

## Making room for inspiration

Sung Min Kim in conversation with Dagmar Frick-Islitzer, Kubus Kulturvermittlung in Balzers, Liechtenstein

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***You come from Korea and studied painting there as well as philosophy, art history and aesthetics in India. You bring an Asian understanding of art with you. What artistic values flow into your works?***

Painting is a method for me to contemplate on myself and my surroundings. It is comparable to the act of writing. When I write, I sometimes find out myself what I really want. I may then understand a bit of the world, but above all I get to know myself better. Through the painting process I get valuable thoughts about life. I'll give you an example. Once I started a painting with a form from my inner vision. After some months of working, it showed a form that rises and flies in the air. But the picture didn't look finished yet. I looked at it and asked myself: What else do I need to do in this picture? I remained calm. What was that I saw with my inner eye? I could see something invisible, that had not yet come to the surface: a counterweight as a balance, something that sinks down. The painting process shows the dynamics of life, which I appreciate very much. For me, painting is a real companion in my life.

***I read on your website that you strengthen your inner self through theoretical knowledge. You see art and artists in the context of the individual, society and nature. You just described that art is a medium for you to co-relate yourself to the world. How do you manage to influence society through your painting?***

Art makes a social contribution because it is food for the soul. We are feeling the environmental crisis with its unsolved problems in nature particularly strongly at the moment. People realise in their everyday lives that things cannot go on like this. These problems are often discussed in technical terms. But they are not only technical. We humans are part of nature. These problems should be looked into from the perspective of human-nature relationship. When the soul is empty, one feels disconnected from nature. When the connection is missing, there can be no positive development ultimately. Art acts like a spiritual prayer that nourishes the human soul that makes it possible to connect the individuals with each other. This connection is easily experienced in the artistic creative process, because so many different forms come together on one space and an honest picture can emerge out of these.

***In your studio I see many brushes and pigments. Please describe your artistic approach. How do you start?***

It varies. Mostly I feel an inspiration inside me, an urgency of a form to be born. Then I need courage. I don't see this image of inspiration exactly; a concrete form is missing, but it urges me. It is comparable to a seed of a flower or a tree. In the beginning, you don't know how the seed will develop. So similarly, this urgency becomes a desire to give birth to the form. But I have no idea what form it will be. That's just how I start! (laughs)

About which colours I use, which line I draw, or which composition I build up, I don't decide myself. That happens in dialogue with the material. I started this painting here in the background, out of despair and personal insecurity. I went to the Palm House in Vienna, for giving myself rest. There I saw huge palm trees. Something happened there that touched me in the heart: palm leaves were not just palm leaves, but they stood for something that reflected something in my emotional situation and that I should bring out of myself. They were like a finger pointing at something. It is not about the finger, but about the direction in which it points to. But how should I start this task? The palm tree was the starting point, but basically I didn't want to draw a palm tree. That was not the goal I wanted to pursue.

As soon as I start, the materials begin to develop a life of their own. They guide me. I have to listen carefully and react actively. If a material tells me something or shows me something, then I have to take that up and respond to it. It is a dialogue that moves the artistic process forward. It can go on forever, but it has to have a purpose and be directed towards something, that is the first inspiration. The creative process is a mental way of capturing that inspiration or even finding it anew. For me, it is about giving inspiration a concrete form so that we can experience it sensually. However, how I begin an artistic process has changed in recent years. I used to deny my own thoughts and my own will. I didn't want to have any thoughts, any concepts, any desires in my painting, which was quite impossible. I just wanted the materials and the elements on the surface of painting to speak themselves. I wanted something to emerge from the painting without my imposition, without my conception. When I had a beautiful form in my head, I didn't paint it. I simply ignored it. But in such an artistic process, dialogue was very difficult. I didn't say what I wanted. I just wanted to hear what the painting was telling me. It sometimes tried to communicate itself to me, but I didn't react to it. This process became more and more difficult and I was so exhausted. I would sit in front of the painting, look at it for hours and ask myself: what is the painting trying to say? After this phase, I changed my attitude and I decided that I would add my own voice. Why? Because I am also a part of the painting. Suddenly the painting process became so playful, fun and much easier. It was like making music together. Today I experience painting less as a meditation than as an interaction.

### ***What role does your body play in your painting?***

In traditional Korean painting, the long-haired brush is to be understood as an extended part of the body. I also feel that the brush is part of my body. The power comes from the heart. The shoulder has to be loose so that the power can flow through. This is then transferred to the brush through the fingers. When I speak like this, I use my hands gesturally. When I think something, a hand movement often follows. Then how I breathe is decisive. With the breath, emotions are connected to the whole body. My inner state becomes visible through the brush. When I was studying in Korea, I once drew a bamboo, traditionally with a brush and ink. It was a homework assignment. At the time I was in a personal crisis. When I showed my drawing to the professor, he immediately recognised my mental state. He could read how the brush was moved. The brush movement is related to the breath. With traditional Korean materials such as paper, ink and long-haired brushes, the person himself becomes visible in the painting.

### ***How important is observation and reflection to you?***

Identification is more important to me than observation. For me, painting is a way to unite with my surroundings, with my inspiration. What is important is how I sink into the painting. For me, it's not about observing from a distance, but about getting inside. When I paint, I like to place the painting

surfaces on the floor, because then I can adopt an optimal posture and overcome the distance between body and painting more easily. This enables me to immerse myself more easily.

Looking at a painting objectively during the painting process is not always good. Afterwards, when the painting is finished, the phase of reflection begins for me. Then I see myself in my painting. In our painting tradition, the fusion between the object of painting and the painter is the first goal. It is about redeeming myself and becoming one with nature. Art supports this process. Not just "me, me, me" in a single, isolated capsule. The layers of ego become lighter and more permeable so that the real me can rise and become free. This is the path of freedom.

### ***What role do concentration and a mindful attitude play in painting?***

Intense concentration comes from the process itself. In the beginning it is very difficult. It means physically working. I have to develop many lines and forms in a dialogical process. When a certain will emerges from the autonomous life of painting, the process will guide itself, like a child growing up with his or her own will. In this process I can concentrate well, but without intention. It is about immersion. In 'doing' the concentration comes by itself. That's why I need patience and diligence in the work. At some point it is a play that flows itself. I am inside, well concentrated in the flow of myself.

### ***Do you paint every day?***

I paint every day, but I don't draw much. Painting for me is about colours, lines and different depths of the materials that together brings life on the surface of painting. The forms emerge naturally from this. In drawing, I follow the external form more. That's why I don't draw so often. My painting consists of forms, but I speak to myself that I have to be free from phenomenal shapes. That corresponds to the Zen teaching. I must not cling to a form, but want to 'dance' with it. The right form then emerges from this. I don't know whether I look at the painting process in a standard way of artists. But I love to just sit quietly and contemplate on it, without any thoughts.

### ***How do you recognise in your painting that you are on the right path?***

I rarely think that I am on the right path (laughs). It's more a process in which I often despair. With every painting I get into the crisis. Sometimes I think that I am not suitable as an artist. I feel overstrained. With every painting, it's always a trial. I think I am not on the right track. I search for the right way. That's why my painting process takes so long. When I set out on the path, it comes by itself. It is only a short moment when I think: Am I on the right path? But it is often preceded by a long uncertain path that has confused me or led me astray. But I simply have to go down it. A wrong path is also a path. The wrong way can also lead me to the right way.

### ***You spoke of painting crises? How do you get into such a crisis? How do you behave in it and how do you get out of it?***

Often I think the crisis is a turning point that can transform the situation well. You do something in the crisis. For example, I put this series of pictures here in the background in a different order, or I am ready to wash out compositions that have been developed from many layers. I do what comes to me. For example, I draw a strong line through the picture. There are different possibilities of what I

can do in a crisis. But these attempts are a little different from what I have done before. If a certain method has not worked well for me, I don't need to continue with it. I change the perspective or order, use different materials. It's about always be ready to try something different to find a right way for the painting to show a life of its own.

***How do you get in the mood for painting? Do you use certain rituals?***

I don't need any rituals to get in the mood. I start directly. I don't need any preparation. Painting itself is a good preparation for everyday life, for the family, the children, the household. Painting is like a ritual for me.

***Do you need imagination for your art? If so, where do you get it?***

I don't need imagination, at least not intentionally. Most of the time I start with inspiration, which does not include forms. I have to look for this while painting. And where does this inspiration come from? I think we have already seen this inspiration. That's why we have it. What I have already seen, I may not be able to grasp, but I have perceived it. On the canvas, I try out different forms until inspiration manifests itself in some form. I need to be able to think freely, but I don't necessarily need imagination for new or unusual forms. An initial inspiration is based on something I don't have an image of. You have to be willing to try something new. Imagination is part of that. But for me that is not a purpose, not a goal. It's always about that first inspiration for me.

***What does taking responsibility mean to you as an artist?***

Taking responsibility is something fundamental. That's why I decided to become a painter. My inspirations want to come out. If I don't show them, I am not being responsible to myself. If I have something inside me that I want to share with other people, I have to make that happen. It is comparable to a pregnant woman. It is not a question of deciding whether she wants to give birth to the child or not. Artists and performers are like pregnant women. They have also a strong will to bring out new life. If you have creative fire in you, you have to control it: Put fuel in it and ventilate it well, being careful not to burn yourself. Art is work about existence. That is very important for humanity, for the development and conscience of people.

***What do you think other people can learn from artists for their own lives?***

I think that other people don't necessarily have to learn anything from artists. They should find their own creativity more, and artists can support them in the way. Nobody can teach your own creativity. You have to experience it yourself. Through the works of other artists, personal creative potentials can be awakened.

***How do you know when a painting is finished?***

For me, the painting is a being. When it speaks or a sound comes, when I really feel the life from the painting, then the painting is finished. It's a very intimate process. I can't explain what conditions have to be in place for me to hear the sound of the painting. The process begins with the physical work. Various materials are chosen and used. Along the way, patience and doubt necessarily follow.

Then comes a phase where the process flows by itself. That is quite a moment. In the flowing, the painting makes itself. It sounds illogical, but that's how it is. The process itself takes over. When the river flows into the sea, the river is no longer a river. Then the process is over. Then I put the picture aside and don't look at it for several months. Then I take it out again and look at it. When I can communicate with the picture, the picture is really finished. The viewer also feels that.