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Cover Photo: *A Night at the Oasis, 2004*

Painting by Sung-Min Kim

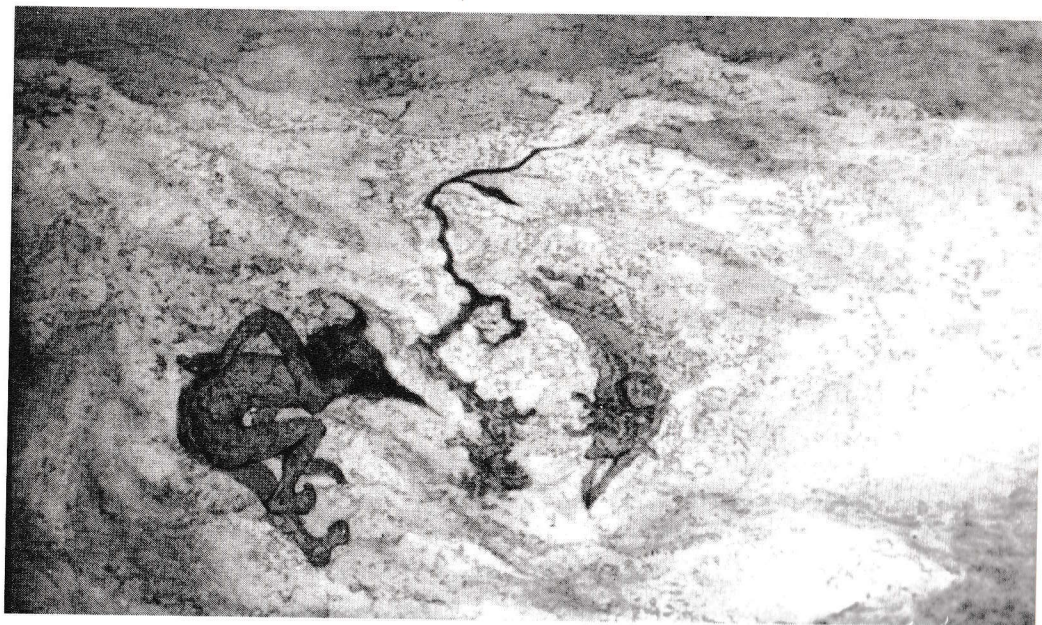
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The India International Centre is a society promoting understanding and amity between the different communities of the world by undertaking or supporting the study of their past and present cultures, by disseminating or exchanging knowledge thereof and by providing such other facilities as would lead to their universal appreciation.



Sung-Min Kim with her painting
Dance of the Earth, 2003-04



Chinese ink, water colours, powder colours on Korean long-pulp paper.

A Philosophy to Painting

Sung-Min Kim in discussion with Geeti Sen

GS: *Sung-Min, you came to India eight years ago, to study philosophy and to pursue your interest and studies in art. Recently, your paintings were exhibited at the India International Centre—and they took my breath away!*

These pictures are possessed of a deeply meditative quality, as though they follow and impart your philosophical ideas. They nurture principles of life and of nature. They seem to be imbued with layers of meaning—also the technique seems to be complex and layered.

We could begin this dialogue with your name Sung-Min Kim, which has a beautiful resonance—what does it mean? I have this odd theory about names, that people imbibe the character of their names and live out the meanings!

Sung-Min Kim: My name was given on the basis of its meaning in the Chinese script. We use the Chinese script in many cases, although Koreans do have a different script which is completely different from the Chinese script. 'Sung' represents nature—it can mean the great principle of Nature, a theory developed in Korea in the sixteenth century. But the character 'Sung' simply indicates human character, human quality. And 'Min' is for warmth and softness. So my name means—warm-hearted!

'Kim' is my family name, and it means iron or metal, which is one of the five Elements. I am from the Kim family which originated from a place at the south-east tip of Korea. There is a legend incidentally, which points to an ancient connection between India and Korea—about a princess from Ayodhya who came to Korea, met and married the leader of the Kim clan.

GS: So you see the strange logic about names ! Your link with India, your destiny if you like, is already written into your name ! Although of course, you chose to come here to India and took the initiative to do this, unlike scores of other young artists graduating in Korea...

Apart from that, as we were saying, your paintings—like your name—relate to Nature as the ultimate principle, and to the Elements in nature.

On one level these canvases are vast mindscapes; and on another they are landscapes—they are about the Elements of water, the sea, the wind, the earth and the sky. They are about man's relation to nature, and in this sense they share affinities with the soul of Chinese landscape painting.

Then, on a third level, these canvases are vast—they are like journeys stretching to the horizon... To me they explore the recesses of the mind, and human emotions, and at the same time they embrace the spaces of Nature.

SMK: The Chinese principles of equally controlling man and nature which you mentioned have influenced me in the technique, and the use of space...

Recently, I started analysing my work. Thematically, I think, I am greatly influenced by the Indian concept of the Absolute: the concepts of Brahman and Atman. In essence, these are not so different from each other, philosophically, to the relationship of the microcosm and macrocosm. ..

That realisation of the relationship between man and nature, of man in nature, it has influenced me greatly... However, the approach to *express* and to *reveal* that relationship in my painting is quite Korean—though the focus might have been channelised with the help of Indian philosophy.

GS: If you have lived in this country for eight years and you have been studying aesthetics and philosophy, it makes sense that you would be inspired by the most profound principle in the learning of the Upanishads—that vital inter-relationship between the individual atman and the Atman which is the life principle and moves through all of us.

Let us come to some concrete experience. You lived in Shantiniketan for your first year in India. What did you gain from this experience—were you disappointed, or enriched?

SMK: Personally, I had an absolutely quiet time there. There are many Korean students studying in Shantiniketan, I could have, if I wanted to, be close to them, then I could have had many friends there... But I wanted to isolate myself, to be in a quiet state. .. I read elementary books on Indian philosophy.

GS: Did you find a guru to guide you in Shantiniketan ? Among all the countries in the world, why did you choose to come to India?

SMK: I didn't have any great ambitions before coming to Shantiniketan. I wasn't comfortable with contemporary trends in art. I wanted to research and examine them in India, and was led to discover the value of the arts in this country.

I wanted to develop strength in myself. Usually, students in Korea don't think about what they will do after graduation. They apply for the Master of Fine Arts, although the faculty members remain the same. I wanted to explore further and maybe, I was very arrogant! I thought if I followed others, it would be my mental laziness...

GS: You mentioned that you had visited India once earlier. Where did you go then?

SMK: When I quit my study at the University, I then looked at books on world history, and some books on photography. I wanted adventure. I could have gone to Europe which seemed quite easy to travel, but expensive. Then I saw the young Tibetan monks in the newspapers. These papers reported that the Japanese are closest to the Koreans on the basis of blood, and then the Tibetans... Instinctively, I was really attracted to Tibet—so I wanted to visit Ladakh in India. But when I landed first in Bombay, I got a culture shock !

GS: People say that Bombay is the gateway to the West, not to the East! Did you eventually go to Ladakh ? Were you inspired by Buddhist art?

SMK: At that time I was not keen on studying Buddhist art as theory. I divided art practice from art history, and I couldn't make the match between the practice and theory.

Before coming to India for my travels, I had a great problem with myself: the problem of my existence, and why I had to continue living on the earth. Instinctively I had to survive, but I

had to find some answers to my question. That question still lasts; but I have become familiar with this question now...

GS: *You told me that you had attended the Kalamandala ?*

SMK: Yes, that was the Yamataka mandala ceremony. The making of the mandala took five days, and three days of puja. I kept observing the monks making sand mandalas, and from time to time they recited mantras. When I saw the combination of mantra and mudra and mandala, it was a great flow of energy!

GS: *I feel that the making of the mandala by the Tibetan monks is the ultimate answer to installation. It is performance: music, voices and visuals. Were you overwhelmed ?*

SMK: I hadn't been overwhelmed so much till I saw the destruction of that mandala. That mandala was destroyed within that monastery. It was carried to the river in a procession, and it was sprinkled on the river. That last stage really overwhelmed me... Next year, they make the mandala and they again destroy it. You go back to the earth when you do this ceremony.

GS: *So when you were talking about your problem about existence on this earth, you had come finally to confront this question ! That is surely part of Buddhist philosophy—that you are formed beautifully—then you go back to dust and to dissolution.*

SMK: Then you take rebirth. I realised that this life is not meaningless when I saw that mandala being beautifully made and destroyed—creation destroyed.

GS: *We began this conversation to discuss your pictures. There is an elusive, enigmatic quality about them which cannot be quite defined, which is not just about painting on canvas. These pictures hold out something else—or at least, a promise of that else.*

Beholding these paintings, I am reminded of experience that is primal and original. Your pictures are inspired from nature and yet there is no comparable scenery—as though we were experiencing a landscape or a mountainscape or a seascape for the very first time ! One senses the existence of a Spirit moving across a valley, or across the waters. And this summons a sense of eternity—of timelessness.

For instance, looking at your first picture in the exhibition, titled 'A Butterfly Crossing the Ocean'—it seems like a vast endeavour ! Of a mere butterfly trying to cross the vast ocean, fluttering over

waves, with the sky stained red in a corner with clouds. It is a surrealist fantasy, but there is also a philosophy embedded, of the turbulence of life. That butterfly could be you perhaps—it is your journey! Looking at this painting, I am reminded of lines from a poem by Wordsworth:

Yet I have stood
Even my eye has moved o'er three long leagues
Of shining water, gathered as it seemed,
New pleasure like a bee among flowers.

Now, what inspires you? What is your process of work to come to such an image ? Do you reflect and work out your philosophy which is then imbibed into the painting ?

SMK: No. Not that. The whole activity is meditation. I feel the existence of something inside me that has to come out, and I don't know quite how to express it. I try to listen, I have some image—I work first with Chinese ink, I try to communicate with that Chinese ink. The ink effect is the reflection of something inside which makes me start work on the painting.

Then I add water colours, powder colours, and white stone colour. It is the white stone colour from Korea which makes the image glow with a kind of translucency—but I use this white stone sparingly and only in certain places on the canvas.

GS: *But quite apart from meditation, there is tension, a struggle for existence! Look at the painting titled 'Butterflies Flying over a Waterfall', which Ramu Gandhi described with such eloquence as he walked around the art gallery... The butterflies seem so fragile, millions of them fluttering red against the torrents of white water pouring down—this conveys a very powerful sensation. As in the mandalas which we were discussing, there is in your work a sense of the fragility of existence. There is, you seem to be saying, death in life and life in death. This is philosophy—not painting!*

SMK: I came to that image when I saw millions of butterflies flying, when I was in the process of painting. Then I saw the image of the waterfall in that canvas—although it was not there in actuality—and then the picture seemed complete.

GS: *There is another enigmatic work to which I am drawn. It seems to truly express the affinities between man and nature, because it expresses both. It is metaphor and analogy, and at the same time, it is*

experiential. You call it 'The Stretch of the Heart'. Ramu compared this picture to looking within, when the heart has been opened up for open-heart surgery! I also find here the bones and tissues and ligaments of the body because the painting seems to simulate them—and at the same time, I can recognise that this could be the stretch of a lake in the lap of the mountain. It is vast and luminous space, worked intricately and finely meshed.

SMK: How I came to that image is quite interesting. I was attached to something. Then things did not go as well as I wanted. So I was suffering, and my heart seemed about to burst, be torn apart. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep ... I had a severe headache, and suddenly I saw the image. After that, I became okay.

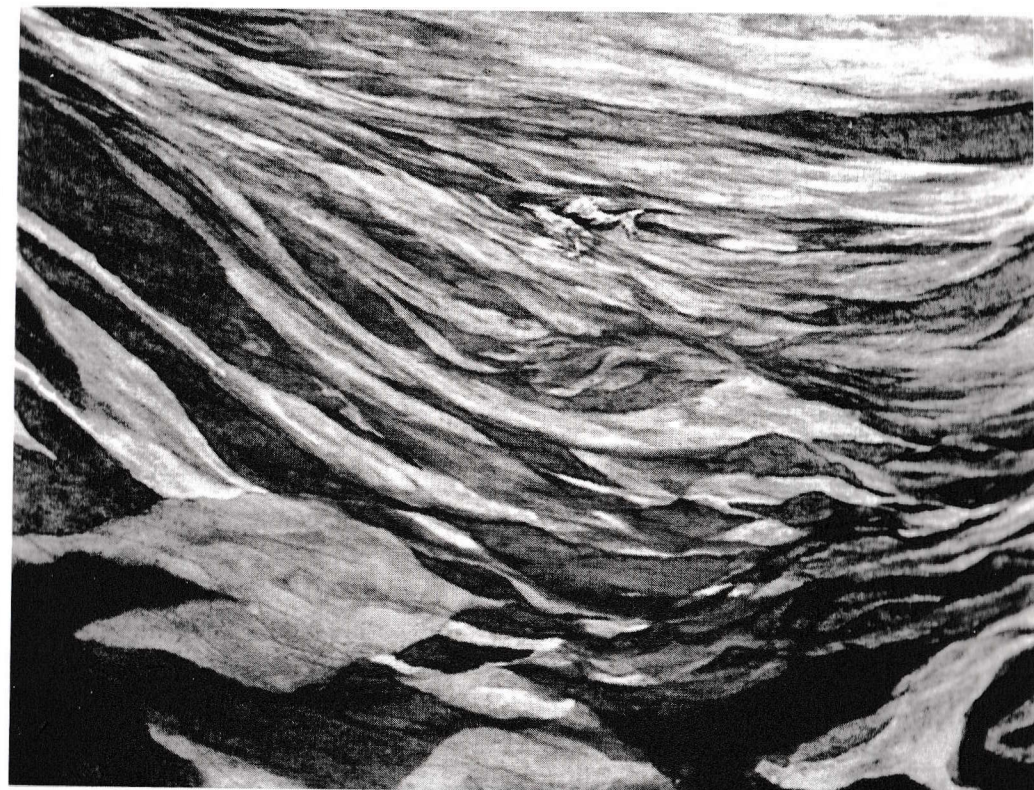
I couldn't resolve my problem with words, or with my rational thinking. But suddenly I had this image, and it helped me.

GS: So this painting became, in some senses, a kind of resolution for your emotional state—your inner state of being. There is a line in your little introduction to the exhibition held here where you say:

We cannot open the eyes under the constantly moving/blasts of light. Instead, we fall into the world of eternity/with our eyes closed. The painting space I understand/corresponds to the inner world which we have a glimpse of/in the physical darkness. There, from the blankness/the imageries emerge.

In these lines I am reminded much of the way the Indian artist Raza had described the process of creation, in our many conversations. He wrote: "Forms emerge from darkness..." The process of meditation is there, vital to his work—but the images are quite different from yours! I begin to realise that the most profound works grow out of a process of meditation, not mere action.

There is also another approach in your work which is experiential rather than meditative. In the painting which you call 'The Wind' where you have created the actual sensation as to how it might feel like to be caught in the ravines, with a powerful wind blowing through... Here the wind flows in ribbons of red, orange, yellow and blue cascading down the mountain gorge—they could be rivulets but they possess a sense of wild abandon which belongs to the wind. The expressionist use of these colours evoke sounds, like musical chords—as has been described by Kandinsky in his little book, 'The Spiritual in Art' (1914).



The Wind, 2003
Chinese ink, water colours, powder colours, pastel on Korean long-pulp paper

SMK: I sense and feel the vibrations of the Element, and I try to create that vibration through ink and then colours. My body moves across the canvas as I work...

GS: Tell me about the painting titled 'A Night at the Oasis' which appears on the cover of this journal. It breathes a magical spirit—as I had experienced once in looking up at the night sky in the Himalayas, when we were visiting the ancient monastery of Tabo.

SMK: I was inspired by the small flowers, and saw their petals are like wings of light. The stars which we see are the empty centre through which the light comes. Then I related this image of the flowers to the night sky, and to the radiation of the stars...

GS: I love the titles to your works! There is that one which is called 'The Dance of the Earth'! This is one painting which does not seem to have tension and anguish in it, as is present in so many of your other works—it has a sense of fun, possibly of joy! Ramu had suggested that this picture reminded him of Sita and the furrowed earth; but that argument was not convincing for me. Can you tell me about it?

SMK: Every person can interpret my paintings, or any paintings, as they 'see' them.

There are only two figures here in this large canvas of earth colours—of dry land. And they are in the upper corner, swirling together around a tree. The horned figure is drawn from my fantasy, about the 'Wildebeest', an animal which lives in Africa and which I have never seen... You had talked earlier about how names define people—here the name 'Wildebeest' has fed my imagination with an image! And the girl dancing with the animal is the human form of the same beast. Their dance is happening to revive and revitalise the earth that is parched...

And yet, they represent the very essence of the earth—they are not apart!

GS: Each one of your pictures in the exhibition is distinct from each other—in terms of theme and image, and also, the colouring of a certain mood. What I mean is that you have created different 'moods' in your paintings through the use of colours and different forms. In this they resemble the purpose of ragamalas—each picture summons up a mood through the music of colours!

But in one painting you have surpassed yourself! It is both experiential and tactile, yet at the same time, it holds out a philosophy which touches the core of one's being.

Here all the sensations come together, of seeing, listening to the music and almost touching the image. The painting is called 'Under the Wisdom Tree'. It is layers and layers of white spiraling forms, breathing through the spaces in grey shadows ... Hands encircling spaces, crossing over—like perhaps the Buddha's hands would cross over, gently embracing within them the light and the dark.

Is this work related to the Buddha and Bodhgaya, and to Shantiniketan where you had lived for your first year?

SMK: I received this image out of my personal experience in Bodhgaya. The suffering of human beings who have desire, love and life is confined to superficial elements. And I saw the intense eyes of a human being who had a great desire. When I saw those eyes desiring something, that was a different form of suffering. Suffering seems to be quite opposite to desire, but they are essentially inter-related—as of course, the Buddha himself had said.

In my painting, suffering and desire seem to be taking place within the arms of the Buddha, and dissolving again within that embrace.

GS: *It is like compassion, in the way that the arms encircle the space—as though he is gathering unto himself all the suffering in the world... I feel this is one of your most profound works, deeply inspired.*

My last question. Do you think your work has changed since you came to India eight years ago?

SMK: I am fundamentally interested in what is life, vibrating life. The theme of life remains at the centre of my paintings.

In the previous works I wanted to project vibrations of life on canvas—life in its literal sense. However, I came to see the pause in between vibrations more clearly, as I have painted in these pictures...

Downfall, darkness or death—equally, they are a part of life, and of my paintings. You can't just have life—you have death. I wish I could see the negative side of life becoming positive.