Seeing echoes: Inspirational sources of my work

YouRa Kim

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Seeing Echoes:
Inspirational Sources of My Work
by
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF PAINTINGS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Spiritual Influence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: Motivation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: Physical Influence</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part IV: Explanation of Individual pieces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sorrow</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Floating Flowers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Touch &amp; Experience</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Orpheus I &amp; II</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Echo</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Deep gratitude to my parents, especially mom, who had gone through loneliness and supported me even in the time of financial difficulty.

And last, thanks to my aunts in Georgia and New York, and to my best friend Jin who has been through it all with me.
# LIST OF PAINTINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorrow</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snow</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Floating Flowers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch and Experience</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orpheus I</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orpheus II</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Echo</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the aesthetic reflection of my works, during my two years in the graduate courses at Rochester Institute of Technology.

In the past, I have used shattered glass as a model to express my deepest emotional state such as sorrow, despair, obsession, and insecurity. In this period of painting, I used a literary background which was in a diary form.

After taking courses in textile and learning to sew, I incorporated this media into my painting to create a collage. In doing so, I’ve escaped from the rectangular canvas.

The theoretical background for my work is derived from Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism. Especially, Vincent Van Gogh, Philip Guston and Cy Twombly. I will clearly show their influence on my painting within this thesis, through researching these painters of Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism.

By researching these subjects, I intend to set up a foundation for a theoretical base and establish the direction of future works.
Part I: Spiritual Influence

The word painting comes from the Greek word *zographoke*, a word composed of *graphike* (writing) and *zoon* (living being)\(^1\). I found that rather than writing, my daily drawing allowed me to continue to examine my personal experience honestly. Not only my exterior life, but also my deepest inner state, is expressed in my works.

I am inspired by Philip Guston (1913 - 1979), and Vincent Van Gogh (1853 - 1890).

Philip Guston’s returned to the figurative subject matter in the late 1960’s, after he had been for many years one of the most lyrical of the first generation Abstract Expressionists. His painting’s moving narrative of confrontation, struggle, and doubt is ambiguous as it is compelling with precedents in his social commentaries painted during the 1930’s and 1940’s. Guston’s work remained an intensely personal statement throughout its many transformations, often relying on his private iconography of images to convey the truth about the human condition and express the artist’s own inner fear, obsession, and crises.\(^2\)

Vincent Van Gogh pursued truth through his pain and suffering while other Impressionists sought gay and joyous life through light and color. He believed that Impressionism did not provide the artist with enough freedom to

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\(^1\) Prestel Verlag, *Cy Twombly Paintings Works on Paper Sculpture*, page 22.
express his emotions. Since this was his main concern, he is sometime called an Expressionist.

Vincent Van Gogh was born of a minister’s son in a poor Dutch family. Though he lived in an affectionate family, Vincent Van Gogh himself lived in the mist of pain and sorrow. Van Gogh’s dedication to focusing his pain and sorrow toward art made him feel valuable. He saw himself as a visionary, a witness to the truth and reality of his inner experience.3

The subject of my works is my deepest emotional states, such as sorrow, despair, obsession, and insecurity. Vincent Van Gogh and Philip Guston’s life are not only inspiring, they also filled me with sorrow. The spirits of these two artist always stay deep within me and have provided a foundation for my art.

3 H. W. Janson, History of Art, Page 310.
Part II: Motivation

I seek to explore my own emotions, passion and terror. I intent to use shattered glasses as a model to express my deepest emotional state. I painted my first shattered glass painting entitled Sorrow in my first quarter at Rochester Institute of Technology.

The series of shattered glasses painting has a story to tell. This story about Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale, The Snow Queen, a story of a mirror and it's fragments. The story is about an evil one who makes a mirror that reflects everything to appear wicked. After seeing everything on earth, he wanted to look at the angels and God through the mirror. As the evil one was taking the mirror up to heaven, the mirror shattered and plummeted to earth. The shattered glasses broke into billions of pieces varying in size. Small fragments from the mirror became airborne and entered people's eyes, and heart, turning them into a lump of ice.

From this time on pain, misunderstanding, and negative things happened in this world. The small fragment of glass enters the little boy, named Kay, eyes and heart making his heart into a lump of ice. Kay follows the Snow Queen because she is the only one he sees as being perfect. Kay is given a puzzle of ice that he must accomplish in order to earn his freedom. Gerda, a little friend of Kay, takes off on a journey in search of Kay who has mysteriously disappeared from the town. The insoluble puzzle of Kay becomes
solved when Gerda’s’ love for him frees him from the piece of shattered glass in him. Like this, the insoluble puzzles of the world can only be solved with love. This is my idea and hope. Love can solve every problem.

After painting the first shattered glass painting entitled Sorrow, I made a series of shattered glass paintings. Literally, broken glass gives certain feelings; it can be very dangerous, can hurt somebody to death, or just slightly hurt but it really irritates. The words dangerous, careful, sensitive, and delicate come to my mind when I describing shattered glasses. These make me feel insecure, like a human relationship.

I am satisfied with the shattered glass series because I have express my literary interests and my deepest emotion. Moreover, I enjoy the visual elements: various color, size, shape, angle, light and shadow.. I put them onto a canvas determined by whatever complex of emotions and thoughts.

After painting several shattered glasses painting, I realized that I do not care about the story of Snow Queen or any other story. I just enjoyed pure form, pure color, and pure arrangement because I am less diverted by incidental matter. These paintings are not representation, except for the first shattered glass painting, Sorrow.

I realized that all painting - the painting of the past as well as of the present - are made up of line and color. However, I still can express my emotion through color and line.
Part III: Physical Influence

I began to mingle with pioneering artists of the Abstract-Expressionists who identified with this style and sought a direct expression of their emotions. This expression, however, took the form of abstraction using image color, shape and line.

Abstract-Expressionism can be defined as total freedom, both in content and composition. Freedom, because of the spontaneous nature and the boundless gesture, relates directly with the artists’ psyche. Everything is a direct expression of the artists’ mentality, pictorial space, objective and subjective facts which become the essence of the painting. I am inspired by a slightly later generation of Abstract Expressionist, most importantly Cy Twombly.

Cy Twombly is a member of generation of American and European artists that emerged in the immediate wake of the Abstract-Expressionists and that includes Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. They have helped develop the art for the second half of this century. The essence of their contribution was to reunite the issue of referential, as subject matter, in ways that are still of great concern today.  

Twombly treats his painting like a person abandoning his memories of words, numbers, letters, diagrams, paint smears, and graffiti. My paintings are

\[4\] Karen, Cy Twombly, page 11.
directly related to the Twombly's freedom of expression, treating it in my own way. The lines are autonomous, vibrant, and expressive; the painting no longer standing as a representation of something, but the painting becomes the subject matter with substance. I have kept the physical influence of Cy Twombly's Expressionist gesture and the spiritual influence of Philip Guston and Vincent Van Gogh. Through the Expressionist gesture, I reveal my deep emotional state.
Part IV: Explanation of Individual pieces.

1. Sorrow  
   
   (60” x 48 ½”)

   This painting is the beginning of my instruction into the images of the shattered glasses within a series of shattered glass paintings. The painting Sorrow is a version of this Hans Christian Anderson story but as I envision it.

   This picture is about a hand reaching out to the mirror as it breaks up. These hands are bleeding from what seems like a nail mark through the palm. The hands appear to be that of Jesus who is just a little too late to catch the mirror as the mirror plummets to the ground below. Fragmented pieces drip with blood which symbolizes the pain it will inflict on the people below. The blood symbolizes the pain of the artist and Jesus.

   The column of various reds, (cadmium red extra deep, deep magenta, and napthamide), contrast with the dark phthalo cyanine green background. The colors of the shattered glass are a rich impasto surface of light blue violet and turquoise green which appears as reflection of light. The color of the hand is white to represent purity; fragmented mirror and the dark sky symbolize corruption.

   I have applied paint in thin, overlapping, and translucent brush strokes that livens the dark green surface. The variations in color evoke a full range of emotions from the bright, joyous primary hues used in the glass in contrast to the dark of the background.
2. Floating flower  

In the beginning of December of 1993, I started painting the Floating Flower. The painting was done on a bed sheet which I've had for quite awhile. Even though I wasn't fond of the flower pattern of the bed sheet, I started to experiment on the sheet trying to imitate the painting of Henri Matesse, Harmony in red, who's painting is so colorful.

As I was coloring the borders of the flowers, I got bored. In order to alleviate this boredom, I introduced three rectangles into the sheet. Even though I hated the painting, my professors liked the idea that I was going in a new direction. With all the encouragement I got from the professors, I still did not like the painting and put it away until the summer of 1994. This is the period when I was in the middle of experimenting with the shattered mirrors.

The repetitive flowers of the bed sheet made me feel confined, hard to breathe. In order to relieve the tightness, I cut the flowers with the rectangle connecting them and put the rectangle with the flowers on a new canvas. This new canvas, with the Abstract-Expressionist background, became a explosion of colors with flowers flowing out of the canvas. By looking at Cy Twombly's work for awhile and studying the colors and gestures, I became inspired to use his method and incorporated his language. I used the Abstract-Expressionist language such as the flicking, splattering, and dribbling, enhancing the colors creating movement and giving freedom.
**Floating Flowers** reminds me of being in the midst of a garden of azaleas, crocuses, and lilies. The strong horizontal placement of lines and color gives it continuity and movement. A wide range of contrasting images, which harmonically coexist, resembles nature in its glorious existence.

My sole intent in working is to express the emotion of my dark side, but this painting showed my bright side of emotion. Even though I didn’t expect to paint this way, **Floating Flowers** filled me with joy and happiness.
3. Touch and Experience  

(64" x 90½"

This painting, called *Touch and Experience* (1994), creates a new feeling compared to those created in my earlier years. The painting is set on a solid black background, with a wide horizontal plane dividing the painting. The division is irregularly formed with protrusions from the top. This white divider is painted with a thin coat of translucent colors of various hues.

The top portion of the painting consists of a large rectangle with a forest green, irregular shape sewn on top. The borders of the rectangles are filled with threads sticking out at the edges. The irregular shape has cadmium red thread sewn across its volume, from border to border, like a beam of light bouncing off the edges.

A strong pair of rectangles and a pair of flowers below dominate. The left rectangle contains tiny flowers embroidered on the black cloth and an iridescent copper painted on it to resemble calligraphy. Flowers under the rectangle appeared in a former painting *Floating Flowers*.

In this work, I use different languages: cutting, pasting, painting, and sewing. I carefully consider the visual relationship between these different areas. This painting is contemplative in tone because of its subtle harmonies of colors and relatively static composition made up of simple elements. In a collage, the individual fragments are reduced to their own autonomous
identities: pure poetic abstract painting delicately colored with interwoven brush strokes.

My sewing skill is still in its preliminary stages, as seen in the irregular sewing pattern; on the other hand, free use of the sewing machine gives this piece a more playful and painted look. I deliberately left threads of various colors hanging out, making it more rhythmic and joyful.

This practice of collage offered me a new freedom, presenting diverse possibilities for experiment within the internal structure of the picture, lovely, lightly, and derivative, on the way to something else, which was really my break-through. Restriction in my use of color displayed virtuosity in my sensuous, in the expressive handling of paint, surface, and line.

I abandoned the diary form of shattered glass painting completely. Color and shape replaced traditional narrative content and figurative images. My palette was reduced to predominantly black and iridescent metallic colors. The painting had no meaning but was rich in its use of different languages. In short, this painting was controlled by intellect rather than by fevered emotion.

I exercised the modernist’s freedom to appreciate mixed media, making this the first purely abstract painting engaging me in a silent dialogue. I wanted to invent a new formal language, entirely independent on my previous work form.
I wanted to create two same size square painting but give different feelings, one dark and the other light. For this reason, I started with one completely black and one completely white painting.

I painted a black painting even though I usually I don’t use dark colors such as ..... However, I wanted to express negative feeling, for example anger, fear or loneliness; but my painting always ended up being bright primary colors. Therefore I purposely used black gesso for the back even though my painting was removed from the subject matter and placed into pure abstraction. I enjoyed painting with playful form, color, and line while keeping my attitude toward life pessimistic. This dark painting still today, expresses my loneliness and sorrow.

In two of my paintings, there is a shape that looks like the state of Ohio with swirls in the middle like that of Cy Twombly’s painting. At the completion of the first painting, I gave this painting a name Orpheus.

Orpheus is a character from Greek mythology; Orpheus lost his wife, Eurydice, at the time of their wedding. Grief stricken Orpheus went down to Hades, overcoming all hostile powers through the power of his song, but failed in the end by turning too soon to see his wife. At once she slipped back away from him, and stretched out her arms to reach him and hold him.

Unfortunately, as she grasped nothing but the yielding air, dying a second time,
Eurydice spoke no word of complaint against her husband, what might she complain except that she was loved. Then she uttered a final “Farewell” and sank back out of sight. In reaction, Orpheus fled human companionship, especially that of women. His mournful singing attracted wild beast, trees, and rock. Finally his life came to an end when frenzied women attacked him with rocks, twigs, and clods, as birds, beast, trees, rocks, and rivers wept for him.  

This painting did not start with this story line; but in the completion of this painting, it’s swirls reminded me of this story of Orpheus consequently, I wanted to share this story and the emotion that goes with this story to everyone who sees my painting.

I adopted a title from Greek Mythology because of my desire to escape the reality and search for land far away in a different time. Orpheus is the symbol of music (artist) and who is a self ostracized individual always anxious and suffering. He is a lonely person who is not understood by people and in the end he is destroyed by the people. Orpheus portrays an artist like Vincent Van Gogh and Mark Rothoko.

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On a un-stretched cotton fabric, a blue rectangle swatch was added. This was an attempt to mimic Cy Twombly’s method of adding a rectangular geometric shape and adding swirls and splashes of color which dripped from it’s origin. Putting in order just to create chaos. A splash of translucent colors where added which acted like watercolor, which was applied with the Abstract expressionist language of Cy Twombly. At first the rectangle and colors would add a collage like characteristic, but prove to be dull. The remainder of the painting sequence is to dilute the rectangle from the fabric, and hide the rectangle in the background.

At this time I was very interested in collage and sewing, and wanted to combine those media into my painting. I collected swatches from various hobby stores and dress shops, to obtain many different patterns. I started to study the shape and texture of the fabric that I’ve collected, in order to create a collage of mixed media.

As the painting changed, it went from a painting to a mixture of media, where paint, patterns, and cloth of various textures came together. The canvas became a meeting place of musicians without a conductor. All the media was finely tuned, but without guidance they could not exist in harmony. In my struggle to obtain order within this array of media, I changed the background to white, than red, then black, without the hope of an end. Cy Twombly’s
work showed me the way. Cy Twombly produced a contrary visual rhythm, exploring the positive and negative feelings. They were deeply involved with one another both intellectually and emotionally, and the intensity of what passed between them filled up their lives.

This is were I finally got the name Echo for my painting. The mythological character from Greek mythology. Echo is a nymph who falls in love with Narcissus, but is not capable of saying a word of her own. Echo is only able to repeat a word or part of a word of other as soon as they speak. Echo becomes heart broken when Narcissus runs away, disgusted when Echo confronts him. Echo hides away in a cave and starves until the flesh wilts away and only the voice is left.

I gave the title Echo because my painting is about sorrow and loneliness, since the story of Echo is a tale of sorrow and loneliness. The word echo gives a feeling of emptiness and loneliness.
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to show what I have done for the past two years in Rochester Institute of Technology. I've started with the shattered glass series using Hans Christian Anderson’s story to express the negative emotions within myself, but ended up deserting the idea story line painting as I got deeper into painting.

Inspirations came from other sources such as great artists like Vincent Van Gogh, a Post-Impressionist who lead the way to expressionism, who does not follow others blindly, rather make his own path to search for the truth. Philip Guston, who is known for his emotive Abstract expressionist, but passes to the stage of iconography which expresses his inner fear, obsession and crises. Vincent Van Gogh and Philip Guston have shaped my psychical background for my paintings, but Cy Twombly is the one who directed me to release those feeling into form which can be clearly conveyed. Even though my path for the future is set for the moment I will not stop researching other artist for new inspiration and new media to broaden my horizon.

The subject matter that I’ve used in the past was that of stories and fable, but by the end of this two years, subject matter became the painting itself, and the only part the stories and fable take a place is the titles. By learning and experimenting, I have found a new person within me, who is
unlike anyone else. I feel that I will continue to change and grow as in the future
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sorrow
Acrylic
60" x 48 1/2"
Snow
Acrylic
30” x 30”
Snow
Acrylic
30" x 30"
Blue
Acrylic
22"x40"
Touch and Experience
Mixed Media
64" x 90"
Orpheus I
Acrylic
60" x 60"
Orpheeuse II
Acrylic
60" x 60"