

JULIE UMERLE : IMPERMANENCE CAPTURED

I will approach Julie Umerle's distinctive brand of abstraction via two linked interpretative paradigms – one art historical, the other more broadly cultural. The first will place her within a genealogy that includes such artists as Barnett Newman, Brice Marden, Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin, while the second will expand contexts and read Umerle's paintings from the perspective of ideas that derive from East Asian cultural traditions. As we shall see, the two contexts are linked.

1: Let's begin by looking at one work in particular by Umerle: *Yellow/Red* (2007). The skeins of paint running down the surface suggest processes in nature, just as its colouration perhaps puts one in mind of autumn. In this context, the horizontal division at the top of the painting can be understood as an actual horizon line. But this work is not an overtly landscape-derived abstraction, and instead one is struck by the painting's assertive flatness and frontality. While we are aware that the larger part of the surface has been produced through the enlistment of gravity as partner, this seems to be employed in order to assert the reality of the surface. Any reference to nature is thus counter-balanced by the sense that the painting is meant to be seen as a thing in itself –

which brings to mind Frank Stella's declaration that "what you see is what you get." It seems that Umerle is determined to present us with an obdurate plane rather than a depth, and that she thereby wishes to deny the reading of her painting as in some way opening onto an atmospheric depth.

This impression of objecthood places Umerle squarely in the company of certain American painters of the 1950s and 1960s who sought to focus our attention on the formal aspects of their craft. Their champions were Clement Greenberg and then Michael Fried, and they considered a painting successful to the extent that it rebuffed literary or representational associations and honed-in on intrinsic visual qualities. It is now conceded that such a narrowly formalist reading of a generation of American, and then European painters, fails to fully do justice to the complex issues raised by the works themselves.

This reading is unable to adequately engage with, or account for, the ability of even such reductive paintings as those produced by Mark Rothko to generate a richly emotive field of associations, ranging from the quasi-religious to the political. Nevertheless,

a formalist reading does force us to recognise the very tangible and concrete means through which a complicated pictorial experience or event can be produced.

But while Umerle consciously evokes such a context, she seeks to extend its range. For her paintings resist the implicit logic of development followed by many of the American and European heirs to the Abstract Expressionists, by refusing to abandon the lyrical element that still imbues her work with a certain nature-related pathos. In other words, Umerle is no minimalist. Nor is she a postmodernist. We do not feel that her works aim to pastiche or quote the elements of earlier styles. It would be also wrong to place her in the company of a British painter like Ian Davenport, for example, who exploits the legacy of American art – in particular the poured paint gesture – in order to fully ground painting in the world of mass production.

Closer to Umerle are the atmospheric paintings of the Scottish artist Callum Innes, whose process-based rigour seems to find parallels in Umerle's practice. But there is something else that is distinctively at work in Umerle's paintings which needs additional attention, and in order to identify what this might be I will now introduce my second paradigm.

2: I want to think about Umerle's painting in relation to East Asian concepts of radical impermanence and void. How this relates to visual art is made clear by the Korean curator Lee Joon in writing about the key concept of void:

'void was often used to express not only profound spaces of nature, such as clouds, atmosphere, and the ocean, but also worlds that are abridged, suggested, and invisible'⁽¹⁾

While East Asian artists customarily employed the iconography of clouds, smoke and water – all of which denoted impermanence within nature – they also deliberately engaged with aspects of experience and technique that were not governable by the subject and which stand outside circumscribed boundaries. They used methods that were explicitly designed to relinquish conscious control of the process of making, and to blur the boundaries between sign and non-sign. They sought an explosion of viewpoints. For example, in the fifteenth century under the influence of Zen there emerged in Japan a technique called Haboko – broken or flung-ink painting – a very freely and rapidly executed style in which ink appears to have been flung across the paper surface, and so is beyond conscious control. The artist was thereby exploring how any frame or construction could be opened up or exposed to what can be described as the force of an expanded and expanding field of transformation. But this was very far from being seen as a threat to

the self, or as implying its depletion, as would be the case within a western ontology. Rather, it was understood as signifying the completion of the self, now established within an expanded field.

I think Umerle's paintings can be seen within this context, in large part due to the fact that the American artists she admires draw upon such non-western ideas. For, at a time when western assumptions about art seemed, to forward thinking artists, to have run their course and were in need of regeneration, American artists were Janus faced – as the California based painter Mark Tobey noted in the late 1940s – in that they pointed both westwards towards Europe and eastwards towards the orient, and thereby sought to forge a new cultural fusion.

In addition, I would also draw attention to the way in which her works seem to evoke a feeling of suspension, as if what we see is a held or frozen moment within an on-going process. This sense of simplicity is achieved through an enormous process of condensation, resulting in a level of clarity and unity that permeates the work. Here too, American painters such as Newman, Martin, Marden and Ryman are exemplary models, but they too can be fruitfully understood by evoking the traditions mentioned above, where knowing what not to do and remaining still is as important as acting, doing or making.

3: The perceptions implicit in ideas of radical impermanence have been corroborated in the West on a scientific level through the discovery of the strangely indeterminate world of the uncertainty principle as revealed in quantum physics. But while the mixing of western and eastern cultural traditions has long been underway, the direction of influence within the mainstream has been largely from West to East. Today, however, we witness a West that is in serious crisis, a West that is in dire need of principles long familiar in the East.

In this context Umerle's paintings can be understood to address the delicate balance sought by consciousness between impermanence and permanence, order and chaos, the microcosmic experience of the here-and-now, and the macrocosmic experience of the cosmos. Such art suggests a complex, subtle, unfolding and inscrutable interrelationship between form and void, passivity and activity.

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1. Lee Joon. 'Void: Mapping the Invisible in Korean Art' in *Void in Korean Art*, exhibition catalogue (Seoul: Leeum Samsung Museum, 2008), unpaginated