

Shuling Guo: Meditation in Color

Meditation is difficult to define, as its practices vary both between traditions and within them. In spite of the countless customs to practice meditation in different cultures, the goal through all kinds of rituals is indubitably consistent – to train attention and awareness, in order to achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable state. No matter what technique individuals use to reach this state, they always pursue a spiritual sublimation to transcendental consciousness. Though as a diligent practitioner of meditation in daily life, artist Shuling Guo never restricts herself to any specific technique or method. She believes the most critical part in her practice is not the way to meditate, but the highest mental state she achieves. Therefore, minimizing superficial forms and concentrating on the most intrinsic essence has become her philosophy in both living and painting. Every year, Shuling Guo spends a lot of time living on a sailing boat and enjoys a simple way of life far from stressful environments. She clears her mind to contemplate herself and the world, at the same time completes her paintings during the voyages. Most of her recent oil painting series 5–6 pm and *Skin* were created on the boat when she was surrounded by the infinite sea and sky. Dismissing concrete images and merely extracting the transformation of light and color, she attempts to abandon external appearances and only preserve the intangible mental state she gains from her daily meditation in her paintings.

5–6 pm series is Guo’s depiction of a number of vivid evenings. In the northern hemisphere’s winter around 5 to 6 pm, the sun descends towards the horizon and the daylight gradually dims to end the day. This is the moment when the sky becomes a glamorous kaleidoscope of colors. Known as “*Ōmagatoki* (the time of meeting demons)” in Japanese Shintoism, the twilight, when night alternates with day is believed to be one of the occasions—with sudden changes of natural phenomenon—where non-human spirits appear. 5–6 pm, depicting subtle changes of colors and light, were created from Guo’s contemplation and observations of these moments: sunset emanates a dazzling glow and casts a spectrum over the sky, the sea, and a corner of a wall. There are no concrete figures in Guo’s framing, but only empty scenes with mere light and colors that spread their fluctuations onto the painting surface.

Skin series portrays the impressions of light being softly refracted when it penetrates petals and leaves. By magnifying commonly overlooked details, images of objects are de-contexted and thus become abstract. Colors in the paintings present similar lightness and clarity, yet subtly shift between warm and cool hues. The emphasized appeal of generic things implies unexpected perspectives in the observation of everyday objects.

Shuling Guo has a keen and accurate intuition for interactions and shifts between different states, which results in a touching reproduction and amplification of subtle perceptions, her paintings being full of delicately honed shades and gradients. Her application of colors is inspired by her dedicated study of artist and educator Josef Albers’s color theory: “In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is—as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art.” (1963) In other words, people’s understanding of colors is not simply true to its physical properties, but rather subjective, variable and non-repetitive in their minds as circumstances change continuously. With a faith in perceiving rather than seeing colors, Guo is able to capture and re-render ephemeral beauty and a flowing atmosphere beyond the mundane with her sensitivity and concentration, although her themes of work are just segments of everyday life. The visual imagery of her work is minimal; but through a deliberate presentation of a myriad of transitions of tones and shades, her visuals are divorced from generality and are sublimed into a higher level of emptiness and tranquility with spiritual shock.

As a high state of consciousness through meditation is not reached overnight, Shuling Guo's creation has also come through a process of trials and errors. The most palpable difference between her early period and her matured stage is the pictorial subjects in her paintings as the carrier of color transitions. In her 2012 painting *Aura-2*, the leading role in the painting - plants and light – are depicted rather figuratively with elaborate details that fill the canvas with her impulsive monologue. While in her 2020 painting *Skin-4*, she discards all clues of a figure and avoids representing the common impression of a plant, simply leaving an abstract frame with pure color tones and shades. Guo considers 2018 to 2019 as her bottleneck period in her career, but then she made a breakthrough and stepped in a new sense of being through her everyday meditation. The uniformity of her concept is not altered, yet the motivation of the change in her painting style is a consequence of her insight in how to see through the appearances, and abandon them to perceive the essence.

This perspective in her creation is also influenced by artist Mark Rothko's signature works. In Rothko's large-size paintings, symmetrical rectangular blocks in contrasting or complementary colors end with delicately blurred edges, seemingly floating on the base color and vibrating against each other. Although the color blocks in Rothko's paintings are extremely pure and abstract, they convey intense emotions that immediately overwhelm the audience. Guo believes the most important essence of art is to evoke ubiquitous but precious memories and emotions that dwell in every human-being, therefore she hopes her art can create striking moments for her audience with direct emotions conveyed by the emptiness and simplicity in her paintings.

In addition, the technique Guo applies in rendering colors is developed from her inherent appreciation of traditional Chinese ink paintings. The Yuan (1271–1368) landscape ink paintings, especially the sfumato of ink in the works of the eminent painters Huang Gongwang (黄公望), Ni Zan (倪瓒) and their peers, have influenced her on the overlay of colors to render as subtly and richly as possible. One of Huang Gongwang's most unique contributions was his technique of using very dry brush strokes together with light ink washes to build up his landscape paintings. Thus, the transitions of the dark and the light appear complex and exquisite in monochromatic, reflecting the painter's effort to hone the elaboration through time. Shuling Guo appreciates this scrutiny of enriching layers and transitions in colors for a whole sense instead of refining concrete lines in detail, in order to create an ambience from the painter's sensation when contemplating on the scenery. To quote Ni Zan's statement as a complement to this concept, "I use bamboo painting to write out the exhilaration in my breast, that is all. Why should I worry whether it shows likeness or not?" (1364)

However, the rootedness of traditional Chinese culture in Shuling Guo's art practice is far from being visually obvious. As part of a young generation born around the late 1980s, Shuling Guo grew up during a time when globalization continued to accelerate. Back then, the ever-growing openness, flexibility and freeness of the cultural and artistic environment in China gifted this generation the opportunity to immerse themselves in many unique subcultures and foreign cultures, which ultimately resonate and integrate with their innate Chinese culture. Guo appreciates the "Wabi-Sabi" aesthetics derived from Japanese Zen Buddhism which esteems austerity and humility, and considers ephemerality, impermanence and imperfectness inevitable in the beauty of all substances. Consequently, her paintings capture evanescent instants and atmospheres, refresh typical impressions of ordinary things, and leave room for limitless imagination with her seemingly abstract frames.

The aura of one's art is never divorced from the way one lives one's life. Shuling Guo regards painting as a spontaneous behavior that is nearly physiological, complying with the most genuine sound from her heart. It sprouts from her nature without any pretension, and thus appears as the most direct image of her aesthetic and faith. She deeply appreciates artist Agnes Martin's austere lifestyle in her late years dwelling in New Mexico. Agnes

Martin absorbed Asian thought after hearing lectures by the Japanese Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki at Columbia, and saw Zen as a code of ethics, a practical how-to for getting through life since then. She is also an admirer of Mark Rothko with the praise “reached zero so that nothing could stand in the way of truth” to him, and thus pared down to extremely reductive elements in her art practice to encourage a perception of perfection and to emphasize transcendent reality. Since 1968, Agnes Martin lived in her self-built adobe house in New Mexico and stayed solitary till death. When she died at age 92, she was said not to have read a newspaper for the last 50 years. Agreeing that solitude brings the ultimate inner peace, Shuling Guo enjoys being far away from the hustle and bustle like Agnes Martin, and merely focuses on training her attention of mind for calm and compassion through her meditation.

Practicing meditation can be accomplished in every single behavior in daily life. Reflecting and Meditating thoroughly on her inner spirit as a daily practice, Guo tries to naturally fertilize her life and creation with growing authenticity as time goes by.

Liang Hai



Shuling Guo, <5—6 pm>-23, 2020.
Oil on board, 35 x 25 inches.
Photo by Azumi ©Shuling Guo,
courtesy of Fou Gallery.



Shuling Guo, <Skin>-4, 2020.
Oil on board, 12 x 12 inches.
Photo by Yun Kai ©Shuling Guo,
courtesy of Fou Gallery.



Shuling Guo, <5—6 pm>-19, 2020.
Oil on board, 12 x 12 inches.
Photo by Yun Kai ©Shuling Guo,
courtesy of Fou Gallery.



Shuling Guo, <Skin>-5, 2020.
Oil on board, 12 x 12 inches.
photo by Yun Kai ©Shuling Guo,
courtesy of Fou Gallery.



Shuling Guo, Aura-2, 2012. Oil on canvas,
70.9 x 70.9 inches. ©Shuling Guo



Shuling Guo, <5—6 pm>-13, 2020.
Oil on board, 12 x 12 inches.
Photo by Yun Kai ©Shuling Guo,
courtesy of Fou Gallery