

## There's a hidden force behind Kanya's stark statements

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From a comfortable vantage point it is almost too easy to say that Kanya Charoensupkul's recent works, presently on view at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art until July 26, are nothing more than slashes of black ink hurriedly applied to a white surface. What I find extraordinary about Kanya's paintings and lithographs is that the way they sustain themselves as pulsating rhythmic beats over stretches of space --- as though the space would run out before the beats did. The extreme reductivism of colours and lines stripped to the bare bones of black and white, positive and negative, cool and hot, fast and slow, illusion and allusion, elevates us to the realm of serenity --- that is, if we let ourselves be moved by such evocation.

In the elucidating introduction of Kanya's catalogue, Dr. Chetana Navajara wrote, "The charm of Kanya's work lies in that pleasurable uncertainty whereby we cannot distinguish between what is intentional and what is "improvised" ...their (the works) value can be gauged not necessary through an exclusively visual communication. There exists an immensely hidden force behind these works that impel us to think and imagine further". But we ask ourselves what is this hidden force? Is it the zeitgeist or the angst that has caused the anxiety for the artist to create these forceful brushstrokes? Or is it our imagination that makes us feel such a force once we are confronted with these monochrome paintings and prints? In order to find some answers to these questions let us try to feel that beat of Kanya's powerful *Statement* series.

Like a philosopher, the artist lives in a world of ideas vastly different from that of the businessman or the merchant. Society for him or her is a huge world of property, manufacturing, buying and selling --- a society to which he or she is alien. It is not surprising that artists have come to regard isolation almost as a routine of their profession; but their rejection of the values of the bourgeois world can also act as a lever for true liberation. In this particular case, Kanya has eliminated such values to the bare essentials: black and white and the act of painting. What is left is the white expanse of flat paper and the residue of her black action painting.

Anything can be "traced back" to anything. By seeing Kanya's gestural brush marks, the viewer may recall the hidden force evident in the "automatic" paintings of Joan Miro and Andre

Masson or works by gestural painters such as Hans Hartung, Hans Holmann, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell. "I admired the large paintings by Hartung, Kline and Pollock when I was at Silpakorn University and in Chicago," explained the 40-year-old artist, "but my recent works have nothing to do with those artists. The inspiration of these works came from within me. It is concerned with emotion from the heart... I want to get away from chaos and reach tranquility... the calmness one may experience when walking in a Japanese temple." Kanya said that before she paints she would get into certain moods: the feeling of ecstasy, rapture, adolescence, innocence, anger or the rhythm of a galloping horse. The viewer may associate this kind of painting with black and white Chinese brush works on scrolls. Kanya, whose ancestors were Chinese, explained that she was fascinated with Chinese paintings of landscape and animals that her father showed her when she was a child. But personally she felt that her Statements are far removed from Chinese calligraphy and brush painting.

With Kanya's Chinese heritage, Japanese experience, and her emphasis on serenity one may wonder about the method of her forceful brushstrokes. For her the paper has become something like an arena for her action-performance as the large brush in her hand moves in mid-air, strikes across the virginal white surface with vigour, drips of black ink drop on the surface accidentally --- but so what, they remain as the process of art making. Then all of a sudden it is over, the action is finished. The statement has been made. But the viewer is still puzzled as Kanya's fast moving actions seem to contradict her main objectives that express serenity and tranquility. The viewer may argue that her brushworks are full of chaos and confusion.

In the arena a Ballerina twists and turns in the air before she makes a faultless landing. Calmly, she flows into another movement like an elegant swan. We applaud her ability to control such complexity within a restricted space. Like a confident dancer, Kanya has control of her arena that is in the form of the white sheet of paper. Her female instincts move with certainty and elegance. But Kanya moves in a different kind of space. The physical space of the dance floor is different to the pictorial space created in visual arts. The latter is the artist's "space of the imagination." It is the space within which the creative mind functions.

The essence of the picture is the picture plane. The essence of the picture plane is its two-dimensionality. By means of the creative process the marks applied on the flat surface can create a three-dimensional effect. Therefore, optically the plane is always in the state of tension resulting what the abstract expressionist master, Hans Hofmann called the creation of "push and pull on a flat surface." Moreover, when only white and black are used in the composition such a tension is at its most extreme as these opposites create flatness-depth ambiguity of negative and positive space. Therefore, the power of paintings like *Statement 7* and *Ambition* lie in the black 'objects' of brushstrokes

and lines that float wonderfully on the white areas or planes. The negative space of untouched paper compete forcefully with the moving black brush marks. The pressures created from the edges of white tissues seem to rush out towards the “real” space as the black lines recede into infinity. Once the viewer realizes that a thing in itself never expresses anything. It is the relation between things that gives meaning to them. Only then he can grasp the “spiritual quality” that transcends the act of looking at art to something like a magical experience.

Those viewers who suffer from the national identity complex may argue that they cannot find any “Thai” quality in Kanya’s work. They should, however, consider the creator of these silent black and white Statements a little closer. Kanya was born in Nakhon Ratchasima and is very much a Thai artist. The simple materials used in her paintings and prints are found locally. She likes the rawness of materials and prefers to use stone and not metal plates for her lithography. Cheap lacquer-ware brushes and Chinese ink are used on mulberry paper from northern Thailand in her paintings. Most important of all, the action painting “performed on the white arena” came from the “heart” of this Thai artist. The action speaks for itself. Nothing else needs to be said. The powerful statement has been made.