Antonio Puri's Abstract Paintings

Donald Kuspit,

Exhibition catalogue essay for Journey into Mysticism, 2006.

Is there still life in abstract painting, and if so what kind and quality of life? These are the questions that are raised by Antonio Puriąs abstract paintings. They ąre inevitable after a century of abstraction--a century since Kandinsky's gestural abstraction and Malevich's geometrical abstraction emerged. In 1935 Alfred Barr declared them the be-all and end-all of avant-garde creativity. But a lot has happened since then, especially the academicization and conventionalization of avant-garde art, and with that of high abstraction, whatever its expressive form.

So the question is to what use Puri puts gestural abstraction. Does he breathe fresh life into it--fresh spiritual life, to recall Kandinsky's view, stated in 1912, that abstract art alone keeps spiritual consciousness alive in materialistic modern times, and Motherwell's assertion, in 1951, that abstract art is a form of mysticism? Is this still the case at the end of the 20th century? Can gestural painting still have spiritual import? Puri's New Millennium paintings suggest that it can. But with an important difference: Puri's abstractions are rooted in Buddhist rather than Christian spirituality, as Kandinsky's and Motherwell's were, however different their forms. Kandinsky is explicit about his Christian sources, Motherwell less so, although his Spanish Elegies have been understood to be crucifixions in all but name. Malevich's Suprematist paintings have been said to be Russian Orthodox icons in abstract disguise, or rather to have made their innate abstractness explicit.

In other words, Christianity no longer seems to be the spiritual point, at least for Western artists. No doubt this has something to do with the convergence of East and West through globalization, and with that the attempt to reconcile their spiritual differences. These are not merely exotic differences: spiritual otherness is an obstacle to practical harmony. But the decreasing importance of Christian spirituality to abstract artists also has to do with the fact that the Buddhist attitude of compassionate detachment seems a better way of surviving emotionally in the modern secular world than the Christian emphasis on salvation through suffering. Newman's Stations of the Cross are perhaps the climactic expression of Christian spirituality in abstract art, and with that the theory that suffering is the exclusive way to otherworldly transcendence. For the Buddhist, spiritual transcendence is a practical this worldly matter, not a privilege of ritualistic suffering unto deliberate death.

It must be emphasized that it makes no sense to privilege Eurocentric Christianity as a superior embodiment of spiritual consciousness in an increasingly global and specifically Asia-oriented society. Eurocentric Christianity is thus no longer the necessary basis for a genuine spiritual abstraction. In a sense, Buddhism is more realistically spiritual than Christianity, for it

aims at enlightenment rather than resurrection. Transcendence involves achieving universal consciousness rather than personal salvation. Buddhist universal consciousness accords well with abstract art ąs ambition to communicate universally (transculturally) through its dialectical use of the contradictory universal languages of geometry and gesture--to communicate and symbolize fundamental truths through the dialectic of fundamental forms.

Puri is well-positioned to take the Buddhist path--the most important revolution in attitude and concept that abstract painting has had since its implicitly Christian beginnings. As A. M. Weaver writes, Puri, a native of India, embraced Buddhist concepts, which for him meant adopting a practice of conscious existence and awareness of the completeness and interrelatedness of every aspect of life. The recurrent circle in Puri's work conveys this completeness and interrelatedness, even as it suggests the self-containment that results from constant consciousness of them. Puri's circles are mandalas awash with color, drips and undulating splashes of paint.

Mandalas abound, but good paintings--aesthetically convincing paintings--are rare. The painterly character of Puri's paintings is what makes them good, not their Buddhist import. The artistic issue is how Puri spiritualizes his paint--how he makes the mundane material of paint vibrate¸ spiritually, that is, convey the cosmic consciousness he associates with Buddhism. It can only be achieved by detachment from desire. The paradox of Puri's paintings is that they resonate with desire and passion, conveyed through their painterliness, even as their circles—a geometrical form that symbolizes eternity and integrity in many cultures--convey the cosmic consciousness that transcends desire. It is this paradoxical synthesis of sensuality and spirituality—passionate attachment to sense experience and dispassionate detachment from the lifeworld with no loss of concern for it--that gives Puri's paintings their aesthetic resonance and expressive complexity.

He is clearly an abstract expressionist, as his brilliant polyptych Conversation with Pollock, 2003--has ingeniously fragmented the Pollock all-over mural painting, serializing it into the discreet easel paintings in which it originated--makes clear. Kalia's Demise, 2006 is another abstract expressionist tour de force, whatever its spiritual aspect. Kali is the Hindu goddess of destruction. And the Essence Series, 2005, with their squares--another geometrical symbol of cosmic wholeness and the supreme¸ modernist icon, as Malevich emphasized--are elegant distillations of gesture and surface. Puri is clearly exploring every aspect of abstract surface, from the gesturally extravagant to the meticulously refined. He tends to work in series, reaffirming the modernist idea that the creative process--virtually every work is a process painting--matters more than the particular aesthetic product that results from it, however much that product must stand on its own aesthetic merits. As Weaver writes, Puri's paintings attempt to place traditional Asian spiritual concepts within the context of modernist and postmodernist practice. But my point is that their edifying spiritual effect depends on the edifying aesthetic effect he achieves through such practice.

But the real secret of Puri's aesthetic success--the spiritual beauty and expressive richness of his paintings--involves what he calls his modified Batik technique. It involves, as he writes, using wax as a resist, which allows him to reveal several layers of paint, which would

ordinarily get covered up. After the wax has been applied the fabric is dipped into a dye....Thin lines appear where the pigment is able to penetrate the crackled wax surface. This process can be done any number of times, depending on how many colors are going to be on the fabric. In other words, it is not simply the layering that matters, but the transparency of the layers by reason of the wax on which they are painted. The expressionistic sedimentation of paint is a familiar way of creating tangible texture, but the transparency afforded by the wax creates an effect of translucent depth--of the inner luminosity and unwavering interiority associated with spirituality in all cultures.

Puri's modified Batik technique may be Asian in origin--¸batik is an ancient technique used in Tibet, Nepal, and India, and it has traditionally been used on fabrics such as cotton or silk--but it could just as well be avant-garde: it satisfies the requirements of modernist painting, that is, painting which emphasizes the medium at the expense of whatever image may emerge from its handling. Even the ancient Asian Mandala has its equivalent in modern Western geometrical abstraction, suggesting the universality of the spiritual aspirations and contemplative function innate to both. It is ultimately the universal modernist dimension of Puri's paintings that makes them aesthetically convincing and authentically spiritual.