

## LOCATING THE MONOCHROME

The intention of this paper is to talk about

something .... the monochrome ... which appears in some of its manifestations to be about nothing and through this nothing to address something else... the complexity of cultural encounter and exchange.

In the paper I will not go into a detailed definition of the monochrome but will define it as an artwork consisting of primarily of one colour. I will not discuss cultural readings of colour.

I avoid a detailed discussion about drawing as *disegno*, or drawing as expression of an internal feelings.

I only address British and Australian encounter tangentially. ...

So perhaps I am in the wrong place and I should leave now.

By focussing on the monochrome, the North -East Asian monochrome to be precise, and on Asian-

Western interaction, I do hope to offer us something in our considerations of some of the issues facing contemporary drawing regarding representation, expression, objecthood and temporality as well as proposing ideas regarding the current state of the ongoing encounter between Australia and the UK.

As he is not present I will also blame Kit Wise of Monash University, Melbourne ....who invited me to speak on these ideas suggesting that they would be appropriate to this forum.

My observations are at a formative stage but I want to share them with you in order to open up a discussion which may lead to further clarification. So to the monochrome and drawing...

Colour by its very nature, and in particular the monochrome, problematises the classical conventions of drawing as *disegno*.

In the 1960s Yves Klein questioned traditional *disegno* that type of drawing defines and builds form within the conventions of western classicism and realism. He wished to replace it by the immersive void of the monochrome, the void of colour, space and light.

For Klein line delineated form, whereas colour filled and unified space enveloping the viewer visually and psychically, becoming a passage into the infinite as both pictorial and actual space. Colour became the void. I will return to the ideas of the real and void, actual and empty later and how the contemporary monochrome and the Asian monochrome may differ from Klein's metaphysical and metaphorical passage into the infinite.

More recently Briony Fer in her writings on Gabriel Orozco 's 2004 exhibition at the Serpentine discusses drawing as *disegno i.e.* as a conscious analytical representation and an idealist construction WHILST also recognising another type of drawing. Drawing as doodle, as an unconscious repetitive act embracing both chance and time. This type of drawing does not necessarily have any analytical or mimetic function. She goes onto talk about Orozco's use of drawing as a process, related to an awareness of the body, an encounter with matter and importantly his use of drawing as a temporal signifier.

It is here that I make a connection with the use of the monochrome in North East Asia, where the monochrome not only reconciles drawing with colour but also pictorialises time in space, a characteristic of North East Asian practice for millennia.

I hope that by presenting some of the differences and similarities between Asian and Western art through reflecting on the ideas and concrete realities surrounding the monochrome, we may be better able to celebrate the complexity of the interaction between cultures and recognise the complexity of being in the contemporary world. Understanding this has implications for the

way we understand teach and practice art today, both in the UK and Australia. It affects not only our understanding but implies an expansion of content and curricula, and of who constitutes our colleagues and audiences.

The encounters between East and West, or for that matter Britain and Australia, have never been simple, and they have never been one directional. They are in actuality ones of exchange, mutual influence and complexity ... to paraphrase Homi Bhabha's definition of translation; they are a movement of meaning, or the movements of meanings over and in time...

But to return to the monochrome. My early art education taught me that the monochrome was solely a Western construction and an outcome of the Modernism.



Thomas McEvelley in his 1988 essay *Seeking the primal through paint; the monochrome icon* writes:

“ The monochrome painting is the most mysterious icon of modern art. A rectangle of a single colour more or less unmodulated is erected on the wall at eye level and gazed at by humans in reverential silence. What is happening? The painting does not impress the viewer through a display of skill. In it skill is negated. Draughtsmanship is negated. Compositional sense is negated. Colour manipulation and relationship are negated. Subject matter, drama, narrative, painterly presence, touch is absent. .... One might as well be looking at the wall the picture is mounted on. Yet here, in this ritual-pictorial moment, the deepest meanings of western Modernist art are embedded- its highest spiritual aspirations, its dream of a utopian future, its madness its folly....” McEvelley then goes on to trace the theme of unity in western thinking and belief systems tracing it back to Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus in the second century AD who focused on the problem of the one and the many... McEvelley acknowledges parallels between Eastern and Western ideas here of unity and difference. He traces ideas of colour through Western cultural history of Modernism via Kasmir Malevitch, Suprematism and later Russian Constructivism. He spends time discussing the Post World War 2 Monochrome movements that included: Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, Manzoni and the Zero group in Europe, Clifford Still, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman in the USA. He addresses certain links with Buddhist thinking and discusses Sam Francis. He briefly talks about Mel Ramsden, A. Barry and John Baldessari and finally mentions the ironic use of the monochrome by post modern artists, ending his essay with

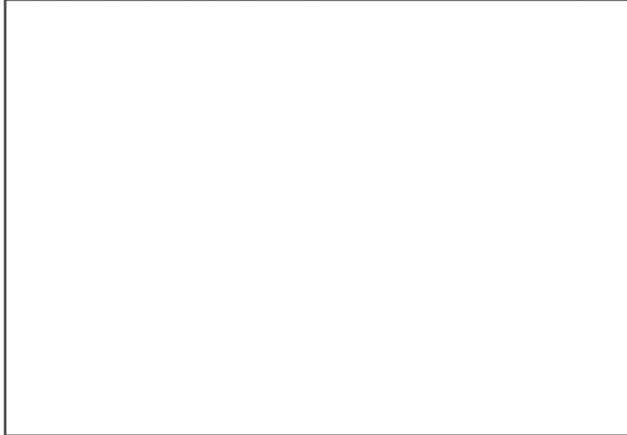
the following comments:

”As an element of design it may live ...past the end of the Century. But as a major conquest....it lies in the past exhausted and wrung dry of meaning. It is a banner of the mad ambition of Modernist Abstraction.”

It is a lively and intelligent essay, its focus however is on the Monochrome as a Modernist ICON. I argue later that the Monochrome in its recent manifestations is more than an end game of Modernism and offer another reading of the Monochrome, as a temporal signifier not solely as an icon, that is an image /object.

At a similar time to McEvelley, Denys Riout in his book *La Peinture Monochrome* discusses the trajectory of the monochrome from irony of the French satirists through the ideals of high modernism to post modern pastiche, irony and humour.

He discusses the satirical 1884 monochromes of Alphonse Allais a member of *Les Incohérents* .



Alphonse Allais “A volley of tomatoes thrown by apoplectic cardinals by the Red Sea” 1897  
Lithograph.

Eg translation of title of Red Monochrome lithograph of 1897,

“A volley of tomatoes thrown by apoplectic cardinals by the Red Sea”

Barbara Rose follows similar terrain in her book on the *Monochrome*. Angeline Morrison in *Autobiography of an (ex) coloured surface; Monochrome and Liminality* discusses the fear of blankness, the meaninglessness and horror of emptiness that underpins certain western approaches to the monochrome. She places these ideas amid Lacanian and Freudian psychological theory and post-colonial cultural political theory.

And so it goes.

Putting McEvelley aside, none of these books discuss in depth the relationship between Eastern thought and the monochrome, and although McEvelley discusses aspects of Eastern Buddhist philosophy he does not discuss Eastern art practice, traditional or contemporary connected with these ideas. Most of this literature locates the monochrome amid the framework of Western Modernism. This in some ways is understandable, but it overlooks another history and overlooks the implications for the recent worldwide renaissance in monochrome and polychrome art.

Until recently Western mainstream art education, criticism and curatorship rarely looked at the Asia - Pacific region. And although this seems to be changing when we consider the amount of scholarship and curatorship that is now emanating from Europe and the USA there appears to be an unresolved issue inherent to the situation. Although many of the works and ideas discussed in

this paper have been exhibited, published and discussed in Europe and the USA, the work is often seen there as art coming from the periphery to a centre and if it is discussed at all it is in the tradition of colonialist /post colonialist terms or in terms of an implied lack, that is... that the art produced is a secondary variation of primary Western forms that occurred earlier. So although the Asian work is seen in Europe and the USA its remains framed in Western First world interpretations.

I wish to suggest that the educational and artistic exchange between Australia and Asia is of a different order as both regions can be seen as being part of the “periphery”, from a European/ British or American perspective.

From the position of the periphery I believe we can have a different view.

For example artists and academics from my own art school at RMIT University not only teach the usual proportion of international UG and PG students onshore in Melbourne, of which a high percentage are from North- East Asia. (It is worth remembering that Melbourne ranks usually around 3 and 4 in cities with the highest number of international students in the world, after London and New York.) RMIT staff also teach offshore in an ongoing manner in the region, in programs in Hong Kong, Shanghai Vietnam NZ and until recently in Singapore This means we/they work amid the complexities and realities of Asia and have been involved there since the development of the new Asian contemporary art practice since the late 1980s, a significant part of our expertise, of our own histories are located there.

The following considerations are informed by this experience.

At least 4 key movements that have employed the monochrome in some form in North East Asia since the 1950s:

- 1 The Gutai movement in the 1950s and 60s in Japan
- 2 The Mono-ha movement in the 1960s and 70s in Japan
- 3 The Monochrome movement in Korea from the 60s-70s to the present.
- 4 In Shanghai China from the 1970s-80s to the present there are isolated manifestations of the monochrome.

Individual artists have also worked in Hong Kong, Taiwan and SE Asia in this mode. A discussion of them or of the monochrome in Australia and New Zealand is beyond the scope of this talk.

The North East Asian tradition of monochrome painting is informed amongst other things by Chan Buddhist or Taoist painting. These traditions emphasise simplicity, naturalness of materials, directness of making, change, balance of positive and negative emptiness and unity.. These attitudes have permeated the conventions of the North-East Asian art for centuries. In saying this I am not implying that all the artists in the movements mentioned are involved directly with the practice of these traditions but that these traditions have informed the cultures they work in.

The Gutai movement founded by Yoshihara Tori developed out of the Zero society in Osaka in the early 1950s. Gutai translates roughly as Concreteness. It was a complex group with diverse practice that did not see itself as derivative of western movements but grew out of a renewal of Japanese culture amid new post war global conditions. In the west until recently it has been categorised as derivative of Western movements i.e. Anti –Art, Happenings of Alan Kaprow, Neo Dada, or “ a little like Cobra or Art Informel”. This does not do it justice or recognise its potential relevance to contemporary issues.



Atsuka Tanaka, *Untitled* . 1955. Silk and sticks 10m x 10m

This work by Atsuka Tanaka a member Gutai was exhibited in Kassel the 2007 Documenta She originally made the work in 1955. It consists of 10 x 10 metres of silk supported about 20 cm s off the ground on sticks.

This horizontal monochrome responds to the natural phenomena of wind and rain and light. It ripples in the wind, it holds leaves or water if they fall on it, It reflects light and colour. In its passivity it activates our recognition of the surrounding world.

Its bright pink colour fills one's field of vision saturating the eye with warm red blues, and in turn affecting the way we see the surrounding world. When we look away , the greens of the grass are intensified as luminous afterimage. This work is not simply an end point to Modernism... it is an immersive work placed in situ amid the world not as a signifier of essence or reductive purity à la Greenberg's colour Formalism but in its blank richness, activates one's awareness of perceiving in time and space.

This work when placed amid the monochrome tradition, when viewed through the filter of the monochrome expands our understanding of the monochrome and has implications for practice today. Its contribution lies I believe in expanding the boundaries of content of monochrome beyond readings of a reductive or formalist essentialism into those of a temporal nature, of an interval in actual time and space. Colour acts as a movement in time, Colour 'becomes', a means of recognising our own perceiving.

This work does not represent anything other than what it is . It is materially different from so much Western art of its time. I think here of Abstract Expressionism, Art Informal or Matter Painting. Tanaka's piece is transient, mobile, transportable and fragile. It locates itself and us as viewers amid both the worlds of nature and of culture, amid the external world of phenomena and the internal worlds of perception, sensation and meaning.

Helen Wetsgeest in her book *Zen in the fifties : interaction in art between east and west* outlines the post war interaction between artists from Japan and Korea and those of France, Germany and USA . Her work obviously focuses upon the influence of Zen Buddhism on art practice but it is useful in understanding the number of the interactions between people and cultures of this time .

After World War 2 the influence of Western Modernism was felt throughout Asia with the exception of the Communist states, particularly in Japan , Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong. The first Generation of post war artists from Japan, Korea and Taiwan who were able to travel went to not only to the USA but also to Germany and France. There they were drawn towards movements i.e. Art Informel, Art Creation in France, and Zen 49, Zero in Germany and Abstract Expressionism in the USA.

For me the interesting thing is that the very streams of Western Modernist Abstraction that they embraced were often influenced by Eastern, in particular Taoist and Zen ideas, particularly via the writings of D.T. Suzuki in the UK, France, Germany and the USA. After World War 2 these ideas were embraced by many western artists, some due to fashion and some because Eastern ideas became a foil against the post war gloom and existential despair.

Buddhist and Taoist Philosophy and culture approached the idea and experience of nothingness not as an existential *nihilism* but as the emptiness of *sunyata*. (Westgeest, pp. 215-222.)

*Sunyata* is complex understanding/experience of emptiness and its definition could be debated for years. It has been. In my understanding of *Sunyata* emptiness is viewed not as a lack or a negative, it is much more a process than a thing, a relational state of mind, a mental place of nothingness, situated amid/ in relation to the complexity of the extant world, that helps the nature of that world to be recognised. That is a world / mind of dynamic change, that is aware of the illusionary nature of perception and the transitory nature of phenomena.

From the 1930s to the 1950s the Zen ideas via Bernard Leach in the UK had influenced fine art practice from ceramics to painting including the work and ideas of American Mark Tobey. In post war New York Ad Reinhardt, and John Cage interpreted Zen and Taoist philosophies inspired by D.T. Suzuki's teachings lectures and radio broadcasts. German artists including Rupprecht Geiger, Karl Otto Götz and Günther Ecker, French artists; Jean Degottex, Pierre Alechinsky, Yves Klein, Matthieu, Soulanges and Fautrier all investigated to varying degrees Zen ideas.

Some including Mark Tobey Sam Francis and Jean Degottex had visited Japan between the wars to study the culture. Pierre Alechinsky, Yves Klein visited Japan in the 1950s.

By the 1960s a second wave of Asian students and artists studied overseas and embraced anti-war, anti- nuclear, anti -authority anti-capital ideas and interpreted the implications of Minimalist, Conceptual, earth art, art Povera and performance art of Beuys, Fluxus and new technologies. The Korean Nam-June Paik was at the forefront of these ideas and likened himself to an Asian Shaman beside the German one. These events were paralleled in Asia both politically and culturally by movements such as Gutai and the Mono – Ha in Japan and were also reflected in the developing local art infrastructures including; art schools, galleries museums and the rise of local and international markets.

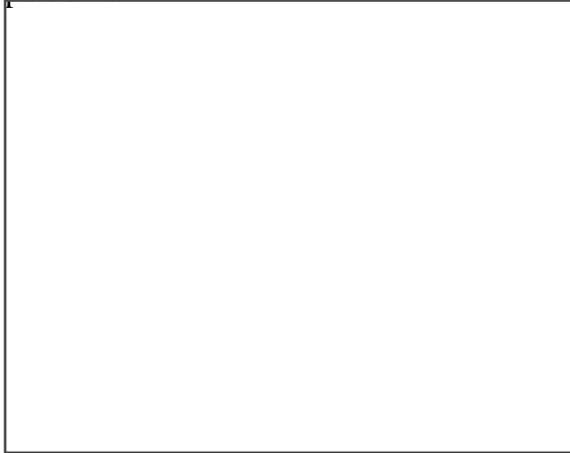
In the post-war climate Zen's links with the discipline and nationalism of Bushido and Japanese militarism were put aside in favour of its focus on individual perception, anarchic freedom and the questioning of dogma.

Previously the alliance between Japan and Germany in the 1930s had fostered not only a range of military- economic political exchanges but also intellectual, and cultural, political exchanges that included interaction between the philosophers Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani,..and Martin Heidegger

Zen's being in the present met Kitaro Nishida's place of nothingness, met Heidegger's being in the world.

Norman Bryson discusses the connections between Heidegger, Nishida and Nishitani in his essay *The gaze in the expanded field* in relation to sunyata, (emptiness) to being in the world and to the decentring and destabilising of vision. I make a link here, between these ideas and the condition of indeterminacy, which is the condition of much contemporary art. This decentring and destabilising of vision are the affects of both Chan flung ink painting and monochrome painting. They are achieved by the conflation of figure and field relationships on the picture plane. It is in this context we can consider Lee Ufan 's work., as concrete and gestural manifestations of time

via the setting up of relationships between natural objects in time and space via his sculptural works, and via trace in his monochromatic brush paintings . These paintings are related to time, the time of brush stroke, the time of breathing. Process meets body , trace manifests energy. And the time of encounter by the viewer. Man is not the centre of the world in this world view but a part of it.



Lee Ufan *From line* 1973. Glue and pigment on canvas .182 x227 cm. Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum

Nishida and Nishitani were based at Tokyo and it was to there that the young Korean Lee Ufan , who is well known to audiences in the Europe and the UK went illegally to study philosophy in the late fifties early sixties at Nihon University. Lee Ufan's was interested by Nishida's investigations of both Eastern and Western thought concerning the place of nothing and the ontology of being. Lee Ufan's thought was informed by Korean Confucism , Zen religious philosophy, European phenomenology and by the practice of art as a material manifestation of these realisations.

**Lee Ufan became** spokesman, theorist and artist one of the founders of the Mono-ha movement, Mono-ha translates as the School of Things.

The Mono-ha movement exploited the use of actual, natural things in the world. After the 1952 war many other Korean artists travelled and studied in Europe and the USA. They returned, adapted and transformed movements such as Art informel creating new relationships between Western and Korean traditions which were played out in the new art schools. Hong Ik for example emphasised Western oil painting and Modernist ideas, where as Seoul National University developed an Asian Modernism using traditional materials. It should also be remembered that a strong and important dialogue between artists Within the North East- Asian region existed at the time . Not all artists looked elsewhere.

By the 1970s a home grown mono-chrome painting developed, informed by Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist and local influences which asserted a Korean identity. Monochrome painting has different readings in Korea to that of the West. Eg Ha Chong- Hyung This work is made by applying paint from behind the canvas. This has implications regarding where we are located as artists and by implication viewers, not only in front but also amid things.



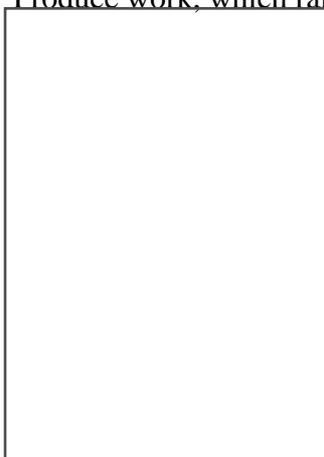
Ha Chong-Hyun *Conjunction 95-001* 1995. Oil on and pushed from back of hempen cloth, 195 x 260cm

I interpret Mono as meaning “the natural, the whole, the thing” , as oneness, wholeness as a multiplicity rather than a reading of one as singularity. This is different from certain Western interpretations of mono as meaning “one, singular” i.e. monochrome as one colour, a reductive and essentialist procedure as is understood in one stream of Western Modernism. Korean monochrome painting does share some mutual philosophical ideas with the West, including Minimalism’s depersonalising of the means of production and in its reaction against the self-expression of Abstract Expressionism. Korean gestural monochromatic mark making became a fact, a signifier of time and energy.

There is little imagery at present available from artists who worked with the monochrome in Shanghai in the 1970s and 80s as it was illegal to work this way, particularly during the Cultural Revolution.

However older artists i.e. Zhou Chang Jaing or more recently the younger generation including Ding Yi and Lu Qing did and do

Produce work, which ranges from using monochrome to polychrome.



Lu Qing. *Untitled*. 2000-1. ink on rice paper 83 x 2500cm

This art, which often used geometry and the traditions of Chinese gestural painting, did produce

the occasional monochrome painting that fits more closely to a Western definition of the monochrome. These works often employ seriality or gesture to manifest time, and energy.

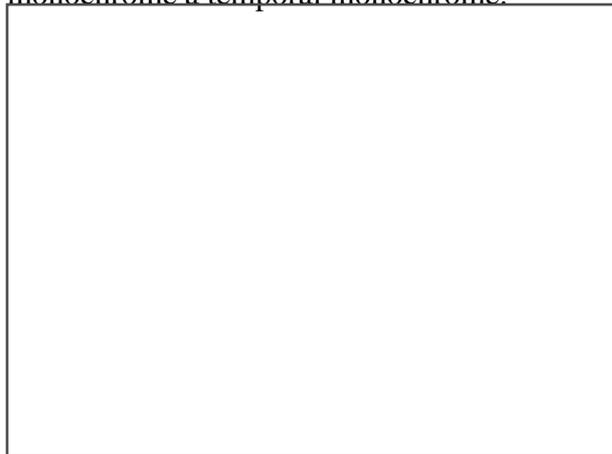
In my view this practice in Shanghai had in its early manifestations little connection with the Western understandings of the monochrome and a very different purpose.. It can be likened to an ethical or political use of abstraction to assert independence, freedom, and difference if you will to the existing order. It reconnects with older contemplative traditions and claims contemporaneity in reaction to the idealist extremes of heroic Maoist painting of the Cultural Revolution of the 70s. Shanghai was a global city in the the1920s and 30s many international architects including Bauhaus trained, worked there , European modernism including reproductions of the works of Mondrian were available and later after World War 2 information via Japan of European or Japanese abstraction became available. Traditional patterns of architectural decoration i.e. the patterns of window screens and or floors also became models for certain compositional structures.

In the 1980s many of these paintings were exhibited without stretchers and have apparent initial formal visual similarities to the works and strategies of Support Surface and Art Povera but in reality I believe this was due to the need for concealment and portability and was not simply formal. As a result both oil paintings and works on paper retain parallels with scrolls and hangings. Today amid the noise of China's art boom abstraction and the monochrome remain quietly present on the periphery.

So what do all these details mean?

Well hopefully they open up for consideration the longevity and complexity of our cultural interactions. For me this history helps me to recognise how the contemporary monochrome is not solely a Western construction . It sits wonderfully in between the traditional concerns of the East and West and points to new possibilities for the future. It locates drawing within the monochrome tradition as a concrete reality that manifests its time of making in the world.

Colour is, to state the obvious, an important element, but not the only one in these monochromes. Texture, material, surface, process, support, size, media and site are others. I call this type of monochrome a temporal monochrome.



Lee Ufan. *Correspondence*. 2004. Oil and stone pigment on wall. Espace d'Art Contemporain Fernet Branca. Saint- Louis / France.

This temporal monochrome can be seen, not as the modernist essentialist object, but more like an interval, a passage. It s very blankness assists us in seeing what surrounds it, a means not an end , a tool for considering how we look, feel and construct experience of and in the world. New

works informed by the monochrome can have a vitality that locates us amid the realities of time and space, literally as well as metaphorically.

The new monochrome is experiential and phenomenological in its means and carries multiple diverse codes of meaning.

The Monochrome is witnessing a renaissance. The non-Western contribution to this should not be overlooked.

David Thomas      Melbourne Sept 2008

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