

## Fiat Lux: the Works of Su Kwak

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More light, Goethe is reported to have said soon before he died, asking his servant to open a shutter so he could be surrounded by it, see it more abundantly as the room and the world dimmed around him. Light, of course, illuminates and more light illuminates more. It vanquishes darkness, fills the void, and has always been synonymous with life, essential for sight and insight, and symbolic of the transcendent across time and cultures. It has also been the subject of Korean-born Su Kwak's paintings from the beginning of her more than three-decades of artistic endeavor, both as natural phenomenon and as a metaphor for the spiritual and ineffable. In "Light Journey: An Odyssey in Paint," a survey of her work from 1996 to the present, light remains palpably, luminously the heart of the matter.

Kwak works in series over a period of years. Evolving slowly, incrementally, her latest canvases are closely linked to her earliest, the idea of progression, of large, predetermined changes not something that she consciously seeks, allowing changes to occur organically, without forcing them. One painting leads to another as part of a process, part of what is happening in her life as well as her art at the moment. Her production is extremely personal—as she is quick to point out—even if its themes are eschatological, visionary. In many ways, they function as a meditation and a prayer, a talisman and an offering, a deeply felt search for meaning and spiritual redemption through art. Her paintings are also formal investigations and resolutions, part abstraction, part referential based on process and materiality and informed in part by the modernist aesthetic that was taught at the University of Chicago in the 1970s when she was there, earning her MFA in 1979. But they always return to Kwak's rather ecumenical belief system, one that presents light and darkness, solid and void, visible and invisible, good and evil as a kind of antithesis and synthesis, based on Judeo-Christian teachings, Buddhism and East Asian mysticism and indigenous religions.

Time is an important subject for her. She pictures it, however, not as a linear sequence but as something more simultaneous, more eternal, a blend of Asian and Western European philosophies and aesthetics, oppositions that create a more inclusive whole. The spaces that she creates in her work are not only the more ambiguous metrics of contemporary art—far from the fixed point of view of Renaissance space and one point perspective—but also encompass the poetic, conceptual measures of Asian landscape paintings. Movement is also present, integrated into the paintings, the images in seeming motion, regarded from multiple, even cinematic perspectives. Reality, after all, is always in motion, always changing and what we see and how we see it is a function of elapsing, unstoppable time. Her frequent use of diptychs and polyptychs partakes of that impulse to redefine and reconstruct pictorial space and make it more extensive, enveloping. She also likes a vantage point from above down, often used in Chinese, Japanese and Korean landscapes, a bird's eye view paralleling that from an airplane--or up and outward as if from space satellites. Juggling the microcosm and the macrocosm, in which each is a manifestation of the other, Kwak also seeks to conjure the indeterminate, psychological spaces of memory.

Her most recent works, from 2010-2012, shown for the first time in this exhibition, are in some ways simpler, form and content concentrated, burnished. Increasingly assured, she can arrive at her resolutions more succinctly but with undiminished vitality and intensity, the paint applied thickly in places to create textures that absorb and reflect the light across tautly stretched

supports, her works a combination of real and depicted light. Many of her current images are circles and arcs. While suns and moons have often appeared in her compositions in the past, they are the focal point in this series, other motifs excluded or minimized, as in the very potent *Eternal Moment*, 2010. Varying shades of blue dominate, from beautiful deep midnight to lighter sunrise shades as well as whites, yellows and blushes of rose—her preference for modulated primaries one more hallmark of her paintings. Vertical in format, rhythmic concentric circles create a kind of vortex that seems to be a view of surging seas, beyond which a bright light shines as if after the Deluge, after darkness. The aura around the glowing center is slashed, Fontana-like, adding a tremulousness, a vibration, something that Su Kwak often does as part of her repertory. In addition, she cut the canvas and folds it back, another longstanding tactic, to reveal a second layer of canvas, to display actual depth, the stretcher bars at times, the wall behind, revealing how the painting was made, juxtaposing reality with illusionism to foster tension. Her peeling back of sections of her painting, her stitching together, she said, is to indicate that “meaning is many-layered and truth complex.”

*River of Light* (2010), also vertically directed, moves the eye along a white diagonal stream toward the upper right where a similar white circle glows, edged in warm orange. The other half of the painting consists of a series of blue shafts cutting through several concentric rings, adding to the reverberation of the surface. Radiating outward, the shafts appear as if they will leap beyond the canvas’s edge into the space of the viewer, ignoring the finite limitations of the painting. This recent body of work has affiliations to works such as Blake’s heavenly visions, Turner’s roiled seascapes and Constable’s cloud studies (the latter two verging on pure abstraction) and more recently to Dorothea Rockburne’s vividly colored, cosmological images. Mondrian, Newman and Rothko are also sources, to name only a few modernist artists of the spiritual.

*Sun Within* (2010), the color scheme similar and also slashed in a radiating ray-like pattern of light, seems inundated with water, light, reflections and refractions. Tucked into it is a long band of scripture from the pages of a Korean bible, a collaged inclusion that is yet another mainstay of her visual vocabulary, something she calls “invisible light” or the “sun within,” referring to the sacredness of the text. *Winter Light* (2010), a somewhat smaller work, is also slashed, its glacially blue, scumbled surface cut along the top and bottom to reveal the red beneath. Inspired by a cold, wintry day, Kwak said she was grateful for the refuge of her home, while awed by the storm, contrasting the power of nature with that of domesticity and civilization. *Seeds of Hope* (2010) is another example of transitional states and regeneration and continuity, depicting a tree and embedded with real seeds. Materiality is another significant component of her formal lexicon, including the re-incorporation of bits and pieces from older paintings.

Kwak’s works from 2011 are almost all fiery suns and cooler moons, representing a universe in perpetual flux. *Descending Light*, the title suggested by Duchamp’s famous descending nude, also evokes the theme of the Descent from the Cross although this diptych in scorching yellows, whites and oranges seems fierce, more apocalyptic, about an all-consuming, purifying brilliance as a beginning and an end. *Light Journey* is less turbulent, a handsome four-panel celestial panorama soothed by deep blues and one of the most monumental of the series. And *Youth*, another painting with continuity and bloom as its theme, echoes her beginnings with its paired canvases, sharp incisions, cut-outs, and folded back fabric, its scale and subject human, intimate. One of the artist’s many strengths, which includes a rare, non-ironic sincerity, is her ability to shift from great to small, to make a stream or a river the equivalent of a star-studded galaxy, sparkling with light, reminding us that we are all stardust. “For me,” Su Kwak said, “light and life are the same.”