

Hegelian dialectics propose an ontology of opposites – a formula, if you will, for comprehending the conditional dynamic of existence. Hegel’s construct, of course, simply formalizes for Western minds what is implicit throughout Eastern perception: contrary forces meet and ultimately come to a resolution. In aesthetic contexts, especially, that resolution is the result not of battle but of discourse – that is, of artistic practice.

By bringing her Japanese cultural heritage to the fore within a framework of Western abstract painting, Shizuko Greenblatt does not simply limn a dialectical process, she lays it bare. In a sense she illustrates the Hegelian ontology, certainly by defining clearly its (supposedly) clashing elements; but her paintings are obviously more than mere illustrations. They exist not to explain dialectical relationships but to set them in motion visually. The clash of thesis and antithesis does not simply result in synthesis but embodies it.

Greenblatt’s Eastern *métier* is calligraphy, a practice laden not just with tradition but with intricate meaning. Calligraphic gestures are captured moments of manual virtuosity; they are forms and images in themselves; and they bear lingual, not just visual, meaning. Every stroke of the Kanji figure is an integral locus of energy, as distilled as a poem or an icon. A calligraphic notation exists on its own, in the company of other notations, and/or in the realm of the pictorial. This is no longer a foreign notion to Western eyes, but Greenblatt elucidates it without compromising its presence or poise, adding to our experience of calligraphy by imbuing it with personal vigor even while clarifying its visual presence (and by inference its history).

Greenblatt renders her calligraphies against, within, or upon fields of saturated color, often broken up into spectrum- or panel-like arrays. Just as often, the calligraphic figures seem to be generating their own grounds, far more painterly than the colored geometric formats; but, still, the figure-ground relationship (a Hegelian dynamic if ever there were one) dictates composition. In still other works Greenblatt suppresses the calligraphic presence altogether (or almost so), preferring instead to activate the surfaces of her works with repeated inscriptions of clearly formed but eccentric shapes, or even low-relief superstructures. After our exposure to her Kanji gestures, Greenblatt is able to have us understand these seemingly obsessive shapes as a kind of slow-motion calligraphy, a form of (quasi-)notation freed of its verbal and manual associations but still apparently “standing” for something.

Shizuko Greenblatt is hardly alone in exploring the Hegelian implications of combining Sino-Japanese calligraphy with Western notions of non-objective abstraction. Indeed, various forms of calligraphic notation from all over the world have been introduced into abstract painting for a good century or more. But Greenblatt’s work is unusual in its schematic and imagistic lucidity. Its contrapposto of thesis – gestural calligraphic figure – and antithesis – plain, planar color field – provide us an object lesson in dialectic interaction. The vigor of her art speaks to the potential for tumult as well as tranquility in that interaction. And that art’s ultimate harmony speaks to its goals of inspiration and transformation.