



Form of a Tree I, Mixed media on board, 90 x 90 cm, 2004



Forming with Rhythm II, Mixed media on board, 90 x 60 cm, 2004



It Forms, Mixed media on board, 90 x 60 cm, 2004

APRIL SHIN

1976 Born Seoul, Korea

EDUCATION

2003 Elam School of Fine Arts, MFA
1999 Elam School of Fine Arts, BFA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2003	<i>Presence</i> , Warwick Henderson Gallery	Auckland
2002	<i>Existence</i> , Warwick Henderson Gallery	Auckland
2001	<i>Diversity</i> , Warwick Henderson Gallery	Auckland
2000	Warwick Henderson Gallery	Auckland

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1999	George Fraser Gallery	Auckland
1999	Warwick Henderson Gallery	Auckland
1997	George Fraser Gallery	Auckland
1993	ASA Gallery	Auckland
1993	Epsom Girls Grammar	Auckland

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2003	Dunn, Michael, <i>New Zealand Painting A Concise History</i> , Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2003
2002	Elizabeth Caughey, <i>Art New Zealand Today</i> , Saint Publishing, Auckland, 2002



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April Shin



Form



Form of a Tree II (detail), Mixed media on board, 90 x 90 cm, 2004



It Forms (Detail), Mixed media on board, 90 x 60 cm, 2004

Opening Tuesday 7th of September
at 5.30 pm until 26th September 2004

WARWICK HENDERSON GALLERY, 32 Bath Street, Parnell, Auckland, NZ. Phone / Fax (09) 309 7513. Email: info@warwickhenderson.co.nz. Web: www.warwickhenderson.co.nz



Forming, mixed media on board, 120 x 90 cm, 2004



Form of a Tree II, Mixed media on board, 90 x 90 cm, 2004



Forming with Rhythm I, Mixed media on board, 100 x 80 cm, 2004

April Shin: Form



What first impresses about the painting of April Shin is its quiet subtle beauty. Her paintings are not loud statements that shout to attract our attention rather they are modest in scale, intimate in their engagement with the viewer and speak in a low soft voice. She draws the viewer into her world of animate forms with a gentle but irresistible force, which issues from the thought and feeling that are hallmarks of her style. Nothing happens in her art without considerable reflection in the quietness and solitude of her studio. There she is in a closer contact with her inspiration that is as much spiritual as material in nature. The mystery of life itself, of growth and being are very much at the centre of her consciousness of the world and of her understanding of the meaning of our lives. Belying her years, April Shin has in her philosophy of art maturity and gravity that strike a deep chord of truth.

In the process of making her paintings there is a slow meditative dimension, which can extend over months while the works take shape. There is a cyclic relationship between the year and each body of work. Each stage of making is approached systematically and carefully so that the final outcome is analogous to natural growth in trees and plants from a small seed to a large branching tree. She begins with small panels that she works into a relief-like surface with applications of gesso and a modelling medium. Her consideration of these surfaces shows her concern for the three-dimensional elements of her imagery in which the tactile is important as is shown by her affinity for texture and surface. She scrutinises each projection and recess of the surface of each panel before she applies colour in glazes of acrylic paint. It is almost as if the drawing takes place at the first stage, in the development of the relief-like surfaces, and before paint is applied.

Then the colour can be selected to give the painterly dimension to each part of the work. April applies colour with great sensitivity to the relationship between it and the underlying forms that acquire new life and identity in the process. Her range of colour covers a broad spectrum from bright yellow or blue through to deep greys and browns. By mixing and contrasting each coloured panel, she can create a wide range of combinations that are linked by their modular nature and grid-like disposition across the backing board. To choose the final components, April hangs the panels on the studio wall in various combinations before arriving at the final grouping. A percentage of the panels is discarded somewhat like the natural selection process in nature when the fittest survive and the weak die. While the intuitive and subconscious act of making and selecting is at play in all her paintings, this does not exclude the premeditation that is at the core of her work. Scale, format and theme are all thought out in advance and underlie the final process. Each painting only defines itself at the last stage and is not fully known in advance.

Born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1976 April came to Auckland with her family in 1990 and was educated at Selwyn College and Epsom Girls' Grammar School. She remembers being encouraged to study art by Marté Szirmay who taught her in the 7th form for a few months. She gained entry to the Elam School of Art in 1995 where she majored in painting under tutors like Jude Rae, Don Binney, and Nuala Gregory. However, Séraphine Pick was the tutor whose work and teaching were most in sympathy with her own approach. While at art school she was able to develop her ideas and to find some accommodation between her Korean cultural background and contemporary Western ideas about painting practice.

She was studying at a time when Elam was gradually widening its intake of students to achieve a greater diversity of cultural backgrounds compared with the almost mono-cultural profile that had prevailed for over a hundred years. She was fortunate that there were several other

Korean students at the school during those years when being from an Asian background was still novel and somewhat problematic. Also, she met Luise Fong then tutoring at the school who has a comparable cultural identity combining Asian and European strands. After completing her BFA degree in 1998, she worked for two years as a painter before returning to Elam in 2001 to do her Masters degree. Her first solo exhibitions were well received and attracted buyers from both Korean and European backgrounds. Her success was striking considering that she was as yet unknown outside the art school and a limited circle of family and friends. However, the seriousness and quality of her painting that is unlike anything else being produced in Auckland undoubtedly attracted a discriminating clientele.

To some degree April's painting reflects her Korean background because it is suffused by a flavour that appears to the Western eye as exotic and redolent of the decorative arts that we loosely associate with the Orient. She, of course, grew up in Korea and lives in a Korean household where English is not much spoken. She has travelled back to Seoul on a number of occasions and has studied the land and the people with the eye of an artist. While she does not draw upon anything that could be called a Korean tradition of painting she does convey a feeling for the colours, textures and designs of her homeland. In Chinese and Korean porcelain, for example, there is a great sensitivity to the handling of natural forms like leaves and flowers in a decorative fashion and parallels can be found with the way April employs similar forms in her paintings. The study of Korean calligraphy, too, helped her to develop a sense of line and rhythm in the deployment of forms and patterns across the surface of her works. Unlike some immigrant artists she does not deliberately seek out such relationships while she creates her paintings rather they emerge subconsciously during the working process. Accordingly in her paintings a number of strands of thought and feeling intertwine and add to their individuality and appeal.

The meeting of cultures in her art is akin to the wider meeting and mixing of diverse people from different ethnic backgrounds that can be seen in the Auckland community as a whole. Her art has an almost postmodernist dimension to it in the mixing and mingling of elements that join together to make her works. It is possible to relate her painting to some developments in the art of her contemporaries in Auckland who are concerned with matters of cultural identity such as Josephine (Pui Yee) Do. However, her art remains very much a personal development and such relationships are general in nature rather than specific. Instead of stressing her sense of difference April Shin searches for an accommodation between her cultural backgrounds that make her a New Zealander of Korean lineage. She feels she belongs in New Zealand and likes the openness of society and the opportunities that exist for those who choose to make creative work in this environment. It is important to realise that she has also studied the history of Western painting and likes the works of Antoni Tapes, Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, all artists with strong decorative qualities and an interest in the intuitive.

Looking back over April's painting, since 2000 when she held her first solo exhibition, it is possible to see some changes and evolution in her work. Her first exhibition was more realistic in the relationship between the tree forms depicted and the painted imagery than her present works. One painting was based very closely on a photograph of a Moreton Bay Fig tree in Albert Park but was restricted to the trunks, roots and first branches. Painted on forty-two small panels the image was assembled to make a large and effective composition. Although it did not show the entire tree, her intention was to provide enough for viewers to create a mental completion of the whole by using their imagination. In that painting April modelled the light and shade of the trunk and used texture in the brushwork to evoke the surface of the bark of the tree trunks. In her second exhibition, the following year, her painting became more experimental and abstract. Also, she used brighter colour

making a transition from spring to summer, if thought of in seasonal terms. The theme remained concerned with trees but more with their energy than their literal appearance. Now the individual panels were more varied in colour and contrasted in appearance, no longer making a realistic picture but rather collectively suggesting the growth and vitality of the tree. She used textures to show seeds growing and colours, like yellow and orange, that suggest the sun and its role in the miracle of life. The process of growth and fertility now become more important than description, though leaf and bark forms are still to be found.

These ideas continued in her third show in 2002 where she used darker tones and made paintings that were more conventionally composed of one panel. Several of these works appear totally abstract but relate to photographs of rock formations taken in Korea and New Zealand. She used raised areas of gesso and modelling compound on a larger scale than previously to give a sense of relief and mass. In 2003 she travelled to Europe where she took many photographs of scenery and of textures such as crumbling walls in Rome. Back in Auckland, she painted the landscapes that were exhibited in the show called Presence. These paintings appear as more conventional landscapes than her previous work and are in a restricted palette of greys, blue and brown. Her intention was to suggest the spiritual presence of the Creator in the natural world by reference to the elemental forces of air, land and water. In particular she wanted to convey the spiritual element through evoking the presence of wind in the landscapes, invisible but powerful. She quoted the biblical verse: 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' Again tree forms are prominent and appear with reflections in all the paintings to which her fine sense of design and pattern gives distinction.

Her current exhibition called Form continues with the tree theme and synthesizes various ideas and approaches with which she has experimented over the past four years. In it she returns to what she calls her first style by making the paintings of multiple parts allowing her to depict the visible outer aspects of the tree, leaves and bark, alongside the invisible forms of cells that create its growth from small a seed to a large tree. In the arrangement of the component panels April has varied the spacing and made the ordering less symmetrical than in her previous work. Her positioning of the panels is arrived at partly intuitively but partly also by considering the relationship between the component parts. This combined with the greater sophistication in the textures and colouration marks a step forward in the maturity of her work. For example, in some of these paintings she has used a bright red for the first time that enlivens the cooler colours that surround it and has connotations of autumn, especially when it is in the form of a leaf. But the red leaf forms also suggest the idea of a wound and of blood, and point to the symbolic layers of meaning in her work that deal with the purpose of life and the need for sacrifice to attain our spiritual destiny.

In a few brief years April Shin has established herself as a painter of accomplishment and individuality. Her Christian beliefs and cultural background combine to give a spiritual meaning and dimension to her works at a time when New Zealand society is becoming increasingly materialistic and amoral. They contribute to the significance of her painting, which provides a vehicle for contemplation as well as for aesthetic pleasure. Her art operates on a number of different levels and provides a richness of responses that is a sign of enduring quality. April has already achieved a great deal and shows promise of achieving a great deal more.

Text by Michael Dunn 2004