

Literati Paintings of Brushstrokes and Cross-Disciplinarity (ShiShuHuaYilu): Lee Kang-So's *Serenity* Series

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Serenity: Paintings Built from Brushstrokes

Lee Kang-So's artistic experimentation has traversed genres of photography, painting, sculpture, installation, and performance - which grants him due recognition as a central figure in the history of Korean contemporary art. At this solo exhibition at Gallery Hyundai, the cross-disciplinary artist Lee Kang-So introduces his new paintings of the *Serenity* series where the fewest brushstrokes condense infinite energy and imagination, reaching harmony between autonomy and ephemerality.

Lee Kang-So's *Serenity* series are paintings based on strokes, strokes that are concise yet powerful and unpredictable in the images that they form. This harkens back to East Asian traditional paintings where objects are depicted as ink lines upon paper. In East Asian art, brushstrokes form the basis of calligraphy as well as the principles of painting. This is why each artist defined the implications of brushstrokes in the context of one's own art, and attempted to utilize them in artmaking. For example, Jing Hao (荆浩)¹ in the 10th century explicates the importance of the brush within six fundamental concepts of ink wash landscape painting. In his definition, a brush "must follow rules but transform based on its usage, not choosing either just the background or the form, airborne and in motion at the same time." Jing Hao thus concludes that a state of "qi (氣)" can only be achieved after fully understanding the characteristics of a brush and "the mind can follow movements of the brush without hesitating to take a tangible image."

1. Jing Hao (荆浩, 855-915) was a Chinese landscape painter and theorist of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period in Northern China. Jing Hao's theories on art provided the foundation for much of what was to come during the later Song Dynasty. His style is known as the Northern Landscape style and strongly influenced the tradition of Northern Song painters.

Shitao (石濤)², a Zen Buddhist monk and artist who lived between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, explains the idea of a single brushstroke as the origin of all creation:

Any single stroke comes from the mind. The beauty of mountains, water, and figures, the temperament of birds, animals, grasses, and trees, and the composition of gazebos and towers by the lake - if one does not have deep understanding of the principles behind these objects and fails to recognize details of their appearance, it means that one has not yet achieved the ways of a single stroke. Far roads and high climbs all embark from the movement of a single stroke, and so a single stroke embraces even what lies beyond the enormous universe.

In the freeform brushstrokes of Lee Kang-So's paintings, we witness Jing Hao's definitions of a brush and Shitao's aesthetics of a single stroke. In a state of union between brush and hand, emotion and spirit, he enacts the vitality of "being drawn" by coincidence rather than "drawing" by intention. Indeed, there is no marker of human intention or activity. Passive brushwork that strives to become one with nature rather provides boundless freedom and imagination. It is a creative process as play, that reveals unforeseen forms in an unconscious state. The play of strokes becomes even more conspicuous in contrast to the unadorned canvas background. Even the empty background itself, untouched by strokes, issues a voice of its own.

The empty background where strokes cross functions much like the emptiness in East Asian painting. Margins where nothing is drawn upon drawing paper may appear incomplete, but is in fact a compositional element that by itself holds a perfect form. It already holds all of creation and the potential for birth of existence from nothingness. It is the reason behind the old saying "painting only starts after preparing a white background (繪事後素)." Therefore, the white of margins is not simply a visual 'white' but the disappearance of color that condenses the revival and life of all beings, while the contrasting black of ink is not just a visual 'black' but the appearance of color that condenses material attributes of all beings.

In his experimental art during early years, Lee Kang-So had already introduced the idea of margins. That is his reed installation work *Void* (1971). It provides an experience of wandering between a field of white reeds, each visitor experiencing margins in different senses. When the inevitable variations in the installation are

2. Shitao (石濤, 1642-1707) imperial clan as Zhu Ruoji (朱若極), was one Chinese landscape painter in early Qing Dynasty. Among the most commonly used names were Shitao (Stone Wave - 石濤), Daoji (Tao-chi - 道濟), Kugua Heshang (Bitter Gourd Monk - 苦瓜和尚), Yuan Ji (Origin of Salvation - 原濟), Xia Zunzhe (Honorable Blind One - 瞎尊者, blind to worldly desires), Dadizi (The Cleansed One - 大滌子). Shitao wrote several theoretical works, including *Hua Yu Lu* (畫語錄).

perceived for their own sake, the paths between reeds become space for movement. It is because the paths are simultaneously physical spaces and variable installations.

Variations of strokes and margins as seen in Lee Kang-So's paintings have "happening" at the core. The artist has professed that he finds this happening, or efforts to escape a subjective intention or projection of emotions, difficult. He characterizes the ego not as a certain, immutable subject but an uncertain, fluctuating object. Happening is where one yields the self, limited by preconceptions and empties everything until one is not preoccupied by which objects crosses the eyes. Viewers of Lee's works can imagine an act of self-effacement in the form of a brush traversing time and space. Much like how Zhang Yanyuan (張彥遠)³, critic of calligraphic paintings during the Tang Dynasty, gave the utmost compliment to the spirit and command of brushwork in Wu Daozi (吳道子)⁴'s paintings that "it is able to encompass all existing things because god takes his hand as vessel for harmony."

A state of self-effacement and unity with nature cannot be reached without rigorous training. First of all, one must achieve adept skills to control the brush. One should also discard the habit of premeditating things. Only through this process can one forget the existence of hands, feet, and the body entirely, resist the workings of ears and eyes, transcending form and leaving knowledge until one reaches a stage of "sitting back and contemplating (坐忘)," on which one meets the tremendous way "Tao (道)." Lee Kang-So confesses that he was never formally trained in calligraphy or East Asian ink painting. Yet, we witness a state of "sitting back and contemplating" in his paintings.

Works displayed in this solo exhibition are entitled *Serenity*. Serenity refers to clarity and purity, as well as the fifth season among twenty-four seasons in the third lunar month when the sky starts to clear. The winds that blow at the start of summer are also called "Serenity Winds (立夏)," perhaps referring to the clear, refreshing feeling of winds just at the transition from spring to summer. As such, 'Serenity' is most commonly known as a term for seasons. But it has also been used in classical texts to depict the personality and virtue of sages - for example, the sentence "When the personal character is serene, the spirit and mind are like those of a spiritual being" in *The Book of Rites (禮記)*⁵ by Confucius, chapter "Confucius at Home at Leisure (孔子閒居)." It can be understood as when a sage embodies fair and luminous virtuosity, the changes in spirit and will are mysterious and numinous.

3. Zhang Yanyuan (張彥遠, 815-879) was a Chinese art historian, scholar, calligrapher and painter of the late Tang Dynasty. He wrote several works about art and calligraphy, among them *Fashu Yaolu* (法書要錄, Compendium of Calligraphy), a collection of poems on color paper, and *Lidai Minghua Ji* (歷代名畫記, Famous Paintings through History) - a general arts book, about the famous historical paintings.

4. Wu Daozi (吳道子 or 吳道玄, 680-758), also known as Daoxuan, was a Chinese painter of the Tang Dynasty under Emperor Xuanzong. He traveled widely and created more than 300 murals in Buddhist and Daoist temples. Wu also drew mountains, rivers, flowers, birds and was known as the best artist of the Tang Dynasty. No authentic originals are extant, though well known as his lively and sculpture-like expressions.

5. The *Book of Rites*, also known as the *Liji*, is a collection of texts describing the social forms, administration, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou Dynasty as they were understood in the Warring States and the early Han periods. Some sections consist of definitions of ritual terms, particularly those found in the *Etiquette and Ceremonial*, while others contain details of the life and teachings of Confucius.

Lee Kang-So's *Serenity* series features brushstrokes that are even more clarified, intense, and condensed. It is thanks to the efforts to visualize implications of clarity and purity in serenity. Moreover, these recent works also demonstrate a bold use of primary colors. The colored *Serenity* works either consist of an intense orange and different shades of blue brushstrokes, or entirely different colors on a single plane. The *Serenity* series emerges as something entirely unprecedented. The harmony of primary colors, reminiscent of the refreshing early summer winds, is both flamboyant and subtle, dynamic and calm.

Serenity can be divided into works that vaguely suggest an image and ones that entirely abolish particular forms. The former group reveals hazy silhouettes of boats, ducks, trees, or houses, while the latter only features strokes. Primary colors particularly appear with more frequency in the former. But perhaps forms are not so important to Lee Kang-So's paintings since they are flat surfaces built from strokes and not lines, happenings and not representations, sentiments and not concepts.

A Realization of Common Logic (常理), Coexistence of Poetry and Calligraphic Painting

Indeed, there exists a genre of East Asian art that highlights strokes and margins: literati painting. Although literati painting commonly refers to ones by noblemen of letters, in reality, it covers various practices and ideas. For one, literati painters consider literature, calligraphy, and painting as sharing the same creative sensibility. The phrase "Poetry, calligraphy, and painting are of one principle (ShiShuHuaYilu, 詩書畫一律)" comes from this idea. Also, literati painting refuses a perfect depiction of objects, since its goal is not a representation but an expression of imageries in the mind. Instead, it emphasizes the artist's character over the completeness of their work.

Humans perceive and judge the world from their own experiences. The unique literati sensibility also originates from their particular everyday routine imbued with leisure and style in every corner. In an interview a few years ago, Lee Kang-So associated happenings and events of contemporary art with appreciation of *Pungryu* (風流)-the arts in the Korean tradition. To him, appreciation of art is "a noble and elegant play away from secular life," "an experience of the essence and truth of all creation

in the universe,” and “artistic spirit based on improvisation.” In other words, the life of a free person of noble character is in itself *Pungryu*, an appreciation of art, and an attitude of departing mundaneness to pursue new things with individuality is, in itself, style.

Lee Kang-So’s appreciation of art echoes a conversation between Confucius and Zeng Dian (曾點), one of his disciples. One day, Confucius asked his students what they would like to do if they became recognized names. While some desired richness and fame, Zeng Dian, who was playing his lyre, answered: “To get a new outfit in late spring, wash my face in the streams of Yishui county, get a nice breeze in Wuyu and come back singing.” This episode encapsulates the idea of *Pungryu*, true appreciation of art as a lifestyle far from the secular world and connects to nature in its fullness. Lee Kang-So, too, found home in Anseong, Gyeonggi-do, twenty-five years ago. He not only prepared a spacious studio space but selected each tree and pebble himself to place in the garden, where he can enjoy nature inside the city (“forest within the fortified city,” as phrased by a Ming Dynasty literati), an unmatched style and leisure. He is, in fact, reenacting the life of old literati who wanted to commune with nature and learn its ways.

Now I attempt to trace the thoughts of literati who established the theory of literati painting. Engrossed by Neo-Confucianism, these scholars controlled their emotions and looked inwards in meditation when faced with any matter of life. They also strived to grasp the logic (理) at the essence of all incidents and objects, through which they would become one with them. This thought process also aligns with the concepts of “common form (常形)” and “common logic (常理)” as outlined by Su Shi (蘇軾)⁶. “Common form” is an object that has a fixed, immutable form. However, objects that continuously change by ways of nature still hold their own logic and unchanging property within. This is what Su Shi called “common logic.” When common logic fails, he said, the entire picture fails—adding that its true understanding entails careful observation and meditation on the growth of all things in the universe. Only through this process can art truly “become one with the harmony of heaven (合於天造)” and “satisfy the will of people (厭於人意).”

Seen this way, Lee Kang-So’s *Serenity* series is the creation of “common logic” according to Su Shi. During an interview, artist emphasized that the age of visible, material things has already passed. He also expressed a strong belief in the existence

of something “real” beyond. This belief provides impetus to visualize “common logic,” an immutable truth, through the unconscious wielding of a brush and the fewest strokes needed. Its result are paintings completely empty yet brimming, and simple yet profound.

This creative attitude also appears in his early work, exemplified by the *Disappearance (Bar in the Gallery)* project at his first solo exhibition at Myongdong Gallery in 1973. It originates from his epiphany after meeting his friend from school at a pub for lunch, realizing that not only landscapes but all matters in life ceaselessly change according to the surrounding situation. Transferred into an exhibition space, the bar was produced as a familiar place, yet a scene of free amusement and *Pungryu* where unforeseen emotions and conversations flow back and forth. “Disappearance” in a subtitle of the exhibition leads to appearance and back in an infinite cycle where “common logic” derives from a space of “common form.”

Strokes demonstrated through vivacious action in the *Serenity* series at moments appear like pictures, sometimes like letters, or even a poem that delivers the artist’s emotions and thoughts in just a few words. Thus, Lee Kang-So’s paintings are art of oneness between poem, calligraphy, and painting, condensing the common qualities of the picture, letter and poetry: connotation, lingering, and spirit. In a sense, the tradition of cross-disciplinarity was already materialized in his early ‘chicken performance’ *Untitled-75031*. It is said that Cangjie⁷, creator of the universe in ancient Chinese mythology, observed constellations with his four eyes and created characters based on the silhouette of birds and turtles. At the time, letter and image were undistinguished and one, much like the random footprints of Lee Kang-So’s chicken that left traces of white powder on the gallery floor. Appearing as both image and letter, the chicken footprints are no different from the Bird-worm seal script (鳥篆), a script invented from the shape of bird’s footprints.

In the end, Lee Kang-So’s *Serenity* are paintings of strokes, a condensation of the thoughts and actions he had experienced during early his years of experimental art. It is a visual testimony that proves the continuity throughout his past to current works. Nevertheless, the recent *Serenity* work is much more improvised, simplified, and vigorous—a reinterpretation of literati painting in unhesitant brushstrokes that embrace ideas of improvisation and cross-disciplinarity, like an old scholar reveling in clear, refreshing winds, or like a sage just reaching the moment of enlightenment.

6. Su Shi (蘇軾 1037- 1101), was a Chinese poet, writer, politician, calligrapher, painter, pharmacologist, and gastronome of the Song Dynasty. He is also known as Su Dongpo (蘇東坡). Su Shi is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished figures in classical Chinese literature, having produced some of the most well-known poems, lyrics, prose, and essays so that he was one of the members of *The Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* (唐宋八大家).

7. Cangjie (倉頡) is a legendary figure in ancient China, claimed to be an official historian of the Yellow Emperor and the inventor of Chinese characters. Legend has it that he had four eyes, and that when he invented the characters, the deities and ghosts cried and the sky rained millet.