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Twist

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

TWIST

BY

TAKEshi TAKAMOTO

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to all my professors who taught me the joy of painting, all my friends who always supported me, and my family who gave me the best time of my life and believed in me.

Thank you all.
Thesis Proposal

The purpose of the thesis is to explore opposites, such as natural forms contrasted with manmade forms, in order to portray the coexistence of nature and man. In addition, I hope to seek natural and unique combinations and contrasts of realism and abstraction. I wish to combine realistic images and fantasy images with symbols and patterns.
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Introduction

There are so many potential painters all over the world even though they know that being a painter often means it will be tough to make a living. It seems that they all have their own reasons for painting and pursue what they believe in order to live without a regret. I was one of those potential painters and am now about to earn a Master's degree here at RIT, but I do not consider myself a risk taker. By knowing what I am good at, I would choose to pursue my career in the art field no matter what. When it comes to my background and the way I chose to be a painter, that shows how life can change in unexpected ways, and how a person sometimes has to accept it. Now I would like to talk about how I got involved in painting, my development, and my recent works, and I hope this will encourage potential painters who happen to read this.

My background in Japan

I grew up in a house which used to belong to a painter before my father bought it from the artist. The artist had to sell the house because of bankruptcy. One good thing he did for me was that he left several paintings of his in the house when he moved out. My father hung some of the paintings on the walls, so I was surrounded by these paintings ever since I was a baby and had just started paying attention to the world around me.

In addition, my father's younger brother used to be an illustrator and a painter when he was young. Every time I visited my grandmother, who lived with my uncle, I
had a chance to look at his painting tools in his studio. Even though I had no idea of
how to use them, especially a palette knife, they interested me.

Growing up in Japan, it is very difficult to resist the temptation to get involved
with comics and animations, and I am no exception to this rule. I was not satisfied by
just reading and watching them, so I started copying super heroes. Most of my
childhood was time spent challenging myself to copy cartoons accurately.

Compared with drawing, painting and art history did not interest me very much.
Travel to Europe during high school and visits to many museums there did not help
increase my interest in painting at all. Even when my high school art teacher, who
liked the work I did for his class, asked me to join the art club, I rejected the offer. Soon
after that, creating comics with a friend who asked me to work with him occupied my
mind completely, and I spent the next five years of my life drawing comics. This activity
helped me to improve my drawing skill and to cultivate my imagination a lot. My
imagination is the key to my paintings right now.

My background in Vermont

My life and my thoughts toward painting changed dramatically in the summer of
‘91 when I visited my younger brother who was studying at Saint Michael’s College in
Vermont. The beauty of nature in Vermont struck me, and that made me feel like
painting nature. This became the prologue to my new life in the United States. I was
tired of making comics by that time and I was looking for something new. After the trip
to the United States, I felt like learning how to paint and decided to study abroad at Saint Michael’s College. Although it was not my intention to study art at first, during my sophomore year I decided to major in fine art. It seems as if my life was directed towards painting since I first visited Vermont.

Influences and developments of my painting style

After setting my aim to get involved in painting, it was easy for me to decide what to paint. Considering what made me feel like painting, to paint nature came into my mind naturally. At the same time, my life in Tokyo and my father’s real estate business gave me an interest in architecture. Therefore my idea for painting came to depict the surreal combinations of nature and buildings in a realistic or impressionistic style. In my first oil painting class I was kind of satisfied by painting realistically. However, just as impressionism was popular among Japanese people, I was interested in painting impressionistically too. However, this was where my former professor came to change my ideas and style. He taught me that abstraction was the key in today’s art world, and that I needed to change how I painted.

Even when my former professor explained what it was, I had no idea what abstraction was at that time because of my poor English and my lack of knowledge of art. My original idea was to construct buildings in unusual places, for instance, on the lake, on clouds, and so on. I started to simplify the texture and reduce the number of colors I used to make it flat and then got rid of the buildings next. After deciding to
focus on only landscape or nature paintings, an abstract symmetrical waterfall painting I created out of nowhere impressed the professor somehow. He then suggested I make a series of waterfall paintings just like that one. This turned into a great opportunity for me to explore my own definition of abstraction.

During the time I explored abstraction, some people pointed out interesting influences of Japanese culture in some of my paintings. It was not actually noticeable to me, but I could understand their observations of similarities between my paintings and Japanese prints. Although I had no favorite artists at that time, it is almost sure that I had been influenced by a lot of paintings through out my life, such as the Japanese Ukiyoe printmakers, Hokusai and Hiroshige, and western painters like Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec and Picasso. It is difficult for me to define what Japanese paintings are, but I must have been absorbing the essences of it unconsciously. Perhaps this influence is revealed through the way I use colors, draw, or in my sense of design.

After I started taking foundation courses at Saint Michael's college, I began to pay attention to paintings, prints, and illustrations I saw in Vermont. During my time in Vermont, two things interested me, one of which was the prints of Sabra Field, who lived in Vermont, and the other one was printed T-shirts from Ben & Jerry's. The two are similar in that they both were colorful, flat, and had peaceful atmospheres. Those two features, "colorful" and "flat," have some relationship to my painting style. Thus it might not be wrong to say that living and studying art in Vermont was the major influence in the development of my painting style.
At RIT-new development

Right before I graduated from Saint Michael’s College, I felt that I needed more time to think about my future and to improve my skill too. So I decided to go to graduate school. At my former professor’s suggestion, I sent my applications to major in graphic design instead of painting, because he told me that a person did not have to go to school to be a painter. However, there was no school that accepted me, and only RIT suggested that I switch from graphic design major to painting major. This is how I got to RIT, as if someone directed my life so that I would continue painting.

Coming to RIT was a big leap for me, and this pressure somehow turned into my motivation to be a good painter. I then started to seek what kind of painting style could be right for me in order to develop. After I made several experimental paintings in the first couple of months, I decided to gather most of the major features of my paintings into one style. This idea worked out perfectly, and my painting style was established at this stage. I had also just started to paint on a large canvas around that time, and I have no doubt that the chance to work on a large canvas affected and helped me to develop my style too, because now I had more freedom of creation and more time to think and to develop paintings.

To be original in my paintings is what I am always after. At the same time, I hope that my paintings please myself and viewers. There was time I was standing at the crossroads to decide to go either abstract or realistic. However somehow it was comfortable to stay in the middle, and I found my originality there.
Style of my painting

My painting style can be described in three categories: color, design, and theme. First of all, I tend to use a lot of color as if to make viewers dizzy. This started when I tried to use every color my eyes could catch in the object. For instance, suppose there is a green leaf, and it looks like only green color exists in it. However, several different colors should be there in reality. Thus I expand those colors on canvas. The words of Paul Cezanne have influenced me, “Nature is more often present in depth than on the surface, and thus the need to add to red and yellow vibrations of light enough blue to make one feel the air.” (Joan Minguest, 1995) I do not use only the colors I see but also the colors I imagine. I sometimes play with colors too. There seems to be no rule in the way I use colors, but I try to look all over and keep them in balance. Paul Klee says, “Every color should not be used too much and too little, and do not attempt to hand on deceptive mixed colors without thinking.” (MADO Bijutsu-no-mado, 1996) I follow my instinct and try to create some rhythms like music when I play with colors. Henri Matisse also says that what is important in constructing colors is only to bring colors out to make clear differences like a musician does in harmony. (MADO Bijutsu-no-mado, 1996) In my paintings, juxtaposition of colors create rhythm by the different intensity of colors and the contrast of warm and cool colors.

Secondly, the design of my paintings is often ruled by the way I use colors. My paintings are usually puzzle-like because of the many colors I use and my tendency to
break objects into pieces. Although there is no specific rule of how I break an object into pieces, I always look for the shapes and lines I like. The way I create shapes really depends on my mood while I am painting, and this can give the design of the painting very unpredictable effects. Since I deal with landscapes which I like to make fun and interesting to look at, I do not want to design my painting to be too complicated and difficult for viewers to understand. My paintings are given simple and symbolic features which brings an abstract quality to them.

Finally, the theme of my painting is to paint imaginary and fantasy landscapes in order to show my appreciation of nature and remind myself of the environmental problems we have been facing by depicting the coexistence of manmade things and nature. I use my imagination to create fantasy landscapes and images, and use photos only as references because I have noticed that using photos often limits my imagination. When I sketch ideas from imagination, they often change. Although there are many ideas I would like to try, I choose the idea carefully and use only one I feel is strong. At the same time, I seek something new to try as a challenge. My old paintings or a previous painting sometimes give me a hint for a new painting, but I attempt to add new features as a motivation of creation for me.

My interest in the environment occurred for me when I moved to Vermont. Tokyo and Vermont have quite different environments, and this gap became the key to the theme of my paintings. I have witnessed the pollution problems and the destructions of nature during my life such as the sea where I used to go to swim becoming dirtier and
dirtier. Many dead fishes were floating on the river where I used to play, and the green field where I used to play baseball and soccer disappeared because of the buildings constructed on it. However I still have some interest in architecture because of my father’s job, and both my appreciation of nature and my interest in architecture appear on the canvas. I try to show viewers the world full of cold geometric forms, the convenient lifestyle in exchange for losing nature, and a fear of the possible destruction in the future by making contrasts between buildings/ manmade forms and nature. At the same time, I would like to suggest the coexistence of nature and man. Simple landscapes also are one of my themes to depict the energy and beauty of nature. On the whole, painting landscapes is fun and also helps to remind me of environmental problems.

My recent works

The six paintings I will talk about now are from the body of work for my thesis. They all are painted in oil on canvas, and the dimensions vary. I would like to explain one by one in chronological order so that my change of interests in style and theme will be clearer to see.

“Awakening” (Figure 1), 38” x 46”

“Awakening” is about the energy of mountains and nature. Basically my intention was to create something similar to what I was painting in my first year of
graduate study. Therefore, it is puzzle-like and has flatness, and this time it went extreme. It may look too busy and hard for some viewers to understand what is going on. Unlike my old paintings, clear contrasts of warm and cool colors are introduced, especially in the sky, in order to express dynamism, to define the edges of mountains and waves on the lake, and to use color realistically. It was originally designed to be one of the fantasy landscape painting series “Where...,” and it was supposed to be titled “Where Mountains Are Born.” In my original idea, stones are falling onto the ground from the sky to build up mountains. I rejected this idea because the stormy sky was already too complicated to add those stones, and instead I decided to focus on the energy of the mountains and the nature around them. The theme was changed to express the awakening of energy inside of the mountains as if those mountains have anger which is about to explode.

“ONE” (Figure 2), 44” x 56”

The second painting is titled “ONE”. In this painting, there is a half-naked woman who appears to be standing but is actually floating on the water in the center. She is surrounded by mountains, trees, and clouds which are reflected on the surface of the water. This time the theme or concept came into my mind more clearly than usual, and its designing was easy to realize. The title “ONE” means “to become one with the nature.” It is about a woman who is a symbol of the mother earth and the hope of human beings trying to be a part of nature. She is absorbing all the essence of
nature, including the nature on the surface of water by floating on the water. Water is a symbol of life too. The woman appears unconscious and inert, however, the vivid colors on her body are a sign of the absorption of nature’s essences. I decided not to make it too complicated, so I created a clear separation between the water, clouds, figure, and mountains by using different colors and hues. In order to provide the feeling of a quiet place, I did not break the water and mountains into pieces. Introducing a figure into a landscape was an unusual step for me.

“Circles” (Figure 3), 42” x 48”

In “Circles,” I attempted to mix my old style and pure abstraction when I had a vision of a large iceberg melted by the sun. It was supposed to be titled “Melting” and to be painted in various milky colors in a puzzle-like style as if it were a dream image. However, the idea did not come out as I imagined, so I changed the colors to be brighter and added other elements, such as trees, a tower, an observatory-like building and an amusement park. The theme also changed to show the relationship between nature and manmade objects on the earth: Like the sun creating a halo, the circles and round shapes are reflected in the light from the tower in the distance, a Ferris wheel in the amusement park, and the round roof of the building in the middle ground as a symbol of relationship. Thus, this painting is titled “Circles”. To change and develop an original idea was sometimes difficult but gave me a chance to learn to be open and flexible above all.
“Surrounded” (Figure 4), 50” x 72”

I needed to wait for quite a long time until the idea for the next painting “Surrounded”, came into my mind. It was a time for me to think of where to go next and what new thing to try. Although I did not get answers to those questions, a strong image which suddenly came into my mind made me decide what to paint next and showed me a new direction somehow. It was an image I got while I was sitting on a chair in my studio and looking at the walls which surrounded me, and it turned into a surrealistic image with a human figure. However, I was concerned that it could be too different from my previous paintings. Nevertheless, I decided to challenge myself, because it seemed there was still a chance to leave some marks of my style in this image. The idea of mixing my style and a more realistic style was realized by creating another dimension and carrying my style over into the image of Japanese screen of the painting in the middle ground. To show my appreciation of Japanese prints, I did not make the screen part as colorful as I usually do but focused on the sense of the design this time.

The concept of the painting is to suggest the irony of human life in the city and a warning of a possible future without nature. Except for the screen, most of the painting is gray so that the color means coldness and oppression. This helps to create a strong contrast between colorless inorganic forms and colorful organic forms. The big screen is a symbol of wealth and yearning like Japanese culture, especially as exemplified by prints and screen paintings which became a boom in Europe as “Japonisme” in the
late 19th century. The design of the trees in the screen part is influenced by the Gustav Klimt, who was inspired by Japonisme.

As a result, this painting became very different but was still related to my old paintings in terms of design and the intent to build a fictional world, and also turned out to be the most narrative painting. I think this one is very successful and led me to a new level.

“Light from Paradise” (Figure 5), 44” x 62”

Fortunately, I did not have any problems for getting an idea for the painting “Light from Paradise.” On the same day I was sketching for “Surrounded,” I got the image for this painting when I was walking down the stairs and thinking about “Surrounded.” I worked on these two paintings at the same time, therefore, the similarities between “Surrounded” and “Light from Paradise” may appear inevitable in terms of design, realistic painting style, and color.

The theme of the painting is also similar to the previous painting, “Surrounded,” but it is less negative. It is not dealing with the picture of the future; it simply is about the hope and yearning of a man trapped inside of the building and wanting to hold the beauty of nature within him. However, he is ironically surrounded by the fake nature just like the man in “Surrounded.”

After trying a different field for “Surrounded,” there was nothing to make me hesitate to paint this one. What was new for me was to focus on light and shadow
because of the stained glass part, to create a realistic space with a steep angle, and to compose a quiet atmosphere by changing the intensity of lights. In order to have a good effect with the stained glass, it was required to be more realistic than before. However, it was not my intention to paint too realistically, so I left some looseness in it in order to let my style remain in the stained glass part and to balance the stained glass painting with the other areas of the painting. Although the color intensity of the reflection of the light from the stained glass on the floor became unrealistically strong, this created double images of the stained glass and turned out to be effective in keeping the image stylized.

"Resistant" (Figure 6), 50" x 60"

The last painting, "Resistant," is based on an etching print I made in my first year. After the two realistic paintings, I had an urge to paint a simple landscape and to see how it would turn out. I decided to paint loosely and to stay somewhere between realism and abstraction. However, I felt uneasy painting as I had planned, and I returned to my old habit of breaking objects into pieces. As a result, the painting became a mix of the puzzle-like style and realism. I had no intention of repeating what I had already done and going back to my old style completely, so I figured the combination was suitable as a new style. The coloring is not as complicated as in other paintings so that the contrast between cool colors and warm colors can be clear. The clouds are also painted gray in order to simplify the painting and to relate it to the
previous two paintings. I have learned that the monochromatic large shape of gray helps to control and organize the diffusion of colors for painters like myself who use too many colors.

The contrast between cool colors and warm colors in this painting mostly consists of blue and orange. I see blue as symbol of fear and resistance, and orange as a symbol of energy and destruction. The depiction of energy in the orange area seems suggest either sunset or sunrise, but in my interpretation it suggests a strong light which comes from the explosion of an atomic bomb in the distance. In this sense, the huge mountain in the middle ground can be a symbol of defense and something which stands up to fight against the destruction. My interest in this painting was to depict the confrontation of cool colors and warm colors, and that idea somehow helped this painting to be unusual.

Conclusion

Through the process of these six paintings, my painting style has developed and the quality of my painting has also improved at some point. I am proud of the result and the variety of styles and themes. The important thing I have learned through them is that challenging myself is the key to success and satisfaction. Hopefully, my painting and my interests will keep changing in order to always motivate me in the future.

Life is full of surprises. I am at the stage of my life where I could not have even imagined to be a few years ago: studying art in a graduate program in the United
States. At first painting was just one of my hobbies, and now here I am, about to earn a Master’s degree. The fact still seems unreal to me sometimes. Though I feel uneasy when I think about my future, I know that it is wrong not to pursue my career in this field and to waste what I have learned so far. Thus I shall not give up on the world of painting until my challenge is completed.
Bibliography


Figure 1. Awakening. Oil on canvas, 38" x 46".
Figure 2. ONE. Oil on canvas, 44" x 56".
Figure 3. Circles. Oil on canvas, 42" x 48".
Figure 4. Surrounded. Oil on canvas, 50” x 72”.
Figure 5. Light from Paradise. Oil on canvas, 44" x 62".
Figure 6. Resistant. Oil on canvas, 50" x 60".