjunction with his tendency to keep a bright palette, Mr. Lasker could appear to be covertly making an appropriate commentary about our omnipresent cohabitation with plastic household goods. Absurd as it may sound, his painting at times, look delicious to me in seeing how he may have achieved his heavy brush strokes that sit thick on top of his bright colored flat canvas surface. It is easy to visually relate his strokes with the way I lay down bright colored sweet frosting thick onto individual cupcakes. And these days I have become extremely proficient in putting down thick layers of frosting with a palette knife, this is of course after having spent over a decade in fulfilling orders for countless occasions. Just as being drawn into sweet cup cakes or other goodies that signifies a great deal of warmth, comfort and good feelings, I am always drawn into Mr. Lasker's delightfully whimsical paintings.

Lee Ufan, a Korean-born painter and sculptor who lived most of his adult life in Japan has only in recent years gained international fame at the age of 70. His signature compositions consisting one brush stroke in its center is about stillness, purity, and beauty of its single stroke. Prior to ever seeing his work in person, a Korean classmate told me a story about this artist who happens to be one of his favorite artist. Mr. Lee Ufan would year after year send his painting of single brush stroke to competitions after competitions to Korea and to everywhere, only to be denied from any entrance to exhibitions and prizes. Many years of endless rejections did not deter him from his continuous submission to where ever he could from his home in Japan. I first saw Mr. Ufan's work at the Basel Art Fair and wondered if he was the artist I heard about from my friend, and in purchasing book on his work I was able to confirm that this was the artist who never gave up hope. However, I was perplexed by his work being represented by a London Gallery, Lisson and not by any one of numerous Korean Galleries who were participating at the Basel Art Fair. There could be have been numerous reasons for not being represented by any one of the Korean Galleries, but assumed that it had to do with his residence in Japan. Of course now he is fully embraced by Koreans not just as a Korean Artist, but also as an international artist. The authenticity in his conception and in his execution of his work embracing the Eastern and Western elements is a rare achievement.

Twenty years after hearing this story, I had the privilege of attending the opening of Mr. Lee Ufan's first US solo exhibition at the Pace Gallery in NYC. There were two Pace Gallery exhibitions of Mr. Ufan's work which opened on the same evening, one at the uptown gallery exhibited his drawings and older works and the downtown Pace Gallery exhibited his most recent sculptures and paintings. I was fortunate in tagging along with Korean acquaintances that knew him personally and knew that he would be at the downtown Pace Gallery for his opening. Mr. Ufan, appearing very humble and down to earth and even appeared a bit to be out of place in this enormously big and sterile space that housed a long list of dead and living blue chip artists.

Works on paper; Mr. Werner Kramarsky, Il Lee, Mark Lombardi, and Sid Garrison

My first encounter with Mr. Kramarsky, a collector who has collected over 4,000 drawings by artists working in NYC was in 1996 when he purchased my drawings. It was then and there where I saw rare works on paper by Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, Agnes Martin, Mel Bochner, John Cage, and Brice Marden among many others in his private collection on 560 Broadway in Soho. Mr. Kramarsky has recently published a book on his collection titled, 560 Broadway: A New York Drawing Collection at Work, 1991-2006, edited by Amy Eshoo and Elizabeth Finch (published by Yale University Press in 2008). Prior to my encounter with Mr. Kramarsky's large drawing collection, I was unaware of the significant number of the artists working on drawings as their primary work. This experience of encountering many works on paper as well as meeting many of Kramarsky's artists eventually lead me to visit many art studios of emerging artists. And thereafter, I started to curate several group exhibitions around the theme of abstraction. Few titles of the exhibitions at non-profit spaces around NYC from 1996-2000 are; "Blue, Black and White", "Lines and Dots", "Recurrence", "Now and Then". My studio visits to other artists helped me to mature from being very narrow minded in being exclusive about particular types of work to becoming much more open minded about embracing and appreciating other styles of work that were very different than mine. Even more importantly, I was truly humbled by seeing some of the artists with exceptional bodies of work having spent much of their lives in their studios making work without much recognition from the larger public. Mr. Kramarsky has a web site that lists the information on the works done by all of his artists in his collection, <http://aboutdrawing.org>. What is most impressive about Mr. Kramarsky is that he is not only extremely passionate about collecting drawings, but works very hard to secure his collected work to be placed permanently in the best possible public educational institutions and museums.

Through Mr. Kramarsky's private art collection, I discovered works by Mark Lombardi. Using a graphite pencil on paper, Mark Lombardi (1951 – March 22, 2000) over a short span of time, created a unique body of drawings. His drawings were created to unfold and chart specific political conspiracies of the current political events. I saw his work from a distance at the Drawing Center in Soho and remembered how I became emotionally drawn to his elegant hand drawn lines

and texts, and after closely reading his hand written text and following the diagrams that linked information, I became even more drawn to his work. His charts and diagrams are simple and direct but have always appeared daringly new and fresh to me. His work has always stood out among many other works for it is hard to match his scandalous political content and the directness in his execution.

Il Lee's forms in his compositions have been steadily expanding in scale and in depth over many as I have been observing his work and known him through group exhibitions and shared activities involving Korean Artists in NYC. I've come to respect his deep commitment to his Zen-like choice in essentially using nothing but ballpoint pens for the past 30 years. And through his mastery of maximizing every possible potential of such an ordinary writing tool, he has created an exquisite and dynamic body of work. He once informed me that he had accumulated countless buckets full of used up ballpoint pens. And in recent years his unique vision has come to public attention through solo exhibitions at the Queens Museum in NY and at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts among other exhibitions at private galleries.

About a year ago, I encountered Sid Garrison's color pencil drawings. Sid, who was very polite and sweet person sat across from me during Danese's dinner for artists. And briefly during our short conversation, he tried to describe his work to me. At that time, I could not quite understand or imagine what kind of work he did and embarrassingly, didn't know which was his work among many others that were part of the gallery's large group exhibition. I did go back to see his color pencils drawing. Since then I have been intrigued and fascinated by his innovative ways of using color pencils, and to be exact, they were Prismacolors pencils (I also use the color pencils by this company, for they make color pencils that are easy to use on fragile or delicate papers and they are the only color pencils that I was able to find with dense pigment content). His unique gift is in his imaginative vision, generating compositions that are completely different from one drawing to another. His compositions consist of abstracted and semi-representational forms and often appear to me somewhat familiar but hard to place. His drawings are completely and tightly filled with bright colored pencils lines and marks that from a far can easily be mistaken for collages or paintings. I am bewildered by his well thought out colorful compositions that are full of life and beam a great deal of light.

My attraction to his work may have more to do with my own projection into his colorful images that seem to provoke a subtle nostalgia for my own childhood. Experiencing various color combinations in Sid's drawings inexorably takes me back to my early childhood days of being absorbed and engrossed in making my own drawings. I can recall one particular moment in the summer time in Korea, being dressed in almost nothing during a hot afternoon, I was busy at copying a Western landscape from a calendar that I found laying around. As I got more and more into copying the image of a girl in beautiful Western dress and a large hat sitting on a swing that was tied to a very large tree in a forest like wilderness, I felt

as if I had become the girl on the swing, swinging in the great green forest of wilderness feeling cool in the lovely flowing white dress.

Sculptors; Martin Puryear, Peter Coyne, Louise Nevelson

In early spring of 2009, I saw a retrospective of Louise Nevelson's work at the Pace Gallery where they presented a selection of works from her four decades of work. It was a unique and moving experience for me, for I had only seen her work in museums and in most occasions, very few pieces at a time in poor conditions. And because in these situations with bad lighting and awful placement of her work as well as the poorly maintained condition of her work, they appeared outdated and dull. This exhibition at Pace Gallery was done with a great deal of sensitivity and with a great deal of space in between her individual pieces. Her work in this enormous pristine gallery space projected a vision of absolute power, beauty and timelessness. Once again, I was fixated and moved by her larger than life creations.

I was especially captivated by one particular piece that I saw for the first time in person. This was a large black monochrome wood wall relief titled, "End of Day Nightscape" done in 1973 (size of 281.9 cm x 421.6 cm x 16.5 cm). Unlike any other pieces, the scale in this relief being quite large in size had an extremely thin width. And this unusual thinness made the work appear to be closer to being like a painting. This work had also many subtle rhythmic patterns enclosed and repeated through out divided and boxed structures, but never repeated with the exact sameness. Visual elements in this relief reminded me of various proportions and structures of Korean traditional black garments, as well as conjuring up other visual associations. I found this piece very poetic and most memorable in her show.

I first fell in love with Louise Nevelson when an older friend lent me a monograph of her work. This was around the mid 1970's after emigrating from Korea and living in a very small town in Alaska. I still remember the magical moment of opening up Louise Nevelson's monograph to the pages that opened out in three folds extending the images of her large installation of boxlike structures. Her work had completely transformed me and thereafter inspired me to challenge myself to make life sized sculptures. I still have the book with me; my older friend was very generous in parting with the book as she insisted that it would be more useful in my hands than in her library.

I take refuge in Martin Puryear's beautiful and sensuous sculptures with alluring tactility and timeless beauty. I am very much drawn by his unique vision and his superb technical craftsmanship that has magically transformed various raw materials and found objects into unique and powerful pieces of work. I was able to see a large body of his most important work in his 2007 MOMA retrospective. His big biomorphic shapes of wood along with metal mesh and other materials are sensuous and unique. Although his forms are usually in abstracted shapes and forms, there are traceable resonances to various household and other objects from the past and present. I had gone to this show numerous times lingering over

every one of his remarkable pieces and had to fight off strong urges to feel the surface of his objects. It is hard to pinpoint reasons for my being obsessed with his work but I have been faithfully following his work since my first encounter with his drawing that was in an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art where my 1998 wood cut drawing was hanging near his drawing. I have great admiration for his unique vision that has come from his investing a lifetime of dedication to his work, and I have much respect for his work that has been and is free of market trends.

The stunning visual and sensational impact of I walking into Petr Coyne's first exhibition of her candelabra exhibition still remains with me today. The visual impact of larger than life size candelabras that were literally made out of hundreds of individual candles that were melt down in variations of different height. The built up of the multi layers of individual candles along with the wax covered satin fabrics that were dripped with wax and suspended in air from the ceiling of the gallery was a visual feast along with the strong presence of the intense fragrance of burnt candles added the magical and intoxicating experience to her installation of candelabras. Her idea for this exhibition came from her experience of seeing the gigantic crystal candelabras at the Versailles where she had gone during her sabbatical.

I had gone to Petr Coyne's exhibition at the Gallery Lelong during my 2nd year at SVA and have thought about her exhibition over the years and then in my 1999 solo exhibition, I tried to emulate her idea of creating an exhibition that would be about creating body of work that are inspired by real objects/ texts from the past that visually captivated me. This idea was inspired by my purchasing a series of books of Chinese woodblock inscriptions and illustrations of Chujun, the master engraver who worked during the Qinglong Reign (1736-1796), rubbings of inscriptions during Asian Art Fair at the Armory in Park Ave, brought me back to thinking about Petr Coyne's exhibition. My text had the strong visual appearance of the Chinese text but had no translatable meaning since it was my visual correlative symbols to the standard system of musical notation. I transformed notes into seven characters that incorporated elements from the calligraphy of my native Korea and the Roman alphabet. Arabic numbers indicate fingering information and arrows replace the symbols for flat and sharp. These drawings are an exact translation of the etudes by David Popper (1843-1913), a Viennese composer.

De Kooning and digital imaging

In Oct. 2001 I saw Terry Winter's digital Prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts. I was interested in his prints precisely because he was trying to play around with images that were created without the inflection of his gestures. And this idea of moving away from hand created gestures in making art fueled my curiosity and interest for wanting to use digital imaging in preparation for my 2003 solo exhibition. In his prints, Terry Winters digitally altered his preexisting hand drawn lines in his drawings by scanning it into his computer, and after digitally altering the images it was then sent to a machinist who was able to incise them with a

laser into blocks of wood, and in the final process the blocks were used to print the woodcuts. In a way, this exhibition to was a disappointment to me to since the final prints had a generic visual look result that is common in many images that were altered by the Photoshop software. To me, such a result in the end of his involvement with technically complex arduous processes seemed questionable and pointless. I have always been very passionate about his biomorphic organic forms and images that are expressive and was very curious to see how his work may have been transformed by this new media and new techniques in printmaking. Then again, I eventually realized that my disappointment had to do more with my expectations than Terry Winter's bold movement with experimenting with a new medium.

In the same year as Terry Winter's exhibition, I saw an exhibition of Willem de Kooning's large drawings on vellums at Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery in Upper East Side. The exhibition was of de Kooning's large drawings of nudes on vellum that was used directly onto his canvas as template. These vellum drawings from 1966-1983 were shown with a double sided glass frames showing images on both side of the paper. This exhibition was a most unusual and elegantly installed exhibition in the way his larger than life size drawings were beautifully framed with glass on both sides of the drawing, placed on very short white pedestals. In that afternoon as I walked around to look closely at his drawings, I felt very compelled to use his mark directly from his drawings right onto my own compositions using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop programs. And the just for fun, I reversed the roles by imaging Willem de Kooning taking my place in that white pristine space which was radiating with sun light that afternoon. I pictured him sitting in that white gallery space, sitting behind the desk where the gallery director was sitting using a Wacom Tablet and pen tools in manipulating his images of distorted nude using an Apple Macintosh Computer and with a giant Epson Printer ready to print out his test images.

My primary passion in art has always been for abstract paintings, whether looking at the works of abstract painters or making paintings in such a manner of style. However, as much as I am drawn into continuing the language of abstraction in my own work, I have been harboring mixed emotions about the longevity of its stylistic influences. Most alarming for me is the appearance of brush marks becoming too familiar and even sadly having lost its authenticity in the crowd of overabundant circulation of images. I had thoughts about using expressionist brush marks in my own work but was not quite sure how I would incorporate it into my experimentation with digital imaging. Around this time in early 2000, I was very aware of other young artists like Carl Fudge, Jeremy Blake, and Jeff Elrod who were continuing to make abstract painting using digital imaging. Ironically, in that particular bright afternoon standing in front of de Kooning's elegantly standing drawings, I arrived at my decision to use preexisting historical abstract gestures as a way of keeping the heart beat of the abstract expressionist gestures alive for myself in my digital images.

Conclusion

I have covered a much shorter list of artist than I had in my slide presentation of NYC artists. In a way, I could have easily continued on in discussing more exhibitions I'd experienced as well as about more works of art that have had importance to me. However, I am choosing to stop here, for I feel that I have given a peripheral view of my experiences as an artist living in NYC and of my personal reflections of works of art I have experience here. And there is no point in my continuing on with more of views since I am not a scholar and cannot claim any experience in delivering deeper insights as much as being able to give more accurate information on works of art. Just to touch the surface of my own questions that I have raised in my very first paragraph about making meaningful work in our current times, I am still in the process of figuring it out for myself. I am slowly learning that being an artist in my time, may not be all that much different from other times that is, if I could bring myself to muffle out much of the noise by turning off my computers and other gadgets that persistently beg for my attention. What I have learned so far through my own cycles of trials and errors in my life and in my life of art making is that, I have finally come to accept that I am ultimately making work for myself. And knowing that I am my own worst critic, this inner critical voice is pushing me to make work that is meaningful to me.

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