

Still in the Now, Becoming and Fading

Thomas W. Kuhn, art critic

Forms, reminiscent of gemstones in an emerald cut, seem to delicately hover over paper or canvas. They give the impression of reflecting color and light, unveiling their mysterious beauty, a result of minerals, artistic creation, and human ingenuity. Surrounding these painted jewels, glimpses of landscapes or architectures emerge—occasionally waves, frequently mountains, and at times, gables and columns. The micro and macro dimensions converge in the fictional realm of the image, evoking memories of the familiar within unfamiliar shapes.

In a painting that unmistakably asserts its identity, Sen Chung consistently crafts novel constellations of symbols characterized by great economy. It is a painting of lines, brushstrokes, and droplets of color, where substance visibly engages with subject matter. Unrestrained freedom in execution and the arrangement of forms coexist. Diverse and sometimes opposing forces come into play, yet they appear harmoniously united, as if the entire surface of the picture is permeated by a shared principle in which contradictions are absorbed.

Opposites can take on various names and embodiments. Ancient Greek culture assigned one pole of these forces to each of the deities Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo represents order and form, while Dionysus embodies intoxication. Friedrich Nietzsche derived a pair of concepts from this, describing opposing forces in both humans and art.

I Ernst Kamnitzer (Ed.),
Novalis, Fragmente I,
Dresden 1929, available at:
<https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/novalis/fragmen1/chap023.html>,
retrieved on January 1, 2024
[quotation translated].

This transformation also finds its counterpart in the aesthetics of the beautiful and the aesthetics of the sublime. These concepts, initially explored in the eighteenth century by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Edmund Burke, have since played a crucial role in shaping the creation and reception of contemporary art, spanning from Classicism and Romanticism, possibly even extending into the present day.

The principle of order is manifested in artificial geometric forms—rectangles, circles, arches, and polygons—dissolving within the medium of irregular-natural landscape symbols, more like those on a map than in deep space. Serving as a connecting element, perhaps visually corresponding to the unifying principle, is a fluid reminiscent of fog and mist. This gray hue, often with subdued color values, occasionally shines intensely into the field of view unimpeded. The struggle between the forces of Apollo and Dionysus unfolds in the work of the painter Sen Chung, manifesting within the artwork. To openly acknowledge such a conflict is an act of courage—the courage to embrace ambiguity.

The early Romantic poet Novalis (i.e. Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg), in 1797-/98, penned these words: “Nothing is more poetic than remembrance and the anticipation or imagination of the future. The ideas of the past draw us towards death, towards flying away. The ideas of the future drive us toward enlivenment, toward embodying, toward an assimilative activity. Hence all memory is melancholy, all anticipation joyful. The former moderates an excess of liveliness, the later vivacity, the latter enhances a too-feeble sense of life. The ordinary present integrates past and future through constraints. Contiguity emerges, crystallization through consolidation. There is, however, a spiritual present, which brings both into an identity through dissolution, and this mixture is the element, the atmosphere of the poet.”¹

Occupying the extremes would be easy, to *crystallize* them, to speak in the language of Novalis. However, the notion of dissolution echoes the later idea of synthesis in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, where thesis and antithesis converge into a new resolution. Each individual image by Sen Chung emerges as a fresh synthesis, poised to transition into a new resolution in the subsequent artwork.

It appears that the painter treads a parallel path with Cy Twombly and his graphisms, wherein expression progressively supersedes the original meaning of the signs. Squares and circles, lines and planes *shed* their baggage of art-historical connotations, returning to an almost primal form, as if shapes were etched in the sand out of an unknown impulse on a beach, where the sea's waves soon grant renewal in forgetting and reminiscing, in drawing anew.

Sen Chung's painting is also a celebration of patina. Roland Barthes, reflecting on this essential aspect in Cy Twombly's work, remarked: "As we can see, these gestures, which aim to establish matter as fact, are all associated with making something dirty. Here is a paradox: a fact is more purely defined if it is not clean. Take a common object: it is not its new and virgin state which best accounts for its essence; it is rather a state in which it is deformed, a little worn, a little dirtied, a little forlorn: the truth of things is best read in refuse."²

So, this is also about transience, not merely as a vanishing act but as a revelation of the essence of a thing. It embraces an explicit revelation of transience, employing an original material semiotics—deliberate *imperfections* and *irregularities*, akin to certain ceramic artisanal traditions. In a sense, it corresponds to the multitude of artificial ruins in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nestled in artificial landscape gardens, intertwining humanity's ultimate powerlessness in death with a yearning for the past.

Noteworthy are Sen Chung's recent works from 2023, where streaks and twists of black paint blanket the pictorial space, partly like a grid, only leaving small areas of the colored underpainting visible. The sparse colored islands in red, yellow, and blue, or the outlines of shapes resembling gemstones in an emerald cut, shine more intensely against this backdrop.

The timing of Sen Chung's painting remains elusive. Sketchy notations imply swift movements, yet the numerous individual sequences of strokes, each possibly applied quickly and intuitively, stretch time into a prolonged duration. The snapshot, in photographic terms, transforms into both a multiple and long exposure. The note, the *notation*, evolves into a polyphonic composition. Once again, it is one of those contrasts that breathe life into Sen Chung's art: time doesn't crystallize; it flows like water into a pond, creating waves on the surface, simultaneously reflecting above and revealing a below.