

A Light-footed Odyssey

Notes on Sen Chung's Current Works

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Even at the age of sixty, the South Korean artist Sen Chung maintains a resilient physicality that he brings to his canvases, propelling the painting process forward. These canvases become floating structures, emerging through a dynamic interplay between painterly action and reflective pauses. What unifies them is the gesture of touching and exploring. Rather than relying on familiar icons, a sublime interplay unfolds between ascending areas of color and absorbing, even erasing, pictorial grounds. As viewers, we witness the outcomes of this search for a balanced equilibrium, observing how it is meticulously crafted. We navigate branching pictorial paths while simultaneously being displaced from overly harmonious realms through calculated disturbances. Sen Chung's artworks invite us to develop emotional receptivity while avoiding the temptation to seek easy identification. The experience involves sharing in the quest for a newly postulated beauty or, ultimately, saturated with reality, being convinced of the impossibility of such a pursuit—antinomies that deliberately elude a definitive either/or response but call for a culture-creating “as well as.”

The artist's studio, situated in the industrial milieu of Düsseldorf-Heerdt, serves as a programmatic sanctuary for contemplation. Within its confines, the clamor of the world and the tumult of external media discourse fade away outside the weighty steel door. Here, distinct standards govern—an environment fostering intensive, yet fundamentally introspective self-questioning, all while maintaining a sense of gravity. Sen Chung's life is marked by a continual oscillation between Far Eastern and European influences: early studies at the University of Fine Arts in Seoul exposed him to the grand traditions of ink painting, fluid image transitions, and calligraphic compositions, juxtaposed with an avid absorption of Western modernism.

Subsequent studies at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and Chelsea College of Art and Design in London expanded his horizons, offering almost unlimited possibilities of encountering diverse people, trends, originals, and attitudes.

The ongoing pursuit of defining his own artistic position, influenced by luminaries such as Mark Rothko and Cy Twombly, is enriched by individual experiences that resist easy assimilation conducive to disdainful imitation. Eventually, Sen Chung's exploration led him to the cosmos of German Romanticism in painting and literature, with its aspiration for the universal dissolution of boundaries, spiritual depth, the claim to absolute artistic freedom, and the practice of spiritual contemplation. Sen Chung has absorbed these diverse spiritual worlds, sublimating them into a unique lightness that allows his works to hover above the abysses of human nature, acknowledging and transcending them.

Surprisingly, Sen Chung speaks of the Apollonian and Dionysian facets of his work, outlining efforts to balance these conflicting forces in a quest for an aesthetic of sublimity. This discourse harkens back to the long-lost educational contexts of young-genius Nietzsche and subsequent professors of aesthetics, whose simplistic grid between a rationally guided clarity of mind and the dark chaos of instincts is perhaps no longer sufficient for the complexity of today's existential experience.

However, Sen Chung remains steadfast, emphasizing that he sees himself not as a philosopher or politician, but as a painter navigating the realms of colors and forms. He explores opposites—the weight and lightness of pictorial elements, linear symbolism versus vibrant hues—and consolidates them into autonomous organisms. Each canvas becomes a visible expression, modestly hung on the whitewashed studio wall, inviting contemplation.

To engage with Sen Chung's works is to adopt a mode of seeing, perceiving, feeling, and internalizing. Those who embrace this approach—whether in the studio, future exhibitions, or through catalog illustrations—experience a liberating freedom beyond practical constraints, gloomy prognoses, and catastrophic world events. It's a reminder that such freedom is still attainable, even if only for a fleeting moment.