

Limning the Abstract Landscape

Jiha Moon's work is often discussed in terms of opposites brought together in a single image: East and West, tradition and innovation, representation and abstraction, spontaneity and control. This view is largely true. Her work teems with the results of productive tension between contrasting forces, and she herself describes her experience of moving between diverse cultures—Korea and the United States, small town and city, the North and the South—as a primary influence on her imagery.

In looking at Moon's sensuous and animated paintings, I am also interested in the individual language she has developed to express this tension. Each of her works—ink and acrylic on Hanji paper—presents a drama of improvisation and imagination in which the primary protagonist is gesture: the gesture of a loaded brush pulled across the paper to form a thick wake of variegated hue; the gesture of multiple veils of colored ink washing over each other in successive layers, deepening the sense of space as they build atmospheric density; the gesture of fine lines surrounding and embellishing areas of flat color, teasing out their identities until these forms themselves become dynamic presences in the overall field. One can appreciate why she groups her new body of work under the rubric "line tripping."

The emphasis on line and gesture is not surprising for a Korean artist. Korea, like its neighbors China and Japan—whose successive waves of migration, invasion, and conquest over two thousand years deeply shaped Korean art and culture—long valued calligraphy above all other art forms. The required skills of wrist control and stroke formation, the subtle effects of space, and the balance of light and shade and movement and stasis all provided the foundation for many other kinds of painting. Moreover, the complete clarity of every aspect of the calligrapher's technique further elevated respect for his achievement.

Moon's work builds on this calligraphic-painterly tradition. At the same time, she incorporates practices and imagery from her study of Western art and culture. Moon begins by laying down a variety of abstract marks, starting most often with ink washes followed

by thicker strokes and opaque forms in acrylic paint. She likens this initial phase of pouring, dragging, pooling, and wiping off of her materials to the process of a gestural color field painter like Helen Frankenthaler. In her most recent works, she uses a special Hanji paper made by a man designated a Korean national treasure. The dark tone of these handmade sheets, no two alike in color or texture, has prompted Moon to adopt a more saturated palette of deep greens and blues, inspired, she says, by a style of richly colored landscape painting that flourished particularly in Tang Dynasty China (618-906 A.D.).

Moon next studies the accidental forms she has produced, taking her cue from what they naturally suggest. Some she embellishes in flashes of inspiration, using thin brushes to add detail, not unlike Surrealist automatist techniques that pulled out odd creatures and other idiosyncratic figures from the abstract lines and patterns formed by chance process. She might add an eye and teeth to the ends of a wavering impasto brushstroke to form a flying dragon. Or develop a stain into a fluttering leaf or strange bird. In other cases, though, she cancels out a form whose figurative reference is too legible, concerned to maintain a balance between abstraction and representation.

The bulk of Moon's imagery is landscape based, dominated by the natural elements of earth, water, and sky. Her works often defy a fixed perspective, instead presenting maelstroms reminiscent of Leonardo's late *Deluge* drawings, which she admires. Although it can be difficult to tell which way is up in her turbulent visions, one can often sense rock and mountain formations, swirling clouds, and gushing, pounding, or crashing water. In this way, Moon's works also build on Asian landscape painting's celebration of the spectacle of the natural world and, by contrast, the humbling insignificance of human presence. Even the lack of a fixed view point is characteristic of this tradition. While Leonardo and other Renaissance artists might forego the usual Western linear perspective when addressing an apocalyptic theme, East Asian landscape painting commonly features multiple perspectives to allow the viewer's eye to move successively through a work while also reinforcing the panoply of nature's bounty. Moon's sense of atmosphere and deep space, combined with elements of minute detail, recall the traditional East Asian notion that a good landscape painting makes a viewer feel he can walk through it; a better one

allows him to feel he can stop in it; best of all, to live in it. Moon takes this a step further, presenting fantastical worlds of drama, beauty, fear, and humor in which one could imagine epic adventures.

Moon has said, however, that she dislikes the term fantasy for her work, as her images often make specific cultural references and have an immediacy and vividness that contrasts with dream-type images. She prefers the term comic utopia and has also used the word purgatory to describe her work. Both these monikers suggest the kind of non-places or quality of in-betweenness that she captures in her images—places that seem to hold in suspension contradictory formal qualities, cultural associations, and emotional states. Moon sees this as reflecting her own experience of an ongoing journey between vastly different cultures (the thin red lines in the largest work in the show, *Beaufort Gorge*, underscore this theme by referencing flight routes on airline maps).

The theme of journey, in all its manifestations, has long served as a central concept in East Asian landscape painting. One traditional role for these kinds of images was to provide artist and viewer alike with an escape from the stress of urban living through “visiting” tranquil and beautiful places. Landscape painting also played an important role in intellectual and spiritual cultivation by exploring the relationship between the artist and the outer world. Moon’s images provide a similar kind of mental and emotional exploration, taking the viewer on a journey at once back in time by allusions to Asian and Renaissance art, forward to an apocalyptic future, and inward through the recesses of one’s imagination—all the while remaining grounded in a present day of global interconnection and cultural hybridity.

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