Phenomenal Marks, Ruptured Spaces, Relearning Language, Crossing Cultures

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PHENOMENAL MARKS
RUPTURED SPACES
RELEARNING LANGUAGE
CROSSING CULTURES

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MEELEE AHN
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**ABSTRACT**

The form of my thesis is one of interruptions, or “Ruptures,” as I call them. These are events of my personal history, or stories from the lives of artists, that intervene against my narrative through graphic and language devices meant to be understood as equivalent to the material affects in my painting. Important artists and movements mentioned are Gerhard Richter, Franz Kline, Helen Frankenhauler, Lee Ufan, Doho Suh, and Abstract Expressionism. Writers and philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Joan Banach, Sigmund Freud, John Gage, Brian Massumi, Allen Weiss, Clement Greenburg, Shin-Chulgyu, and Yoon-Dongju are also discussed. The idea discussed include phenomenology, marks, ruptured spaces, learning process of language, and crossing cultures.
RUPTURE #1:

I started painting in kindergarten with artist-grade watercolor, thanks to my cousin who studied art and gave me his unwanted art supplies. Everyone else in my class had the Korean version of Crayola or other brands that were suitable for my age at that time. With different tools I felt confused, because I was given more colors and more options. I immediately asked for a set of regular watercolors- but my mom didn't agree with me. She didn't understand why I was complaining when I had such good supplies. For me, the tubes were too hard to squeeze for my hands and I didn't know how to read most of the colors. This uncomfortable experience was reenacted five years later, when my family emigrated to the United States. The first day of school, in the Fall of 2001, felt like I had brought the wrong school supplies to class. I was blind, deaf and mute to the language and culture. Adapting to a new culture is a unique experience; where you lose everything you had as a 10-year-old - the friends you made with your newly developed social skills, and the language you just started to master, the value you learned from your parents- what to do and what not to do... with this isolation, I recognized the difference.
PLACELESSNESS

I question my cultural identity the most when I visit Korea. At the airport, I wait in line for immigration. They question if it’s a business trip or a vacation and there is no option for visiting home, but only visiting family.

... we feel warm because it is cold out-of-doors. Further on in this deep-winter “artificial Paradise” Baudelaire declares that dreamers like a severe winter. “Every year they ask the sky to send down as much snow, hail and frost as it can contain. What they really want are Canadian or Russian winters. Their own nests will be all the warmer, all the downier, all the better beloved... Like Edgar Allan Poe, a great dreamer of curtains, Baudelaire, in order to protect the winter-girt house from cold added “heavy draperies that hung down to the floor.” Behind dark curtains, snow seems to be whiter. Indeed, everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate. 1

AIRPORTS

Modern transportation allows people to move easily from place to place. This evolution led people to travel more often and experience the different characteristics of places. These experiences of travelling allow to people to recognize the differences between places and identify them. Airports are influential places for me. These places signify waiting, time, and cultural difference merging and disbanding.
RUPTURE #2

All the marks begin with the intention of expression. My intent is to make marks that are transient and ambiguous without apparent purpose. My method is guided by the successive layers of pours, with a few brushstrokes brushworks enhancing and emphasizing aspects of the composition. This method is how I portray my perceptions.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses phenomenology with the structure of perception. To Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a direct description of human experience. The experiences are individually unique, and are part of the person who experiences them. Phenomenology of perception cannot be defined or retained by language or any other expression. He states,

> The thing can never be separated from someone who perceives it; nor can it ever actually be in itself because its articulations are the very ones of our existence, and because it is posited at the end of a gaze or at the conclusion of a sensory exploration that invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or the achievement by us of an alien intention or inversely the accomplishment beyond our perceptual powers and as a coupling of our body with the things.2

Merleau-Ponty’s writing entails the stance of Rene Descartes’ cogito ergo sum, perceiving the world through our bodies, the ability to reflect on one’s actions. The language of narrative works by persuading others of a similar situation to understand
its significance and movement through acts of remembering. Language presupposes that words achieve meaning through such memory reenactments. Merleau-Ponty states, “Language does not presuppose thought, it accomplishes thought.”\(^3\) Unlike perception, written or verbally stated narratives do not create a thought, but work as a tool to transmit an idea. I try to free my work from narrative language, and allow viewers to individually enter the work through their own layers of experience. Although viewers experience without the limitations, per phenomenology of perception, it is impossible for viewers to contextualize experiences. This is a double-edged sword: the language allows but limits viewers to process art.

In 1949, Artist Robert Motherwell wrote in his essay, “Reflections On Painting Now,” that the painting that a painter makes becomes itself the painter of its own significance:

So a painter, in working a canvas, sensing it all over, watching it shift and change and slowly emerge from its flat void, mere extension, may have the illusion that the picture is not being painted by him, but it is rather painting him, that he who is supposed to be the subject has become the object, that the picture knows him better than he knows it... Painting itself told him what to do, so to speak, and in so doing, gave him his identity.\(^4\)

Painting enables artists to experience themselves through their experience of painting.
Now that I have in perception the thing itself, and not a representation, I will only add that the thing is at the end of my gaze and, in general, at the end of my exploration. Without assuming anything from what the science of the body of the other can teach me, I must acknowledge that the table before me sustains a singular relation with my eyes and my body: I see it only if it is within their radius of action above it there is the dark mass of my forehead, beneath it the more indecisive contour of my cheeks – both of these visible at the limit and capable of hiding the table, as if my vision of the world itself were formed from a certain point of the world. What is more, my movements and the movements of my eyes make the world vibrate – as one rocks a dolmen with each flutter of my eyelashes a curtain lowers and rises, though I do not think of an instant imputing this eclipse to the things themselves; with each movement of my eyes that sweep the space before me the things suffer a brief torsion, which I also ascribe to myself; and houses, the whole of the setting near at hand quivers with each football on the asphalt, then settles down in its place...

My marks are who I am: they are the residue from my thinking process. It is the representation of my thoughts and identifies myself against the material other. From the paint tubes onto the paper palette, then to a primed and stretched canvas, the pigments move through the different surfaces leaving different residues behind; my marks are affected by the surface I work on. Just like one's experiences affected by the surfaces they move through.
The Korean word, 대기 (DAE KI) entails several definitions like, “the atmosphere,” “a large vessel,” “watching and waiting for a chance; standing by.” When I add a title in a Korean word, the ambiguity affects both non-Korean and Korean speakers, with ambiguous use of language. The work is painted in layers using different mediums to capture the apparently uncontrolled imagery arising from material residues.
My use of full spectrum of colors creates overwhelming visual information. Viewers will focus on the visual, responding according to their own experience. The residue of different textures and marks also allows viewers to create their own interpretation of what the imagery represents. Like the word, 대기, the imagery does not have narrative information limiting the interpretation.

대기 (大氣) (지구를 둘러싸고 있는 공기) the atmosphere; (공기) the air. 대기의 atmospheric(al). 요즘 대기가 불안정하다 Atmospheric conditions have been unsettled for several days.

대기 (大器) (큰 그릇) a large vessel; (인재) a man of capacity[talent]; a great man[talent]; a genius; a man of great caliber.

대기 (待機) watching and waiting for a chance; standing by.

These marks are created by my pouring actions, shifting of the surfaces, with brushwork imitating, guiding and interrupting the fluidity of the pigment. The pours are often controlled by brushstrokes, and my marks often mimic the residues of the pour. These marks contain different chemical reactions with the drying medium such as polyurethane. The mixture cracks and fades out into the negative space, losing its material identity. There are both intentional and unintentional marks resulting from my gestures; the form of thoughts.
This work consists of four different canvases. Each canvas stands on its own as a complete entity, but works with the other canvases to comprise a whole piece. It’s read left to right in Western Cultures, also right to left for East Asian readers.
To me this is the reversible direction of scanning that helps define my identity. It’s a physical journey along the different surfaces, that also reflects my thought process, where I navigate through filters of languages and cultures. Being born in South Korea, learning and speaking Korean for ten years before moving to the United States, then studying and adapting to a new language and culture, required me to travel between these different cultures in a manner comparable to the movement of materials traveling across my canvases.

I approach my work by experimenting how different mediums react to each other leaving different marks on the surface. The marks of the elements are constantly drawn, overdrawn and faded. this is parallel to how some memories are retained and others fade into forgetfulness. This reflects the constant movement and sense of evolution.

I’m influenced by the idea of absence and negative space, because I believe that the act of isolation allows oneself a chance to look back, and discover or enrich one’s identity. In Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty states:

Just as the absence of sound for the hearing subject does not break the communication with the sonorous world, so too the absence of the visual or auditory world for the subject who is blind or deaf from birth does not break the communication with the world in general; there is always something opposite this subject, something of being to be deciphered, an omnitude realitatis, and this possibility is forever established by the first sensory experience, as narrow or imperfect as it might be.8
Although the representation of the experience may not be in sync with the actuality of the experience, it is significant to express the origin of it. Merleau-Ponty continues:

We do not have a series of profiles of the world whose unity would be established in us by consciousness. The world certainly appears perspectivally, and primarily spatially. [...] And on a deeper level, spatial profiles are also temporal: an “elsewhere” is always something that we have seen or that we could see, and even if I perceive it as simultaneous with the present, this is because it is part of the same wave of duration. 9

He introduces the idea of temporality within experience, letting each different interpretation gain its own validity.
이사는 생각한다
신철규

이さんは 생각하는 사람처럼 앉아 있다

수평선을 바라보며
수평선이 그려진 그림을 바라보며

금방이라도 무릎을 박고 일어설 것처럼
구름이 피어나고 있다

구름이 왼쪽 귀로 들어와 오른쪽 귀로 빠져 나간다

다정한 연인처럼
창에 비친 서로를 바라보며 낮아 가고 있다

살의 절반 동안 기억해야 할 일들을 만들고
나머지 절반 동안 그 기억을 허무는 데 바쳐진다

아무도 모르고 지난번 생일을 뒤늦게 깨닫고는
다음해의 달력을 뒤쳐본다

누군가 자신의 어깨를 툭 치고
이제 말을 시간입니다, 라고 말해주기만 기다리고 있다

의자 위에 물음표 하나가 앉아 있다

구름의 초대장은 아직 도착하지 않았다 10
The Chair
Shin-Chulgyu

The Chair sits in thought

Stares at the horizon,
Staring at the picture that the horizon portrayed

As if it’s going to stand up in its legs,
  the cloud blooms

the cloud comes in left ear and leaves from the right ear

Like an intimate couple,
they grow old as they stare at their reflection on the window

Spent half of the life making memories
spending the other half nihilating the memories

realizing the past birthday no one remembered,
  flips the calendar to a year after

hoping for a tap on the shoulder
  saying, “it’s time to close”

there is a question mark on the Chair

the invitation from the cloud hasn’t arrived yet

Translated by Meelee Ahn
The phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a surface, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other. It should not be forgotten that in this zone of sensitized surface, before being, one must speak, if not to others, at least to oneself. And advance always. In this orientation, the universe of speech governs all the phenomena of being, that is, the new phenomena. By all means of poetic language, waves of newness flow over the surface of being. And language bear within itself the dialects of open and closed. Through meaning it encloses, while through poetic expression, it opens up.
Gerhard Richter’s work conveys the expression of crossing cultural boundaries. His works are rooted in Romanticism, which comes from his German background, but the content extends to international perspective. It contains both political and historical aspects which are subjective, and its objective aspects are purely visual.

When I paint an abstract picture (the problem is very much the same in other cases), I neither know in advance what it is meant to look like nor, during the painting process, what I am aiming at and what to do about getting there. Painting is consequently an almost blind, desperate effort, like that of a person abandoned, helpless, in totally incomprehensible surroundings – like that of a person who possesses a given set of tools, materials and abilities and has the urgent desire to build something useful which is not allowed to be a house or a chair or anything else that has a name; who therefore hacks away in the vague hope that by working in a proper, professional way he will ultimately turn out something proper and meaningful. 12
“You have to know how to use the accident, how to recognize it, how to control it, and ways to eliminate it so that the whole surface looks felt and born all at once.”

FIGURE 3
Helen Frankenthaler emerges as a second-generation Abstract Expressionist. With the influence of previous generation artists like Hans Hoffman and Jackson Pollock, Frankenthaler developed her own distinct approach to the Abstract Expressionist style. Her process included “soak-stain” technique, where she poured turpentine-thinned paint onto unprimed canvas creating bright color washes that denied three-dimensional illusionism. She states:

... I don’t start with a color order but find the color as I go. I’d rather risk an ugly surprise than rely on things I know I can do. The whole business of spotting; the small area of color in a big canvas; how edges meet; how accidents are controlled; all this fascinates me, though it is often where I am most facile and most seducible by my own talent.14

Frankenthaler finds herself as an attractor when she finds and controls different accidents within her work. The Bay (1963) is an embodiment of the flatness of the picture plane, which Clement Greenberg characterizes as the most important aspect of modernist painting:

“...For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art. The enclosing shape of the picture was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theater; color was a norm and a means shared not only with the theater, but also with sculpture. Because flatness was only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else.15

The use of color and its flatness allowed viewers to approach the work experiencing the solely through the optical sense.
I want to create an experience, apart from the narrative, the language, and the identity to resist narrative that limit freedom.

The narrative, its language works by persuading similar situation to others to understand the significances and movements through remembering. Language presupposes a primordially in which words receive a use and a meaning through the reenactments. Merleau-Ponty states, “Language does not presuppose thought, it accomplishes thought.” Written or verbally stated narratives do not create a thought, but only work as tools to transit an idea. Beyond the narrative, the language allows the viewer to enter the work through his/her own perception, encountered through layers of experience. the experiences through after the fact language.
Although the viewers experience without the limitations, per phenomenology of perception, it is only impossible for viewers to contextualize the experiences through after the fact language.
nomad noun

a member of a people having no permanent abode, and who travel from place to place to find fresh pasture for their livestock.

- a person who does not stay long in the same place; a wanderer. 17
한국에서 커서 일본에서 서러고 하니 일본 쪽은 나더러 한국적이라며 침입자 취급을 하려고 시간이 흘르니 한국에서는 일본 바람을 탄 도망자로 몰려는 느낌도 있었다. 그래서 더 멀리 설 곳을 찾아 유럽 각지를 삼십여 년 헤맸더니 그쪽에서는 또 동양적이니 이방인이니 하며 침찬으로 점잖게 계외시키려 들지 않는가. 하지만 그래도 낳선 곳을 찾아다녀야 하고 생소한 작가와 만나고 함께 전람회를 거듭하는 가운데 열린 자기를 기르는 수 밖에 따로 살 곳이 있어 보이지 않는다.

...growing up in Korea and trying to debut in Japan as an artist, Japan treated me as an intruder, and in Korea, people treated me like I betrayed ran off to Japan. So, I went further and stayed in Europe, and lived there for about 30 years, but they still treated me like a foreigner and defined my work to be exotic and oriental, because I was Asian. But still, I have to chase after foreign places to meet other artists from different places and develop as an artist... 18

Lee Ufan is a Korean artist who founded group Mono-ha, or School of Things, Japan’s first internationally acknowledged movement in contemporary art. He is best known for his Minimalist steel and stone sculptures that accentuate the juxtaposition between objects, as well as the relationship between objects and their environment. Ufan is also noted for his distinctive simplified paintings, often composed of a single brushstroke. Of his practice centering on matter and space, “The work is never complete, because there is no perfection or completeness”19
With the bold strokes of a master colorist, Franz Kline presents a dynamic structure of diagonal brushwork exploding between two registers of contesting coloration. Contrasts between light and dark - blue black and orange-yellow - dominate the upper and lower halves of Color Abstraction, 1957, a brilliant and complex fusion of strokes and pigments. Crowned by the incursion of a bright red band that doubles a diagonal blackened-red band below, this irruption is framed by triangular light yellow planks, which create an intersection of forces that define this masterwork. Diffusions of pigment in multidirectional splatters, scrapes, and surface granules attest to the speed with which the artist wielded his brushes. A passionate transcription of oppositions - between values, textures (liquecence and the marked dryness of brushwork), directional thrusts, and rhythmic oscillations caused by the velocity with which the artist moves over the canvas - Color Abstraction is a triumph of inspiration, an action painting whose monumentality seems to break out from its contained field. Warm and cold hues are framed and cropped, pressing multiple pictorial incidents into a vortex of animation and visual intensity.
**Internal-Culture** express changes with subtle but powerful effects. Just like the effects of the weather- the traces of rain, snow, and ice. Also, wind and temperature affects stage of drying elements on the differently layered and textured surfaces. These are accidental effects that appear from these apparently uncontrolled elements of nature.

I see the abstraction in my work reflecting, in a way, my subconscious making patterns, which I now see as related to automatism in American Abstract Expressionist painting. Like that energy made visible in Abstract Expressionism, I want my work to reflect the constant movement that I see in nature. Like the different nature leaving residues behind or faded out naturally, I see this as parallel to how some memories are retained while others fade away. My marks are constantly drawn, overdrawn and faded. In my work, the markings of the clouds are abstract allegories of memories, stories, and to me the residue expressed by paint, and the overlay of different kinds of brush strokes, represent different influences and ideas.
HOME

The experience was about transporting space from one place to the other – a way of dealing with cultural displacement. And I don’t really get homesick, but I’ve noticed that I have this longing for this particular space, and I want to recreate that space or bring that space wherever I go. So, the choice of the material, which was fabric, was for many reasons. I had to make something that’s light and transportable, something that you can fold and put in a suitcase and bring with you all the time.
That’s actually what happened when I first made that piece, the Korean house project. I brought that piece in suitcase – two suitcase – to L.A., where I showed that piece for the first time, at the L.A. Korean Culture Center. It was about challenging this notion of site-specificity because the piece was made inside the house. Everything was made in that space, so it was a site-specific installation. But once you take that piece down from its own site and display and transport it in a different pace, this idea of the site-specific becomes highly questionable and [debatable]. And that what I was really interested in, because in my mind, I think this notion – home – is something that you can infinitely repeat.

... some point I your life, you have to leave your home. And whenever you go back, its just not the same home anymore. I think home is something that you carry along with your life. That’s what I mean by [saying] it’s something that you can repeat over and over again. I just dealt with that issue visually in a physically [minimal] way, it’s this light fabric thing that can recreate this ambience of a space. I didn’t want to sit down and cry for home. I wanted to more actively deal with these issues of longing. I decided not to be sad about it. I just want to go with it. I just want to carry that with me, you know, all the time. 21
CULTURAL BALANCE DISORDER

FIGURE 11
It starts with the idea of off-centered pour. It’s a puddle that signifies where I stand. Not quite in the middle, because of the gravity of cultures I am between. The gravity of cultures reminds me that I’m not fully Korean, American, or Korean American. I leave crackles in the middle to show its imbalance. Then the vague water marks seep through. These are the marks that escaped from the pour, the faint residue from the time of its making. The faint water marks are interrupted by brand new marks that are intentional and unintentional. The marks are repetition of their own, with the variable of time.
새로운 길

내를 건너서 숲으로
고개를 넘어서 마을로

어제도 가고 오늘도 갈
나의 길 새로운 길

문들레(민들레)가 피고 까치가 날고
아가씨가 지나고 바람이 일고

나의 길은 언제나 새로운 길
오늘도... 내일도 ...

내를 건너서 숲으로
고개를 넘어서 마을로

- 1938년 5월 10일, <하늘과 바람과 별과 시> 중에서 22
The New Road

Across the river to the woods
Up the hill to the village
I went yesterday and will go today
My road is a new road

Dandelion blooms, the bird flies
Lady passes by, the wind blows

My road is always a new road
Today and tomorrow

Across the river to the woods
Up the hill to the village

-May 10th, 1938 Yoon-Dongju
Translated by Meelee Ahn
LIST OF FIGURES

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50 x 60 inches

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FIGURE 7: 
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Meelee Ahn 
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Acrylic on canvas 
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FIGURE 10: 
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FIGURE 11: 
Meelee Ahn 
Beautiful-Disaster, 2016 
Acrylic on canvas 
50 x 50 inches
NOTES

6. Definition, 대기 *Dae Ki*
7. Definition, 갈래갈래 *Galeh-galeh*
10. Shin, Chulgyu, 의자는 생각한다, 2016
12. Gerhard Richter
13. Helen Frankenhauler
16. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*
17. Definition, Nomad
18. 이우환 《여백의 예술》(2002)에서, Interview, Korea 2002
19. Lee Ufan, Interview with Studioleeufan.org
20. Franz Kline, Article, Christie's
21. Doho Suh, Interview with Art21
22. Yoon Dongju, 새로운길 1938
Moorhouse, Paul, Gerhard Richter: Abstraction and Appearance, Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center Moscow 2016