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Color journal

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COLOR JOURNAL

A Thesis

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Louisiana State University and
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in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art

by

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ABSTRACT

"Color is sensibility in material form, matter in its primordial state."

Yves Klein

Color Journal consists of a collection of works, which depict landscapes and cityscapes with an underlining consciousness of the interrelationship between humans and their environment. Over the ages, the relationship changes through the history of human civilization. In the current age, nature seems to suffer a losing battle. Therefore, there is a personal nostalgic sentiment to emphasize the beauty of our natural environment and the importance of the balance of the relationship. The image of houses is chosen to represent human activities because of the inherent symbols embedded in houses. All the paintings in the collection rely heavily on memory and imagination. Memory filters our perception of the world and brings out images in our deepest psyche. Imagination enhances and provides structure to the painting.

INTRODUCTION

Color Journal is a collection of landscapes and cityscapes that represent images from my memory and imagination. They represent subjective images linked to specific experiences. Many of them are images from places I have visited or lived in for a period of time in my life. My experiences in these places make the paintings personal and meaningful.

All the landscapes and cityscapes are painted at different levels of abstraction. My main focus is in the relationship between color, shape and mark in paintings. Color is an important element in setting the mood for a painting, while the shape and mark imply reality. I enjoy using nature's recurring patterns and organic shapes in my paintings. The curve of the foliage, the horizontal lines between layers of grass and land, and the irregular shapes of petals are just a few of the elements I borrow from nature.

Many paintings in the collection include houses. People identify themselves with images of houses and project emotions on the images according to their life experiences. Houses also serve as a symbol of human society. The interrelationship between human society and the natural environment is a constant struggle. Humans take resources from nature and at the same time damage nature at a rate that does not allow nature to recover. In my paintings I am promoting an image of harmonious coexistence with houses sitting peacefully in the embrace of nature.

Color Journal projects my view of nature as a generous provider that supplies and balances different forces in the human environment for our existence and survival. Through the process of painting Color Journal, I have learned to observe nature with a renewed enthusiasm and a humble attitude.

SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Nature is the main source of inspiration for my paintings. I take inspiration and joy when I travel into nature. Traveling into nature is a unique experience for me. Whenever I am surrounded completely by nature without a trace of human society, I feel like I am entering a different space where my senses are refreshed and I can think independently. Physically and spiritually it clears my psyche and revives my energy. By simply enjoying the moment, a mental image is created and stored.

My journal is another source for my paintings. Keeping a journal was a practice for me since the early years of my life. Over the years, it became a record of my constant moving. I have moved more than most people in their lifetime. Originally I moved from Taiwan to the United States for my education. Later I moved within the states from Kansas to California, to Texas and finally settled in Louisiana. Each geographic location left me with images of its own local characteristics.

My journals include sketches, photos and writings. Each of them informs me differently in my paintings. I use sketches to quickly record a general structure of a place. I can also invent or delete objects to emphasize what interests me. Usually sketches provide me with the spirit of a locale.

The benefits of photos for me, on the other hand, are the precise details they retain. When I want to recall the exact relationship between objects, photos are the best source. My memory records subjective information, but photos present me with objective evidence of the physical world. Photos from different angles and distance inspire me to set paintings on various perspectives.

Writings in a journal provide another layer of sensuous information to solidify an experience. A place can be described in words in terms of sound, smell, surface, lighting, atmosphere, impression of colors and forms, as well as all other physical characteristics. Moreover, it conveys what is beyond the appearance. A place can remind me of a personal experience or form an association from fictional materials. These mental responses can only be recorded verbally.

MEMORY

Memory is subjective and unique. When information from the outside world reaches us as stimuli, we process the information to start an encoding process so that we can save it for later retrieval. Each individual encodes the information differently and thus creates a different mental image or understanding, which we call memory. Memory is influenced by personal experience and subjective inclinations, sometimes combined with personal preference and imagination. It is a useful function for practical daily life; but for painters, it is particularly amazing because of this individualized interpretation of the same world we live in.

When people recall a mental image, it usually comes with an emotion. This emotion is closely connected to a memory. Because of memory, we are able to relive an experience and savor the emotion repeatedly. The process of making a painting to me is a process of reliving an experience. While a painting is progressing, memory unfolds and blossoms with more details. Painting and memory feed each other and direct each other.

I usually start a painting by looking at all the photos, sketches and notes I have of the subject. The physical information helps me remember and connect to the mental image as I remember. The mental image eventually guides and shapes the process of the painting. Usually I consider a painting finished, when it connects with the original experience that inspires it.

PSYCHOLOGY OF HOUSES

The image of a house or houses instantaneously conjures up our memories of former dwelling places with our deepest emotions. Houses are human beings' first universes. In them, human beings are sheltered from the danger outside, particularly when we are still children and the world seems enormous and dangerous. In most cases, the houses we grew up retain an iconic status. They provide a sense of stability, protection, comfort and freedom to daydream.

The freedom people feel in their own houses creates an intimacy that connects people with places they lived through their lives. There is a personal experience of houses and a communal experience from time immemorial. From either experience, people harbor subconscious images and feelings toward houses in their deepest psyche. "The houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us." as Gaston Bachelard wrote in The Poetics of Space. Those houses stay in our dreams and show up in our creative expressions. They become part of our identity and influence who we are. In my case, they are in my paintings.

Images of houses appear in many of my paintings. I paint houses for their symbolic meaning as human society and the human race. Even though there are no visible human figures in the painting, human existence is suggested. There are ladders, curtains, gardens, cups, chairs and other small traces of human activities to encourage narrative associations and for the viewer to imagine being in that space. These houses coexist with nature in a harmonious way. Houses are connected to the larger environment like small parts in a large system. The concept that people and their natural environment are codependent is a recurrent theme in my paintings.

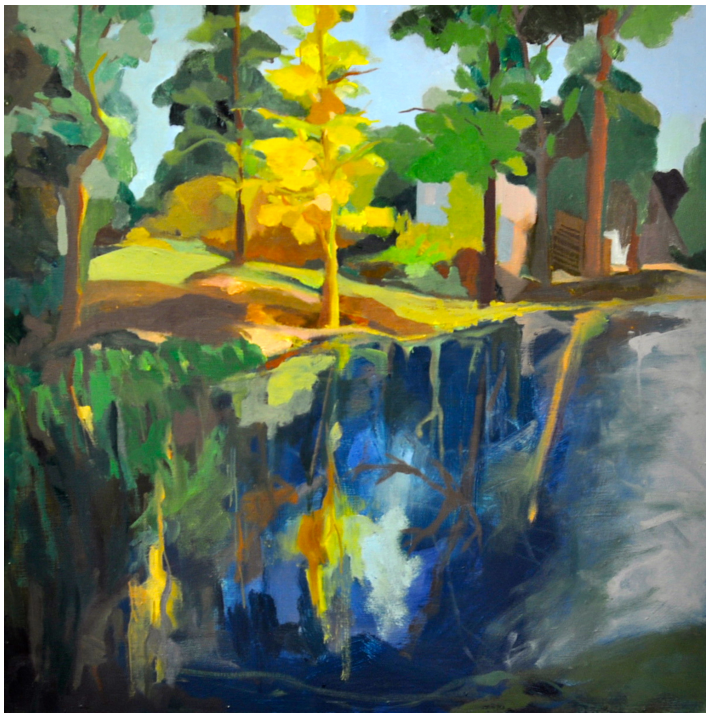


HOUSES ON MY STREET

COLOR AND SHAPE AS A LANGUAGE

Color lives in the painting, not on the palette. When colors are on the palette, they are like isolated individuals; but when they are mixed, they become much richer and sophisticated. Once they are applied to the canvas, colors are enlivened through being put next to each other. They express emotions without verbal communication.

Color speaks a different language in different environments. Josef Albers designed many exercises in Interaction of Color to demonstrate these unique qualities of color. It shows us that the same color can appear to be different when the background is different. Subtle changes in quantity, saturation, or value can also drastically affect the perception of color. Much like chemical reactions, certain colors compliment each other while others might decrease the luster of both. Isolating or connecting boundaries between colors creates yet another unexpected effect. It is up to the artist to manipulate these factors to create the desirable image.



HOUSE BY THE POND

can relive the experience of climbing up the tree, peeping through the branches. Depending on the personal experience, it could create anxiety or joy. It could also be a view from down the road, looking up the house on the hill. The house looks small and unreal.

The house next to the pond can be any color. I chose the color for its relationship with the environment. The house can be presented as part of the environment or standing out as an intruder in nature. The house can be cozy or cold, lively or abandoned, comforting or gloomy. Color changes the mood and speaks in different tones.

The angle of perspective changes the shape of everything. I enjoy uncommon viewpoints that portray a different perspective. It could be a

view from the treetop looking down at a barn. The viewer



TREETOP

The mark of a brush stroke conveys another message. I use circular, soft, organic shapes to portray life and energy in vegetation. They are countered by the harsh, straight, angular lines, which suggest man-made architectural structures. The play of soft and harsh is a reminder of the constant struggle between the man-made world and nature.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Over the course of the MFA program, I came across many artists, through introductions from my teachers, seminars, visiting artists, museum visits, and various forms of media. Although there are many masters in art history that guided my overall appreciation of painting, I am always thrilled to discover contemporary artists who strike a resonance in me either through their works or through their thoughts about art.

The few contemporary artists I chose to talk about represent a fraction of the multitude of artists I find interesting. However, discussion of the following artists produces a general picture of my own artistic direction. All of them produce mainly landscapes in different levels of abstraction. Their paintings look very different, but the underlining idea is similar. Color and shape are the tools to describe a space they create in response to nature. Time and memory are the real subject and sentiment behind their work.

Stuart Shils:

My first impression of his work is his color. Even though his painting is generally very loose and simplified, his color is very informative. A place is well developed and felt with a definite sense of time and light because of his marvelous use of color. His work is highly abstracted with a few simple forms to suggest objects. He sees his work as an extended metaphor, a highly compressed meditation on form and light.

For 25 years, Shils has painted in the outdoors. He also spends time to just observe and submerge himself in a scene. I appreciate his idea of taking in all the facts of a place and trying to recreate the experience by selecting the right elements to express “the mood of a locale and the temper of its weather”. Recently, he started painting indoors using his drawings. It is a change to allow him to paint from memory. In his own words, his recent work is “... rooted in sensation. It is coming from an internal conversation with myself but also it is coming from being out of doors for many years with the sensory snails hoisted, from the long conversation with many observations and considerations of things in the visible world even if they were only absorbed peripherally.” Ultimately, he is painting what is internal whether he sits outdoors or indoors.

He views art as the ultimate playground and a frontier, where people can have fun and can explore. As a painter, as well as a viewer, art provides a way for him to push himself beyond the edge of comfort and open up to a consideration of possibilities. It is this belief that brings him to the current development of his painting, which is different in size, style and process from his earlier paintings. As an artist, he is willing to take risks and venture into unfamiliar territory to find the path that continues to challenge and satisfy him.

Brian Rego:

Brian Rego picks the most mundane subjects to paint. He paints parking lots, street corners, storage buildings, sheds, barns, etc. He is not selective about his subjects. He is describing his response to a particular space in a way that is meaningful to him. What he is interested in is the way color and form change as they move through space. In his painting, there is a clear delineation of each plane from distant to close; from sky to the ground. The sense of space and volume is clearly felt.

In his artist statement, he stated, “ For me, the purpose of painting is to tap into something that is profoundly human, something sensual that lies on the fringe of memory, a reality both strange and familiar.” His painting displays a sense of edginess that makes it feels strange, like in a dream. To me, it provides a sense of freshness, an alternative reality.

Allison Gildersleeve:

Allison Gildersleeve has an interesting process of making paintings. She starts by collecting photos of the same locale. They could be photos she took or family photos from years ago. She piles these photos up like film stills and looks through them to create a flickering sensation in her mind. Those images from the photos become layers of paints and marks when she starts painting. The resulting painting is a tapestry of unexpected colors and lines, displaying an accumulation of activities in the passage of time.

There is a strong movement and liveliness in her painting. The juxtaposition of contrasting colors mixed with furious strokes and unexpected marks create a bustling, noisy, dynamic landscape. She calls her painting “experiential landscapes”. They are meant to be felt as well as seen. Traces of life and human activities are felt even though none of the living figures are presented. It is the artist’s intention to present the environments as places full of anticipation, dread, happiness, and calm; places with a past and future. At the same time, she wants to invite her viewer to occupy the space with his or her own histories and projections

PAINTINGS

Nature Series

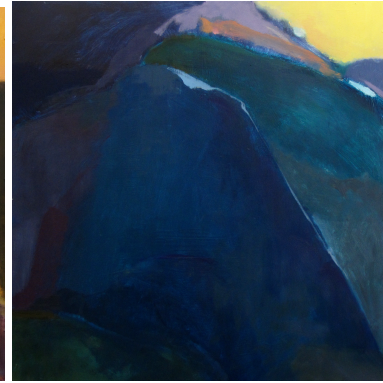
This series includes paintings of mountains, trees, fields, river and ocean. The focus is on the general essence of nature when one is surrounded by it.



MORNING MOUNTAIN



PINK ROCK



SHADOW MOUNTAIN

Three paintings in this group depict three different impressions of mountains. They are all 30 inches square in size, oil paint on panels. I am using simplified shapes and color temperatures to recreate an experience I had in these places. These mountain paintings mark my first attempt to paint abstract landscapes based on my personal experience, and lead the way to the later house paintings.

“Morning Mountain” is based on my impressions of a trip to Ermei Mountain in China. The whole painting is painted with the same kind of organic strokes to express the airy and drifting mountain cloud in early morning. Cool blue and yellow are chosen to enforce the feel of coolness in morning temperature. Color, shape and marks are consciously selected to present the experience of waking up on a cold early morning in the mountain.

“Pink Rock” is based on the views of rocky formations in New Mexico. Strong light and heat beating on the big rocks is the image I want to convey. Warm pink and yellow are chosen to cover most of the painting for the impression of sunlight. A few cool colors in small amounts balance the larger warm portion of the painting. The temperature of the color sets the tone for the painting. It is a hot, sunny day in the middle of the desert with giant rocks and sporadic roads and villages.

“Shadow Mountain” is based on my trip to the mountains in Yellow Stone National Park. Those mountains are huge and ageless. They bring to mind the quality of strength, stability, durability, and time itself. In order to convey the feeling of heaviness, I chose cool and dark colors as a general color scheme. The edges of the mountains are lit up by bright colors to accent large areas of darkness. The shadows from one mountain to another form interesting shapes and connect the mountains.



NATURE

The rest of the paintings in this series include several tree paintings showing woods in different seasons and lightings. An interesting view is to see how trees cut through the sky and divide it into small irregular shapes like stained glass in various colors. Nature can be viewed from close-up or far away. One painting portrays a bird's eye view of a large rice field on hills. The organic forms emulate nature in shape and color. It could be viewed as an abstract landscape or as lines and shapes.

House Series



NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE



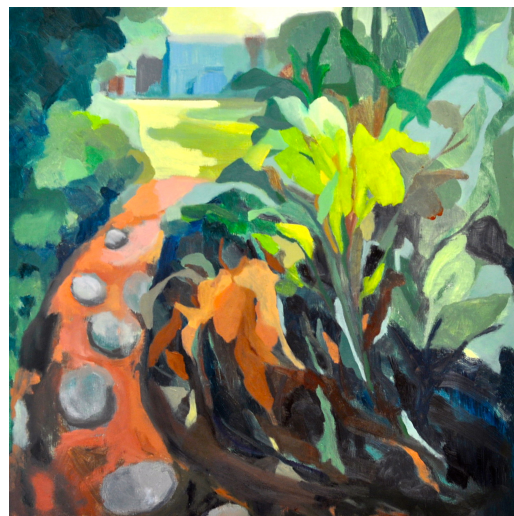
PINK LIGHT

This collection of house paintings represents many of my memories and imaginations about houses. Some of them traces back to my childhood, some from my trips, and some from my current neighborhood. Each of them carries a personal experience.

Each painting in this series presents houses in a landscape. There are houses from Italy, Taiwan, China, the New England area, LSU campus and other cities in Louisiana. Different locales give different characteristics to the painting. The point of view also changes from painting to painting. Some are viewed from far distance; some are close-up. There are views from a window, from a treetop, or by the sea. The shifting of positions allows the viewer to experience fresh viewpoints.



BLUE HOUSE



WINDRUSH GARDEN

Since color is my main concern, I like to experiment and try different palettes. The choice of palettes reflects the overall mood of the painting and the narrative association implied. The “Blue House” projects a positive, warm, cozy mood cradled by the arch-shaped branches; while the “Windrush Garden” presents a historical, distant, pale and ghostly house.



HOUSE IN ROME



HOUSE BY THE POND

The “Houses in Rome” displays a cluster of houses in a narrow area. Houses become different sizes of color swatches, depending on the distance and the light. “Seaside Village” portrays the light of dusk, the last traces of sunlight before darkness takes over. It is also the time when the fishing boats are coming back from the sea to the harbor, a time for family to get together and have dinner. The mood is peace and rest. “Chinese Hermit” depicts the houses in reclusive mountain regions. These houses are tucked between very high and steep mountains. The houses are painted very small in the overall painting to imply a humble attitude from humans in the face of nature.



SEASIDE VILLAGE



CITY WITH A TREE

One painting that is different from the rest of them is a cityscape painted on two 30-inch square panels. In the painting, skyscrapers line up closely in a compressed space against a grey backdrop of sky. The sun reflects on some of the buildings, but the sky still looks polluted. The squares and triangles project a feeling of rigidity and tension. The color choice of orange and blue implies a man-made world where most objects are not grown from earth, which is predominantly green and brown. There is one green organic shape at the very edge of the painting. That one tree implies the badly needed green in the modern large cities.

CONCLUSION

Picking landscape as the subject of my paintings is rooted in my desire to be close to nature. At times, nature provides comfort, serenity and hope; at other times, nature imposes great destruction, infliction and desperation. In its various behaviors, we seem to understand life and ourselves better. There is an invisible connection between humans and nature. When we respect and cherish the resource from nature, nature rewards us with its beauty and its rich supply.

I chose to paint my landscapes in a simplified way, in which the relationship of color and shape are the main focus. The composition of the painting is loosely based on the image from a real place. What is important is the way I organize my palette and how the shapes connect and contrast. I am not interested in duplicating what a photograph can do or recounting all the details in a space. I believe a painting is unique because the artist has infused his memory and imagination into an image, which can communicate and inspire.

Color Journal is a collection of work that marks my exploration in painting. It is a record of a process, which just began and will continue as long as I can paint. Through the process of making this series of paintings, I discover more about myself and more about the world around me. A journal records the inner world of the author. My painting reflects my views about the world I am living in.

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VITA

Meichi Lee was born in Taiwan. She graduated from Taiwan Normal University with a BA in English. After teaching English in local High School for two years, she came to United States to further her education. She received a MS in Education from University of Kansas and later a MS in Management from University of Central Texas. After working in the field of healthcare management for numbers of years, she came back to school to enroll in Louisiana State University, MFA program in painting and drawing, expecting to graduate in spring of 2013.