

INTERVIEW

STUDIO, CAMPO SAN GEREMIA, SANTA LUCIA CHURCH
VENICE, JUNE 3RD, 2013

Penny Cousineau-Levine: We are speaking here in your Venice studio, so perhaps I'll start our discussion with the question of how working in Venice has influenced your practice.

Jinny Yu: When I first worked here for a year in 2006, I was amazed to see the extent to which paintings were integrated into daily lives and spaces. In places like *San Sebastiano* church where paintings are an integral part of the architecture, you can really sense that they were created to glorify religion and impress churchgoers, who would see, live with, and feel these paintings daily. This concept really struck me and changed my work quite significantly.

Living in Venice that first year also expanded my sense of the world. I was born in Seoul and then moved to Montreal, and so my mental map of existence was two-dimensional: Korea as East and Canada as West. I existed somewhere in-between the opposite poles of this two-dimensional continuum. But after having lived in Venice that year, I realized that there was a difference from one 'West' to another. The realization that these poles could be multi-dimensional unsettled my

previous mental map, turning it into a chaotic three-dimensional one, or a constellation of places. This experience was both awakening and disturbing. It affected my work in that it placed it in a more complex world. It also led me to reject the idea that painting is autonomous, contained only within its four corners. I realized that painting has to interact with, and is always affected by, the space it is in.

PCL: What were you working on just before that first time in Venice?

JY: Before coming to Venice, I had done a residency in Berlin. For about a year after, I worked on *Me(n)tal Perspectives* (2004-05), a series that was influenced by that city and the first in which I started to use aluminum. It was linear and spatial, referring to man-made space versus more chaotic space: organic illusional space done with graphite and linear perspective with oil paint. Once I got to Venice, however, I was disoriented, because I felt like what I was doing was irrelevant. I went on for about three months without being able to produce anything until a good friend of mine

Maria Sonino gave me a book called *Dictionnaire amoureux et savant des couleurs de Venise*¹. It's a book that describes the different colours of Venice, for example, of the water, bricks, sun, etc. Reading it, I realized that there was so much colour, movement, and roundness around me, and I was trying to continue a series that was completely different from my environment. So I started another series of work, which was done with acrylic on fine linen. It was patterns of water.

PCL: Pre-dating what we are talking about now was the work you produced when you were living in New Brunswick and teaching at Mount Allison University, a 2003-2004 series called *Interlace*. This series of paintings wove together imagery of marshland vegetation and the lines of analogue television 'snow.'

JY: With the *Interlace* series that I showed at Struts Gallery in Sackville, the paintings were embedded into the wall, so I guess I was already trying to see different ways that paintings could be integrated into space, and in that case, I did it literally.

PCL: Can you describe how your 2011 *Tiepolo Project* came about? The work that inspired it, Tiepolo's painting the *Brazen Serpent* (1731-32), located in the Accademia Gallery in Venice, is obviously representational. In the midst of your

very sophisticated, pointed investigations around abstraction, every so often representational works appear. With your work *Sequence* (2009) we have a sequence featuring a car with notes blowing off from it into the air. This is a frieze-like installation work, with an implied narrative. Can you talk about how investigations of abstraction and of representation exist together for you?

JY: In images, abstraction and representation are not really opposites – they are not two different things. It's only a difference of scale. In the case of the frieze in *Sequence*, that was in the beginning of my trying to integrate painting into space and at the same time, attribute a function to a painting. The painting in the work functions as a frieze, sitting on top of my version of Greek columns. It could very well have been less representational as all I wanted was for these images to show a sequence, and a flow of time from left to right. I thought the papers that incrementally disperse into space showed a time sequence quite well. Paintings cannot embody narrative in the same way as time-based media, but can talk about time in their own way, such as by presenting a sequence of events. For *Sequence*, I took a clip from a Hollywood movie, because I really liked that two and a half second sequence.

PCL: What is the film?



Sequence (detail), 2009, oil on aluminum and latex paint on wall, 518 x 1138 cm, Carleton University Art Gallery

JY: It's called *Wonder Boys* (2000) and it's the story of a professor of literature, who is also a writer, who cannot finish a manuscript. He was once well known, but lost his steam. He's worked on this stuff for seven years, and he has this stack of about a foot of manuscript that exists only as an original. He is driving with his publisher, they are high, the car hits a building, spins, the car door opens, and the papers, the original manuscript, just fly out into thin air. Of course this is really tragic, but I felt an incredible sense of freedom in the two and half seconds of that scene. So I said to myself, why don't I just use the clear sequence of this scene? I see it as representing a time sequence rather than a car, a person, or papers.

PCL: The *Tiepolo Project* is about 44 feet long by 5.3 feet high. Is it permanently installed at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery (CCAG)?

JY: It started at the CCAG and now it's at its fourth exhibition venue. Because it is made in twenty-two panels, the work can be, and is, installed differently in each venue, reflecting the particularity of space and my evolving reflection on painting. At the CCAG, the panels were all together, but the order was mixed up. It is a painting that has many figures, as I took it right from the *Brazen Serpent* by Tiepolo. This painting represents a scene from the Bible when God sent

serpents to punish the Israelites, and Moses held up a bronze serpent, which healed whomever looked at it. It is an interesting story, but it's not what triggered my interest in the painting. It was rather the cracks and striations that were the most important for me in this painting. When I saw it here at the Accademia Gallery in 2008, I was thinking about the relationship between illusional and actual space, and the materiality of paint. The striation is basically void of paint, so it is physically further away from the viewer (however microscopic it is) compared to the surface of the painting, which is describing an illusional space. The fact that the striation that is physically further from us is visually closer to us, and that the painted surface that is physically close to us is actually representing a space beyond that surface, is what interested me. Basically, to me, that painting by Tiepolo was *the* contemporary painting.

The reason why I mixed up the order of the panels in the CCAG was because the viewer couldn't get close to the painting due to the way the room was built and as a result, my intention didn't come across as well. Figures of course, being so strong, come to you faster than any other visual conversation, such as the tension between the illusional space and materiality pronounced by the striations. I didn't like the fact that the figures were so powerful and immediate,

so I mixed up the order, to break up the figures and the narrative. I was more interested in talking about the surface and the materiality of paint, and what painting is. Over the three years since the first iteration of the project, my ideas have progressed and I was able to reflect this in different versions of the work. I enjoyed being able to intervene and change a work that already existed.

PCL: In terms of what is around you in Venice, you have mentioned that when these classical paintings were made they evoked religious feelings. Did you have a religious upbringing?

JY: I did. I was brought up in a Presbyterian household, and I was in the choir from age six to 21, and then from age 21 to 26 I was in the church band where I was playing bass, and from age 26 and on, my faith kind of faded out. My family is still very religious and I have many friends who are extremely religious.

PCL: How do you react to the idea that Modernism has been a kind of religion for painters, and that now, in the twenty-first century, just as one examines the meta-narratives of religion and politics, painters may be called to examine the “religion” of Modernism?

JY: That’s super interesting! Maybe I switched religions – maybe I converted to Modernism. I do not deny that I work within the tradition of Modernism. I think we all are still, and I don’t think it is over yet either. There are still a lot of things to be talked about. I guess one difference between Christianity and Modernism is the length of their histories. I always thought that painting was the oldest medium, and hence it is so difficult and painful to add to it, but also so gratifying to add a vocabulary to that language.

PCL: A major exhibition of your work was held in Montreal in 2008, entitled *Story of a Global Nomad (SGN)*. These images juxtapose the geometric motifs of early Islamic art and those of Western abstraction. This series points to these traditions both in the works themselves, visually, and in the titles, with references to the art of Eastern and Western cultures, Hokusai and De Stijl architectural motifs, as seen in the de Vonk Villa. And there is an obvious reference in the title of the work *Mohammed* (2008).

I’m very impressed by the amount of research that has gone into the making of these works. Can you talk about how research comes into play in your practice, particularly in the *SGN* series? I’m sure it’s much more complicated than simply first you do a great deal of reading and then you proceed to make a work.



(top, bottom left) *Tiepolo Project*, 2013, oil on aluminum, 164 x 1341 x 481 cm, St. Mary's University Art Gallery
(bottom right) *Tiepolo Project*, 2011, oil on aluminum, 164 x 1341 x 61 cm, McMaster Museum of Art

JY: The process of research, as you say, is not so straightforward. I read up on what the visual I am referencing means, and where it comes from, because it interests me. I also reflect a lot on what I am thinking and what I want to say, and research how best to get it out. I guess you could call that process 'sketching.' I do a few trials and then hope to achieve one that works. But it's a kind of a tangled process, and I am not sure if I can articulate it clearly. It also works differently from one series of work to another. In *SGN*, the reason I felt so free to use all the very culturally specific references that I did, was because of my realization of this chaotic three-dimensional identity that I described earlier. I felt very free to be able to use whatever references I felt were necessary to use. Whereas before, I was afraid to be pigeonholed into the category of Korean artist, and so I avoided using culturally specific references.

PCL: Is there any system of signs that you would feel that you could not reference, that might be a cultural appropriation you wouldn't feel comfortable with? Say, for example, the visual vocabularies of the First Nations?

JY: No, I don't think so. I would feel comfortable with any kind of reference. I am a human being and I don't feel that there is that kind of boundary.

PCL: Can you pinpoint what it might have been at that point in time, in 2008, that called you to begin to confront these issues in your work?

JY: It is directly linked to my time in Venice because that displacement triggered a second identity crisis in me (the first being my move from Seoul to Montreal). That my mental map of identity became three-dimensional and chaotic allowed me to feel free to use any reference, and plus, it made me realize that I had stories to tell. I also wanted to dig deeper into abstraction. It was only then that I admitted that what I was doing was abstraction even though looking back, one would call everything I did before that abstraction. Before this point, I had a strong urge to avoid being categorized. But by 2008, I felt I needed to anchor my practice so that it could go deeper and exist within a context. I wanted to try to tell stories using abstraction.

PCL: What were those stories?

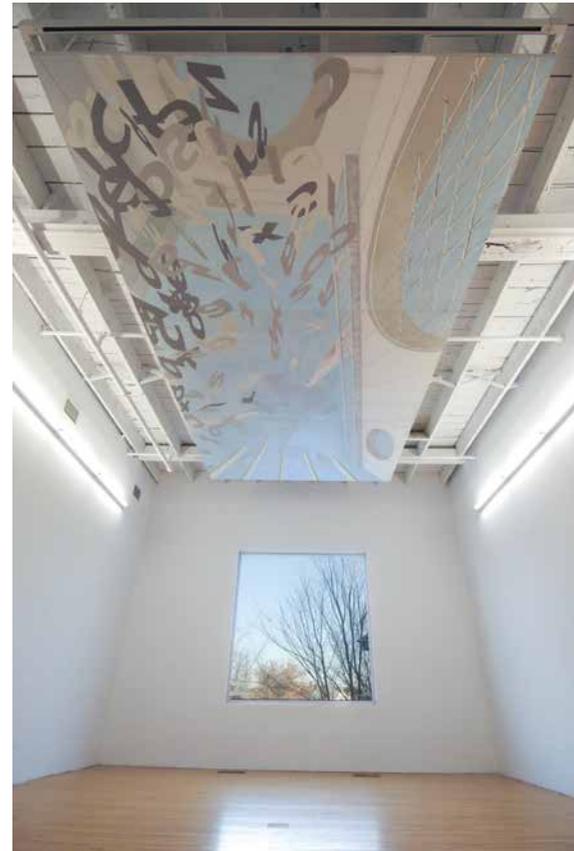
JY: Abstraction tells different stories than those that can be narrated or written. The story is all things coming together, for example, in my painting *SGN (The End)* (2008), I have included motifs of tree branches and Hokusai's waves, and they came together, and it felt like that was the end. It sounds enigmatic, but to me, that is the way abstraction tells stories.

PCL: Do you mean it is the end of that particular period of investigation, or the end of something within painting, or both?

JY: I mean it is in that particular series of work. I felt that I told my story and I could move on.

PCL: How then, did the *SGN* (if it did), lead to the 2008 *Ceiling Painting (a tigress' wedding day)*? Does East meet West here again in terms of the subject matter?

JY: With *SGN*, I explored abstraction and tried to narrate stories with it. At the end of the series, I felt that I had hit a wall with that exploration, and that realization also marked the end of my paintings being autonomous. I said to myself, painting needs to have some kind of function, physical function, in the space in which it is placed. And that's when I thought about what I saw here in Venetian churches: the daily encounter with painting. The fluid relationship between painting and space seemed so much more natural and real compared to the artificial relationship a painting has to the space in a museum. So my stay in Venice did play a big role in the change of direction in my work. In terms of Eastern references, "the tigress' wedding day" is an expression in Korean to describe a sunny day with scattered showers.





Precarious, 2010, oil on aluminum, 145 x 61 x 12 cm

PCL: And do the letters that are in the painting have anything to do with narration? With language, with text?

JY: No, they are just scattered letters raining. I had this image of the letters and I really liked it, so I used it to show a space.

PCL: In 2010 to 2011 you lived in New York City, and did a residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program with a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. I noticed that when you returned from New York, your work had changed. The shift in your work signified to me that you had, for the time being, chosen a lane, that of Western abstraction, and you had decided to position your practice vis-à-vis that.

JY: My practice was always within Western abstraction, and I never thought I would enter into Eastern abstraction in the sense of traditional Eastern painting. But since New York, I did choose the lane of questioning where painting was going, and abstraction provided me with a good basis from which to start. Now, I feel like my work is not just about abstraction. It's also going into a conceptual realm where I am questioning what painting is, beyond the image. I don't think I can get away from Eastern influences because I am who I am. I don't try to escape from it. I try to see how being an

Easterner influences my existence in this world, and dictates what I find out in my work.

PCL: One of the persistent preoccupations in your work has been dualism, the dualism of landscape and culture that we saw in the Interlace paintings, and of two cultural traditions in the *SGN*. I don't see this duality in the more recent paintings and sculptural works. Would you say that in this new lane, duality is less of a concern?

JY: I associate my position in the world with that of painting, establishing parallels in my work. So the realization that my world is no longer a two-dimensional one shows up in my work. I am an atom floating in a three-dimensional space. The duality became untrue; a false reality for me.

PCL: Was the 2010 *About Painting* show in Montreal held before you went to New York, or was it while you were there?

JY: That show was just before my New York stay. I put up the show and then went to New York. I guess I had started to get into what painting meant to me and attempted to place it, but once I got to New York, I went into it deeper. I felt freer to let it out and confident to pursue the idea.

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PCL: Is there a relationship between your crumpled aluminum sculptural/painting work in the *About Painting* show, which use oil on aluminum, and which you title *Notes* (2010), and the notes flying out of the car in your *Sequence*? You mention being inspired by the film *Wonder Boys*, and you say the loss of the manuscript the film protagonist was working on for many years was, of course, a bitter loss for him, but also a liberation. So if we could extrapolate and say that your sculptural *Notes* are notes that hold the premises of a kind of abstraction, of a mode of painterly investigation, is there a liberation in crumpling them up, in saying now I am moving to something else?

JY: That is really interesting! The *Notes* that are crumpled or painted later did come from the *Sequence*, because that is when I started to use just black. Actually there, I use both black and white, and from then on I just use black. I came to crumpling purely by accident. I stepped on an aluminum sheet that was on my bed in the studio. It crumpled and it looked really good! Sometimes I plan things and make them, but sometimes, things just happen and I recognize that it is something that needs to be worked on further. Crumpled aluminum was the latter case. So there is a sense of liberation. I always felt a liberation in destruction; destruction of something you've spent so much time on.

PCL: You called them *Notes*, and notes are usually notations towards something more final, more resolved. Your *Notes* works seem visually and conceptually resolved, but are they also annotations to something else?

JY: Not really. Titles are so difficult for me. Coming up with a word that can summarize a body of work is really difficult. *Notes* are called that way because of how they looked, but not necessarily with deep meaning in what the word note means.

PCL: The boldness and the authority with which you were able to own a space like that of the Patrick Mikhail Gallery in Ottawa, where in 2011 you entirely covered two large walls by painting on aluminum directly adhered to those walls, does take confidence from a female artist. Cindy Sherman has talked about deliberately making very large works in order to own the gallery space in the way that she observed her male contemporaries felt entitled to do. Is there any feminist thrust to your taking on a Modernist tradition that has been largely dominated by male artists? Are you conscious of yourself as a woman painter entering into a conversation that has been mainly held between male artists?

JY: I am conscious of who I am, and that is an Asian woman who has lived two thirds of her

life in the West and one third in Asia so far. I think my position is slightly more complex than just in regards to the male-female relationship. For a long time, I tried to ignore that one's position in the world makes any difference in the work. But of course it does in the way I treat or I think about painting. I think men and women think differently and are different. The instances where I feel the most disadvantaged being a woman are when I interact with people in the art world. The rules of the game are made by men and we women have entered a bit later, so it's played by their rules. Although there have been some changes in the past thanks to feminist pioneers, we still have to learn how to play the men's games by their rules. But in terms of my big works, I think it comes more from my Napoleon complex.

PCL: What I see as another through-line in your work is the reflection on twentieth-century ideas of utopia. What would you say is your relationship, as a twenty-first century painter, to that utopian vision of abstraction as a universal language, as autonomous, as separate from social, historical, political realities? Are you disillusioned with those ideas, or do you see them as still holding potential?

JY: I see it as a passage (or a part of the way) to which we don't yet know the end point. Perhaps

we will never know but only continue to search. I don't think that Modernist abstraction can exist separately from socio-political realities, nor do I think a work can be disconnected from the space it is in. I don't think we know exactly where we are going, and we are all trying to see it, but utopia, I think is a phase. It may come back as another thing. I don't see it as an end point.

PCL: Abstraction for you still holds the possibility of going with us wherever that future is?

JY: Abstraction is an important vocabulary in the language of painting and it continues to be developed, in the same way any language changes over time and exists for centuries.

PCL: In your recent exhibitions, your painting has taken on a sculptural dimension. Some painting has bled onto the wall, for instance. Do you feel that for painting to continue it will have to carve out a so-called "expanded field"?

JY: Painting was never two-dimensional. It is not just an image. Painting is a thing that has always existed beyond two-dimensional space. Oil on canvas is oil on canvas. It's a thing.

PCL: It's an object.

JY: It's an object. An image can be constructed, but it is composed of matter. The fact that it seems to be expanding from what falsely was called two-dimensional is simply recognizing what it always was. It cannot expand beyond a confine that never existed.

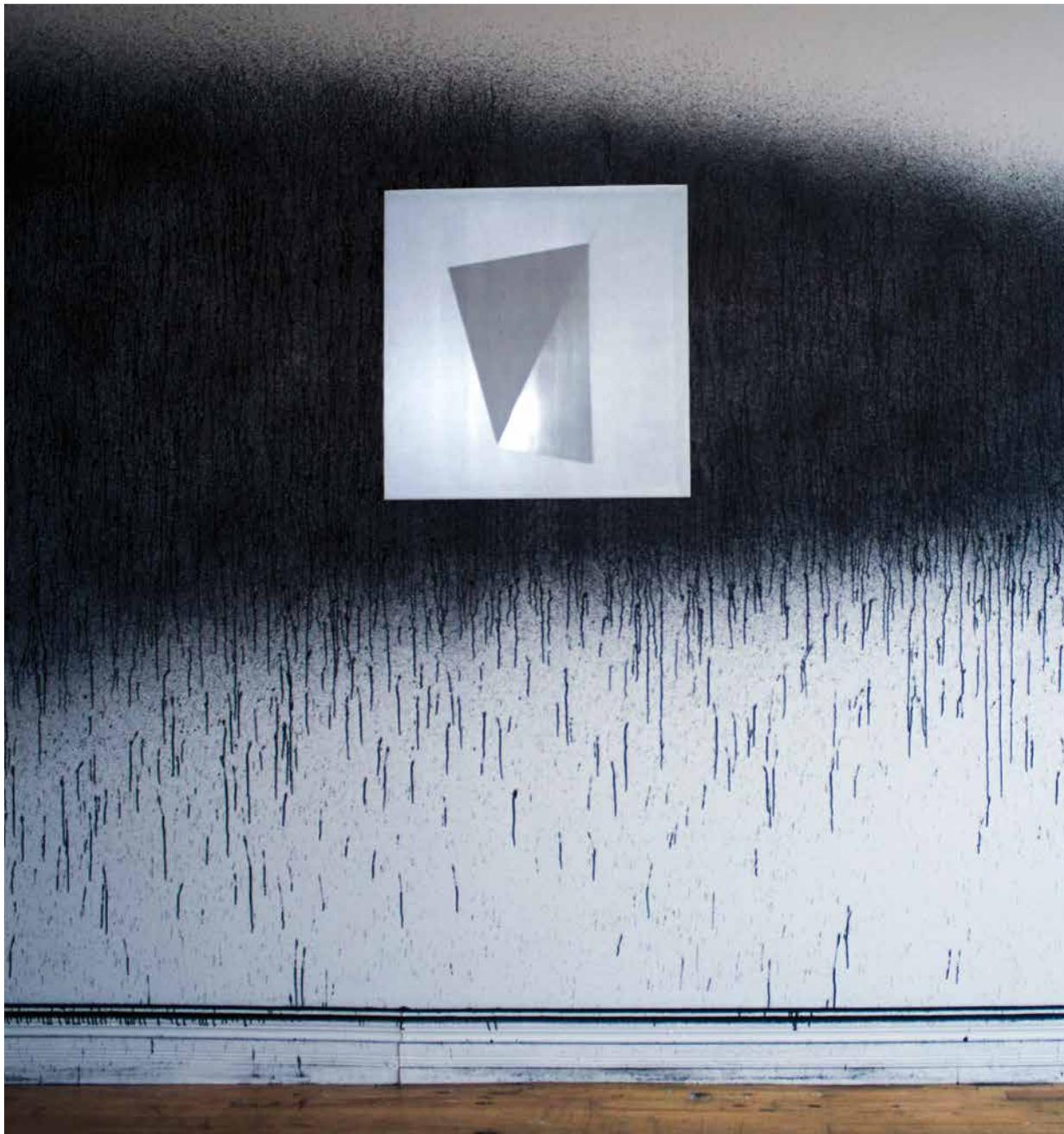
PCL: So it's a false understanding of painting to think that it had constraints and now is bursting out of these constraints.

JY: Yes. To me, painting is a thing and is beyond trying to make an image, at least since the language of abstraction; the birth of abstraction.

PCL: As you have mentioned, in an exhibition in New Brunswick in 2004, you had sections of the gallery wall cut away and then you inserted your paintings. Was that the beginning of your conversation with the wall?

JY: Yes, it absolutely was. I had wanted to do it for some time, but I had to wait till I found a space that would let me do it. Struts Gallery was open to the idea.

PCL: How would you talk about your dialogue with the wall? You've mentioned the fact that painting for you never was only a two-dimensional thing, but the traditional assumption about painting has been that it's for the wall.



From the Superstack, Sudbury (detail), 2013, ink on wall, 260 x 800 cm and Bent in Motion, 2012, 16mm transferred on HD, colour, sound, 2'29", camera: Irina Lyubchenko, sound: Jung Hun Yoo, Galerie du Nouvel-Ontario

JY: I negate the traditional way of thinking of painting as something on, and for, the wall, something self-contained, and something autonomous. That was one phase of my work. I had to negate what I assumed was the essence. So I began by negating. In one painting, I incised a line that went from top right to bottom left, and that was a negation. I have a few other works where I was negating what I thought painting was. But now, I think it's gotten to a stage where it has passed the stage of negation.

PCL: What is your relationship to the wall now, if it's no longer about deconstructing that understanding of what painting is?

JY: The wall defines space and it is part of a space and not simply a flat surface. For example, in my 2012 *Non-Painting Painting* work, shown in Seoul at Kunst Doc Art Gallery and in Montreal at Art Mûr, the reference to Malevich becomes a part of the space rather than a two-dimensional work that I deny.

PCL: What prompted you to create *Bent in Motion*, which features your 2011 oil on aluminum wall piece of the same name? It's not a video, but film?

JY: It's 16mm film that is transferred digitally. It's in colour, though it appears to be black and white. I see that as a painting, too.

PCL: How?

JY: That's how I see my work. It's a painting that is in movement.

PCL: Is this how you see it when you are working? When you are creating it? Or after?

JY: That's a good question. All of them. Yes. I think all of them. It came about when I was talking with a musician friend Jung Hun Yoo, a pianist and a Maestro collaboratore at the Teatro La Fenice opera house, about the notion of time present in my work. I was renting a small space from her as a studio one summer in Venice, and I had done a few sketches, one of which was a bent thing on paper. I didn't feel like bringing it all the way back to Canada so I left it there, and she took it to her home and looked at it. The next time we met here, we talked about the work, and she, being a musician who deals with a time-based medium, described what she saw and I described what I thought. When I visualized what she described in my head, the film was born. She composed the sound after the visuals were done. And it worked!

PCL: You have talked about “beginning where painting ends.” What does that mean to you?

JY: That I paint on reflective surfaces such as aluminum and mirrors, which embody illusional space already, which is where, traditionally, paintings ended.

PCL: Because something from the world is reflected in those surfaces.

JY: That’s right. Say that painting traditionally attempted to create an illusional space, a reflection of reality, and that’s when painting ended. My surface already has that even before starting and from that point on, I start painting.

PCL: Did painting end when photography took over illusion?

JY: I don’t think painting ever ended. But painting has shifted with the invention of photography.

PCL: So what is the challenge of painting now?

JY: I think it’s reflecting the world. Conversing, stating what there is. I don’t think medium is so important now, even though I say that I’m a painter, my work is about painting, and my works are paintings. Artists have the responsibility to interact with the world they live in, not

necessarily always directly, like participating in demonstrations, but having a position and voicing it in some way. It is the artists’ duty and role to interact and show what we see. I do it through the medium of painting and within the history of painting.

PCL: What would you want someone who doesn’t know the history of painting to draw from an installation such as *Non-Painting Painting*, which refers to an early twentieth-century exhibition of the work of Malevich? It is a dazzling aesthetic experience, but would you be satisfied if the viewer only got that and not the historical reference?

JY: Yes, I would be satisfied, in the sense that I cannot extend my control that far. There are many different audiences and I don’t expect everyone in the world to get it, feel it, like it, or understand it, and that’s fine with me. I think art-making is a selfish activity even if it is an integral part of society. If a gesture that an artist makes in response to what is going on in our society manages to impact only me, even if the transformation happens just to me, it’s still ok. If it has a larger reverberation, then I think that’s great! I think a small voice is also important and justified. So, yes, I am satisfied if viewers respond to my work primarily aesthetically, but hopefully they will have multifaceted reactions to it.





NOTES

1. Alain Buisine, *Dictionnaire amoureux et savant des couleurs de Venise*, Éditions Zulma, 1998

Window to the World, 2013, opening and latex paint on wall, 76 x 91 cm / 289 x 1399 cm, Sookmyung Women's University Museum

Black Matter, 2013, Sookmyung Women's University Museum