

TO ACTIVATE SPACE: JINNY YU'S ABSTRACT PAINTING, 2008-2013

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Jinny Yu's abstract paintings have evolved significantly since her *Story of a Global Nomad* exhibition in 2008. Her work from the mid 2000s distilled multiple global impressions into complex abstract paintings that betokened the nomadic condition she shares with many artists of her generation. While the historical implications and affinities of her abstraction remain, Yu's recent work activates more immediate spatial coordinates in a sustained project to understand and expand the potential of abstract painting. Always engaged socially and physically, always implying and inviting narrative, her new work communicates most intensely with its immediate surroundings.

Yu is a prolific and ambitious artist. She wants to find out big things through painting, and her method is systematic and disciplined. She patiently works through ideas, gestures, and materials. We should do the same before standing back to comment on the collective effects her abstract paintings make today. Most of Yu's recent work falls under several

communal names: *Non-Painting Painting*, *What is to be Done?*, *About Painting*, or most recently, *I am Painting*, titles that she also uses for exhibitions. But unlike many abstract painters, she doesn't therefore think in series. Works in these groups are related to a specific time and place of making and to her questions at the time, but they are also remarkably individual.

A deceptively simple, two part painting from the family *Non-Painting Painting* (2012; Fig.1) is a case in point. A small square sheet of Yu's signature material – industrial grade rolled aluminum, Canadian or Korean, depending on where she makes a given piece – leans against a wall at floor level. In front of this surface is another piece of aluminum, smaller and folded almost double. Able to support itself, it is centered against the leaning square and almost touches it at floor level. The stage is set for visual magic. The freestanding aluminum form is reflected and framed traditionally in the square. The image is registered in a precise and saturated way where the elements are closest

(at the bottom) and with increasing blurriness as the forms diverge towards the top of the square. We could say that the open side of the standing form draws a Barnett Newman-like “zip” up most of the square, “draws” it in the way light draws on traditional photographic film. While we may not see this effect from the outside of the standing form, there is painting inside the folded area. Even if we don’t see this interior painting, even if it appears that there is no hand work or choice exercised beyond the cutting, bending, and placement of the two elements, “painting” still obtains. The seductive reflective capacity of polished aluminum does everything; it creates and populates illusionary space all on its own, beautifully. With the utmost subtlety, Yu here suggests that the gestural and material reality of painting remains important. “Painting is a thing that has always existed beyond two-dimensional space,” she explains.¹

Measuring out Yu’s priorities, this work easily maintains both an internal dialogue between the painting’s two main physical components and an external reference to the space it subtly but not tentatively occupies. Just as these are literal coordinates, they are simultaneously allegories of Yu’s double concern with the permutations of painting as a contemporary genre and its social implications.

It may seem surprising to say that these concurrently intimate and expansive concerns are fully consistent with Yu’s aesthetically disparate work in such large paintings on aluminum as *Green Mountains* (2007), seen in the exhibition *Story of a Global Nomad* at Art Mûr, Montréal, in 2008. Aluminum is still the “support,” one so important for Yu that it becomes a primary material that can now stand alone as well as function as a receptor for the artist’s gestures. Colour is minimized in more recent work, replaced by ivory black oil, or most recently, by water soluble Korean ink. (Fig. 2) Yu moves painting more and more into space, into what some might call sculpture. She is concerned not only with a range of possible manipulations of paint – brushing, wiping, spraying, erasing – but also with what she can do to and with the surface, whether bending, scoring, or folding it.

Abstract painting has over its long and increasingly complex history offered artists a way to think through fundamental questions in painting and in the world. Within abstraction, monochromatic painting (especially in black, Yu’s choice) has in turn provided an even more intense field for both introspection and commentary.² One way to describe Yu’s painting since 2008 is to say that she has exercised this now classic option within abstract painting. Yu suggests that the directions she is now taking in







Fig. 4 *Notes*, 2010, oil on aluminum, 61 x 48 x 8 cm

monochromatic abstraction developed from elements in a large figurative work from 2009, *Sequence*, specifically the stills of papers flying in the air that she borrowed from the film *Wonder Boys* (2000). These sheets or “leaves” suggest individual, self-contained units for the exploration of visual ideas, what she soon came to call and still produces under the title *Notes*. While Yu moves effortlessly between figurative and abstract idioms – in the recent *Tiepolo Project* (2011-13), for example, where the linear striations of damaged surfaces in the Venetian master’s originals are her ‘abstract’ focal point, as they were in earlier work such as the *Me(n)tal Perspectives* (2005) – her *Notes* are often small in scale and confined in what they explore. Some *Notes* emulate a single sheet of paper; Yu erased pigment to suggest its form (Fig. 3), or in other cases, crumpled her aluminum rectangle as if it were a mere piece of note paper (*Notes Crumpled*, 2011). Others move away from their source in *Sequence* to function as laboratories for her experiments with abstraction, in this case the three dimensional possibilities of aluminum as a surface (Fig. 4). Still others belie the diminutive sense of an ordinary “note” by working out physical relations on a much larger scale (Fig. 5). Important differences among these and sibling works notwithstanding, these are themes within a focused range of concerns. In some of her most recent work, Yu extends her

experimentation by spraying black Korean ink onto her aluminum surfaces, creating powerful images whose evanescent fragilities we cannot miss.

The often meditative mood of the *Notes* waxes more communal in Yu’s recent work. Individual *Notes* have been placed in conversation with other works in her exhibitions, for example in *About Painting* at Art Mûr in 2010 (Fig. 6). More recently still, Yu has placed what we could, in their exploration of the monochrome, take as individual or paired *Notes* increasingly into dialogue with one another and their ambient space (Fig. 7; Fig. 1).

These exchanges begin with simple gambits: in *Non-Painting Painting* (Fig. 7) for example, Yu contrasts and balances the relative density of the paint applied to a semi-reflective aluminum surfaces. She draws our attention to the commensurate but scaled difference in size of the two forms and to the almost “loud” variance in the area of untouched support she allows us to see. Here, what I construe as a conversation between two parts and with the long tradition of monochromatic abstraction that Yu invokes, takes place in the most traditional, civilized format: on the wall of a gallery. The pairing of works she sets up extends such discussions almost infinitely. Yu’s title for these



Fig. 5 *Notes (large)*, 2010, oil on aluminum, 152 x 195 x 18 cm

Fig. 6 *About Painting*, 2010, Art Mûr





Fig. 7 *Non-Painting Painting*, 2012, oil on aluminum, 61 x 44 cm / 44 x 44 cm



pieces - *Non-Painting Painting* - refers not only to the atypicality of her unusual if not unheard of aluminum surfaces (employed sparingly but effectively in the past in abstract work by Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Irwin, and Christian Eckart, for example) but also to the fact that she moves her conversations into three dimensions, as we have seen with *Non-Painting Painting* (Fig. 1). It is in this way that the social extension of a work's implications activates the space around it, as we see in *Negation* (2011; Fig. 8) and related works that employ a well-known sign or mark that prevents us from reading the marked surface as merely self-referential.

With its massive scale and corner-defining, almost architectural, placement, *Painting*, for example (2011; Fig. 9), commands the viewer's space. Like the embracing canvases of Newman that Yu makes reference to with her various incarnations of the "zip," yet with a bend in the middle as opposed to literal flatness, this work envelops our vision and makes it as much physical as optical. Yu has extended the atmospheric and social implications of large scale painting in work shown in Korea in the summer of 2013,³ painting an extensive surface red, then inscribing (or excising) a small but centrally placed area in the wall to create a negative painting within an assertively positive painterly space. Sitting to the left of this shallow excavation is long, rectangular aluminum

Fig. 8 *Negation*, 2011, oil on aluminum, 152 x 110 cm



Fig. 9 *Painting*, 2011, oil on aluminum, 289.5 x 366 x 488 cm, Patrick Mikhail Gallery

Fig. 10 (p. 22) *Bent*, 2012, oil on aluminium, 61 x 44 x 18 cm

painting, an imperfect rectangular form that hangs, according to convention - but also uncomfortably, even defiantly - on the surface of the red field. It is a testament to the power of Yu's ongoing interrogation of abstract painting's norms and potential that the negative space she has carved out suggests the acts and objects of painting as easily as the "normal" component to its left. We might ask of the whole, is this one work with three elements, two works on a red wall, or three separate works somehow acting communally?

There is something restlessly systematic in Yu's way of testing the abilities of monochromatic painting in the present. *Painting* shows one way to work with space with a flat surface: bend it into a corner, large scale. *Bent* (2011; Fig. 10) approaches similar territory on a small scale yet with even greater effectiveness, thanks to its subtlety, portability, and penchant for variation. *Bent* is another deceptively simple accomplishment. Here Yu has folded the left half of a diagonally bifurcated aluminum painting reminiscent of her *Notes* towards us as the piece sits on the wall at eye level. Seen straight on, we register variations in tone. From any angle, though, the shadow thrown by the raised surface comes into play. As we move, so does this element of the work. In fact, the work seems to see and to follow us,

which is both fascinating and disconcerting as social behavior for an abstract painting. She moves this form into a large open space in her 2012 exhibit at the Nanji Art Gallery in Seoul (Fig. 11), *What is to be Done?* Yu has also exhibited a remarkable film of this work. Animated as a light source moves across it, *Bent in Motion* (2012) holds our attention for its full two minutes and twenty-nine seconds with its poignant simplicity. Shot in 16 mm colour film for depth of tone but appearing almost black and white, and with an evocative, minimal piano soundtrack by Jung Hun Yoo, a camera pans slowly from right to left to reveal how the painting *Bent* can, with light, expand into and activate its surrounding space. The work appears still at first, caught on the wall, but we soon notice a line growing from the top right corner of the prominent diagonal fold that runs across its painted surface. This shadow extends upwards along the trajectory established by the fold, then seems liberated and grows to the left of the aluminum form that, with the collaboration of light, produces it. From a line, this form increases so extravagantly that it appears to be another wing in the original painting and exceeds the camera's frame to the left. It is at this early climax in the sequence that we begin to notice other, smaller shadows populating the space to the left of the vertical plane of the painting. These materialize as blank pages in a book, a notebook perhaps.





The 2012 exhibition in which *Bent* migrated to the floor is one of two in that year in which Yu's abstracts increasingly take on the character of players in an abstract drama that leaves the wall, if not the gallery, behind (*Non-Painting Painting* at Kunst Doc Art Gallery and General Hardware Contemporary and *What is to be Done?* at Art Mûr and Nanji Art Gallery). Another version of *What is to be Done?* was seen at Art Mûr in the fall of 2012. An iteration of *Non-Painting Painting* seen at Kunst Doc Art Gallery in Seoul also made abstraction both highly theatrical and social in its use of space. We might wonder about what is left of painting as Yu takes her actors onto the floor with such grace (Fig. 12).

Yu has an astute answer to this question, one she articulates if asked and that she makes visually evident: painting is work that uses the language of painting. Even her film *Bent in Motion* is a painting in this sense. Her declaration is simple, disarmingly so, and it is simply right when we think about contemporary abstraction; there is no will among contemporary practitioners to revisit the strictures of medium specificity. We see what Yu means in two of her recent exhibitions (Fig. 13), in which she cheekily includes references to pioneer abstractionist Kazimir Malevich's placement of one of his icon-like Suprematist squares in the privileged high corner of the room in the *0.10* exhibition in



Fig. 11 *What is to Be Done?* 2012, Nanji Art Gallery

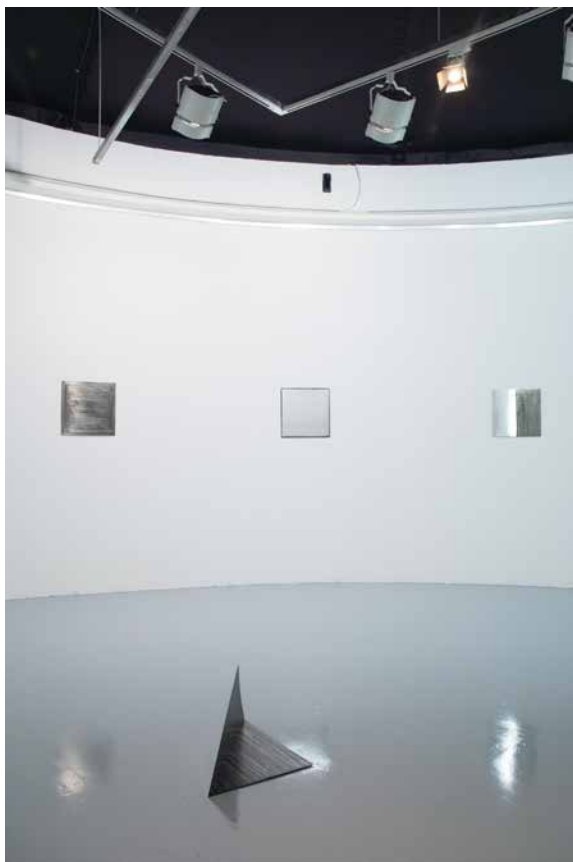


Fig. 12 *What is to Be Done?* 2012, Nanji Art Gallery

St. Petersburg in December 1915 (Fig. 14). Yu's Malevich (Fig. 13), seen in another version here (Fig. 15), is impertinent almost one hundred years on because it was Malevich who helped to inaugurate the languages of abstraction, whereas Yu is inevitably part of what has famously been called painting's "endgame."⁴ Yet she doesn't give us pastiche or simply a "smart" riposte with this gesture. Abstraction in the hands of the Russian and then Soviet avant-garde was radically social; it was designed as a universal language for a new nation. Yu acts on this premise. As she claims in the interview with Penny Cousineau-Levine published here, "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."⁵

In Yu's able hands, abstraction is only passingly about itself. It tends instead towards a more extensive physical and social space than most painting today. Like Malevich's Suprematism but unlike other abstract artists with whom we might think to compare Yu's efforts, such as the Brazilian Lygia Clark (1920-1988) – whose engaging aluminum floor pieces took over large gallery areas and were readily identified as neo-constructivist sculpture – Yu's work maintains its status as painting. We see this in her nod to Malevich and in her other frequent references to lions of abstraction such as Barnett Newman.



Fig. 13 (top) *Non-Painting Painting*, 2012, Kunst Doc Art Gallery

Fig. 14 (left) Kasimir Malevich, Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10, Dobychina Art Bureau at Marsovo Pole, Petrograd, RU

Fig. 15 (right) *Non-Painting Painting*, 2012, Art Mûr



Fig. 16 *Zip*, 2010, oil on aluminum, 244 x 5 cm

As Newman himself did by calling his three-dimensional zip *The Wild* (1950) a painting, Yu's *Zip* (2010, Fig. 16) and *Zip or Voice of Fire* (2010) insist with their titles on their place in the discourses of painting. Yu makes references to earlier abstract painters to underline her seriousness and to cement her contemporary relationship to this tradition, not to drop names or to compete with them. In this way she can explore abstract painting's reference points further and add to its language.

One recent painting explores these permutations in a particularly unexpected yet productive manner. In *Painting, wiped, on wall* of 2011 (Fig. 17), Yu has pushed her black oil paint off the painting's "proper" surface; it registers most intensely on the surrounding wall, beyond the perfect edges of the aluminum.

As a result of this gesture, the sharp, industrial edges of the metal contrast with the painterly registration of the enveloping pigment. The moodily reflective aluminum surface is now double-framed, ultimately by the gallery wall but first by the more immediate presence of the soft black perimeter. The painting's spatial presence becomes more ambiguous as a result because it looks like the black paint might extend all the way under the aluminum, pushing the metal square forward towards the viewer.

Yu's methodical exploration of monochromatic painting yields aesthetic insights that she is quick to extend. I have mentioned the importance of the *Notes* in this regard. *Painting, wiped, on wall* is similarly suggestive; Yu has in effect used its talent for spatial reframing in some of her most recent work. The connection between this work and the wall-sized *Painting = Subject + Boundary* (2012, Fig. 18) that introduced her General Hardware Contemporary exhibition in Toronto in the fall of 2012 is both clear and subtle. Clear, because Yu has here deployed a double version of the pigment as framing edge motif seen in *Painting, wiped, on wall*. Subtle, because her signature aluminum support has vanished, replaced by a large rectangular mirror that leans against the wall inside the double drawn frame.

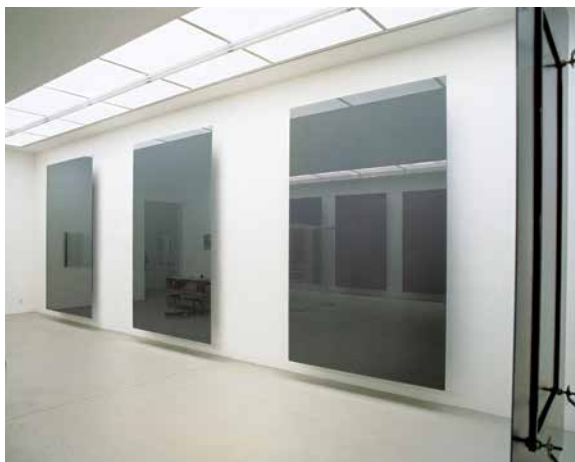
While Yu explores abstraction more intuitively than historically, it is no surprise that some of her recent work takes the qualities of reflectiveness inherent in polished aluminum to their ultimate instantiation in back glazed mirrors. As Gerhard Richter and Michelangelo Pistoletto have demonstrated memorably in mirror works from the past thirty years, mirrors can be the perfect monochrome abstractions and the ultimate social beings. Richter's magisterial installation *Eight Grey* (2001, Fig. 19), for example, presented a series of massive grey tinted enameled glass panels that perform, on the one hand, as analogues to his

many grey paintings in oil on canvas and on the other as restless surfaces that bounce all visual information back into the space from which it originates. from which it originates. Characteristically, Yu is also exploring the potential of mirror abstractions in stepwise fashion. Like Pistoletto before her, she understands the reverberative power found by placing reflective paintings adjacent to one another in a corner (Fig. 20). To confound any simple visual resolution in the visual conversation between this pair – and to underline again their nature as paintings – Yu has wittily but tellingly painted simple rectangles on each surface, lines that are endlessly mirrored in the other "face." Her own markings are therefore only part of what constitutes this double painting.

In yet another iteration of *What is to be Done? - Mere Mirror Painting* - (2012, Fig. 21), Yu has placed a mirror beside a similarly sized, leaning painting that carries her usual black pigment but this time also on a mirror surface. To make sure the nature of the surface is evident – forcing it to remain part of this duo rather than to disappear in its own reflections – Yu has broken the mirror. It's a strong gesture, one that assures that we extend the conversation about painting, the illusional, and the real.







By using mirrors within painting, Yu dissolves the over emphasized distinction between abstraction and figuration. To acknowledge that she works within this tradition is in fact the opposite of saying that she is traditional in the pejorative sense. Her new work proves that such explorations can happen within the evolving languages of abstract painting. Jinny Yu does not have time to dispute the value of painting; that's a tired conversation. She is instead busy augmenting its potential for us today.

NOTES

1. Interview with Penny Cousineau-Levine, 2013, p. 46
2. See Mark A. Cheetham, *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure since the '60s*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
3. Yu's solo exhibition *Black Matter* was part of Colours of Canada / Les Couleurs du Canada exhibitions organized by the Embassy of Canada in Seoul, Korea seen at Sookmyung Women's University Museum September 5 - November 29, 2013.
4. *Endgame: reference and simulation in recent American painting and sculpture*. Boston ICA, 1986.
5. Interview with Penny Cousineau-Levine, 2013, p. 46

Fig. 18 *Painting = Subject + Boundary*, 2012, mirror and oil on wall, 426 x 426 x 30 cm, General Hardware Contemporary

Fig. 19 Gerhard Richter, *Eight Grey*, 2001, glass covered with grey enamel and steel, 320 x 200 x 30 cm, © Gerhard Richter 2014



Fig. 20 *Non-Painting Painting*, 2012, oil on aluminum, 60 x 48 x 48 cm

Fig. 21 *Mere Mirror Painting*, oil on mirror, 198 x 62 cm each

