The tragic notion of painting

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The tragic notion of painting

by

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Date

Susan Crile
Signature

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Date

Juan Sanchez
Signature of Second Reader
DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my parents, Yang An-Hong and Yu Bing-Yu, who love me, believe in me, inspire me and have supported me every step of the way.
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List of Illustrations:

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**Fig.2** Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 92 × 79 in
“The tragic notion of the image is always present in my mind when I paint and I know when it is achieved, but I couldn't point it out, show where it is illustrated. There are no skull and bones.”¹ This quote is from a speech Mark Rothko gave at Pratt Institute in 1958. Human tragedy is the most important subject matter in his artwork. He had always been fascinated by Greek tragedy and, later in life, Shakespearean tragedy. From the late 1940s on, he often spoke of his pictures as dramas, with his shapes as the performers. The speech he gave at Pratt is the closest insight we have as to how he himself saw his paintings. I want my paintings to deliver a similar effect as Rothko’s did.

The Raw Experience

I saw Untitled (fig. 1) in 2016 at Pace Gallery in New York City. It was a solo show of Rothko’s dark paintings. Although, I had seen his paintings several times, this was the first time I could get close enough to really see them. The feeling I experienced was profound. The light was dim in the gallery, and the colors were shimmering and pulsing in the dimness.

The first time I saw his paintings in 2004, I was a much younger man without much experience in life. I had no fear; I thought my future was bright and would be full of adventure. Since then, I have experienced much more than I could have imagined and most of it has been painful.

A painter’s work progresses, as Rothko had written in 1949, “toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer.”² These dark paintings touched my soul; I almost cried while I was looking at Untitled (fig. 1).

¹ Mark Rothko, Writings on Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 127.
² James E. B. Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 528
Just as Rothko said: “A picture lives by companionship.” To me, companionship is a shared experience. When I saw these pictures, with their floating color fields, I felt connected to the memories of the shock and the extreme sadness I felt when I was in the hospital. It brought back the sense of doom I had when the doctor told me that my son had a genetic defect that would affect him for his entire life.

I remembered the darkness inside the hospital, the sleepless nights I spent outside the ICU. I could not sleep because of the beeping sound of the medical equipment and the crying of the other babies coming from behind closed doors. There were no stars when I looked out the window. It was as if the window was blocked by thick black curtains. The weather was hot as hell, inside and out. Those nights were terrifying, violent and surreal, dark and disturbing, as if I were in a nightmare. All I knew was that I did not want to see my son die in the darkness.

As Rothko said: “to those who think of my pictures as serene, I have imprisoned the most utter violence in every square inch of their surface.” Rothko wants his paintings to be the raw experience, the thing itself. In speaking of the “thing itself”, Rothko writes, “I am speaking of the boundless aspirations and terrors, the welter of restlessness, the senselessness, the desires, the alterations of hope and despair, out of context and out of reason, on which is constructed the shaky security of our ordered life.” Rothko’s painting Untitled (fig. 1) captures the feeling I felt when I looked through the hospital window into the dark night. There is violence hidden beneath his canvas. No light comes through; it is blocked by darkness. There is no hope. It is choking the viewer, smothering the people who dare to step up close. I also want to convey such tragic emotion in my own paintings. I want the viewers

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to feel the anxiety, and helplessness embedded in its layers.

I use collage to physically create these layers. I apply photos and hospital documents onto the canvas to evoke memory. The photos are photocopies of the photos I took while I was in the hospital. They are the witnesses of the sadness and cruelty in my life. The pictures evoke the feeling of being in an institutional space. They are the archaeological excavation of my personal experience. I then go a step further and make photocopies of the photocopies. This process allows for the images to become degraded and blurry. This directly references memory, as memories become altered and blurred over time.

It is important for my paintings to have a human scale; this allows the viewers to feel the paint and its surface and creates a sense of intimacy. I add small details that seduce the viewers in and draw them closer in order to feel the tension hiding in between the brush strokes. I use deep stretchers to further emphasize the physicality and illusion of depth.

The Colors

In the Rothko show, all the dark colors have breath. One senses this rhythm of breathing. Rothko says about his colors: “This was the way in which I could achieve the greatest intensity of the tragic irreconcilability of the basic violence which lies at the bottom of human existence and the daily life which must deal with it.”6 It was not I looking at the painting, but rather the painting reaching out to me.

Rothko accesses his emotional content through his use of color and space in ways that relate to my painting as well.

The grey color we see in his *Untitled* (fig. 2) is achieved by layering many different colors. The last coat of grey appears to be a layer of zinc white. Its translucence allows the colors beneath to come through. In my paintings, I use zinc white in a comparable manner. I

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use certain colors symbolically: white represents fear, cutting through the noise of life; Alizarin crimson represents blood and terror; black represents darkness and helplessness. The chromatic temperature is cold and dark. Although investigating a dark palette, I use as little black as possible. The bright green crosses function-like shoe laces and hold all the fragmented elements of the painting together.

There is a depth of surface created by the layers of both the images and colors, which relates to the layers and depth of the viewer’s feelings. To get this depth, I start with photocopies adhered to the canvas. Then I use fluid paints mixed with diverse mediums so that the paint has substantial body while still remaining translucent. The bottom colors seep through the top layer, as the colors on top blur the layers underneath. On the surface, the black masking tape cuts through the colors, invading the semi-transparency of the mediums. This correlates with my personal experience; the memory of trauma fades away through everyday routines, but the extreme experience resurfaces again, often disturbing daily life.

The Cinematic Atmosphere

When I was at Pace Gallery, I found that Rothko’s dark palettes and the low light created a cinematic atmosphere for the show. Viewers waited in the dimness for the magic of Rothko, waiting for the colors to shimmer and come alive. Creating a cinematic feeling in my paintings is one of my goals.

My paintings are on the border between representation and abstraction and they have multiple perspectives. For me, a key to having a cinematic atmosphere is to use a centered composition, as well as dark tones of color. The dark center in my painting represents both my son and X-ray film. The interior painting is centralized and there is an imagined light source coming from the top left corner. Like a theater, there is one important thing front and center waiting to be witnessed. Both the central image and the light source in my paintings
function as the order within chaos. A contrary sensation of disorder and chaos is created by multiplying the perspectives and by layering lines of tape at different angles. The black center and light source work with the tape to achieve a controlled-madness.

The End

I still remember very clearly the strange feeling that day when I was in the gallery looking at Rothko’s paintings. As I looked at Untitled (fig. 2), I was reminded of the photos when humans stepped on the surface of the moon for the first time. I imagined I was there. It was so far from home; the sensation of loneliness flooded my heart.

The rippling edges, flaring with light, which gave Rothko’s pictures so much of their movement, have gone. What did Rothko put onto the canvas? To me, it was an answer and his destiny. The “ragged borders” are the evidence of searching for the meaning of life. After so many tragedies, Rothko knew his destiny. It was one of desperation, and the certainty of an unhappy ending. By seeing the painting, it was as if the viewer had been standing in the middle of nowhere in a moon lit desert. The void and inky sky is crushing down to the earth. The sense was heavy and helpless. And people had nowhere to hide or way to escape the fatal ending.

The tragic notion in my painting is to remind the viewers of the preciousness of their lives. It is the reminder of difficulties people must deal with, and an expression towards fulfillment. Only by confronting and overcoming tragedy can people become stronger than ever before. It is the testimony of life.
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