

# An Ontology of Painterly Subjectivity

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## **A particular universality**

Abstract painting has continued to evolve, transcending the art-historical debates that once categorized it within the self-referential objecthood of Minimalism during the development of Modernism. The trajectory of abstraction in art has subtly moved beyond the confines of ever-changing critical perspectives in both avant-garde and postwar neo-avant-garde movements. Despite its apparent inability to elicit the “shock of the new” in practice, the demand for abstract expression persists, continually challenging our aesthetic perception of art. Perhaps, this enduring demand is not rooted in historical narratives or genealogy, but rather in the aesthetic desire to stimulate fundamental thoughts through artistic means. It neither responds to past historical products nor seeks novelty through the incorporation of new media. Instead, contemporary abstract painting, including that of Sen Chung, emerges from a macroscopic dynamic, positing the relationship between the world and the individual as a matter of expressive forms and the philosophy of being. In doing so, it unveils the approximation of infinite thoughts generated through the artistic process.

The uniqueness of today’s abstract painting lies in the formations created by each artist’s exploration of what art can achieve in their post-historical existence. Analyzing Sen Chung’s painting within the context of chronological cause and effect in Western or Korean abstract painting is imprudent and counterproductive. Neither is it crucial to highlight his European practice after leaving Korea or his identity as a Korean German artist working in Europe. What we discern from his paintings is a fundamental inquiry into the nature of art and tentative answers regarding how one can express the primordial interplay between the Self and the world through painting. Consequently, his art touches upon the paradox of the “particular universal,” a result of the simultaneous action of body and mind. This is because the ontology and sublime, as universal values in metaphysical thought, are encapsulated within the authentic formal particularity of “Sen Chung’s painting.”

Each of Sen Chung's works embodying this "particular universality" is liberated from the massive weight of thoughts, emerging with optimized density. This characteristic becomes particularly pronounced after the shift in his work from the figurative aspect to a fortified abstract expression. This shift is deeply rooted in his continuous exploration of Asian ink wash painting methods and European Romanticism. Drawing inspiration from Asian traditional painting, he identifies elements of Romanticism and perceives it as "the most closely related European school of art to Asian traditional painting, emphasizing the essence of art and spirituality."<sup>1</sup>

However, to confine Chung's painting within the conventional framework of synthesizing Asian and European characteristics is inherently limiting when attempting to grasp the rhythm of the surface undulating with ink-painting-like touches and the gradual emergence of allegorical shapes. Foremost among the elements to prioritize when confronting his work are the brushstrokes that underpin painterly transparency, the deliberate arrangement and rhythm of shapes bathed in vibrant colors, and the articulation of painterly form that encompasses it all. Chung has described his painting as a "painted philosophy," urging us to delve deeper into how the surface layer, implying ink painting, and allegorical shapes collectively convey this unique "philosophy" of his.

### **"Painted philosophy"**

It is widely acknowledged that Asian ink wash painting, rooted in landscape painting, inherently involves the concept of wettability. Lao-tzu's statement, "The highest goodness is like water," links the flow of life in nature to *wu wei* (無爲), suggesting letting the body be as it is. The act of damp brush strokes supporting Chung's painting deeply penetrates the canvas or other surfaces, exposing the repeated layers and creating a transparency characteristic of his work. The densely interwoven, translucent traces construct a sense of infinite distance without compromising the flatness of the painting. Chung describes his painting as a metaphorical window, signifying a passage or an in-between space where the inside and outside intersect. This concept deviates from the traditional illusionistic perspective associated with the notion of a window. The space of images traversing through this window achieves a detached sense of distance from representational projection while retaining the flatness, epitomizing the essence of painting as advocated by modernism à la Greenberg. This forms *wu wei*, a potential depth achieved through the simultaneous manifestation of *sumuk* (black and white ink wash) in accordance with the Asian painting tradition.

Within this space reminiscent of Asian ink wash painting, Chung's romanticism floats as allegorical shapes, planes, dots, and strokes of color. Formalistic elements such as basic

painterly dots, lines, and planes merge with imperfect geometrical shapes, vibrating with sound and translating auditory states onto the pictorial plane. Rather than adhering to clear and solid geometry, his figures scatter and revolve following a cryptic logic; they result from sovereign and irrevocable choices made by the painter. In doing so, his work embodies both the absoluteness of traditional abstract painting and the originality of contemporary abstract painting. At times, his geometry materializes on the pictorial plane in the form of crystallized gems or minerals. Not only the painter's subjectivity but also that of the viewers can interact with the basic representational form, proposed not as an external beauty but as a painterly state. Chung asserts:

"I ponder why I define that gemstone under various conditions and embrace a certain aesthetic sense of scarcity resulting from it. The image of a gem is perhaps just a symbolic shape, yet I am curious about the contractual sense and the aesthetic form it suggests. This curiosity connects to the painterly drama of my work, a certain tension, and the sense of the sublime, arising from the intersection of Dionysian and Apollonian sentiments."<sup>2</sup>

The historical discourse surrounding the intrinsic value of gem shapes ultimately relates to the manifestation of the primordial sense of aesthetics. Delving into the detailed process of how humans developed a taste for such aesthetics reveals the parallelism of the subject and the world, or the clash of sentiment and reason within the shape. This contemplation welcomes the subtle emergence of figurative articulation in Sen Chung's painting. Simultaneously, the fundamental form of a gem inspires his geometry as a mineral substance. This foundational materiality, encompassing both minimal and maximal space, connects to the horizon of the world envisioned by Chung, showcasing the interaction of utterly phenomenal and abstract thinking simultaneously. It is at this juncture that his painting evokes fundamental models of abstraction, such as empathy or the state of being lost in thought.

To comprehend his ink painting and romanticism, a revisit to the primary model of "abstraction," known as the urge to abstraction and empathy, is necessary. Chung's painting is linked to the coexistence of impulse and immersiveness. In Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907), he defines that "the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, while the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a greater inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of

the outside world.”<sup>3</sup> The inevitability of inventing abstract art from the urge to abstraction is also linked to the limitation of representational art, akin to the quest to discover beauty in minerals.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Chung’s “painted philosophy” materializes within the balance of tension and harmony, between the limitation of pantheistic happiness enabled by representation and the abstract thinking and urge. This balance facilitates the coexistence of two heterogeneous forms—ink wash painting and romanticism—steering his work toward a robust *affectus* by harmonizing the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

### *Ja-yeon* or nature

According to Chung, “painting is an invisible force between [him] and nature, encapsulated within a transparent square frame set in the middle of it.”<sup>5</sup> This “invisible force” can be interpreted as Spinoza’s affect. In his “Ethics” (1970), the philosopher defines affect as follows:

“By emotion I understand the modifications of the body by which the capacity of the body itself to act is increased, diminished, assisted or hindered, together with the ideas of these modifications. Therefore, if we can be the adequate cause of one of these modifications, I understand emotion as an action, otherwise it is a passive state.”<sup>6</sup>

Essentially, since humans are an integral part of nature, and in alignment with Spinoza’s theorem that “if the object of the idea constituting the human mind were a body, nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the mind,”<sup>7</sup> the “invisible force” symbolizes the dynamic of *affectio* surging between nature and humans. Painting serves as the embodiment of this *affectio*, compelling the artist to grapple with the fundamental question of what painting truly represents. Each painting, while manifesting the imperative presence of the art form, simultaneously stands as an embodiment of painting itself. In this sense, the autonomous and enduring ontology nurtured by Chung’s work becomes a canvas upon which philosophy can be depicted—a consequence of visualizing the imperceptible—and a realm where the Self and nature can be contemplated concurrently.

Dots, lines, and planes, assembled as formalistic elements in Chung’s paintings, dynamically traverse diverse notions of nature. Nature, in his work, transcends mere aesthetics and conceptual forms storing thoughts. Instead, it emerges towards us, materializing endlessly from within concepts and objects. Chung’s portrayal of nature pulsates like a microscopic tableau, situated between the conceptual materiality of nature and the artistic elements on

3 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 15.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 Sen Chung, “Der Romantizismus eines ‘Pinselstrichs,’” 141.

6 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethik* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1970), 128.

7 *Ibid.*, 89.

8 Kim, Myeong-Seok, "On the Concept of Ziran in Lao-tzu as Spontaneity," *Journal of Philosophical Ideas* vol. 63, Institute of Philosophy (Seoul: Seoul National University, February 2017), 18–21.

9 B. Spinoza, *ibid.*, 242.

his canvas. Rather than adhering to a predetermined aesthetic, his art embraces demands and authenticity that can only be addressed through the painterly, guided by invisible forces. These characteristics find resonance in the shared logic surrounding the meaning of nature in both Eastern and Western traditions. In Lao-tzu's philosophy, the concept of "*ja-yeon* [nature]" literally implies "leaving it as it is" and "just being itself." This suggests that the inherent essence of the Self manifests through its own force, affirming the presence of an internal logic and force, as well as the growth of this authentic property."<sup>8</sup> Lao-tzu's understanding of nature aligns with the ontological necessity proposed by Chung—a nature as both aesthetic action and method.

Furthermore, the embodiment of the invisible force, triggered by the properties of painting, harmonizes with the demand for all elements in Chung's art to "be itself," addressing Asian thinking and the aesthetic of nature. Conversely, the European concept of "nature" also denotes the fundamental manifestation of something inherent and essential. Regarding the relationship between nature and the Self, Spinoza asserted: "All our efforts or desires follow from the necessity of our nature in such a manner that they can be understood either through it alone as their proximate cause, or insofar as we are a part of Nature, which part cannot be adequately conceived through itself and without the other individuals."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the naturality depicted in Chung's paintings condenses complex processes in the connection between the Self and nature, presenting itself as an implication of the essence of painting accompanied by its infinite variations.

In this regard, the uniqueness conveyed by his artwork transcends the confines of contemporary art, evolving into a practice of painterly ontology. Within this artistic realm, he skillfully employs simplistic painterly characteristics, forging an inexhaustible depth where Eastern and Western concepts of nature converge. There is no need for an excessive projection of meaning onto this formalistic structure; it possesses a clear essence. Standing in front of his artwork offers an inherently "painterly" experience, a confrontation with a painting that has "has become so by itself." His proposed painterly practice stands distinct from antiquated notions of sublimity or a nostalgic yearning for purism. Instead, his paintings are imbued with an unceasing quest to unravel their yet-to-be-discovered essence.

The humility he experiences when confronted with masterpieces from art history emanates from his personal desire for sublimation and reformulation. For him, painting is a vital necessity, embodying the concept of *ja-yeon*—existing in its entirety. The formalistic framework of painting is not a category for subordination; rather, it serves as a dynamic arena where the interplay between body and mind unfolds seamlessly, unrestricted by boundaries. This dynamism is not tethered to specific characteristics from the annals of art history but solely relates to the metaphysical thought for gaining its urge to shift.