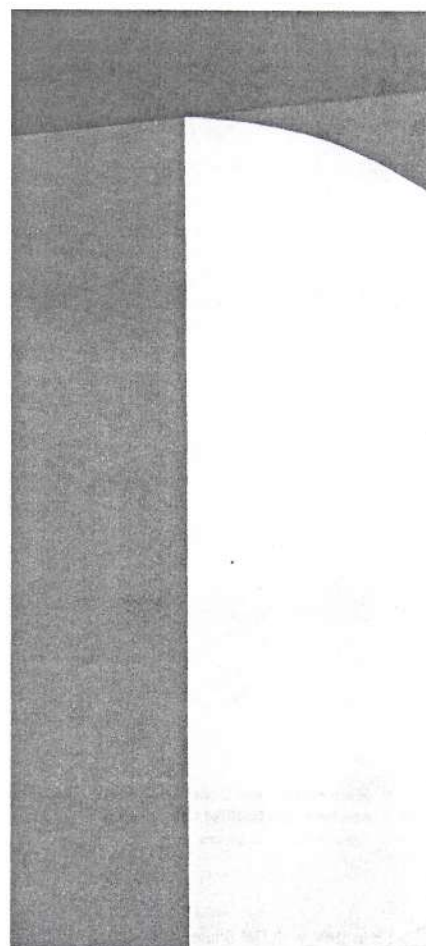
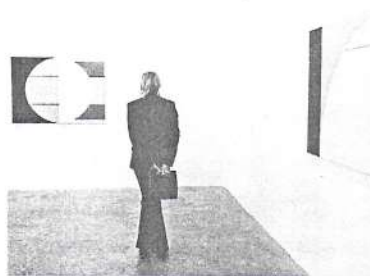


# The Sunday Times

Cristin Leach

12 December 2004

# The works of Korean artist Chung Eun-Mo mine new possibilities for abstract



## painting, writes Cristin Leach

**T**here is a blind woman in Norfolk, in the east of England, who has been selling paintings from a caravan for more than 40 years. At the age of 81 and in answer to the obvious question, she replied: "How can I tell a good painting? It's a vibration. I hear them singing."

Aside from the theories about the loss of one sense enhancing others, there is something to be said for the idea that good paintings vibrate — and maybe even sing — and perhaps it takes a blind woman to point it out.

In the silence of the Kerlin gallery, Chung Eun-Mo's abstract compositions have a measured power. Each canvas is like a tuned instrument, capable of producing a beautiful sound on its own. Exhibited together these paintings invade the space with their presence and aspire to the symphonic.

Born in Korea but now based in Italy, Chung is an abstract minimalist in an age when the majority

of art-school graduates have turned their back on painting.

It is a medium that takes time, patience, constant self-criticism and an awareness of (and engagement with) that which has gone before. However, it is most certainly not dead.

For those who pursue the form, it is as serious as it ever was — if not more so — because now there is even more to prove. Why paint when there are so many other artistic expressions to choose from?

Chung's various meditations on the square, the circle, the ellipse and other shapes have their origins in the primary coloured compositions of Piet Mondrian in the 1920s and Jean Hélion's abstractions of the 1930s. They owe much to the American abstract minimalists of the 1950s and 1960s, including Frank Stella and Barnett Newman — and there have been others since.

With all this baggage it is likely, on first glance, that viewers might feel a little been there, done that

about Chung's work, but these canvases have a resonance far beyond being a homage to art history.

Aside from the tendencies towards vibration, these works exude a calm that is inherent not only in the artist's use of muted, slightly retro colours but in the delicate balance between line and form that drives her vision.

Stella said of his abstractions: "What you see is what you see." Today the battle to prove that a painting can be nothing more than a pigment-covered surface has been fought and won. Chung's work, although it begins and sometimes ends there, is about much more than immaculate, oil-painted exteriors.

S shafts of colour, corners, lens shapes and curves leave space for viewers to construct their own meaning, but they are never abandoned without a map. Intersecting and bisecting forms imply portals to other places.

There are subtle gradations of tone. The colours are not always

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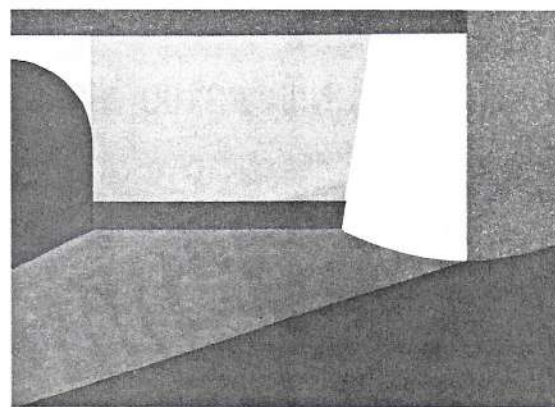
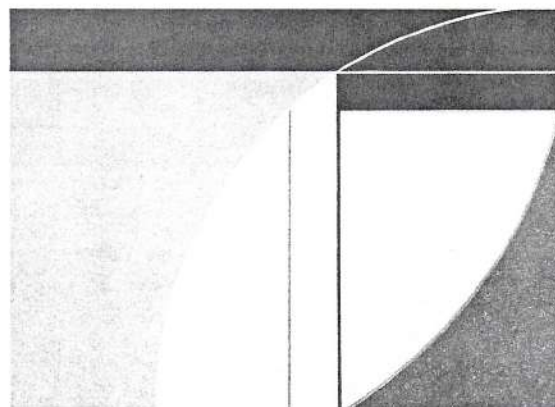
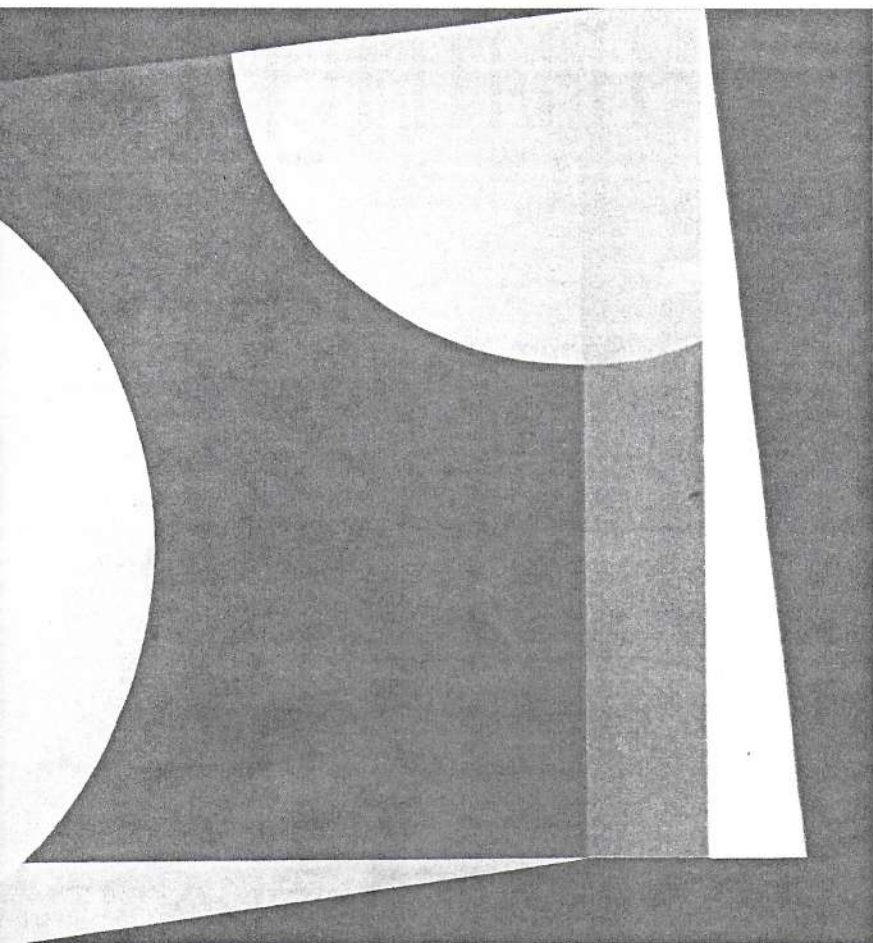
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**Good vibrations: Chung Eun-Mo's canvasses at Dublin's Kerlin gallery include Dialogue, left; Interim, above; and Cortile, below; all of which pay homage to cubism in their architectural shapes**

CURPIN/ICOMWELL

entirely flat, despite initial appearances to the contrary. They recall earth, sky, buildings — the hues of the world we live in.

A painting called Centering reveals the influence of eastern architecture with lines that echo screens and wooden panelling. In Screen-Pthalo Blue, angled curtains of colour obscure a possible inner chamber. In the portrait Cortile, half a black archway balances one side of the canvas against a curved yellow buttress on the other. It is clear we are in some kind of man-made space. As their architectural qualities emerge, these works pay homage to cubism.

Born in 1946 Chung is a contemporary of Irish-born abstract painters Sean Scully and Richard Gorman. The latter's work shares that "What you see is what you see" quality with Stella's, drawing the viewer back to the painted surface again and again. However, Chung's pieces tend to set up a play that takes the viewer further

into the composition. There is a seesawing between planes which the eye is obliged to follow in order to penetrate each work. With precisely measured tone, scale and proportion, the journey of looking at a Chung painting involves a focus that moves in and out, from negative to positive, from foreground to background and back again.

This exploratory movement is necessarily slow and contributes to the overwhelming sense of calm. Far from the harsh black lines and primary coloured squares of Mondrian, Chung's tones with their occasional subtle gradations are cool and elegant. And very controlled.

An aura of calm also comes from the consistency of her output, the reassuring balance inherent in her work and the clear evidence that a transition from chaos to order is part of the process.

It is a transition that takes place within a clearly defined set of boundaries. There is nothing play-

ful or random here and yet none of these paintings is entirely predictable. They entice the viewer in yet still manage to produce some visual surprises.

Loggia uses colour to shift forms which appear to be behind and moves them to the fore, inverting expectations. In Permutations I, an orange wedge acts like a tinted filter, carrying its hue with it as it passes over squares of blue and green.

While the idea of a colour filter implies translucency and a sense of layering, Chung's blocks of paint are more often opaque. Unlike Scully's organic depths, there is never a sense of layers worked up to the surface. There is no glow of hidden colour in the space where edge meets edge.

The 15-year retrospective of Chung's work currently at the Galway arts centre is evidence that she has been ploughing this furrow for quite some time. In the past she has made use of shaped canvases à la Stella, forming them into cir-

cles, parallelograms, wedges, stairs and cropped rectangles that extended the lines in her work beyond the confines of the canvas and into the room.

Her latest pieces are painted on more conventional squares and rectangles, but a dialogue with the architecture of the room remains an important feature of the works. These paintings resonate not only within and with each other, but also with their surroundings.

Abstract painting may be approaching its 100th birthday, but artists such as Chung are still mining its possibilities. There is a sense of its having come of age again in the work of Scully and others, artists who have resurrected the medium as a carefully defined tool with which to delve deeper into the problem of painting itself.

Because they share certain indefinable qualities, when discussing abstract art it is easy to adopt a terminology more usually employed to describe music: to speak of sono-

rous juxtapositions of line and form, of harmonious compositions, of varying tones of colour and of volume emerging from flatness.

In the space where line and colour meet, it seems entirely feasible that a resonance could slowly begin, that it could grow to a definite hum and that together in a room with more of the same kind, paintings could make a subtle but persistent noise.

In this room full of abstract canvasses at the Kerlin, Centering's bright-yellow edge against an expanse of black sings high, the muted blues and greens of Noonday and Marina harmonise, while the artist's blacks and browns clang loudly and Dialogue's harsh blue produces a sharp cacophony where it meets orange and lime green. It turns out Chung's paintings do sing, and you don't have to be blind to hear them. □

*Chung Eun-Mo at the Kerlin gallery, Dublin, until Jan 8*