

Essay by Eleanor Heartney

SU KWAK: BEYOND LIGHT AND INTO SPIRIT

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When Frank Stella was asked the meaning of his art in a 1966 interview, he replied: "What you see is what you see." The pragmatism of that remark has embedded itself in our post-minimal consciousness. As a result, it is often hard for contemporary artists and commentators to accept the possibility of a link between art and spirituality. Postmodernism celebrates irony and cynicism, and judges aspirations toward transcendence or faith as seriously out of date.

Yet some of the greatest art of the 20th century was conceived as a search for meanings which are larger than the prosaic concerns of everyday life. Piet Mondrian's theosophy led him to a spiritualized geometry. Mark Rothko made the battle between light and dark his primary subject, culminating in the haunting black paintings of the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Barnett Newman was influenced by primeval and Christian creation myths. One of his fullest expressions of spirituality was a series of paintings entitled "Stations of the Cross". For all these artists, abstract shapes and colors were, in the words of critic Harold Rosenberg "living things, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of awesome feelings."

In her delicate painted paper works, Korean born artist Su Kwak carries on this tradition. Kwak was raised Catholic, converted to Judaism and retains a sympathy for the Buddhist and Shamanistic traditions of her native country. Her paintings represent an effort to find a more universal form for her spiritual aspirations. In this endeavor, she has turned to an exploration of the metaphoric possibilities of light and color.

Over the years she has produced series of works with titles like "Revelations Series", "Inner Vision" and "Inner Light". These names reveal her long-standing concern with the dialectical relation between the visible and the invisible worlds. Inspired both by landscape and by religious and autobiographical concerns, these works present an abstraction which embraces the metaphysical sphere.

Most recently, Kwak has been preoccupied with a series of paintings inspired by the Stations of the Cross. She has given the series as a whole the title "Beyond Light", a name which indicates her desire to move beyond the physical description of light toward its spiritual expression. Dematerializing form, light becomes a metaphor for the invisible soul.

The paintings are constructed from cut out pieces of painted paper, some of which began life as part of other paintings. Individual elements may have eccentric shapes because they are in fact bits of paper discarded during the creation of previous works. Now they are given new life in a transformative process which mimics the larger theme of these works.

In this series, Kwak pieces paper cutouts together to create forms which relate in some way to the central story of Christ's death and resurrection as they are retold in the Stations of the Cross. But because the paintings are completely abstract, they also operate as a more general story of struggle, loss and triumph over death.

Kwak tells this story through color and form. The earlier works in the series are dominated by more neutral colors - whites, blacks, grays and browns. They tend to be vertical, relating to the figure and the realm of ordinary reality. As the series progresses, circular forms begin to intrude and it becomes clear that these are sun-like shapes, meant to reflect the life giving quality of the sun and its cycle of day and night. Later paintings are dominated by red and yellow hues. These are inspired both by the scarlet glow of sunset and the consuming blaze of fire. Both these references serve as metaphors for the process of spiritual death and rebirth which the series as a whole describes.

The last works, with their exploding and multiplying circles, seem to consider the elation of redemption. The last painting in the series, "Beyond Light #20", presents a ring of golden circles whose center has become detached and seems to be floating upward, literally escaping from the weight of the material world.

But while Kwak is inspired by the mysteries of the Judeo-Christian tradition, she also is expressing a philosophy that derives as well from her Asian background. These works all revolve around the interplay of form and void. Because they are cutouts, the wall which is visible through the paper shapes becomes part of the composition. Negative and positive shapes echo the interplay between yin and yang which, in Asian philosophy, creates the necessary balance of life. The importance Kwak gives to negative space also relates to the significance of the void in traditional Asian landscape paintings where what is not represented often carries as much emotional impact as that which is.

Likewise, Kwak's preoccupation with light transcends any specific belief system. Throughout history and across many cultures, the battle between the forces of order and chaos and the struggle between good and evil frequently have been represented as a confrontation between light and darkness.

By using art to investigate such issues, Kwak delivers a useful tonic to our skeptical times. She reconnects art to an enterprise which once formed its fundamental purpose - she employs art to create a visual representation of belief and the search for larger meanings. In the process, Kwak reminds us that sometimes, what you see is not just what you see. Sometimes it is a door to an unseen reality which can only be opened through art.