

Flower Wind and Floating Worlds

In Unfurled, her current solo exhibition of paintings and works on paper, Jung Hyang Kim has changed her signature diptych format—and consequently, the conceptual base of her new projects. No longer culling biomorphic from geometric forms and painting them on separate canvases, the artist now integrates the two aspects of her aesthetic and sensibility into one composition, dispensing with dualities. By doing so, she merges culture and nature. She is also mixing different cultures together: East and West, the traditional and the contemporary to signify a traversing across time and space.

While Jung Hyang Kim’s imagery is not necessarily Buddhist, it often depicts—among other subjects—lotus flowers that are naturalistic and abstract, checkered wheel shapes that recall dharma wheels and loose chains of usually small white circles that resemble necklaces or prayer beads. In recent works, these dotted chains often extend the width of the paintings. The substance of Kim’s work, however, is ultimately its insubstantiality, its lightness, fragility and buoyancy, qualities that approximate aspects of Buddhist philosophy such as the dissolution of the material world into immateriality and the constant flux that constitutes the universe. Kim’s circles—and her images are most often based on circles, variations of circles or shapes within circles—are images of generation, regeneration and change. . She describes her work as “an unfurling,” a gradual revelation in constant renewal and eternal return.

Flux dominates her paintings as objects stream slowly through the pictorial space in all directions--outward, inward, up, down and across. It is a space that is indeterminate, dimensionless, structured by color and implying an extension and existence beyond the arbitrary limits of the canvas or paper. Jung Hyang Kim says she first wets down the support, then applies watercolor flowed by gouache and finally oil pastel, each contributing to the delicate, finely calibrated, contrasting textures of the surfaces, contributing translucency, luminosity, velvety matteness and subtlety of color. She draws an image, adds color, erases both but leaves a trace, building up the composition instinctively. She wants her surfaces to be thin, permeable, like water with deceptive depths and shallows, layered to hold the history of its process. Jung Hyang Kim loves the process, she confesses. She loves painting, the going in, changing and refining, the back and forth, resulting in a surface with a rich array of colors and the look of the hand-made, the touched and re-touched.

Three of her recent larger paintings suggest air, fire and water but all have an elemental disposition. The one that evokes air is pale, white—but it is a complex, soft milkweed white inflected with hints of other colors beneath that break through the surface at times—hovering like a fog or mist, its images about to recede and vanish, or come forward into sharp focus. The painting that resembles water is mostly cool greens and blues, but with splatters and smears of many other colors, including red dots that define the frontal plane. The most exuberant and celebratory, however, is the red orange painting with its areas of blurred gold, peach, rosy coral, acid green and turquoise. It has the kaleidoscopic radiance and

excitement of fireworks, its crystalline geometries rushing forward as if they might soundlessly shatter, raining down like brilliant sparks, signaling a cosmos in uproar.

Jung Hyang Kim's works on paper are less formal, more exploratory and improvised, not studies for her paintings, but nonetheless a preliminary inquiry, a kind of thinking through. The lovely, ephemeral Flower Wind is one such series. Inspired by a section in Gao Xingjian's novel, Soul Mountain—his description of a fragrant wind full of flowers—Jung Hyang Kim wanted to find an abstract equivalent for that sensual, sensate vision.

The paintings and works on paper also shift, as a group, from dark to light or light to dark, indicating movement from day to night, from season to season. Horizontal in orientation, they are Jung Hyang Kim's evocative, evanescent semblances of landscapes, seascapes or skyscapes, the world as she sees it here and now, contemporary abstractions that are still intricately, intimately connected to the familiar cycles of nature and the contingencies of the human condition.

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