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Painting as Meditation: Smile of Heart

Tammy Wolf

University of New Hampshire

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feature ARTICLE

Painting as Meditation: Smile of Heart

—Tammy Wolf, *Inquiry* editor

Every artist and aspiring artist hopes that some day their art will express their most deeply held personal values and beliefs. This hope is perhaps strongest in artists working in a culture and a language not their own, one foreign to their upbringing.

I love to paint because I can express, explain and understand myself. I am not a good speaker, so my paintings serve as a substitute for my mouth.

Mihee Yeom came to the United States from South Korea when she was fifteen-years-old. In May, 2005, she graduated from UNH with a bachelor of fine arts in painting. The previous spring, encouraged by her mentor, Professor Jennifer Moses, she applied for and won a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF). The goal of her research project: to find how to express her religion, her culture and herself in her paintings.



I have always wanted my art to relate to my religion, Buddhism. My religion is a source of myself, my personality, my culture and my experience. . . I will introduce myself in my art work.

Central to Buddhism is the practice of meditation. In this practice, Mihee saw the connection.

My art is a continuation of my meditation. I have similar feelings about both of them. When I meditate, I feel so calm, peaceful, and full of happiness, and it is the same when I make art.

In her SURF grant application, Mihee proposed to produce watercolor and oil paintings in the standard categories of still life, landscape and self-portrait. She would not, however, use traditional Buddhist symbols in her paintings. Instead, she wanted to convey her spirituality through the artistic elements of natural light, composition and colors.

I will have self-portraits with my facial expression in light and shadow, brush strokes, and my gestures. It should be just colors that relate to me . . . By thinking of brush strokes and not my own likeness, my painting process will be closer to meditation.

Writing a successful research grant application, however, is just the beginning. Now the researcher faces that award of time and money which must be used wisely and well. Although her mentor is there for guidance, she alone must carry out her proposed plan, one made in theory on paper often months ago. According to Moses, Mihee was already an extremely hard-working, classroom painter, "one of our best." During the summer, the two constantly discussed the transition from making paintings for an assignment to creating personally motivated works. "In addition," said Moses, "she really had this goal to figure out what being a Buddhist from Korea means in Christian-based New Hampshire and Western-based art-making."

The opportunity to spend a summer in Durham painting was for Mihee both exciting and daunting. Her family was far away in California; they had not been all together for five years. Close friends were gone until fall. She was lonely. Fortunately, she had signed up for a photography course. As she saw the similarity of the art of photography to that of painting, she picked up her brushes. More important, she found a small lake nearby and went there almost every day to sit on a bench and meditate. She made sketches and wrote down her thoughts, some in Korean and some in English. She still thinks and dreams in the two languages. Then a family reunion in California, followed by her sister's visit to Durham, brought happiness and, in her phrase, a "smile of heart." She was not really alone.

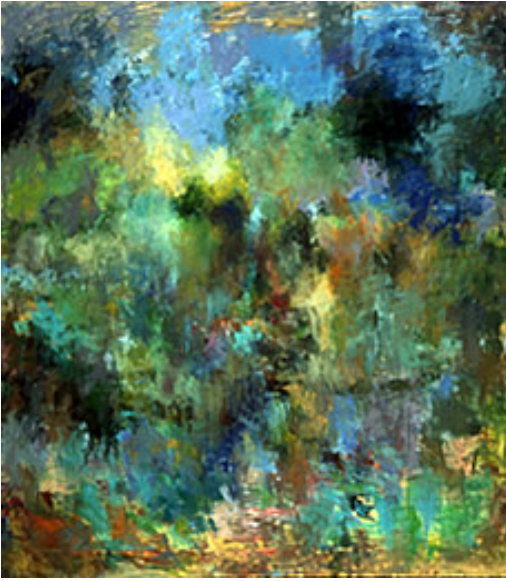
When I miss my family, painting and meditation help me to forget my loneliness. I meet Buddha, and I am Buddha when I meditate.

By the end of summer, many sketches and small paintings led to four large oil paintings, self-portraits but not in the conventional sense. Moses points out that during her summer research work and into her senior year, Mihee was thinking about what painting a self-portrait means if you're not looking in a mirror. "Right away, this is an Eastern idea. Right away, she was thinking about looking inward through her own Eastern sensibility, and she was also thinking of certain stories from her culture and not from the West."

Mihee gave each of these abstract self-portraits the same title, "Reflection." The canvases measure about 48" by 54". Each "Reflection" creates a different feeling through bold, yet subtle colors, dynamic forms, and varied textures. Warm and cool colors and dark and light shapes "dance," yet create balanced and contained worlds. Even though an indistinct face can be seen in each painting, the swirling colors are the portrait of the artist, who she really is.



"What she's really good at, and something she really developed in her work, is a kind of atmospheric vibrating color," said Moses. "Her paintings are very airy, atmospheric, and the colors are saturated."



These paintings are self-portraits, but they are about my feelings. They are more intuitive than my analytical ideas were... I mixed colors for many hours and then painted over them with less analysis and more intuition. These paintings are more personal, more natural than any art work I have done before.

These "reflections" inspired Mihee's BFA work the following semesters. Moses feels that the SURF grant gave Mihee the luxury of time and financial support to think seriously about being an artist: "I think it did something for her confidence and ability to say 'this is what I want to do.'"

In the fall of 2005 Mihee entered the master of fine arts program at the University of Albany, where she is a teaching assistant in painting.

Every morning I get up with a grateful smile and thank Buddha that I am an artist.

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Author Bio

Tammy Wolf is a second-year student editor with *Inquiry*. She was assisted in this article by Senior Editor Jennifer Lee.

Mentor Bio

Jennifer Moses, Associate Professor of Art, has been at UNH for sixteen years, where she teaches painting and drawing. During this time she has mentored students involved in research projects and independent studies. Helping students recognize opportunities for expanding their ideas during the creative process is a challenge she enjoys. Professor Moses says "it is always interesting to work one on one with students who are very engaged in their proposed projects."