

Abstract Arc—An Appraisal of Liu Yung-jen's Paintings

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The twentieth century exploration of abstraction by Chinese artists has been sustained in Taiwan by three generations of artists since its inception in the 1960s. Representative of the middle generation and a remarkable artist, Liu Yung-jen studied in Italy in the early 1990s, where his work started its transformation from representational to abstract. Over these twenty years, he has accumulated much experience exploring abstraction as an artist and studying the field as a curator and promoter. With his abstract paintings, he has not only established a distinctive visual language, but also created a means of connecting with and affecting the psychology and conscious physical state of his viewers. Furthermore, his artwork has spread its influence abroad, suggesting different possibilities for abstraction in the contemporary art context.

The origins of western abstraction can be traced back to the aesthetic forms of cold abstraction, such as hard-edge painting or geometric abstraction, and hot abstraction, such as lyrical abstraction. Representative works of the former form came from Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich; and of the latter, from Wassily Kandinsky and Joan Miró. It would be difficult to simply categorize Liu's work as one or the other, as it does not rely solely on the absolute rationality of geometry, such as the vertical and parallel lines, squares or rectangles that Mondrian considered to be art's basic forms, nor does it only rely on nonrational, organic forms. I think Liu's paintings fall somewhere between hot and cold abstraction, and thereby express concepts completely different from both. The key to analyzing his work lies in his signature use of the arc.

Discussing abstraction in his pioneering book *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky wrote, "This maturity and the elastic full sound of the curved line lead us to seek the contrast to the straight line." Arcs possess the inherent quality of geometric form yet are more liberated and more enthusiastic than straight lines, and therefore are richer in perceptual suggestions. When analyzing Liu's paintings, it is discovered that two types of arcs constitute their basic elements: one is large and divides the space of the painting; the other is a fan shape formed by an arc and straight lines. The arc possesses special significance for Liu. Above all, these small, repeated arcs signify the abstraction of images from nature, suggesting actual physical objects such as hills, sheaves of grain, rivers, sails, windmills, the horizon line or stars. Yet these small arcs are not meant to represent these physical objects, but rather symbolize the myriad things of the universe. Liu seems to understand the universe as basically composed of arcs, and by retaining ambiguous traces of the natural world, shows viewers an interface where the natural and spiritual realms can alternate. He does not, however, stop his exploration of abstraction here.

During an interview, Liu once said, "The triangle elements you see in my paintings are not geometrical elements but natural forms. They are now part of my artistic language. [...] I want to create ambiguous forms, like semi-abstract shapes that are between abstract and figurative. My intention is to find a way to create forms that are beyond the geometrical dimension." It seems that "beyond the geometrical dimension" could be read from the point of view of space. Just as Hung Li-chu wrote, "Liu's uniqueness lies in his ability to communicate a spatial sense and ambiguous worlds that cannot be perceived in

everyday visual experience, his ability to transcend single perspectives, and transcend the reliance in abstract painting on areas of color to create rhythms in two dimensional space.” Taking this a step further, spaces in Liu's paintings composed of large and small arcs neither resort to flat one-dimensional space that would highlight materiality, nor do they rely on retinal, three-dimensional space created using perspective. Instead, they rely on both sensory and mental perceptions to express a consciousness of lyrical space. After rendering arcs that clearly indicate certain imagery as abstract symbols, the next step is to create rhythms by meticulously arranging his compositions just like the notes of a musical score or the rhyme scheme of a poem. In this way, Liu opens another lyrical space for his viewers. But I want to know, what is the spiritual core that the artist wishes to convey with these sensory and mental perceptions?

I would like to suggest that this is related to the genesis of art itself—the unique power of art to heal. For many years, Liu has stressed his breathing concept. Since 1996, breathing has been an important theme permeating Liu's work. He believes that the activity of painting is just like inhaling and exhaling. He not only has named many of his works for breathing, such as *The Alchemy of Breathing* and *Soaring Respiration*, but also has endeavored to establish a concept of breathing. Specifically in his paintings, breathing is expressed through rhythm. Arcs suggest a feeling of expansion, and straight lines a feeling of contraction. Alternating these contrasting elements, combined with the rhythm created by the repetition and variation of arcs mentioned above, allows the viewer to clearly sense the “breathing” in Liu's paintings. And in turn, this coordinates the rhythm of the viewer's breathing with the lyrical space of the painting.

Furthermore, because breathing signifies human existence, I deduce that Liu's concern with his concept of breathing is rooted in observations and critiques of the body and mind experience in modern society. The rhythm of modern life often makes us overlook, or even forget, breathing, while exhausting, oppressing and numbing the mind and body. In eastern philosophy, breathing represents *qi*, an important aspect of mind and body health. Changing the rhythm of one's breathing can change one's state of mind and body, the importance of which is emphasized in Buddhist meditation, Hindu yoga, and Chinese Taiji. Liu uses this concept in his abstract paintings to express an art-based method of healing, and via viewers' sympathetic response with his paintings, regulated breathing and stress relief is achieved. This healing effect hastens viewers to enter a pure and simple state of mind and is the state that Liu seeks with his paintings. He uses common shapes and simple colors such as golden yellow to suggest light beams, blue to suggest the sky, and black to suggest night. While pursuing this state, he also reflects on modern industrial civilization, which can be seen in the his experiments with mixed media. In many of his works, Liu covers industrial produced lead foil with natural beeswax, which, in contrast with the heaviness and gray color of the lead, radiates a spirituality with its liquid, golden-yellow translucence. After the beeswax congeals on the lead foil, it produces a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't effect that renders the lead transparent through an alchemical transformation. Both master abstractionists Joan Miró and Paul Klee considered child-like innocence and freedom as the supreme attainments of abstract art, and wished to allow the spirit to break through the limitations of logic by adopting methods from surrealism and dreams. In my opinion, these abstract artworks suggest that modern civilization is diseased, and in doing so attempt to free us from its grip.