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The Moment

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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THE MOMENT

by

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Abstract

This study explores subtle relationships between people captured together in a photo frame and examines feelings of alienation of modern people as seen in my art. My paintings from 2012 to 2013 are the subjects of this study. The photo images that I took while traveling were used as subject matter for my paintings. The divisions of color areas were made by using pixels, so as to show a variety of color changes on the oil canvas. This study aims to explain the motive for choosing people as a subject for my artworks and my process of painting, and an analysis of the works.

The following artists are also mentioned in relation to this artwork; Edward Hopper and Richard Estes have a similar subject matter as mine. In this thesis, my artwork is presented to account for, and back up this fact. The artworks discussed in this dissertation were exhibited at the Bevier Gallery in 2013.
Introduction

My artwork comes from my feelings about isolation and the emotions manifested by lonely people and their relationships. I concentrate on individual characters and people within that framework. Currently I reside in the United States, which is richly diverse, having various races and ethnicities, providing an abundance of material for me to work with. However, as I am a foreigner, I am having difficulty with a language and a culture different from my own. Thus, I always have feelings about loneliness and this isolation has inspired much of my current work.

My artwork is a sort of record of my life. How can I express my idea on canvas? Since we are living in a digital age, I wanted to use both analogue and digital tools. In my artwork, analogue means using my hands with brush and oil paint, and digital means using digital elements like Photoshop and images from a digital camera. I will nurture my memories, giving them a variety of expression.

The smallest and most basic unit of my paintings closely resembles, and is intended to correspond to, a pixel. This is the result of taking photographs, then afterwards magnifying and altering the images in order to recreate them on paper. In the process of mechanically reconstructing the digitized original, (the images which I photographed) people may appear to be disfigured or distorted. However, as they are transferred onto the canvas with oil paint, the previously independent components come together to form a single entity. Through this transformation, the viewer comes to know that the painting in front of them is a single image on a single canvas, and accepts that the painting in front of their eyes is a platform for playful illusion. As the viewer steps back, the image begins to take form, slowly it becomes absorbed in
the three-dimensional landscape. These different experiences allow viewers to travel between the abstract and the representational image effectively.
Section I: Context

A. Personal Background

I painted mainly landscapes since my college years. Korea has four distinct seasons and I liked to travel around the country taking photos of scenery. At that time, digital cameras came into wide use and became connected to my works naturally. The photos taken with a film camera could not be manipulated, so I had them printed and drew realistic paintings based on these photos. But digital images allowed me to make various interpretations using Photoshop and it became an important foundation of my works ever since.

Ho Moon, *An Isolated House*, 2007, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90"
After finishing graduate school in Korea, I came to the United States and stayed first in New York City. New York was bustling with busy people and many buildings, and reminded me of Seoul where I had lived. But in New York, I was able to see a great mix of people from dozens of countries, which I had never seen in Seoul. Thus, my interest moved from landscape to people. In those days, I knew only a few people and spent a lot of time alone. Unconsciously, my camera followed lonely people in the city and I began to identify myself with those people. I would snap a picture of a person alone in the deserted street and a lone man who kept himself aloof from a group of people. Sometimes I took pictures of people who were complete strangers to each other in one frame to create a new scene. The main themes of my paintings, which include a sense of loneliness of modern people in the city and a strange relationship among those people, started to develop that way.

B. Artistic Influence

Although it is important for an artist to focus on his or her own work and study related works of other artists with similar style, I think, it is also important to look at the artists with different styles. When I was in Korea, I developed an interest in Western contemporary art but I could see it only in the art books and on the computer through the Internet. There is a world of difference between seeing paintings in real life and seeing them only in photos. In the United States, I was able to see not only the contemporary paintings but also the works by 20th century American artists. One of them was Edward Hopper (1882-1967).
Edward Hopper was a prominent American realist painter in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. He was loved by many people for his works in which he exquisitely depicted the sense of alienation and loneliness of contemporary people in a desolate city. People in his paintings looked nonchalant at that moment, but the space that person was alone in revealed his or her state of mind. Although Edward Hopper’s works do not have direct influence on my choice of subject matter, the similarity is found in some of the subjects from my works.

![Edward Hopper, Sunlight in a Cafeteria, 1958, Oil on canvas](image)

In Edward Hopper’s painting, ‘Sunlight in a Cafeteria’, the sunlight was used as a background. Two people were sitting at their own tables as the sunlight poured into the room. The woman, who looked like she was waiting for someone, was deep in thought while fiddling with something in her hand. On the right side of the painting, a man looked out the window in a daze holding a cigarette in his hand. Ostensibly, the subject here is a run-up to attempted
seduction, an early step in the human mating ritual that so interested Hopper.¹ Even though the woman and the man shared the space, they were isolated from each other inside the cafeteria. Using the sunlight skillfully Edward Hopper divided the space into a sunlit area for the woman and an area without sunlight for the man.

The subject matter I chose for my works also usually features more than two people. There appears a subtle tension between them and I captured the moment of silence or the quiet moment with which their conversation was punctuated. The tension created by each other’s presence exposes them in the painting (that recreated a moment in time). Therefore, it would be more appropriate to say ‘being solitary’ than to say alienation and loneliness. While Hopper looked at contemporary people through the 20th century’s view, I depict American men and women living in the 21st century.

Another contemporary artist I found was Richard Estes who was born on May 14, 1932, in Kewanee, Illinois. When I looked at his art works, the first thought I had was to ruminate on some scenery encountered while traveling. Perhaps that is because he drew many images of streets. Richard Estes lived in urban areas and maybe he just used the pictures taken by some traveler who was charmed by urban streets. But I think it could be that he deliberately planned and meticulously recollected the familiar images of the streets he walked on every day.

Estes’s works are not intellectual conceptions, and he does not paint from an aesthetic pulpit. There are no narrative ideas or hidden symbolism. They are intuitive, open-ended paintings that develop accumulatively and are brought to a crystalline lucidity. Even though Estes developed his style by studying the works of Edward Hopper, Estes’ point of view of the world was expressed very differently. When Hopper created his art works on the base of relationships and feelings people have, Estes built his world of art based on urban landscapes without people.

Richard Estes, *Supreme Hardware Store*, 1973, Oil and acrylic on canvas

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2 John Arthur, *RICHARD ESTES PAINTING & PRINTS* (San Francisco: POMEGRANATE ARTBOOKS, 1993), 28
In my works, there are also various urban landscapes but people are always in them too. I once wondered about how my works would look if they did not include people in them. Are they able to look as vibrant as Estes’ works, which include only buildings and streets? Estes and I are searching for the existence of life through empty streets and people each other. Even with the absence of people, Estes’ works still secretly contain the emotional changes reflected in a human eye. Seeing his works makes me recall the familiar landscape of the city where we live our everyday lives.

**Section II: Evolution**

A. Expression through digital methods

Issues of art and science are tearing away the limits of materials and tools owing to the development of new technology obtaining the characteristic of multi-arts crossing all genres. The progress of the information age has made us go beyond traditional formality or frame; instead, it lets us develop infinite imagination, originality, and diversity.

There have been various artworks that use computers due to the development of digital technology today. It is certainly true that more and more artists working in different forms of multimedia from painting, drawing, and sculpture to photography and video-are making use of digital technologies as a tool of creation for aspects of their art.\(^3\) Although not all art forms need to use or depend on every new media, I tried the technology as well because computers are used

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\(^3\) Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson world of art, 2003), 27.
in various ways in real life.

I have realized that my painting method using digital images is influenced by computer
technology, and this made me think about the relationship between the analog and the digital.
Eventually, I understood that paint-like expression can be achieved only when I work on the
digital and the analog simultaneously.

My sketches were made with the Photoshop program, a digital software. I chose to work
this way by using a computer in order to complete my image. Photoshop has filters that have
various functions, standardized by pre-calculated figures, and everyone can easily use it.
Although I, too, use the same method as others, I have made my own source to create authentic,
creative works since I understand that a lot of images can be regenerated depending on how an
individual uses Photoshop.

In order to proceed with the work in a mechanical and deliberate way, I sketch the works
using the photos I took and transform them with filtering effects. Without the help of hands or
direct drawings, all works are produced only on the computer monitor. Getting an image through
filtering keeps the space between a subject and myself by minimizing my emotion and personal
opinion in order to recognize the subject by a physical look so that I could get only the formal
aspect of the original material. This process can be differentiated from other artists who accept
accidents in their work process. Rather, I make artworks under a precise scheme from the
beginning to the end of each production. Therefore, the detail of the original image disappears
and the picture as an abstract image remains.
Section III: The Body of Work

A. Visual change made by viewing distance

In the previous section II, I addressed the reason and process of my work that is produced in a mechanical way. In this section, I discuss the process of my work, writing that I partially manipulated or selected and mixed colors of planes compared to the sketching stage which was made in a mechanical method. In addition, the work is restructured within the boundary of not damaging the feel of the physical image of an original work; only a minimal amount of my personal opinion is included. Also, I would like to discuss what visual effects can be expected by changing the viewing distance of a form.

Some flatness remains in the process of transferring images in a mechanical way. I emphasize the physical aspect of an image, spacing colors evenly on the monitor, letting them spread out with even widths, while stressing the flatness. For the primary subject matter, I take the picture that contains a lone figure or a relationship among people, and I choose an original image that has high contrast and color saturation.

I considered convenience when producing artwork, for my paintings are made on canvas keeping to a standard ratio for existing canvas frames. I enlarge photos and reinterpret them, so the size of canvas does not matter; however, sometimes I need certain sizes of canvas for composition and arrangement of figures in the space of the work.

I attempt to keep the distance between the picture and the viewer by attracting a viewers’ attention and making them recognize my work as a two-dimensional painting at the same time.
The distance between the observer and the subject should be kept in order to evoke the viewer's experience after he or she sees a gigantic subject or space. The images in the work represent an illusional space that could have a possibility to be real through perspective. But I emphasize the flatness to indicate that the space was made on a picture plane (through a few artificial ways). The flatness that I attempt to show is not introduced in order to remove the viewer's expectation of illusion, rather it is presented to make the visual experience of the work and the actual space co-operate and attract a viewer’s attention.

The viewer gains a visual experience that ranges between flatness and illusion of depth. The viewer not only re-experiences several emotions that they had experienced in the real space through the illusional images but also at the same time, looks at the newly reconstructed image of the art on the canvas. For example, the viewer perceives the picture plane on the canvas in front of his or her eyes which is actually just a paint-covered canvas (or a painting) on a flat surface, and it is only an illusional space to trick the eyes. On the other hand, the viewer is going to be immersed in the three dimensional landscape-like image of a large scale picture plane for which perspective is emphasized. My purpose is to show both the joy found in the illusion and the joy found in artistic elements and set a bridge between paintings and the real space, between art and reality.
B. Artwork Analysis

I transfer my experiences and feelings onto the canvas based on a photograph I took. Through painting, I captured the moment seen in the photo forever. A staged scene is supposed to be easier to control the surroundings. Thus, sometimes I allow random factors to contribute to the image. For me, a photo is a reminder of a particular moment in the past and I recreate the scene in the photo as a painting. Surely, it is a recreation of a particular place but at the same time it goes beyond that when imagination and abstraction enter. The objects of interest are transferred into the picture mechanically and this image is visually expressed by removing the illusion, simplifying its shape and color, diverging from shading, establishing a homogenous picture, and more.

*The Man’s Story, 2012, Oil on canvas, 30 x 48”*
Sometimes we are forced to be present at a party we really don’t want to attend. We see people chatting and smiling. There is one person who seems to be an invisible man and avoids the eyes of others. His movements are all very cautious and he seems like the object of antagonism in a social crowd.

The restaurant is dark. Lighting only illuminates each table, which makes a strong contrast between people and background. A man in blue shirt sitting between a man and a woman looks uncomfortable. This picture captured only this moment so it doesn’t tell the whole story, but that is the way I see him. In contrast with a neatly dressed old gentleman, the wrinkles of his shirt represent his heart in shreds and I used contrasting colors of yellow and blue to elicit the sentiment. Feelings and movements of the people at the table can be read only through the restrained expressions under the lighting. For spaces with no light, I tried to avoid using only black because if that empty space, which is large, is covered with only black it could look like a poster. So after several attempts, I painted the space using four or five colors. Since they are all dark shades, the space looks as if it is painted with only one color from a distance. But a closer look reveals the various colors used giving an impression of color field abstract painting.
In the previous work, the main characters were placed to create a stable composition, but I chose an unconventional composition for this work. Two women are waiting for the signal on the other side of the crosswalk. But by placing them in the very front of the picture, the painting shows only parts of their bodies. It is easy for anyone to guess that they are standing on the pavement even though shoes and the road which they were standing on do not appear in the painting. By doing that, the perspective between the figures and the background is better emphasized. Besides, one of the distinguishing features in this painting is the use of an intense contrast of the colors of red and blue representing hot and cold. Through those unnatural colors, the glamour and the chill of SoHo in Manhattan is expressed, along with the air and temperature of the place.
My work starts with taking photographs. I would wait for a long time until the right moment to click the shutter and with that click, I isolated that moment from reality. After that, using Photoshop I make a pixel image out of the photo including people, backgrounds, and other objects at my discretion. Throughout this process, the colors that cannot be found in the real image and the unrealistic colors reveal themselves. I was able to capture this scene for the painting after a long wait as well. A man and a woman who were strangers would meet each other at some place moments later. When an objectively-observed situation like this gets mingled with my subjective view, a new story would be created. Although it may seem like a simple composition including intense red walls, a man in blue, and a woman in yellow, this painting actually displays high tension using the three primary colors (red, yellow and blue).
I usually obtain subject matter for my work while traveling. The photos I took were not staged. They are real. The composition of the painting is just the same as it is seen in the photo. Every photo I took includes people and it is because of those who are present, that at the right moment I was able to capture the image. Like that, ‘the chosen moment’ is born, which goes beyond ‘staging a scene for the moment of waiting’ with artistic instincts or philosophical intuition. Capturing the moment of waiting happens instantaneously, but perhaps, that is the scene I have already conceived in my mind for a long time.

In this painting, contrary to the image of people in a city or indoors, this image of two men (who are sitting down together) looking at the vast ocean, creates a feeling of relief. The whole picture seems overwhelmed by blue, but the bright, contrasting color, yellow, maintains the balance of the picture. To avoid monotonous ocean blue, I put contrasting pink, yellow, and green colors in the waves. By painting waves with intricate colors I was able to prevent visual simplicity. In addition, I used hot sunlight which strongly contrasted with the figures to create a more tranquil mood.
Two strangers, a man and a woman, are sitting in the same area looking in different directions. They each chose their tables among many others and sat there while turning their backs to each other. It is unknown if they were waiting for someone or just sitting there to take refuge from the heat outside for a while. Even though they were in the same space, they were thinking different things and as I looked at them, I was also imagining their stories. In this painting, warm and cool colors appear between the red and blue tables occupied by the two figures. The colors of this painting are not as glamorous as other works but rather monotonous overall. To avoid the monotony, I used various colors and patterns to show perspective when depicting the floor. I also used simple, restrained color to depict fences in the distant background in an abstract way in order to arouse curiosity.

We live in a city where we are expected not to see and hear other people in order to keep our individual spaces. It is a virtue not to invade other people’s public space. In a city, it is interesting to see how people can connect themselves with others sharing our one and only world.
In my early years of work, I had persisted in using the same colors from an original photo when painting. But, in order to make paintings distinct from photographs and add some new emotions, I started to use the colors that don’t actually exist in the real world. Especially, by using complimentary colors and primary colors in this painting, I put an emphasis on expressing colors that bear no relation to reality.

In some way the image of a man sitting on the balcony evokes a feeling of loneliness because it looks as though he was put in jail. But on the other hand, it also looks like that he is just enjoying the fine weather peacefully. Since all seven colors of the rainbow are displayed in this painting, the audience could appreciate various feelings through those colors. Particularly, if viewed closely, the picture looks more abstract because the sharpness of the color plane stands out. But when you look at it from a distance, the original image as seen in the photo appears.
People are standing in line in front of the crosswalk waiting for the signal. Some are tourists and some are residents of the city. People who don’t know where the others came from are gathered in one place and they are all looking in different directions. The audience can freely follow these people’s eyes to see what’s there within the whole picture.

One of the interesting points is that the story of the painting does not end with a relationship between people. A new possibility is still open. The boundaries between people, and between people and background were effaced from organic and abstract color patterns. When the strong sunlight touches the skin, for instance, the silhouette seems to disappear, dissolving into the surroundings and appearing brighter. On the other hand, the dark shadow parts are buried under the reflected light on the clothes or surrounding colors. So the parts of the body and the colors seem united. This is a sort of camouflage. Blurred images are dissolved and mingled together to make ‘open-ended relationships’. Consequentially, open-ended relationship shows a possibility of communication and interchange through mixed colors and shapes in the picture.
Conclusion

This study examines the creative process of taking a digitally captured moment and transforming it into an oil painting on canvas, while emphasizing feelings of alienation of modern man and subtle relationships between people. In order to see a moment in everyday life with a new perspective, it requires a reinterpretation that gives new artistic merit to the moment and an expressive method for recreation. By using digital technology this process can become an artistic approach to expression in a contemporary way. Surely, the picture was made by brush strokes but it looks so smooth as if it is mechanically done. At casual glance, digital elements are so strong that the traces of hand painting don’t show. Ironically, however, this process actually requires more hands on work.

When I was preparing for the Thesis Show, the available space in the gallery was very limited because more than ten people were going to display their artworks in the same show. But luckily, I was allocated the largest space and was able to display larger size pieces. Exhibition spaces were allocated not long in advance of the show, so it was difficult for me to decide the sizes and the numbers of the works to show. Therefore, I had prepared the large size canvas and chose the subject matters with many colors. But, when seeing my paintings hanging in the large space of the gallery, the canvas which had looked large in the art studio didn’t look as big anymore. Besides, since I was not able to install lighting fixtures for every painting, the texture of the surface of canvas could not be seen properly. Moreover, the standardized size of the canvas limited the arrangement of display, which was a disappointment for me.
To me, foreigners were the object of my interest and became the subject matter for my art. However, the audience showed more interest in the background and colors rather than in people because in their eyes, the people in the paintings seem like just ordinary people from a mundane life. I was trying to look for only the new things and wanted to learn about them. Regional characteristics have great influence on artists and their works. I also have been influenced by those things and was unaware that, gradually I have changed too. I think that as an artist who has experienced both the Eastern and Western cultures, it would have been better for me to mix elements from each culture harmoniously in my works rather than focus on only one
For the time being I will concentrate more on people as subject matter for my artwork. I have initially emphasized alienated persons only and due to the limitation of subject matter, I think, I have missed some opportunities to broaden my perspective. Formerly, I let the better possibilities pass because I focused on one or two persons as my choice of subject. From this aspect of the technique, I am going to be less dependent on photographs and Photoshop and I will try to draw a picture based on my memory, which I expect, will contain more abstract elements. My works have been composed of digital elements but now I would like to include more abstract elements with properly arranged design. By utilizing the work process flexibly and developing techniques, I would like to provide a stage for a play on the canvas. In a play setting, not only the main characters but also backgrounds are needed to complete a scene. Similarly, I would like my paintings to be filled with various elements. As an emerging artist, I am waiting to hear from my audience if the people I have created are alienated and lonely, or what they are looking at.
List of Illustrations

Ho Moon, *An Isolated House*, 2007, Oil on canvas, 72 x 90”

Edward Hopper, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, 1958, Oil on canvas

Richard Estes, *Supreme Hardware Store*, 1973, Oil and acrylic on canvas

Ho Moon, *The Man’s Story*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 30 x 48”

Ho Moon, *The Story of Two Women*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40”

Ho Moon, *The Moment*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 36 x 60”

Ho Moon, *The Story of Two Men*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 36 x 60”

Ho Moon, *The Moment*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48”

Ho Moon, *The Man’s Story*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 36 x 60”

Ho Moon, *Coexistence*, 2012, Oil on canvas, 36 x 60”
Bibliography

