

“A Movement Away From Darkness” and “The New Phase”  
by Ekin Erkan

Kate Oh’s two newest works, “A Movement Away From Darkness” and “The New Phase,” signify a significant shift in her work, both technically and theoretically. The former painting, acrylic on canvas, and the latter, which features acrylic on wood, depart from the motifs of traditional Korean folk art—specifically, Minhwa, which Oh has famously explored across her body of work, utilizing Minhwa techniques and materials. However, “A Movement Away From Darkness” and “The New Phase” trade the decorative indices and representational references of Minhwa for abstraction, calling to mind the abstraction of so-called “field painting.” Nevertheless, where bastions of field painting like Newman, Hofmann, Gottlieb, Reinhardt, and the late Gorky utilized transposed gesture and action on to the canvas—often utilizing lone, streak-ridden rectangles and modular figures along a flattened slab—Oh’s works strike one as much more meditative, concerned with the temporal.

This is particularly evident in “A Movement Away From Darkness,” where the sumptuous, flaxen vertical threads bleed into a rim of blue and seep into a stygian abyss, like streaks of rain pooling along a mist-bedaubed sunrise. There is much to be admired about this work: the dimensionality of the golden streaks bears attentive examination, for unlike the well-known uneven drips that serve as references to Pollock’s paint-flinging hand, these small mounds of gold index a slower, more encompassing process: here there is build-up, like a sedimentary rock mountain. Again, there are no representational indices that *directly* reference a mountain, sunrise, or plain. However, “A Movement Away From Darkness” makes use of the gold motif alongside abstraction to lightly suggest the natural landscape—for instance, a field of clouded dusk edges around and envelops a crackled, brilliant gold enclosure. In both paintings, the three-dimensional resplendent saffron-colored center blends into the edges of nightfall.

One cannot help but think of natural processes when appreciating the elevated peaks and bluffs that comprise “A Movement Away From Darkness’s” golden streaks. The title of the painting suggests that the obsidian starless lower field is but a *starting* space, that we are moving *away* from darkness, rather than seeping into it. But the streaks themselves suggests the fall of rain, the descent of lightning, and other such downward processes. With these two movements stilted so as to be simultaneously presented, Oh’s painting thus stakes that these are mutually determinative processes: just as darkness only exists as a determinable quality due to the identifiability of light, so too any movement towards it suggests that which one is departing from. Just as much would be evident if darkness and light were isolable but presented together: and, indeed, “The New Phase” does exactly this, presenting something akin to a bulb of light and its luminous outpouring alongside a clouded backdrop and sable blackness below. But with “A Movement Away From Darkness,” there is also the thin blue rim which illustrates the darkness and lighting’s bleeding *into one another*, the marker of both identity and difference—this is their *movement*, proper. That is, in centering the movement itself, “A Movement Away From Darkness” demarcates the identity of totality, wherein all difference has vanished: the absolute form and collection of all things as, accordingly, only simple self-identity.

“The New Phase”, although similarly abstract and barren of direct references to the familiar objects of our world, does feature a disc in the upper-right corner that immediately culls the sun. This, too, grounds the painting in a natural landscape, albeit one that makes our common modes of perceiving foreign. Oh again also makes use of dimensionality and texture, giving tone to the golden field. The broken, crackled scheme—redolent of a wrinkled tissue or sun-bleached,

leathery skin—is here horizontal rather than vertical; instead of streaks of rain, this culls waves and the sea. One feels as if they are peering from a midnight mountaintop, glancing upon a gold-glossed sea, the amber waves of the ocean lapping against shore. "The New Phase's" color scheme and its suggestion of a cloaked landscape encourage us to abandon our familiar modes of perceiving. Indeed, both "A Movement Away From Darkness" and "The New Phase" are utterly unique works that remind us what abstraction can serve when done with care.