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“The Critical Zone”:
Compositional Elements of Communication in Makoto Fujimura’s Painting,
1994-2006

A thesis submitted to
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By
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Mikiko Hirayama
Abstract

Makoto Fujimura (b. 1960) is an artist who synthesizes traditional Japanese nihonga techniques with Abstract Expressionism to create beautiful paintings filled with unusual light and saturated color. Fujimura believes that art can form a transcendent language of peace. In my thesis I articulate the formal elements that represent his vision of art as communication. I examine questions, visual metaphors and dialectical approaches to ascertain the meanings built into his paintings with special focus on devices that anchor the composition. Fujimura is an artist of growing international status with demonstrated leadership in government-sponsored art forums as well as others. This study will help to define Fujimura as an artist that actively advances contemporary art as a relevant, accessible form of communication. My observations will also provide a foundation for future research on his developing oeuvre.
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Art as communication can be a fairly ubiquitous and nebulous concept. Makoto Fujimura (b. 1960) is a contemporary artist who passionately believes that art can create a transcendent language. In this thesis I articulate how the structural elements built into his stunningly beautiful paintings initiate communication. I will explain how Fujimura’s compositional strategies initiate communication by raising questions and proffering visual metaphors. Although Fujimura himself says, “There’s something about great art that transcends analysis”¹ I believe a scholarly approach that delineates the structure and process of his painting will qualify the nature of his communication and enrich an understanding of his art.

Fujimura blends the traditional Japanese technique of nihonga with Abstract Expressionism to create large paintings filled with deeply saturated layers of color and shimmering light. Nihonga, literally “Japanese painting,” is characterized by hand-ground mineral pigments that are mixed with water and applied to kumohada, a type of handmade Japanese paper. The changes that occur as pigment, water, and paper interact have a mysterious quality that raises questions and suggests metaphors. The questions can be simple, such as, “What is that?” or “Why is it there?” or especially, “How did he do that?” Alternatively, the questions can be complex and philosophical. When I asked Fujimura what kind of experience he hoped the viewer would have, he replied, “I desire to create a ‘critical zone’ space in which deeper layers of questions about life, faith and humanity is

¹ Makoto Fujimura, e-mail to author, March 8, 2007.
Questions can initiate dialogue while metaphorical associations can supply answers. For example, I will explain how Fujimura’s handling of *nihonga* materials in a non-figurative manner suggests evocations of time, change, divinity and humanity, among others themes.

The spirit of inquiry that pervades Fujimura’s investigations is reflected in his exhibition titles. For example, ‘‘Water Flames’’ (New York, 2005) investigates the formal properties shared by two antithetical elements. ‘‘Four Quartets’’ (New York, 2003) parses T. S. Eliot’s masterpiece³ for visual resonance, and ‘‘Columbines’’ (Tokyo, 2002) searches for meaningful links between a mountain flower and tragedy. The numerous essays he has written, published on his website, www.makotofujimura.com, demonstrate a commitment to discussing problems of faith, culture, and history in a manner that is both analytical and creative. There are two other key aspects of structural communication in Fujimura’s expression. The first is the use of what I term anchoring devices in his paintings and the other is a dialectical approach to composition.

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² Ibid.
Anchors and Dialectics

Fujimura’s approach can essentially be described as dialectical in that he formally depicts opposing forces to raise themes that will engage viewers’ further consideration and ideally provoke discussion. My intent in the use of the word dialectic is to point up the dynamic tension between conflicting ideas that exist in Fujimura’s art as a compositional strategy. This is different than the dialectical method that is rooted in classical philosophy which uses the relationship between propositions and counterpropositions to synthesize one assertion from opposing viewpoints. At times, philosophers refer to the singular, synthetic assertion as “truth,” which does not correspond to my argument that Fujimura’s art represents communication through multivalent expression.

I will discuss visual dialectics in Fujimura’s art such as depictions of space, which can be landscape–like suggestions of atmospheric depth or flat and abstract. Although seemingly contradictory, Fujimura succeeds in conveying both representations of space through his use of *nihonga* technique. His depictions of form also embody contradiction; non-representational gestures, such as a calligraphic line or a splash of paint, appear as well as concrete recognizable figures, such as a tree or river. His compositions generally have some element of hard-edged, geometric organization, which implies a degree of control and planning, but at the same time, Fujimura makes great use of loose, flowing

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applications, an important component of his *nihonga* technique. The elements of contrast can function like points of recognition allowing the viewer to focus on one thing. These can be a piece of text, a water stain or a moon, for example. I will refer to these points as anchors because they allow the viewer to grasp some level of meaning in a sea of abstraction. I will examine how anchors and their contexts as well as dialectical elements construct imagery throughout my thesis, as a second tier of analysis in order to explore how visual metaphor and questions are structural elements of communication.

Fujimura converted to Christianity in 1987 and passionately practices his faith. While his religion profoundly shapes his artistic vision, traditional Christian themes do not appear in his work. It is unclear if Fujimura had any religious upbringing or if he defined himself in any religious terms prior to his conversion, but he attributes his Christianity to his wife’s influence.\(^5\) He describes the impact of his transformation on his art making:

> When I transferred my allegiance from Art to Christ in 1987, causing my Art to be art, a shift occurred in my vision. Whereas before, I had an intellectual doubt of seeing reality as is, let alone depicting it, now my newfound faith gave me the foundation to see reality and trust it. Colors and forms I saw were indeed what others could see, and the objective world did connect to the subjective. Not that I had not trusted representational depictions before. I had spent the last year drawing from figures (it was required for my graduate program) and even dutifully copying Japanese paintings from the past. But I now

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had a new conviction, to know for certain that certainty existed, that the “substance of things hoped for” is not a shadow of existence, but THE greater reality, more real and weighty than our own. I saw trees, rivers and skies differently.  

His faith appears to have imbued his artistic expression with conviction, synthesizing art and spirituality for him. Trees, rivers and skies are recurrent themes in his paintings and may symbolically represent the merger of art and faith for Fujimura.

Regarding religious meaning and the presence of Christian values in Fujimura’s paintings, I will steer clear of any such definitive interpretations in this paper, as I feel it is only one aspect of his work. I subscribe to Richard Wollheim’s observations about the artist’s intent: “The spectator will always understand more than the artist intended and the artist will always have intended more than any single spectator understands.”

Additionally, I will give examples of how Fujimura’s desire, which is a more accurate description than “intent,” is for viewers to experience his art as a multivalent transcendent experience, not a prescribed religious one.

Biography

Born in Boston, Fujimura received his B.A. from Bucknell University in 1983 and his M.A. degree from the nihonga program at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1990, where he was named National Cultural Affairs Scholar and earned the top

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thesis prize. Notably, he is the only non-Japanese born candidate to advance to their doctoral-level program studying under noted nihonga master Kayama Matazō (1927-2004).8 Because of his desire to return to the United States, Fujimura turned down a prestigious offer to become Kayama’s assistant and complete his doctorate degree at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music at the end of his studies. Fujimura’s work is in the permanent collections of the St. Louis Museum of Art and the Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as the Nerima Museum of Art and The Sato Museum, both in Tokyo, and Oxford House, Taikoo Place, Hong Kong. He has been actively exhibiting his paintings in museums since 1994 in Tokyo (Matsuzakaya Museum, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, The Ueno Royal Museum of Art, among others) and in the United States (Katzen Arts Center, Washington D.C., Tryon Center for Visual Arts, Charlotte, North Carolina and Noyes Museum, Oceanville, New Jersey, for example). His numerous solo exhibits date from 1996, in New York and Tokyo, with group exhibits dating from 1989. While painting comprises the bulk of his oeuvre, on which I will focus, he has also created video installations, sculpture and performance art to add extra dimensionality to his themes.

Fujimura has garnered attention from Christian publications such as World Magazine9 and Worldwide Challenge Magazine10 and organizations such as The Christian Embassy to

8 All Japanese names will be shown surname first, as is traditional in Japan, with the exception of Makoto Fujimura and Takashi Murakami whose names are usually given first name first in English writing.
the United Nations and The Matthew’s House Project, which explores the intersection of faith and culture. An active member of the National Council on the Arts since 1998, he was appointed president in 2003 by the Bush Administration. Fujimura works closely with the National Endowment for the Arts and in 2003 was selected to be on the delegation to facilitate the reengagement of the United States with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO), which had been inactive since 1984. He is the founder and director of the International Arts Movement, a multi-disciplinary arts collective that sponsors conferences, lectures, concerts and workshops in order to promote art as a peacemaking endeavor. He has collaborated with Yoko Ono on "Making Peace," (All Hallows on the Wall Church, The City of London Exhibit, 2005), percussionist and composer Susie Ibarra, and singer composer Sufijan Stevens. Hiroshi Senju (b. 1958) is a longtime friend, colleague and collaborator of Fujimura’s.11

Fujimura’s website, www.makotofujimura.com, which dates from January 2002, is an important vehicle of communication, especially because he incorporated a web log, or computer generated journal at his daughter’s urging, which allows reader commentary and query. Besides numerous essays, articles and images the web site features links to cultural events, lectures, and other artists’ work. One link, titled “Curator,” details

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11 Senju studied nihonga with Fujimura, earning his doctorate degree in 1987 from the Tokyo University of Fine Art and Music. Senju also represented Japan in the 46th Venice Biennale (1995) winning an honorable mention award.
Fujimura’s work on “Tribeca Temporary,” an exhibition space for “Ground Zero artists.”\textsuperscript{12} Fujimura and his studio mate Hiroshi Senju invited local artist colleagues who were struggling to respond to the devastation created by the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 into their studio to share their artistic responses and initiate a healing process. This forum developed into a permanent gallery, the Kristen Frederickson Contemporary Art Gallery in New York. Fujimura’s commitment to community at the local, national and international level exemplifies his vision of art as communication and peacemaking.

**Chapter Outline**

In my thesis I explore how Fujimura’s expression communicates within the framework of other abstract expressionist work, focusing on his innovations with \textit{nihonga}. I draw from Fujimura’s writings to create a full understanding of his creative process and the issues he wishes to address which concern life, faith and humanity. I have chosen not to present Fujimura’s paintings chronologically but rather to fit them thematically into my argument.\textsuperscript{13}

In my first chapter I will explain \textit{nihonga} technique and materials, emphasizing the manner in which Fujimura translates these elements into his paintings. I will also give a brief history of the origins and development of \textit{nihonga} in order to situate Fujimura’s training within a century-old tradition. In my second chapter I will compare Fujimura’s

\textsuperscript{12} *Tribeca Temporary*, [website]: http://www.makotofujimura.com/index_tt.html ; Internet.

\textsuperscript{13} An excellent chronology of Fujimura’s work is available on his website www.makotofujimura.com.
work to abstract expressionist paintings by Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Jackson Pollock (1912 – 1956), and Cy Twombly (b. 1928) to shed light on specific aspects of Fujimura’s composition that create communication. Rothko was an important influence for Fujimura in his use of color, form and space. A comparison of the two will illustrate the differences in the tone of their artistic communication; Rothko prioritizes a dramatic, emotional experience whereas Fujimura seeks to elicit a more questioning, intimate response.

Fujimura also acknowledges Pollock as an inspiration. I will compare documentaries that were filmed as each artist worked to compare their techniques, as they drip and spatter the supports. Both artists bring a sense of physicality to their application that borders on performance art, but it is evident that Fujimura’s method is the product of many years’ training. I will continue to place Fujimura within the broader context of Abstract Expressionism by drawing from the writings of literary theorist and social critic Roland Barthes (1915-1980) who discusses handwriting as text in paintings by Cy Twombly (b. 1928). I hope to gain access to meanings suggested by the texts that Fujimura sometimes embeds in his paintings.

Lastly, to create a final impression of Fujimura’s spirit of inquiry I will analyze one of his essays “Refractions 21: Come and See: Leonardo Da Vinci’s Philip in The Last Supper”14 in my third chapter. My study of this essay will demonstrate how Fujimura is drawn to

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dialectical compositional elements in Da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* (1495-98) which I will relate to his own artistic concerns.

In my conclusion I will summarize the structural elements of communication built into Fujimura’s paintings and highlight the ways that Fujimura’s art represents a language that effectively creates dialogue and symbolizes a peace making endeavor.

**Review of the Literature**

Little, if any, scholarly writing is available in the literature on Fujimura. Most publications tend to be reviews, interviews, or re-publications of essays from Fujimura’s website, with slight commentary. National publications include reviews in *Art News* by Margaret Moorman (Nov. 1998)\(^{15}\) and Gerard Haggerty (Nov. 1995)\(^{16}\) and *Art in America* by Robert Kushner (Dec. 1995).\(^ {17}\) David Gelernter of *The Weekly Standard* finds Fujimura’s work “as commanding and compelling as de Kooning’s, Pollock’s, or Rothko’s.”\(^ {18}\)

Numerous regional art and cultural magazines such as *NYArts*\(^ {19}\) have reviewed Fujimura’s work and many interviews such as the one in *Hedgehog Review*\(^ {20}\) have been published. The


void in scholarly analysis may be because Fujimura’s art is in a stage of development. Also, his work lacks controversy and shock value. Fujimura contrasts sharply with contemporary artists such as Takashi Murakami (b. 1962), a classmate of his who also studied *nihonga* at the Tokyo National University of Fine Art and Music. Immersed in themes that draw mass media attention, Murakami appropriates popular cultural imagery from Japanese animation and comic books in his paintings and sculpture to raise issues of consumerism and sexual fetishism as an examination of the boundaries between high and low art culture.\(^{21}\) Although Murakami’s work provides some level of social commentary, it is a far cry from Fujimura’s view that art has an important role to play in society “... to redeem the language of art, so that we can all, Christians and non-Christians alike, use the language to communicate.”\(^{22}\)

The writing on Fujimura consistently raises three issues: his bi-cultural status as a first-generation Japanese American educated in two countries,\(^{23}\) his faith, and his use of traditional Japanese painting techniques applied to contemporary art. While these elements do represent an interesting compendium of details I intend to delve deeper into

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\(^{21}\) *TakashiMurakami.com,* [website] available from http://www.takashimurakami.com/; Internet. Murakami, who in most ways represents everything Fujimura is not, states on his website, "I express hopelessness."


\(^{23}\) Tim Ellsworth writes, “Fujimura has worked as a successful artist in Japan and the United States for more than 20 years, during which time he has become a bicultural authority on the nature and cultural assessment of beauty.” Ellsworth, “Prominent International Artist to Speak at Union March,” *The Union News* [website] Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, available from http://www.uu.edu/uniontoday; Internet; accessed 25 January 2007.
how and why his paintings create meaning. I plan to initiate a scholarly discussion of Fujimura’s art to provide a foundation for further analysis as his work develops. Noted artist and critic Robert Kushner believes Fujimura is breaking new ground. He is quoted on the National Endowment for the Arts website as saying, "The idea of forging a new kind of art, about hope, healing, redemption, refuge, while maintaining visual sophistication and intellectual integrity is a growing movement, one which finds Fujimura’s work at the vanguard." If Kushner is correct, then my observations will point to significant observations about Fujimura’s work that could be further developed to define his achievement and they could be fruitfully applied to other contemporary artists who share his concerns.

Introduction

In this chapter I explain the basic components of *nihonga*: handmade paper, animal glue, paint made from natural pigments, and brushes. Fujimura’s nearly magical orchestration of these elements stems from a deep understanding of each item’s expressive potential. His skill in executing diverse interpretations of *nihonga* allows him to create expressions that incite the imagination with visually engaging metaphors and dynamic representations of space. I will locate his unique achievement within the historical context of *nihonga* by explaining the origins of the term and the development of the training he received. I will also comment briefly on *nihonga* as a social construct.

Paper

Fujimura uses *kumohada* paper, which is hand made from the fibers of the mulberry tree and hemp in the western part of Japan. He treasures the process as a valued tradition of native craft and ascribes *kumohada*’s strength and durability to the invention of Hirano Heisaburō, who in the early twentieth century devised a method to “weave” layers of paper together for greater strength and size.¹ *Kumohada* paper is the largest handmade paper available, reaching lengths of sixteen feet. It has a distinctly textured surface and the strength of canvas. The large size and singular texture make it ideal for Fujimura’s abstract

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expressionist work, which is monumental in size yet intimate. He notes in his essay “Cloudskin: Refractions 14” that other papermakers achieve similar size and strength by creating individual sheets of paper and then gluing them together.² I believe this patched method would have inferior durability and irregularities in finish and thickness, making it less suitable for the absorption of paint. I also believe that Fujimura’s use of the term “weaving” is loosely accurate. Based on tours I have made of large industrial textile mills in Osaka as well as small, traditional mills in Nishiwaki, weaving technically refers to the configuration of spun fibers arranged on warp looms with weft yarns filling in to make cloth. From Fujimura’s description, I interpret his statement about how kumohada is “layers of paper woven together” to mean the manner in which the highly fibrous materials of hemp, mulberry, and other plants enmesh together to render a dense, cloth-like material. I speculate that the bonding of fibrous papers could be encouraged with careful soaking in water, followed by manipulation through agitation, pressing, and drying.

The tightly “woven” aspect of kumohada paper is best viewed in Fujimura’s paintings that are not overlaid with gold or silver leaf. Close inspection reveals meandering fibers of varying length, thickness, and shape that appear tangled, yet flattened in a complex web-like surface. In his essay “Cloudskin,” Fujimura notes that the Declaration of Independence (1776) was written on paper similarly formed from mulberry fibers.³ The final result is an appealing surface that is organic and tactile.

² Ibid. “Cloudskin” translates to kumohada which gives some idea of the paper’s permeable lightness, large size, and ephemeral presence.
³ In “Cloudskin” Fujimura also writes poetically of kumohada as a metaphor for democracy, using The Declaration of Independence as a jumping off point. He notes that while the concept of democracy, like
Another key characteristic of *kumohada* for Fujimura is breathability. As watery pigments are layered on to the porous paper “a semi-permanent surface is created.”\(^4\) I interpret Fujimura’s description of partial permanence to convey a surface that continues to shift subtly, according to the absorption rate of the water. In the DVD titled *Water Processes* (2005), Fujimura applies paint to dampened paper on the floor and manipulates the flow with long brushes. It is as if he is drafting a virtual map of active waterways; small lakes flow into streams, which merge into soggy marshland or re-combine into meandering currents. *Kumohada* can not only sustain large amounts of water and pigment but it reacts with them, absorbing and molding in varied ways. When the movement stills and the pigments settle and dry, the process is still in evidence because it “is captured by the watermarks on the surface.”\(^5\) The pattern of dried marks suggest water erosion and a sense of narrative like an ancient river that once disturbed the topography and left sedimented remains in its wake.

When the paint or water is dropped and left to dry without manipulation, such as in *Water Flames: Azurite*, the marks have a readily identifiable human quality. Sara Tecchia, owner of the Sara Tecchia Roma New York gallery in New York where Fujimura has had two solo exhibitions, remarked that children point out the water *kumohada* paper, has tremendous strength and durability it is not invulnerable; both can be punctured, “like on that beautiful azure day of Sept. 11.[sic]” He is referring to the September 11 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, which occurred a few blocks from his studio, his children’s school and his home. This event had profound implications for Fujimura’s vision that art can be a transcendent language, helping viewers to understand and heal.


\(^5\) Ibid.
stains quickly. My guess is that in searching the large and potentially intimidating painting they locate the stains as something empathetic; the stains represent something as fallible and universal as a spill.

The porous nature of *kumohada* means the surface will continue to evolve, as pigments rise or settle and interact with air. Fujimura says the binding process takes about two years to complete and that even boiling water poured directly on the surface will not affect the appearance.

**Glue**

*Nikawa* is the glue that forms an important part of the binding process, and it is made by boiling hides from deer or other animals for hours, from which a gelatin-like liquid is extracted. The substance is then poured into molds for further solidification, cut into sticks, and dried completely. For use it is reconstituted in water and mixed with pigments and more water. As an organic substance *nikawa* has what Fujimura refers to as “fibers,” which create two effects -- they can be “woven” into the paper and they allow the pigments to “breath [sic] with air.” Fujimura contrasts *nikawa* with varnish, which is used on oil paintings. Varnish traps air and moisture, causing degenerative

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7 Makoto Fujimura, e-mail interview to author, March 8, 2007.


9 Makoto Fujimura, e-mail interview to author, March 8, 2007.

10 Ibid.
problems and changing the nature of the applied paint. *Nikawa* promotes the durable fusion of pigment and paper.\(^\text{11}\)

**Pigments**

While *nihonga* pigments are usually referred to as mineral, there are actually five categories of pigments: mineral, natural earth, fine grain, organic, and metals, specifically gold and silver. \(^\text{12}\) From the mineral category Fujimura uses azurite for blue, malachite for green and cinnabar for red. As pure unmixed color, azurite, malachite, and cinnabar have an intense direct glow which almost seems to vibrate, especially when peeking through layers of gold as in *Golden Fire* (Figure 2) or splashed across the surface of many-layered gold such as in *Cloud Voices – Azurite* (Figure 4). The only earth pigments Fujimura uses is ōdo, a kind of yellow ochre, and the only organic pigment is cochineal red, derived from extracts secreted by the female cochineal beetle.

The fine-grained category contains two important pigments for Fujimura – *sumi* and *gofun*, essentially black and white. *Sumi* is black ink made from the charcoal of burnt pinewood and *gofun* is made from clam and oyster shells. *Sumi*, which I will discuss first, has ancient and venerable origins dating from artistic practices in the Tang Dynasty in China (618-907). Zen Buddhist priests in Japan adopted *sumi* for their calligraphy during the mid-fourteenth century and it was further developed into painting as an outgrowth of calligraphy by Buddhist monk artists such as Sesshū Tōyō (1420-1506). Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539-1610), whom Fujimura cites as a formative

\(^{11}\)Ibid.
\(^{12}\) Masako, 110.
influence, painted with *sumi* ink most expressively in graded washes depicting simple
scenes in nature, such as *Shōrinzu Byōbu* (Pine Forest), late sixteenth century (Figure 5).
Fujimura discusses Hasegawa’s skill, stating, “He did not merely want to capture a pine
forest, he wanted to get to the essentiation, the core of being and seeing.”\(^\text{13}\) I interpret
“essentiation” to mean essence. Art critic Christine Cavallomagno describes how
Fujimura depicts essence in a manner similar to Hasegawa, writing:

> His gorgeous monochromatic works recall ancient landscape
> paintings, such as those of Tohaku Hasegawa [sic] whose 16th
> century landscape paintings Fujimura cites as a major influence.
> Hasegawa’s pine tree paintings are said to evoke the experience
> of listening to the air rustling through the trees rather than
> viewing them. The Zen idea of capturing the core of nature by
> somehow conveying that spirit through the work of art, rather
> than simply capturing reality as it appears, is a concept that
> permeates Japanese painting and is clearly present here.\(^\text{14}\)

Cavallomagno notes that Fujimura’s works are difficult to photograph successfully
because the “essence is contained not in the arrangement of forms in space, but in the
mystery conveyed through the work as a whole.”\(^\text{15}\) I agree with this analysis because
photographic images tend to flatten images and cannot accurately represent Fujimura’s
sophisticated renderings of light and space that create that impression of the inner or
true essence of things.


\(^{15}\) Ibid.
While Fujimura has painted scenes evocative of landscape in *sumi* ink, such as *December Hour*, 1998-99 (Figure 6), a large many-layered composition on gold leaf with a depiction of Mt. Fuji suggested in the middle ground, his innovation with *sumi* lies elsewhere. It is his original concept to infuse *kumohada* paper with it, dyeing it a rich, even dark brown that is tinged with purple. Large sheets of this paper, which the papermaker has since named “Fujimura paper,” exceed approximately eight feet in height and twelve feet in length. Fujimura paper, splashed with gold, was incorporated into Fujimura’s second solo exhibition “Golden Fire” in the fall 2006 (Figure 3) at the Sara Tecchia Gallery in New York as part of the exhibition.

The central piece of the exhibition *Golden Fire* (Figure 2) occupied the main wall of the large gallery, and is visible from a distance of approximately fifty or more feet before one enters. Upon approach, blue and black details become evident on and under the gold surface of *Golden Fire*. A grid was revealed, made up of small gold leaf squares and a large upward-moving flame taking shape in the center. As the viewer moves around the gallery space the light reflected from the gold surface, which took five years to apply, behaved in different dizzying ways, reflecting the spotlights above and bouncing off the polished concrete floor below. A smaller gold painting, *Golden Soliloquy*, (2006) echoed the much larger *Golden Fire* and was hung on the opposite wall. *Golden Soliloquy* is approximately sixty inches by forty-eight inches and made of the
same materials as *Golden Fire*: gold leaf, lapis, Japanese vermilion, and malachite. For Fujimura, gold has connotations of the divine.\textsuperscript{16}

Large pieces of Fujimura paper were hung in four locations as part of the presentation. Two pieces flanked *Golden Fire* on nearby walls. Two more pieces wrapped the two main columns of the gallery (See Figure 3). The Fujimura paper was hung close to the floor providing an earthy, grounding respite from the splendor of the gold. In a broad sense, the effect could be likened to visiting the small chapels that line the side aisles of a basilica; the main focus – the altarpiece – may be so grand as to be inaccessible or overwhelming, but more intimate private experiences can be had on either side of the nave. The Fujimura paper that wrapped the columns in the gallery created an immediate physical experience for the viewer who wanted to examine the fibers of the *kumohada* paper up close.

The wrapped columns also help define the three-dimensional space as an experience of movement. Soft gold washes lightly splashed the brown paper at intermittent intervals, achieving two goals. They triggered a sense of visual engagement by inviting close scrutiny, and they materially linked to the intense gold of the dramatic centerpiece. Seen in their entirety the gold splashes on the walls and columns had a cosmic quality reminiscent of the Milky Way in a darkened universe of *sumi* paper. Fujimura’s use of *sumi* ink on such a large scale created a balanced counterpoint to the

stunning gold effects, which contributed to the aesthetic experience and meaning of the piece as a whole.

A subtle dialectic was at work between gold and sumi in the space of the “Golden Fire” exhibit which I characterize as the relationship of the divine to the human. The manner in which the two brilliant, gold paintings were balanced by the four pieces of Fujimura paper evoked harmony as well as interdependence. The dark paper absorbed light that the gold reflected whereas the dark, abraded marks on the gold corresponded to the rustic nature of the Fujimura paper.

While black sumi ink can convey a down-to-earth quality, white gofun, another fine-grained pigment, can express ephemeral nuances. Gofun is used in Water Flames: Silver (Figure 7). Fujimura used oyster shells from beaches in Western Japan for this pigment, in a paint making technique that dates from the Muromachi period (1336-1573). Collected shells are washed, finely crushed and mixed with water to be pulverized to even smaller particles. That process yields a paste that is dried on wooden boards. Once dry, the substance is ground again to a powder that is mixed with water and glue to form paint. The fineness of the resulting paint and the range of its transparencies are best appreciated in person but can be perceived in a reproduction of Water Flames: Silver.

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17 The paste is also used to finish doll heads according to Jean D. Lotz, “Hirano Masamichi’s Dollmaking Process,” Lotz Doll Pages [website]; available from http://www.lotzdollpages.com/mhtech.html. Lotz writes “Traditional Japanese dolls have a heavy opaque finish made of ground sea shells called “gofun”. Part of the artistry of traditional Japanese dolls is how well the gofun is applied completely covering all doll parts. Gofun is applied in a traditional way with a lot of sanding and buffing between each layer. The end result is a silky smooth luminescent white surface.” Lotz based her article on an article in Doll Reader April 1991 in which Masamichi Hirano describes his process.
An animated splash of gofun paint arcs like the uppermost crest of a turbulent ocean wave just crashed, suffused in salty spray. The varying transparencies of the form convey a familiar aqueous substance, but the denser, chalkier areas create an otherworldly glow, which is made even more unreal by its contrast with the silver leaf squares that comprise the background. The silver, which is applied on kumohada paper, reflects light in a flat, impenetrable manner, and the grid creates a sense of rigid, time-consuming organization. The silver squares recall the artist’s hand in a manner that the wave shape does not. The wave seems completely organic and random, as if it appeared all on its own. A strange and exquisite dialectical tension is created between the wild, uncontrolled form and the calculation of known quantities. Water Flames: Silver is exemplary of Fujimura’s skill at taking what are essentially elements out of the ground or as he says “gifts from the earth,”¹⁸ and transforming them into a sophisticated, evocative study of light and form, making them seem ethereal.

Gold and Silver

Fujimura’s use of gold and silver leaf creates subtle meanings related to concepts of time as well as divinity. Those familiar with Japanese art history may interpret Fujimura’s use of overall gold background as derivative of the Kanō school, Japan’s oldest and most influential school dating from the mid-fifteenth century. The style featured large folding screens and sliding doors that were often covered in gold and

embellished with detailed subjects, such as an impressively gnarled tree set at a
dramatic angle, highly individual bird and flower motifs, and powerful, fanciful lions,
for example. *Hawk in Pine Tree* (Figure 8) from the seventeenth century exemplifies
Kanō school traditions in many ways. I speculate that Fujimura may have been inspired
by examples of Kanō style compositions that he studied at the Tokyo National
University of Fine Art and Music, whose initial curriculum in *nihonga* was based on the
Kanō style.19 Visible grid formations from historical Kanō style painters
parallel gold grid effects in Fujimura’s paintings such as *December Hour*. Only
supremely well-trained artists with established reputations could execute the
impressive commissions in the Kanō school style. As a decidedly decorative style that
catered to Japan’s *samurai* class, Kanō represents luxurious display and bold, colorful
motifs as a celebration of elite status -- themes inconsistent with Fujimura’s vision.
Fujimura does, however, recall the Kanō school legacy in that he shares a high level of
craftsmanship and training rooted in historical traditions.

Some of Fujimura’s paintings with gold backgrounds are reminiscent of the Rimpa
School, a delicate and decorative artistic tradition in Japan begun in the seventeenth
century.20 Furthermore, the subjects of Fujimura’s Rimpa-like paintings incorporate
sensitively rendered subjects from nature such as pine trees, quince trees, lilies, and
other flowers, on gold backgrounds. They bring to mind a famous Rimpa painting by

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20 The Rimpa School was developed by Hon’ami Koetsu (1558-1637) and Tawaraya Sotatsu (d. c. 1634).
Ogata Korin (1658-1716) called *Yatsuhashi*, 1705 (Figure 9) which is comprised of two six-fold screens featuring a radiant gold background, with lushly colored purple irises and green leaves, each depicted with individual nuances of form. Also, like the Rimpa School, which uses themes from literature and poetry as subject matter, Fujimura has taken inspiration from literary sources such as Italian poet Dante Aligheri (1265-1321) and British poet T.S. Eliot (1888-1965).

Some viewers, like art critic Margaret Moorman, may find Fujimura’s use of gold backgrounds linked to medieval icons 21 which Fujimura studied while on a trip to Italy in 2005. His use of gold and silver actually derives from the teachings of his sensei, or master, Kayama Matazo, at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. Kayama changed the way that Fujimura thought about gold and silver because Fujimura originally saw them as materials that evoked historical traditions which made them inappropriate for contemporary life. Kayama taught him “The weight of gold and silver will capture the passage of time herself.” 22 Silver oxidizes and tarnishes, an effect embraced and enhanced by Fujimura in many of his paintings such as *December Hour* leaving black marks of time. The use of silver as an imperfect material brings to mind the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi* which values the simple beauty of things withered or touched by time. Gold, on the other hand, remains immutable, and as previously

discussed, represents divinity. 23 When Fujimura refers to the “visual space created by
gold and silver” as “a moment of eternity,” 24 I believe he is metaphorically conveying
two related perspectives of time. Gold’s permanence is never ending in the same way
that silver’s decay will never cease. In a different context, Fujimura’s discussion of silver
and gold has Buddhist overtones:

> Once you accept the fact that things are not permanent, you
> approach the ephemeral with a renewed perspective. You can see the
> permanent and the ephemeral as parallel tracks and can find value in
> something that is aged, rusting, or decaying. 25

One of the major principles of Buddhism is the fleeting nature of all experience and the
inevitability of change. 26 Essentially, Fujimura’s use of the metals communicates a sense
of gratitude for precious materials tinged with melancholy evoked by the passage of
time. But does this interpretation apply to Columbine on Silver, 2001 (Figure 10), a
painting that appears to be composed only of silver leaf squares, which number eleven
squares high by eight squares wide?

The grid pattern in Columbine on Silver is muted and the individual squares betray
slight yellowy tarnish, creating a warm subtle patina within each square, as the overall
shine of metal reflects a diffuse light. This painting was executed as one of a series in

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23 Makoto Fujimura, “Images of Grace,” The Hypertexts [website]; available from
www.thehypertexts.com/Makoto_Fujimura_Art_Bio_Picture_and_Essays.htm; Internet;
accessed 4 November 2006.
24 Fujimura, “Refractions Volume 3”.
Culture and Public Life [on-line journal]; available from http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cachenaZa0-
M3GWIIJ:www.firstthings.com/article.php3%3Fid_article%3D540+makoto+fujimura+parallel+tracks&hl=e
response to the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, 1999. Two teenage students shot and killed twelve students and one teacher before committing suicide. In an attempt to configure some type of a response to the senseless tragedy Fujimura took his three young children to hike the hills of Littleton where they discovered a fragile beautiful flower named the columbine. Most of Fujimura’s Columbine paintings feature this flower, which he has likened to an image of an angel, but Columbine on Silver, with its void of imagery, bears overt witness to death. Fujimura explains:

In Japan, silver has always symbolized death but also the fleeting reality of our existence; in Japanese culture death is seen as something that needs to be viewed as something beautiful. These materials and the technique itself captures [sic] the essence of an aesthetic-world view developed over centuries of Japanese art. At the same time, I believe the range of expression and surface-presence of these materials makes them appropriate contemporary medium, a visual diction that bridges the past and the present.

While all Japanese may not equate silver with death in Japan the painting remains an elegant and beautiful expression, offering a transcendent reality in the face of tragedy. It is the materials and Fujimura’s handling of them that creates meaning in the “visual space” of his painting. The materials enable him to capture that which is difficult to express in words -- that which is abstract. This


concept comes to further expression with mineral pigments in a space he calls the
“grace arena.”

The Grace Arena

The “grace arena” is a poetic term coined by Fujimura to describe the space on paper that is created when pigment-laden water slides over the kumohada in layers, creating a glistening environment of change. He states, “My eyes see much more than what my mind can organize. As the light becomes trapped within pigments, a ‘grace arena’ is created, as the light is broken, and trapped in refraction. Yet, my gestures are limited, contained, and gravity pulls the pigments like a kind friend.” I interpret the “grace arena” to mean a space that is created on the paper that evokes notions of mutability within depth. The layers create a palpable sensation of place that is difficult to explain and captivating to the eye; it is a configuration of great beauty that invites reflection in a unique manner.

The concept of grace is an important one for Fujimura. He has used it in the titles of two of his exhibitions and some of his paintings and has spoken at length about the difficulty of defining grace to an unidentified museum curator in Japan. The curator expressed curiosity about the word grace in reference to Fujimura’s exhibition pamphlets, “Images of Grace,” because, according to Fujimura, there is no appropriate

30 Fujimura, “Beauty Without Regret.”
Japanese equivalent. In English, grace usually connotes elegance, generosity, politeness, and gratitude. Christian meanings are more complicated, usually referring to a state free from sin, as well as God’s endless love and mercy for humanity.  

For Fujimura, grace implies the essence of things, “whether they be are trees, experiences, flowers, or landscape.” Grace, as an expression of essence, is reminiscent of his description of Hasegawa’s art and the influence it has had on Fujimura pictorial technique. Striving to depict essence or the reality of things has two sides; there is a transcendent, heavenly aspect balanced by an earthly and sometimes grim aspect. Fujimura explains his idea of grace further by pointing out that the *nihonga* mineral pigments embody the same duality of transcendence and immanence. I interpret his meaning to indicate that while the crushed pigments sparkle and generate beautiful color, of a quality that seems beyond this world, they still come from the earthly ground that is definitely of this material world. I construe the phrase the “grace arena” to mean a place of grace that incorporates all of the above metaphysical qualities as well as the physical expression of beauty and elegance.

Furthermore, there is a sense of transformation in Fujimura’s concept of “the grace arena.” The shifts that occur as the pigmented water reacts with the *kumohada* and *nikawa* create an impression of lively activity and flow in many layers. Fujimura has videotaped the process of paint drying in an attempt to capture the sense of life it


33 Makoto Fujimura, “Images of Grace”.

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Yale University Divinity School Professor Emeritus Nicholas Wolterstorff describes the results of the process and the sense of dimensional space that it creates, as follows:

The mineral particles themselves are minute refractors; one notices a mysterious subdued sparkle embedded in the surface as one moves back and forth. The colors recede and advance in accord with their intrinsic character, giving depth to the space. And the density of layering makes them change as the light varies and one’s perspective alters. The surface is mysteriously alive.\(^{35}\)

I concur with Wolterstorff’s description based on seeing “Golden Fire,” parts of “Water Flames,” and various smaller paintings from storage at the Sara Tecchia Roma New York gallery in New York during my January 2007 visit. I would add that my eyes and mind struggled a bit to organize the space of these paintings in a logically coherent fashion when viewing them because of the impression of space that they create. Of course, my attempts were futile because the moment I thought understood one effect’s depth and place I was distracted by another effect of light and color. In this manner “the grace arena” is a place to enter and consider possibilities. One could even get disoriented and lost in “the grace arena” in meditative reflection. Even when dry, the pigments continue to shift, as they interact with air, nikawa, and kumohada.

Tecchia likens the shifting process of the completed painting to how a photographic image develops. She initially expressed reluctance to hang Water Flames: Azurite in her gallery because she literally could not see anything in the work. Fujimura encouraged

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her to store it for six months at which time she perceived a paradoxical image – watery flames leaping up the surface of the painting. Water stains, with slightly darker pigment residue outlining their perimeters spatter the surface and contradict the image of fire. Close inspection reveals icy crystalline sparkles in the blue green veils wafting in the background. Months later, Tecchia noted even more change as the pigments continued to rise to the surface. Silvery horizontal lines appeared near the top of the painting, perhaps evoking a distant horizon. As noted previously, the surface of Fujimura’s paintings do become impermeable in approximately two years. A degree of change will always be intrinsic because of changes in atmospheric light refraction and the viewer’s point of reference. Like tarnishing silver, Fujimura’s handling of nihonga materials in the “grace arena” suggests new possibilities.

There are a few other elements of Fujimura’s translation of nihonga that are important to note because they round out the impression that his technique has a physical “hands on” quality. He mixes pigments with water and nikawa in a small bowl using the middle finger to sense the correct consistency. Application can come directly from the bowl or paint can be drawn forth with paint brushes. Masako Koyano, director of the Art Conservation Lab in Tokyo, provides a detailed explanation of the many bristle qualities and brush sizes used by nihonga artists as well as specific techniques in *Nihonga: Transcending the Past*. One technique that Fujimura employs is called *tarashikomi* in which thinned ink or paint is dropped and allowed to seep in wet paper,

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36 Tecchia believes the *Water Flames* series to be inspired in part by the events of September 11th, where the competing elements of fire and water engulfed the two World Trade Center towers.
with additional applications of paint or gold flake. *Karabake* is another *.nihonga* technique whereby dampened paper receives paint applied by a large wide brush. The artists manipulate a dry brush over the paint to create a sense of depth and form as desired. Paper affixed to supports is frequently placed on the ground, especially if it is large, or on a flat table surface for more detailed work. Once the paint is applied Fujimura manipulates the composition more with long handled brushes, by tipping the mounted paper and with the additional application of water, sometimes as a fine mist generated from a power sprayer. The use of these tools offers finishing touches that refine the final concept in a careful, well considered manner.

**Nihonga, Imagination, and Communication**

*Water Flames* represents a juxtaposition of themes but there is also a dialectical quality represented in the basic structure of Fujimura’s expression. I find that Fujimura is drawn to dialectical elements as a vehicle of expression because contradictory or conflicting forces create a sense of tension, which I will explain in chapter three. The structure of a painting has fixed parameters; it is conceived of as a static surface in a rectangular format. The dynamic of change in Fujimura’s paintings, within the set boundaries of the painting, illustrate contradictory forces between the hard edges of the actual painting and the transformation that occurs within the work. By exploiting the expressive capabilities of *nihonga* materials Fujimura creates meaning with metaphor and visual spaces, constructing a range of formal elements that engage the imagination. Fujimura’s poetic allusions speak to the human condition; *sumi*-infused paper suggests
humanity, a wild wave on silver evokes fleeting transience, and tarnishing silver represents the precious passage of time, even death. I conclude that the link between imagination and action forms the fundamental precept to Fujimura’s communication. He describes the connection, using the actions of firefighters during the aftermath of the World Trade Center bombings: “. . . there were firefighters who climbed the fallen towers. We have to realize that before any of these acts were committed, they were imagined. We swim in the ecosystem of imagined actions. We do have a responsibility to that power.”37 While people may not feel a call to action when looking at Fujimura’s art, they may imagine a connection to the processes of his work and the themes he raises in the space of the paintings. Fujimura’s art communicates beyond the limits of known, nameable experience by engaging the eye first, followed by the mind and spirit.

**Origins of the Term Nihonga**

Fujimura’s accomplishments in *nihonga* are deeply rooted in a rich artistic tradition. His work represents an exciting transformation of historical artistic methods.

Although the term *nihonga*, which simply means Japanese style painting, dates from the 1880s,38 the practice of painting with mineral pigments applied by brush on handmade paper or silk dates from the tenth to late eleventh century, known as the Fujiwara epoch of the late Heian period (795-1195), with even earlier origins tracing to Korean and Chinese traditions. There is no specific iconography associated with

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nihonga. Subjects reveal a range of themes typical of Japanese painting, including landscape, seascape, portraiture, and genre-type scenes as well as topics inspired by literature, poetry, the change of seasons, and nature. Depictions that use traditional decorative and graphic techniques, such as sprinkling gold flake over a cloud or emphasizing line through careful brushwork, can be construed as abstract effects. Gekkō Sanrei, 1990, by Kayama Matazō (Figure 11) is a good example the latter technique.

The term nihonga was developed as a direct response to yogā or Western style painting, which was practiced by Japanese artists during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and onwards. In the years following Commodore Mathew Perry’s arrival to Japanese shores in 1853 trade restrictions with the United States were gradually lifted, with European countries eventually following suit. European books, especially those about technology and the natural sciences, were imported into Japan from 1720, when the shogunal ban on foreign books was lifted, but exposure to Western culture intensified in the middle to late nineteenth century as books, prints, art objects, paintings, fashion and technology flooded the main ports of Edo (Tokyo), Deshima and Osaka, spreading an atmosphere of excitement and curiosity. Previously only the port of Nagasaki had been open to foreign trade and then only in a limited fashion to Dutch traders.

Influenced by the influx of Western culture, yogā artists often used oil paints on canvas or panels. Their depictions tended toward pictorial devices that were little

qualities. The Western approach represented a concept of realism that was shaped by science and was therefore perceived to be modern and innovative.

As a reaction to western influences nihonga became a critical term of distinction for those seeking to preserve native Japanese traditions, such as Ernest Fenollosa (1853 – 1908) and Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913), two key figures in the development of nihonga. Okakura was the first director and one of the key curriculum developers of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, which was founded in 1889. Fenollosa, an American educator, also helped found the school with Okakura, as well as the first art museum, the Imperial Museum of Japan in 1889, before returning to America in 1890. The Imperial Museum of Japan was renamed The Tokyo Imperial Household Museum in 1900 and in 1952 was renamed the Tokyo National Museum, as it is known today. The concept of nihonga is usually associated with the origins of the Tokyo School of Fine Arts because it was only under the auspices of a public educational institution that the principles of Japanese painting were formulated for study. It is somewhat ironic that the codification of nihonga was a reaction to western modes while espousing the western university structure of education, such as fine art studio classes supplemented by lectures and courses in the humanities.

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40 In Boston Fenollosa became the curator of Oriental Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and continued to be an important voice promoting Japanese art in America and Europe. In 1893 he was asked to make selections of Japanese art for the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

The Tokyo School of Fine Arts merged with the Tokyo School of Music in 1949,\textsuperscript{42} becoming the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music where Fujimura spent six and a half years training in \textit{nihonga}. The history of \textit{nihonga}, from Fenollosa and Okakura to Fujimura, is long and unbroken, but still vulnerable to the vagaries of a nation emerging in the modern period as a key player in the global stage.

\textbf{History of \textit{Nihonga} Training}

Between 1889 and 1906 the status accorded \textit{nihonga} training versus \textit{yogā} training approached the level of controversy at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Many newly reorganized factions such as the Japan Art Association and the Japan Young Painter’s Association formed to teach and practice techniques outside of the school. Some artists and academics felt that western modes best exemplified modernity while others prioritized the affirmation of Japanese traditional aesthetics as the best way to consolidate a strong modern identity. Ultimately, the value of coexistence was asserted during this period and some artists switched from one discipline to another. \textsuperscript{43}

A renewed sense of nationalism during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 further complicated \textit{nihonga} development because “Japan’s new national identity as a world

\textsuperscript{42} “A Brief History of the University,” \textit{Tokyo Geijutsu Daiku, Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music} [website]; available from \url{http://www.geidai.ac.jp/english/about/history.html}; Internet; accessed 15 April 2007.

power with high cultural sophistication,“ necessitated increased discourse about the best approach for the revitalization of painting and the methodologies of evaluation. The Ministry of Education Art Exhibition, or Bunten, formed in 1907 and helped inspire a creative competitive spirit among artists, emphasizing the importance of art that was independent from industry. Bunten was reorganized as Teiten, or the Imperial Art Academy, in 1919. Nihonga was characterized by a “special confidence and richness,” according to J. Thomas Rimer professor emeritus of Japanese Literature, Theatre and Art at the University of Pittsburgh, in Nihonga Transcending the Past.

During the years 1935 to 1945 socio-political difficulties increased as Japan invaded parts of China, beginning the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Involvement from the United States followed with the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941 and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. Rimer describes this period for artists as one of “fatigue” with a considerable narrowing of free artistic expression and increased government control, for both yogā and nihonga artists. The period between 1945 and 1968 saw arts institutions initiate rapid reinstatement despite devastating losses. Nihonga artists introduced innovative perspectives, partly because of the increasing interest in

45 Ibid.
international contemporary art, according to Rimer. He cites Kayama Matazō (1927-2004), Fujimura’s teacher at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, as an example of the new spirit of postwar nihonga because Kayama combined fine craftsmanship with traditional motifs and sensitively expressed line to render bold, evocative compositions.⁴⁹ The catalogue for the Nihonga, Transcending the Past exhibition bears a cover design of Kayama’s painting Star Festival (1968) in blue and white with gold flake. The biographies of fifty-three important nihonga artists are detailed inside the catalogue.⁵⁰ At the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music the nihonga department is one of nine fine arts departments, supporting three full-time professorships. While that program is the oldest and probably the most prestigious, other courses of nihonga study at the university level are offered in Japan at many universities, such as the University of Tsukuba in Ibaraki prefecture, Kyoto Seika University International in Kyoto, Musashino Art University, and Tama Art University, both in Tokyo.

**Nihonga as a Social Construct**

Mimi Hall Yiengprukasawan argues that nihonga should be analyzed as a social construct in her review of Conant’s book,⁵¹ positing that the need to formulate nihonga as a technique is a reaction against foreign cultural influence that seeks to retain, and

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⁵⁰ The internet-based encyclopedia Wikipedia, while not a scholarly resource, gives an idea of some Japanese nihonga artists practicing today, providing an index of thirty-two artists.
therefore define, traditional Japanese painting in a previously unnecessary manner. She asserts that there are “broad ideological implications” for “matching art to national character,” calling for additional critical social analysis. Rimer echoes Yiengprukasawan’s concerns, writing that the term nihonga places a burden on artists “charged with the task of representing some element in their work which should be considered irreducibly ‘Japanese.’” While I agree that artistic identity linked to national identity is problematic I do not see Fujimura as typifying that problem, in part because his influences – from art history, literature, religion, and contemporary cultural theory – are exceedingly varied. Yiengprukasawan urges consideration of the difficult questions, such as to what makes a nihonga artist a nihonga artist. Based on my study of Fujimura, a nihonga artist is defined by institutional training and review, a committed use of materials, innovation and an active role in the ongoing discourse on nihonga. Most significantly, I believe that his innovations are shaped by an ethos of investigation and engagement. I believe that Fujimura might eschew classification as simply a nihonga artist because it ties him to one technique. While it is an important part of his expression and his training the identification of Fujimura as solely a nihonga artist limits

52 Ibid. 166.
54 In the same way I suspect he would find Gelernter’s description of his paintings as “religious art” problematic because labels tend to create boundaries preventing access to other meanings that the painting suggest. David Gelernter, “A Faithful Art: Makoto Fujimura and the Redemption of Abstract Expressionism,” The Weekly Standard 10, no. 3 (February 26, 2005), accessed www.factiva.com, 2/20/07, Internet.
the appreciation of his art, disallowing for abstract expressionist strains and maybe perhaps aspects of performance art in his expression.⁵⁵

Art critic Robert Kushner’s depiction of Fujimura as an artist of international importance supports my contention that Fujimura is not laboring under the construct of nihonga as a technique defined by national identity:

It would be naïve to think that the only significant art today is being produced in Europe and North America. Yet when we offer museum space to works from other cultures, we chauvinistically persist in selecting art that validates our domestic dialogue. What about artists who work within traditional idioms and mediums, but wish to contribute to a global dialogue? ⁵⁶

Kushner portrays Fujimura as just such an artist breaking new ground and contributing to the contemporary discourse of art that is not limited to European, American, or Japanese perspectives.

**Nihonga Today: Why New Is Not New**

Recent nihonga exhibition titles, such as “Nihonga: The New Tradition” at The Dillon Art Gallery in New York (Fall 1999) and “The New Nihonga” at the Koriyama City Museum, Fukushima Prefecture, Japan (1993) emphasize newness. Both exhibitions included Fujimura as well as other artists from Japan. Obviously, based on

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my discussion of *nihonga*’s origins, *nihonga* is not new, but the interest in *nihonga* is, especially within the United States. This may be partly due to the 1995 exhibition at the St. Louis Museum of Art, which examined one hundred years of *nihonga* art in great depth and variety, contributing to the general knowledge of this little-known (in the west) art tradition. The idea of “newness” within *nihonga* technique is not really new or unusual. Fresh, inventive expression is intrinsic to its century-old institutional training. The fundamental early pedagogy of the painting program at the Tokyo School of Fine Art was that independent, creative expression called *shin’an*, or “new design,” is a natural outgrowth deriving from thorough mastery of traditional skills and styles coupled with comprehensive academic courses. During the Meiji Period this was a modern construct and an entirely new way of examining art training. Rigorous creative autonomy was requisite to keep up with the demands of the final stages of training, then, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and now.

Okakura’s later writings reveal that he placed great value on the students’ ability to appeal to viewers’ emotions through independent artistic expression. He considered this a modern exchange; the highly trained graduates of the Tokyo School of Fine Art – the first ever full scale, state-run, art school geared towards fine art – had the potential to “move, edify, and inspire viewers” with their works, and therefore, artists should play a significant role in modern society. Meiji Period society underwent enormous cultural changes in the face of modernization and increased industrialization. The

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57 Weston, 153.
58 Ibid. 175.
implications of Okakura’s writings are that theoretically, forward looking artistic expression that also honors traditional aesthetic values could help reaffirm the shifting identity of Japanese society during times of cultural challenges.

Fujimura’s desire to use art to communicate with his viewers is entirely consistent with Okakura’s vision. Contemporary culture and society are presented with rapidly developing socio-political issues of great global import, with attendant humanitarian challenges. In a 2004 interview Fujimura described such challenges in this way: “The arts can provide a shalom space in the shouting and killing that go on everyday”; and “beauty draws us out of ourselves and invites us to engage with the world. Beauty causes us to see the world, as it were, for the very first time.”59 Fujimura’s innovation in nihonga relates specifically to a sense of space he creates in the picture plane - a place of beauty, visual intrigue, and reflection, literally and figuratively.

Introduction

Fujimura’s art firmly belongs in the Abstract Expressionist tradition. His work breaks realistic modes of representation with a sense of freedom and innovation. His paintings have visual parallels to Mark Rothko (1903 – 1970), Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956) and Cy Twombly (b. 1928). In this chapter I examine how Rothko has influenced Fujimura’s use of color, form and space to determine how each artist communicates with their paintings. I will also discuss Rothko and Fujimura in terms of spirituality and the role of the artist in society. A comparison of Pollock and Fujimura’s technique will reveal key aspects of Fujimura’s training. Roland Barthe’s analysis of text in Twombly’s paintings has application to the words that Fujimura sometimes embeds in his paintings because diverse meanings are created beyond their textual content.

Rothko

Mark Rothko’s signature works from 1949 onwards share striking visual similarities with Fujimura’s paintings; luminous color emanates from rectangular segments, like strong geometry that commands the picture plane, empty of figures but full of suggestion. See *Untitled*, 1960 (Figure 17) and *Untitled*, 1963 (figure 15), for example. David Gelernter of *The Weekly Standard* disagrees, noting, “Superficially Rothko’s paintings are nothing like Fujimura’s, but Fujimura seems closer to Rothko than to any
other abstract expressionist.”¹ Gelernter is referring to a sense of spirituality that pervades both artists’ paintings.

Rothko emigrated to America from Russia at the age of ten, studying in Portland, Oregon to earn a scholarship to Yale University, which he abandoned in favor of employment in New York at age twenty. Rothko thrived in the vibrant artistic community of New York in the 1930s and 40s, ultimately becoming an important founder of The New York School. ² Rothko’s signature paintings feature rectangular forms that are loosely stacked like building blocks, suspended on colored fields. The groupings of two, three or four rectangles create dramatic counterpoints that reveal complex relationships of color, space and form, enhanced by nuanced effects of surface and depth. Fujimura’s paintings also reflect a geometrically organized composition, often using rectangles replete with intense color to create an evocative visual experience.


² The New York School, also known as the Abstract Expressionists, includes William Baziotes, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, David Smith and Clyfford Still, in addition to Mark Rothko, as founding members. In Mark Rothko, Subjects in Abstraction (1989) Anna Chave makes the point that far from presenting a unified “school” of expression, this group represented vastly different visions, united only in their artistic response to the intensity of the urban experience of life in New York City during the 1940s and 50s.
Scale and Spirituality

Parallels between Mark Rothko and Makoto Fujimura occur in the scale of their paintings; with sizes often approaching six feet in length or width, Rothko and Fujimura’s paintings have a monumental quality. The large scale, combined with reductive form and intense color, can elicit reflective responses from the viewer, often of a spiritual nature.

A sense of spirituality is especially present when Fujimura and Rothko’s paintings are hung in multiples. The scale of their works in religious settings creates a complete environment of spiritual evocation. In 2000 Fujimura installed “The St. John’s Project” a series of paintings and free standing panels, at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine in New York. “Making Peace” (2006) was an installation of video and painting at All Hallows on the Wall, an Anglican church, at The City of London Exhibit. It addressed themes of peace and healing by blending video images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with Fujimura’s paintings in response to the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The Rothko Chapel (1971) in Houston, Texas is the best example of Rothko’s paintings displayed in a spiritual environment. As part of The Menil Collection The Rothko Chapel is a “modern work of religious art.”

The spiritual component of both Fujimura’s and Rothko’s paintings is difficult to define, as it depends on individual interpretation, but it is a factor often associated with

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their work. Anna Chave cites that the architectural historian and educator Dore Ashton (b. 1928) felt that Rothko had a “preoccupation with spiritual values” in his painting. In his book review of *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective* Robert Knott addresses how art critics Peter Schjeldahl and Robert Hughes discuss the difficulty of defining spirituality in Rothko’s paintings. Knott notes how Diane Waldman describes the paintings’ “inner light” in detail as he confirms that this quality of inner light is the source of spirituality in the paintings.

Fujimura’s sense of spirituality is well documented by Christian writers such as Richard Neuhas who writes, “Fujimura is part of a small group of Christian artists in New York who are leading something like a renaissance in work of spiritual consequence.” Secular publications include spiritual references to Fujimura from writers like Carrie Wong, of *Sugarzine*, a New York based art and culture on-line magazine. Wong links Fujimura’s use of *nihonga* with spirituality, writing, “Nihonga ultimately seeks to transcend its viewers emotionally and spiritually. This would explain the semblance of spirituality that is so prevalent in Fujimura’s paintings.”

David Gelernter, art critic for the political journal *The Weekly Standard*, addresses spirituality in Fujimura’s paintings by referring repeatedly to his work as “abstract

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6 Ibid.
religious art.”⁹ While I believe the terminology “religious art” may apply for some, it is problematic in that it limits access for non-religious viewers. By arguing that Fujimura’s art has structural elements of communication I explain why his paintings create meaning that transcend specific cultural traditions such as religion. I view religion as a term that is distinct from spirituality in that it denotes institutionalized belief systems. Spirituality has broader implications in terms of beliefs and a connection to a greater power and is therefore more appropriate for my analysis of Fujimura’s work.

A Christian since 1987, Fujimura has a deeply personal perspective on the role of the artist and religion -- a perspective that has little to do with self-expression.

All art is spiritual, and great masterpieces are works wrestling with issues of faith and reality. The works I’ve done before my ‘inversion’ of recognizing Christ in my life and in my creative process, tend to be limited to self-expression only. I have been trying to move away from ‘self-expression’ for self-expression sake, but to attempt to fit in to the holistic reality, and play a role, however limited, in that reality.¹⁰

Fujimura does not use Christian iconography. He strikes a balance between expressions of spirituality, design and beauty in order to create different levels of individual interpretation. If a Christian reference appears in his paintings, such as a biblical passage in The Hudson #17 1995-1996 (Figure 12) or The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #66 (Figure 13), it is subtle, often unnoticeable, and part of a many-layered design. I learned that the writing in The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #66 is from Isaiah 53: 1-3 from the

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¹⁰ Makoto Fujimura, e-mail to author, March 8, 2007.
exhibition catalogue New York Works,\textsuperscript{11} but I would not recognize it otherwise. The faint passages appeared like intriguing enigmas, open to interpretation, before I located the corresponding text.

Rothko, on the other hand, experimented with well-known Christian iconography as a way to create an experience of tragedy in his painting Gethsemane, 1945 (Figure 19) and Crucifixion (before 1936). He subscribed to Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844-1900) examination of Greek tragedy which posits that “a heroic attribute was imported to suffering by means of art.” \textsuperscript{12} Rothko believed that art had the power to deeply affect people through an emotional appreciation of tragedy. Christopher Rothko confirmed that his father searched for imagery that evoked “The heroic notion of the tragic.”\textsuperscript{13}

While Rothko sought to evoke deep, tragic emotions with powerful, traditional Christian imagery Fujimura’s use of Biblical text is more like a suggestion or the beginning of a dialogue. The difference lies in the grand, heroic quality of expression that Rothko employs versus the more subtle, reflective exchange that Fujimura initiates.

**Self Expression and the Artist’s Societal Obligation**

Christopher Rothko writes that his father was driven to express the drama of the human condition because he felt it was incumbent on him as an artist to depict his unique vision; “. . . he makes clear that the self-centered work of the artist – the expression of his or her personal truth – serves a more important social function than

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
philanthropy.”\textsuperscript{14} The preeminence that Rothko placed on the artist’s vision, which in his case was “expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, destiny, doom”\textsuperscript{15} is vastly different, in tone and meaning, from Fujimura’s concept of the artist as a participant in a “holistic reality.”\textsuperscript{16} Fujimura’s perspective implies a greater philosophical context for art as communication than Rothko’s portrayal of the visionary artist expressing truth and tragedy to the viewer.

Fujimura does feel that artists have a social responsibility. He explains this in an interview by Jennifer Geddes in which she asks, “Should art have a social function or utility?”\textsuperscript{17} Fujimura replies by pitting the contributions of Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), whose vision he praises as “transformative” and “incarnational” against the “crass egotism” of Matthew Barney (b. 1967).\textsuperscript{18} Fujimura viewed a small grouping of Malevich’s paintings at the Guggenheim after he saw Barney’s Guggenheim exhibition \textit{The Cremaster Cycle} (1994-2002), a site specific installation described as “a self-enclosed aesthetic system consisting of five feature-length films that explore processes of creation.”\textsuperscript{19} Barney’s imagery, which uses the cremaster or scrotal muscle as a starting point, is violent, strange, and sexual, including for example, castrated pigeon testicles,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Chris Rothko, ed. \textit{Mark Rothko-The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art}, xxii.
\item Chave, 18.
\item Makoto Fujimura, e-mail to author, March 8, 2007.
\item Geddes, 85.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
amputated fashion models, and “girl scouts dressed as furry lambs.”20 Russian painter Kasimir Malevich is credited with the development of suprematism, which asserts the primacy of pure sensation in art, ideally through simple, geometric, abstract forms.21 Fujimura describes Malevich’s contributions, stating,

> They influenced countless artists... Contrasted with Barney’s effort to undermine the creative possibilities of a world created by the Creator, Malevich honors them by his Orthodox humble vision. . . Malevich’s works created dynamism out of the window/icon space that Barney’s works, even with their wild energy could not attain.22

Clearly Fujimura respects and values Malevich as a creator of objective realities -- as an artist who allows the viewer to derive unlimited potential meanings. When Fujimura decries Barney’s work because it lacks “engagement with the eternal” 23 he reveals his personal priorities that art should have an inherently timeless and forward looking quality. I interpret Fujimura’s vision of art having social relevance to mean that art should reflect positive, humanist values. This is consistent with Fujimura’s statements

22 Geddes, 84.
elsewhere where he speaks of the “strong faith and resolute hope” he wants come out of own his art. 24

I contend that Fujimura is not merely reacting to the controversial content of Barney’s piece. He acknowledges the importance of shock value in freedom of expression. 25 I do not think he is responding explicitly to the challenges of the imagery but rather to the fact that the Barney’s work does not offer a redeeming sense of humanity, in a spiritually transformative manner or otherwise. With regard to Rothko, I can’t determine if he shared Fujimura’s sense of humanism, but I do believe that Rothko’s paintings create a very human, emotional sensation that arises from the viewer’s individual experience. I conclude that Fujimura shares and prizes the quality of intimacy and individual interpretation that both Malevich and Rothko elicit through their geometric reductions as opposed to the epic multimedia experience that Barney offers with his highly charged imagery.

In terms of the nature of Rothko’s communication as opposed to Fujimura’s it is important to understand the different underlying precepts of each because Fujimura’s mode may represent a new understanding of the role of the contemporary artist in society. His approach is an outgrowth of a larger, philosophical sense of community --

25 Fujimura stated, “I am not saying artists cannot shock and am more sympathetic than not to the artists’ freedom to challenge the status quo. I have in the past, written to defend Andres Serrano’s works as his honest depiction of depravity. His ‘morgue’ exhibit, shown at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine at Lent season in 2002, was a profoundly beautiful and humbling experience.” Geddes, 84.
his concerns are “for the deep questions about life, faith and humanity” 26 as opposed to Rothko, whose art I view to be the product of the lone, heroic artist laboring in a studio to express his genius. While the impetus for their expression may be different, Fujimura and Rothko do share a sense of struggle in their attempts to depict form in the abstract space of the picture plane.

Multiforms and Created Space

From 1947 to 1949, Rothko painted a key transitional group -- the “multiform” paintings -- in an effort to make his symbolism more accessible. The multiform paintings are distinguished by flat patches of color, arranged in geometric connection to each other, but not necessarily in relation to the picture plane as a whole. They represent Rothko’s struggle to eliminate obstacles and speak directly to the viewer. 27

Fujimura empathizes with Rothko’s reductive attempts:

Rothko went back, at the end of his life, to multiforms, and I can see why he wanted to do so. I am not sure what Rothko developed was a solution to that frustration, but a sort of a detante [sic]. I am still wrestling with the tension of a created space, and distilling such space to the purest form. 28

Both Fujimura and Rothko struggled to depict the essence of form within “created space.” In that space Rothko wanted to represent “the expression of man’s basic emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, destiny, doom” 29 whereas Fujimura states his goal thusly: “I

26 Makoto Fujimura e-mail interview with author, March 8, 2007.
27 Chave, 111.
28 Makoto Fujimura, e-mail to author, January 22, 2007.
29 Chave, 11.
desire to create a ‘critical zone’ space in which deeper layers of questions about life, faith and humanity is [sic] exposed.” I sense a slightly didactic quality to Rothko’s self-expression which seeks to uncover the essence of humanity as a drama on a grand stage, shining light on the profound emotional experiences that he believed were central to human experience. Fujimura’s quest for the “critical zone” seems more evocative of dialogue than emotional declamation; it is more personal and more questioning. I understand Fujimura’s use of “critical” to refer to two issues, both present in his paintings. On one hand it can describe something of crucial importance and on the other, it can describe analytical commentary, as in criticism. Fujimura’s paintings are invitations to a discussion. In order to explore the specifics of Fujimura’s many-layered meanings I will examine some of his paintings within the context of his commentary on Rothko.

Layers of Meaning in Fire

Sara Tecchia, owner of the Sara Tecchia Roma New York gallery in New York, where Fujimura’s work is exhibited, credits Rothko with being a major influence on Fujimura. She specifically describes Rothko’s ability to evoke emotion through color as a significant impact on Fujimura. The color red may be one of Rothko’s most prevalent

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30 Makoto Fujimura, e-mail interview to Ann DuCharme, January 22, 2007.
31 Fujimura invokes a similar dual meaning in his choice to tile his web log, or online journal, Refractions. Refraction refers to the change in a wave of energy like a ray of light when it passes from one medium through to another. This accurately describes the way that light behaves on the surface of his paintings as it penetrates various layers of mineral pigment. The word refraction is also similar to reflection in a different sense, meaning careful thought or consideration, which makes it suitable as a title of a journal where topical issues are explored.
color choices. Red has a direct, visceral quality, with endless variations in tone. See for instance *Untitled*, 1960 (Figure 17). Rothko uses the contrast of darker reds placed near vibrant reds to draw attention to the full tonal scale of red and various emotional responses.

Fujimura describes how he blends red vermilion pigments by comparing Rothko’s used red to create the illusion of space, writing:

> These reds, combined with coarse, cinnabar pigments, create a unique illusion of space within the semi-opaque layers of pigments. Rothko and Newman both understood the power of red. I wanted to create work that had both the ethereal space of Rothko, but the directness and power of a Newman.”

Fujimura’s depiction of a painting comprised entirely of red tones illustrates how different meanings are created by the same color. In *Fire*, 2000 (Figure 14) from *The St. John’s Project* (2000) Fujimura sets up an interesting dynamic of color and composition. The tonal range, which is shown vertically, like paint brush strokes on a door, is juxtaposed with geometric horizontal elements. Three rectangular bands form the basic structure of the painting, with the thinner middle band painted as if it was slightly raised, like a panel. The vertically arranged reds progress left to right, from red to more of an orange color, back to splotchy red, finally giving way on the right side, to a worn red, revealing a gold undercoat. The contrast of the horizontal cross bar with the

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vertically weathered paint is compelling, warm, and oddly familiar, like an old barn door.

Fujimura believes that the Japanese vermilion pigment that he uses achieves a unique sense of warmth, unlike a cadmium red in oil or acrylic. Because the minerals that make up the pigments are hand ground, they have a varying degree of coarseness, and therefore, different degrees of light reflection. Larger pigment particles reflect light to a greater degree. Smaller grinds absorb light more. The quality of light and warmth that permeates Fujimura’s paintings comes from the irregularly ground mixture of particles. There is a sense of authenticity to the light and color they generate, similar to the effect created by an unusually colored, multifaceted stone picked up from the water’s edge and held to the sunlight for examination. This naturally reflected light is different than the slick sheen of oil paint or the flat, plastic light of acrylic paint.

Space is shown to be many layered; different substrata of gold and orange glow through upper layers of red. Vertical pulls articulate gravitational space; brushstrokes, drips, or a combination of the two move down the painting. The combination of the two sensations creates a palpably dimensional space. The horizontal bands, especially the crossbar, have a stabilizing effect on space, creating a sense of something solidly built. Rothko’s painting *Untitled, (White, Blacks, Grays on Maroon)*, 1963 (Figure 15) has a similar paneled effect. Small dark edges create shadows around four black rectangles. Although each of the rectangles is distinct, they share some common light on their surfaces, as if they are one unit.
Another interpretation of *Fire* is possible if one applies Christian symbolism as interpreted by Fujimura; he uses “red (*shu*) pigments as symbol of atonement and redemption.” Concepts of atonement and redemption are central to the Christian precept that Jesus Christ died on the cross for the sins of humanity, a quintessential act of love and sacrifice. The cross is a highly meaningful and important symbol for Christians because it represents this act. In *Fire*, a thin red vertical line is visible, in the middle of the painting intersecting the horizontal band to make a cruciform shape. *Fire* belongs to a series of paintings, each depicting elements like water and earth, as part of The *St. John’s Project* commissioned for St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York. Because of the setting one could interpret the cross as a symbol of Christ’s crucifixion and the red trickle as his blood, the essence of his sacrifice. Although this type of meaning is informed by the context in which the painting is placed and Fujimura’s Christian perspective, it is not crucial to the meaning of the painting. It exists as an optional layer of meaning contingent on the viewer’s predisposition. Fujimura’s paintings, like many abstract expressionist paintings, work in this fashion; they speak to different sets of human experience whether that includes Rothko-inspired abstract expressionism or old barn doors or Christianity.

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33 Ibid.
Time and Technique: *The Trinity*

In Fujimura’s painting *The Trinity*, 1994 (Figure 16) a Christian interpretation is dictated, by the title. However, the initial impression of three colored rectangles set in a larger rectangle hardly corresponds with the traditional concept of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. Gold, aquamarine, and red rectangles line up in simple, graphic proportions similar to the national flags of Mexico, Italy, and France. Each rectangle features its own textural variations and each is actually divided in two. The painting is executed on a traditional Japanese screen or *byobu*, a form originally adopted from China in the eighth century.

Japanese screens, which can be made from two, four, six and sometimes eight panels, gained prominence as an important interior design feature during the Momoyama period (1568-1615). Screens were often covered in gold or silver leaf to convey a sense of beauty and luxury but also to reflect light and maximize the usage of interior space. The hinged screens could be folded, moved, and used in a variety of ways to create different types of divided space or ornamental backdrops.34 During his six and a half years at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, where he earned his master’s degree. Fujimura studied and copied Japanese screen design extensively, gaining thorough knowledge of their importance in Japanese cultural history. The choice to use the screen format here may stem from a desire to evoke historical Japanese traditions.

while maximizing the graphic complexities of six rectangles, colored as three, and structurally united as one.

Like Fujimura, Rothko attempted to examine the tensions between an even tri-partite division and the individuation of each third. The three rectangles in *Untitled, 1960* (Figure 17) vary in length and their edges are diffuse, which gives them the appearance that they are floating, in varying heights over the main dark red background. *Untitled, 1960* (Figure 17) draws attention to the space in between the forms, evoking a sense of drama and mystery. It seems as if time is suspended, as the viewer strives for a coherent experience of Rothko’s painting. Fujimura is mindful of this time-delayed quality as he writes, “I have learned from Rothko that the mediation of art can offer a timeful [sic] reality unlike any other form.”

I interpret Fujimura’s meaning here to mean that art can intervene and alter the normal perception of time; a person can become so engrossed in a painting that time seems suspended for that moment and during that moment a different reality is created. This can be a transcendent or spiritual experience. James E. B. Breslin describes the viewer of a Rothko painting as being subject, at times to “the picture’s enveloping power” in *Mark Rothko, a Biography.* Breslin likens the viewer in some instances to “a small child too close to a powerful and seductive mother.” Fujimura’s “timeful reality” on the other

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35 Makoto Fujimura e-mail interview to author March 8, 2007.
37 Ibid.
hand, is more reflective, inviting the viewer to consider different experiences be they symbolic, aesthetic or empathetic, as demonstrated by with Fire.\(^{38}\)

The portion on the left of *The Trinity* is covered in visible squares of gold leaf that appear abraded and evoke notions of time passing. The worn look is the result of layering; spots of red render a tarnished, aged look and dark stains and cracks give an impression of ancient wear. Glimpses of green add to the slightly corroded appearance. Time is also suggested in the application of gold leaf. Even if the viewer is unfamiliar with the laborious process of aligning gold leaf squares, there is still a feeling of time-consuming meticulousness in the grid pattern created by the squares. The grid conveys the artist’s hand precisely because it is not rigid and perfect; it sways slightly and fades completely away in spots.

The effect of time on materials that Fujimura creates is one of dignified patina, prized as much for its inherent value as it is for the passage of time and the human touch. In his 1933 essay “In Praise of Shadows” novelist Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965) writes extensively about this aesthetic within Japanese cultural traditions referring to it as “the elegance of time.”\(^{39}\) He cites many interesting examples from Japanese interior design, interior lighting, and cuisine.

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\(^{38}\) Although the concept of multivalent interpretation can be applied to all non-figurative art Fujimura’s type of abstract expressionism seems especially accessible through what I determine to be his use of questions, metaphors, dialect and anchoring devices.

In the sense of weathered beauty Fujimura’s execution of gold leaf on the panel evokes *wabi*, an aesthetic of Japanese culture typified by imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete attributes. Although there are many nuances of meaning, *wabi* connotes an understated elegance and deeper sense of beauty through usage, such as a piece of earthenware pottery might possess, with an uneven finish and imperfect shape. Even if one is unfamiliar with *wabi* the representation of materials as irregular and timeworn implies an appealing lack of sophistication and a simple, rustic quality similar to my reading of the *Fire* painting as an old barn door. While Fujimura’s application of gold leaf squares in *The Trinity* evokes timeworn beauty there is still the undeniable shine that gold emanates, which has symbolic meaning for Fujimura that relates to the title of the painting.

Fujimura uses gold with specific reference, stating, “I use gold (divinity) on paper (humanity) to allude to Christ in all of my works.” This relationship of the divine to the human occurs in the “Golden Fire” exhibition as well with the paper-wrapped columns. Although reviewers sometimes comment on Byzantine and medieval references when they are faced with Fujimura’s elegant use of gold and silver, the actual source of inspiration to use metallic materials is Fujimura’s teacher, *nihonga*

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master Kayama, who chose in his own training to focus on seventeenth-century Japanese techniques, while his colleagues were striving to master western techniques. As noted previously, Kayama taught Fujimura how “gold and silver captures the passage of time.”

It is a difficult task to have the second aquamarine section and the third red section balance with the impact of the gold, but I believe this is where Fujimura’s technique more closely resembles Rothko’s. Rothko applied many layers of oil paint thinned to various densities to achieve the sense of shifting luminosity and space shown in *Untitled*, 1960 (Figure 17) where a pair of two different red rectangles floats beside a white one. Fujimura applies paint in a similar layering manner in the second two sets of panels in *The Trinity*. His medium is water and the pigments are ground azurite with malachite in the middle and, cinnabar with vermilion on the right. Fujimura suggests watery depths by saturating the paper first with water and building pigmented sections slowly, often with finishing touches of water spray and drips. In the exhibition catalogue *Nihonga: Transcending the Past* Masako describes this technique, which originates from the Rimpa tradition, as *tarashikomi*. Fujimura allows the paint to soak into and flow across the paper with gentle guidance from a long handled brush. The red panel conveys a sense of tactile warmth similar to that of *Fire*, with emphasis drawn to

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the surface. The pigmented application here appears chalky and dry, with a feeling of concrete presence. Still, there is a glow to the red similar to the red in *Untitled, 1960* (Figure 17) as if it was lit from below the surface by faint neon light.

A subtle line towards the top of the panels connects the three areas. It aligns with the third bottom line of the gold square leaves, penetrating the blue green area as a light blue streak, finishing the connection in the red with a darkish vein. A Christian reading might interpret the gold as God the Father, red as his human son and the blue green as the Holy Spirit. The tangible materiality of the red pigment fits with this interpretation as does the ethereal mystery of the blue green portion. The connecting line asserts their unity. A secular experience might incorporate a sense of beauty and wonder that borders on the sacred, while suggesting the rich cultural heritage embodied by the Japanese screen. Alternatively, one could merely revel in the cleverness of a graphic structural composition and skillfully executed materials that create visual complexities of light and space. Such are the multiple possibilities in Fujimura’s art.

**Anchors in the Landscape**

Many more illustrative comparisons can be made between Rothko and Fujimura, especially in their paintings that recall landscape. In both artists’ work the rectangular banded format suggests horizon lines, with varied representations of sky above and earth or water below. The significant difference lays in Fujimura’s mode of art as communication; Fujimura provides key accents to help the viewer connect to a visual experience. I refer to these accents as anchors. The anchor in *December Hour* occurs in
the darkened contours of Mount Fuji in the middle, rendered in faint brushstrokes. An obscured moon and a thin shadowy tree serve to anchor the composition as a landscape in *The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #65*, 1995 while a turquoise wing shape suggest a night bird in flight. Anchoring devices such as water, moons, clouds, branches, and rays of light appear as recognizable figures in many of Fujimura’s paintings.

The appearance of text in Fujimura’s paintings poses unique issues and can be considered an anchoring device. *The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #66*, 1995 for example (Figure 13) shows a sunset orange sky over earthly brown and recalls Rothko’s’ stacked rectangles colored in warm, deep tones. Various streaks suggest clouds and precipitation as a wash of red light covers the right portion of the painting. White flickers, like cuneiform scratched in clay, create parallel tracks in the bottom brown half. Because there are no perspectival clues it is difficult to discern if the marks are an orderly city skyline seen from great distance or something entirely different, like rows of parched crops struggling to achieve height. In fact, these white flickers are words, as noted in the exhibition catalogue: 45

Who has believed our message  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
And like a root out of dry ground.  
He had no beauty to attract us to him,  
Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

At seven feet high by seven feet tall the painting is big enough to support legible text, but Fujimura smears and buries the words, in places. Someone familiar with the verse may experience a burst of recognition but many will not. The effect may be one of intrigue or as Margaret Moorman found, “jarring.” I will explore alternative meanings to text in the next chapter and wish to underscore here how they focus attention in the composition.

Atmospheric perspective can be considered an anchoring device in that it creates a recognizable illusion of depth and place. Pictorial devices such as diminishing size and reduced clarity suggest distance. The impression can be enhanced with the use of a calligraphic line that meanders into the distance until it disappears. This occurs in the depiction of a silvery river in the darkened horizon of The Twin Rivers of Tamagawa #65, 1995 (Figure 18). Anchors can be identifiable gestures such as Pollock type drips or water stains. In his review of “Water Flames” (2005) Terry Teachout, art critic for The Wall Street Journal, seemed to particularly latch on to the drips as a point of recognition, writing, “In these spacious, intensely colored visualizations of the essence of fire, Makoto Fujimura fuses Pollock-like pigment-dripping with medieval Japanese painting techniques.”

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The accents in Fujimura’s paintings function like anchors in a sea of abstraction, for the viewer to grasp and fix some meaning. They create a sense of discovery that deepens the level of engagement. I propose that the concept of anchors is the key element in Fujimura’s “critical zone.” Tecchia agrees with my assessment saying that when most people are confronted with abstract art in her gallery they “react and dismiss, out of fear and lack of understanding.” She agreed that Fujimura gives viewers some point of recognition, even if it is a water stain or glittering fragment, adding that children, who are encouraged to tour her gallery through school programs, inevitably ask why Fujimura puts salt in his paintings. He doesn’t, but they recognize something familiar about the crystalline glimmer of his mineral pigments. A conversation is begun with a question.

**Communication and Questions**

Perhaps Anna Chave expresses it best, when she writes that despite Rothko’s deepest desires, “Viewers bring conditioned responses and collateral cultural information to their encounters with works of art, and this phenomenon is so deeply integral to the aesthetic experience that it is pointless to disparage it as a contaminant of that experience.” This was much to Rothko’s chagrin who wanted viewers to approach each of his paintings as a unique experience, even to the degree that he would dictate the optimal viewing distance. Not only is it futile to deny the value of

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49 Chave, p. 35.
conditioned responses, but the fact that Fujimura speaks to viewers’ diverse interpretations reveals his great respect for those who encounter his art.

When Tecchia experiences the multiple dimensions of Fujimura’s art she surprises herself, saying, “The artist does not want to show us la retta via; the right way for us to decide. Fujimura’s paintings allow for us skeptics as myself to do the one thing that secularism has labeled as a sign of weakness: to hope.”

Tecchia interpretation of hope contrasts sharply with Rothko’s presentations of tragedy and doom. Whereas Rothko strove to provide the definitive emotional experience, Fujimura struggles to frame the essential questions.

**Technique and Pollock**

The concept that Fujimura creates points of recognition for the viewer extends to his use of drips and splatters which raise questions in the same manner that the appearance of text in his work does. These drips create energetic focal points that captivate and complicate the space of the paintings. The lively application of liquid paint flung, poured or dripped onto the surface of a painting is often associated with well-known American abstract painter Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) whose innovations in materials and technique impacted many artists. Fujimura notes Pollock’s influences: “I was impressed by the way Pollock took an interest in traditional sand painting and then

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moved from that to drip paint and to walk into the canvas as a sort of ‘performance’.”

Fujimura and Pollock share a sense of physicality in the process of their work, constantly moving around the perimeter and even in the painting during the process. My examination will illustrate how Fujimura belongs within abstract expressionist traditions because his synthesis of *nihonga* and innovative techniques breaks new ground while embracing a non-figurative aesthetic.

Art historian Matthew Baigell describes Pollock’s physicality as driven by boundless stamina and a “lust for action.” This is best appreciated in a video documentary of Pollock where he lunges and flings paint, stepping in to it, a lit cigarette with precarious ash tip between his pursed lips. Fujimura’s movement is vastly different, slow and rhythmic. Based on a DVD titled *Water Flame Processes* the initial Fujimura’s application of paint is two-handed; one hand holds a bowl that can spill on to the paper directly or be placed closed to the opposite hand, which dips the brush. With a movement that is part paddling, part ladling Fujimura draws the paint up and out of the bowl as he side steps and extends his arm. The resulting mark that drops onto the dampened paper is long and fluid, but controlled, like a directed splatter. Fujimura has painted as part of performance pieces and in collaboration with other artists, where, like Pollock, he steps into the painting.

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Regarding performance art I would like to consider the analogy used by French literary theorist and art critic Gerard Genette (b. 1930) in *The Work of Art*. Genette discusses the relationship between improvisation and training in art as evocative of “the moves of tennis players or soccer players, the nature of these games and the largely unpredictable developments of each match guarantee that they will be improvisational even if it goes without saying that the art of improvisation presupposes, here as elsewhere, a mastery born of long training.”\(^5^5\) I argue that this analogy is particularly apt because like an athlete, Fujimura has achieved a degree of muscle memory in his application from many years training and practice that allows for the creation of an unprecedented expression in performance. Fujimura’s training, which includes calligraphy, focused on highly refined effects created by the nuances of brushes, paint consistency, and paper textures. Pollock’s application differs in that it truly seems random and filled with energy and excitement, like the product of a completely new discovery. Fujimura’s approach has a meditative quality but also the quiet intensity and focus of an athlete. In describing his process he says he tries “to release the intuitive”\(^5^6\) which recalls an excellent soccer player called upon to perform on a field after many hours practicing.

Both Fujimura and Pollock share a concern for surface evidenced by their drip application, but Pollock’s coverage is all over. In Pollock’s paintings the paint is built up

\(^{56}\) Makoto Fujimura e-mail correspondence to author, January 22, 2007.
in a manner that yields an aggregate of visual patterns and rhythms creating what Matthew L. Rohn refers to as “equivalence” in *Visual Dynamic in Jackson Pollock’s Abstractions*. Rohn acknowledges that he borrows the term equivalence from Clement Greenberg’s discussion of Mondrian to demonstrate how diversity coexists with unity in his paintings. Fujimura’s paintings do share a “bottom-up structural order” with Pollock, but he uses drips as accents and counterpoints, as opposed to overall content. Fujimura’s drips create dialectical opposition that exists within a sense of total harmony and balance created by the many layers of pigment wash.

Rohn writes extensively about the relationship between Pollock and traditional Chinese brush painting to shed light on the nature of control and freedom. He explains that by placing the paper, or canvas in Pollock’s case, on the floor, gravity’s pull is negated with greater freedom to direct the flow of paint. Fujimura takes advantage of this same sense of freedom by working on the floor. However, he also exploits the vertical flow of paint by lifting the paper at times to create long parallel drips. This creates a dynamic counterpoint to the flat, horizontal impression of the floor supported application. The effect interjects a note of the artist’s manipulation within the confines of the process and the artist’s physical intervention in material properties.

In *Water Processes* this is evidenced by Fujimura’s brushwork. Once the paint is on the paper, Fujimura tours the perimeter with long handled brushes. The brushes may

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58 Rohn, 107.
59 Rohn, 42-44.
exceed two feet in length, and are manipulated from the tip. The brush end is large and can be roughly fan-shaped, holding a great deal of paint. The manner in which Fujimura manipulates the puddles and streams with the long brush in his extended arm has an elegant quality, with great range of motion. He varies his distance from the work, crouching low, stooping or standing at full height to consider various effects. The resulting brush marks pivot and slide, thin and thicken, on a dramatic scale much larger than Zen or traditional Chinese brush painting but in no less an evocative style. It’s clear that the drips are the mark of the artist’s hand but so is the presence of text, which I will explore in the next section.

Text

The words that appear in some of Fujimura’s paintings may be recognized as biblical text but I speculate that this is a rare occurrence. The words may be seen in the calligraphic tradition of European medieval illuminated manuscripts or Japanese Buddhists scrolls. Although in both cases the writing was originally applied because of its content, the text does not have to be decipherable to contemporary viewers in order to appreciate the beauty of the pattern and line. Fujimura recalled his calligraphy studies at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music saying that he found the experience “very formative.” 60 Aside from decorative concepts, the notion of gesture can also be applied to text if one considers Roland Barthes’ examination of the role text plays in Cy Twombly’s paintings. Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was a French literary

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60Fujimura, e-mail interview to author, January 22, 2007.
theorist, semiotician, and social critic. About Twombly he wrote, “….the essence of writing is neither form nor usage but gesture . . . a garble, almost a smudge.” Barthes presents Twombly’s writing as the pure evocation of the artist’s hand and without meaning. Handwriting is a highly individual mark often conveying a sense of the writer beyond the literal meanings. Because the text in Fujimura’s art is painted, probably with a thin brush, it appears like handwriting and suggests the artist’s presence. Twombly’s large, crayon-scrawled letters evoke a childlike freedom and sense of play which differs from Fujimura’s tiny, tidy gold letters. A palpable sense of the artist is created in each case. With Fujimura I would describe the text as planned, careful and orderly in appearance but paradoxically there is also the impression that it is partially buried, with some letters flickering to the surface and some remaining inaccessible. In its evasive quality Fujimura’s use of text may represent the process of thought, because the words either form and take shape or refuse to become concrete. The writing could be interpreted as palimpsests, which would tie in to Fujimura’s representation of the passage of time on the surface of the paper similar to tarnishing silver. If the text is palimpsest it could refer to previous notes about the painting now painted over, which would tie into the sense of careful planning. Alternatively, as biblical text it could exist purely as inspiration for Fujimura as he paints. On any level the appearance of words offers an anchor to grasp and develop different meanings.

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Conclusion

Both text and paint splatters belong to the larger tradition of abstract expressionism represented by Twombly and Pollock in which non-figural elements are exploited for multivalent meaning. Fujimura’s use of these striking accents works successfully within the composition demonstrating how he synthesizes modern developments from the middle of the twentieth century with traditions of nihonga from many decades ago. Rothko’s struggles to depict powerful emotional evocations using color, form and the suggestion of space are present in Fujimura’s art. Abstract expressionist techniques seem appropriate for both artists struggling to address spiritual issues. Unlike Rothko, Fujimura communicates in a manner that seeks to initiate questions and dialogue.
Introduction

Makoto Fujimura wrote a lengthy essay titled “Refractions 21: Come and See: Leonardo Da Vinci’s Philip in The Last Supper” 1 (August, 2006) in which he explores composition and meaning in The Last Supper (1495-98) by Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519). The details of the essay convey two important issues that shed light on Fujimura’s belief that art can form a transcendent language. First, the essay demonstrates Fujimura’s spirit of inquiry; he has a strong sense of curiosity backed by an analytical disposition. By examining compositional elements in the painting he arrives at an interpretation of the painting’s main theme of betrayal that is new to him. He expands his analysis to include a critique of contemporary culture, media, and consumerism. He also uses his findings to emphasize the importance of questioning established systems. Secondly, I found that the specifics of Fujimura’s analysis fall into a dialectical framework; he seems drawn to points of contrast, conflict and inconsistencies. I use the definition of dialectic as follows: “the tension or opposition between two interacting forces or elements.”2 I contend that his interest in dialectical compositional elements reflects his own strategies to exploit the expressive potential of similar elements in his own work. In The Last Supper these conflicts occur in depictions of form, space, movement and light. In Fujimura’s paintings dialectical elements occur in those areas, but also in others like overall structure and application technique. In a broader


sense, the essay betrays Fujimura’s heightened sensitivity to the ways in which art, even if it is three hundred years old, can communicate fresh meaning relevant to contemporary concerns. In this chapter I explain the origins of the essay and what it is about the visual dialectics that captures Fujimura’s imagination so intently and relate that to his own work.

The Last Supper Essay

In July 2006, Fujimura traveled to Milan to view The Last Supper (1495-1498) first-hand. A number of people had asked him his opinion on the masterwork in light of the movie The Da Vinci Code (2005).³ The original painting, technically a mural, was commissioned by Duke Ludvocio Sforza (1452-1508) and resides on the refectory wall of the Santa Maria delle Grazie convent, high above the heads of viewers in Milan, Italy (Figures 20 and 21).

Fujimura focuses closely on the depiction of the apostle Philip who stands third from Jesus’ left in the painting. Fujimura discovers something startling -- Philip’s figure is compressed and distorted. Fujimura analyzes formal elements in the composition as a context to uncover the meaning underlying Philip’s strange portrayal. He concludes that “The most important visual catalyst for the painting is not the effeminate John, or Judas, nor even Jesus Himself. In fact, the key figure in kick-starting the visual movement of the painting is Philip”⁴ The manner in which the depiction of Philip’s form contradicts the other twelve figures represents the first point of contrast in the essay.

³ The movie is based on the best-selling fictional book The Da Vinci Code (2003) by Dan Brown, and like the book, the movie was released amidst much heated controversy.
⁴ Fujimura, “Refractions 21”.
Visual Dialectics in *The Last Supper*

Form

In *The Last Supper* Jesus sits at the center of a long table draped with a white cloth. The twelve apostles are arranged on either side of him in two pairs of triads. Jesus has just revealed that one of the apostles will betray him, and they react vividly and variously to the news. Philip is in the process of rising from his seat as he simultaneously leans in toward Jesus and gestures towards himself as if to say, “Is it me?” Fujimura describes the appearance of Philip’s figure in print reproductions as opposed to the actual painting, stating “In any reproduction Philip’s body gets flattened. However, for a trained artist/viewer, the visual response to the actual piece is to see Philip’s body contorted, surrounded by negative spaces. The angle compresses his body and accentuates the movement of his reaction.”

Fujimura continues to analyze the effect noting that artists working on large commissions tend to elongate figures to compensate for the distortion created by the height and size of the painting. Fujimura notes, “Leonardo did not make Philip’s body taller, but kept his body twisted, compressed and angular . . . why does Philip stand out when you stand under the painting?” The important dialectical component here is that Da Vinci’s handling of Philip’s figure is inconsistent with the others, and Fujimura searches for the reason why. The answer occurs in Da Vinci’s handling of perspectival space in opposition to planar space.

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
Space

The setting of *The Last Supper* is a room where depth is depicted illusionistically, receding into space. The impression of deep space continues out into the landscape, which is portrayed through three posterior windows. Fujimura explains that the presence of Jesus anchors the illusionistic effect, stating:

> It is emphasized by the use of perspective, a Renaissance invention used to create an illusion of three-dimensionality in a two-dimensional space. The windows and other architectural elements create lines that end up in a single point, called the vanishing point. In *The Last Supper*, the vanishing point ends on the forehead of Jesus, the centerpiece of the painting. But if the painting were an equilibrium centered on Jesus, it would not create the psychological tension we feel from it. But the tension is there, and this is because Philip breaks up the visual stasis.  

Fujimura explains that Philip breaks the horizontal plane created by the tops of Jesus’ head and the heads of ten of the other disciples, except Judas. Fujimura writes, “Philip’s head aligns itself with the perspective line that juts out from the horizontal line. This only happens if you are standing below the painting.”  

I understand Fujimura’s point about how the figures’ heads align on a plane better if I see the figures as an extension of the plane created by the front of the table cloth. This rectangular white form and the arrangement of figures directly above it are in direct structural contrast to the dramatic illusionistic depth of the room. The dialectic of space here creates an increased level of visual engagement while injecting psychological tension into the composition; the figures

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7 Ibid.  
8 Ibid.
feel pushed to the forefront of the picture plane, commanding our attention. Yet, the illusion of a long room with landscape visible beyond is also compelling. Fujimura is clearly impressed with how Da Vinci blends content and technique, referring to the complex and contrasting execution of space in *The Last Supper* as “visual sophistication.” Fujimura concludes, “Leonardo reveals both his genius and the true message of the painting.”  

**Movement**

Fujimura describes a sense of motion created by a “shock wave that reverberates throughout the painting.” It begins with Philip “who leaps out of his chair in disbelief” and travels across five figures to rest on Judas. This is accomplished through a series of “M” shapes formed by the outstretched arms and head positions of Jesus and five other apostles. Fujimura describes the structure of the movement in detail concluding that it plays a key narrative function because it carries the eye from Philip the innocent one to Judas the guilty. The contrast occurs with the figure of Jesus, who is depicted in stable, pyramidal form. While Fujimura does not specify the contrast here, he has already noted that Jesus “is what anchors the painting.” I contend that his focus on the wave movement as an effective compositional device is due to the contrast created by the solid, static form of Jesus, which he previously established.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
The last and perhaps most obvious dialectical quality represented in *The Last Supper* occurs when Fujimura discusses the light source within the painting. Fujimura notes, “As an artist, I naturally try to identify the source of light in the painting because I know that artists often use light to reveal what they want the viewer to see.”\(^\text{12}\) He explains that logically the light source should be the three windows at the back of the room; yet the light actually emanates from Jesus’ face. Because the light comes from Jesus, it falls on the faces of the apostles as they turn toward him, with the exception of Judas who is “under painted in black.”\(^\text{13}\) The effect is to draw attention to Jesus, as Fujimura notes. The choice to show Judas in shadow defies logic if Jesus is the source of light because Judas is fairly close to him and turned toward him. The shadowing has symbolic value – Judas will be the guilty one. Fujimura’s points about inconsistencies in light source are not novel but they are worthy of noting because they tie into his predilection for compositional inconsistencies as a way to create engagement and meaning.

I maintain that Fujimura’s twelve-page essay demonstrates that the importance of dialectical compositional elements is about eliciting a feeling of participation from the viewer. He summarizes Da Vinci’s effects as strategies of engagement, noting, “He painted *The Last Supper* in such a way as to force the viewer to enter the painting, physically and emotionally, and to viscerally become part of the narrative.” Fujimura uses similar approaches, with the same result.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Dialectical Elements in Fujimura’s Painting – Form, Space, Light, Movement

The dialectical qualities of form, space, movement and light occur mostly in Fujimura’s paintings that suggest landscape. It is difficult to come up with an example from Fujimura that is analogous to Da Vinci’s distortion of Philip because Fujimura’s depictions are largely non-figurative. However, I do consider the way that Fujimura occasionally layers recognizable figures, such as trees or moons, in an abstract landscape to be a point of contrast in form. These points are what I refer to as the anchors because they provide a focal point and sense of stability. The idea of an anchor is reminiscent of Fujimura’s reading of *The Last Supper* where he explains how Jesus anchors a composition filled with tension and inconsistencies.

The area of greatest similarity between Fujimura’s painting and Da Vinci’s is in the compositional dialects that occur in their handling of space. When space is rendered as receding into atmospheric distance in Fujimura’s compositions, the evocation is one of landscape. Often he established this through the placement of a high horizon line and the appearance of lines that diminish they approach the horizon. In *December Hour, 1998-99* (Figure 6) energetic, brushwork towards the bottom of the painting suggests a foreground of wild plants while a fainter, smaller rendering of Mount Fuji appears in the middle ground. A red vapor floats towards the top of the painting, suggesting a sunset in the distance. The illusion of landscape is sharply contrasted by the overall grid pattern formed by gold leaf squares on which the landscape is painted. This is an emphatic reminder that painting is an artificial construct and we are not really looking at a mountain scene. The
gold squares form a screen that commands our immediate attention while the reference to
Mount Fuji – a traditional, poetic image in Japanese artistic tradition – draws us deeper into
the landscape. Spatters in bright blue and red on the gold reinforce the idea of an
established frontal plane, as do glimpses of green between the squares. The contrasting
clues about space create counterpoints that are comparable to Fujimura’s examination of
recessive space versus planar space in *The Last Supper*.

A similar contrast exists in *The Twin Rivers of Tamagawa #65, 1995* (Figure 18) where the
top half of a tree silhouette at the bottom right edge establishes the foreground while a
dark, diagonal road draws the eye up towards the horizon, near the top. A thin, bright line
that snakes toward the top of the painting suggests a river flowing in the distance. Gold
splashes of paint draw attention to the surface and add a note of mystery to the depiction
of space. Geometric patches of transparent color float in the foreground. These fragments
seem to stem from a cubist tradition, because they break up the anticipated sense of form
within space. They also remind me of the white tablecloth in *The Last Supper* because they
establish a frontal plane that competes with the perception of receding space. I believe
Fujimura recognizes the conflict between the two depictions of space in *The Last Supper*
because he employs these strategies in his own art to engage the mind and eye of the
viewer.

I have already discussed the painting that is perhaps the most exemplary of dialectical
qualities of movement; *Water Flames Silver, 2005* (Figure 7) pits the wild, random nature of a
wave splash against the graphic rigidity of the silver leaf grid. Other examples of contrasts
in movement occur in the splashes that appear on Fujimura’s paintings such as *December Hour*, 1998-99 (Figure 6), *Golden Fire*, 2006 (Figure 2), and *Cloud Voice: Azurite*, 2006 (Figure 4). These splashes and drips also fall on controlled geometric form represented by grids or large rectangular patches, creating a contrast of opposing movement. Examples of energetic streaks and splatters on large, simple, rectangular compositions occur in *Hudson # 17*, 1995-96 (Figure 12) and *Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa # 66*, 1995 (Figure 13). Fujimura observes in his essay that the “genius” of *The Last Supper* is how the contrast in movement creates drama and visual intrigue that leads the viewer into the painting. The same holds true of the dynamic tensions he creates in his paintings when he juxtaposes gestural marks of movement with geometric organization.

Light is a more difficult dialectic to identify in Fujimura’s paintings because he does not tend to use figurative sources in a narrative way which would reveal light sources in a manner similar to *The Last Supper*. Fujimura does convey pictorial qualities of light such as are found in landscape. Washes of reddish golden light pour down from the sky in *The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #66*. Fujimura uses the reflective qualities of light like paint, creating different effects with gold and silver metal or layers of sparkling pigment fragments. The manner in which Fujimura uses pictorial depictions of light in a landscape and reflective light materials do not occur in dialectical opposition but the presence of both reveals his skill and sensitivity to issues of illumination. Dialectical oppositions do occur however, where gold and silver appear in pigmented compositions. Gold and silver reflect light whereas the density of ground minerals absorbs light, almost like velvet. The two
opposing effects create a vibration, as I addressed in my first chapter, making it hard to
discern how the layers were configured. Another possible dialectic of light occurs if I pit
the overall glow of the metal finishes against the glittering, pigmented fragments that
embed his paintings like Water Flames- Azurite. The former feels solid and durable like a
thick sheet of armor whereas the mineral reflections seem magical and ephemeral. Suffice it
to say that Fujimura fully exploits every quality of light that his materials afford him.

Dialectical qualities can be usefully explored in other aspects of Fujimura’s work, such
as his use of color which can be subtle and monochromatic or it can display a brilliant array
of greens, blues and reds. I predict that he will seek more points of contrast and conflict in
his art, as a way to communicate to the viewer and that this is will be a useful analysis for
future work.

**Conclusion - How Do Dialectics Communicate?**

To confirm that Fujimura is drawn to dialectics as a trigger for communication I read
his essays, many of which illustrate conflicting and unusual relationships. For example, he
addresses seemingly unrelated issues like “Mondrian and The Japanese Bomber” 14 or the
relationship between literacy and professional baseball 15 in a manner that is unique and
provocative. Resolving dialectical issues represent a sense of engagement based on

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14 Makoto Fujimura, “Mondrian and the Japanese Bomber,” *Essays* [website]; available from
http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:bn32L_ip2SUJ:www.makotofujimura.com/essays/mondrian_and_the
_bomber.html+mondrian+and+the+japanese+bomber&hl=en&ct=ci&cd=3&gl=us; Internet; accessed 16
September 2007.

15 Makoto Fujimura, “Refractions 23: The Game That is Designed to Break Our Hearts,” *Refractions*, [web
log]; available
from
http://64.233.167.104/search?q=cache:kkj65UQEZ_gJ:www.makotofujimura.blogspot.com/+makoto+f
questions such as “Why is that tree there?” or “Where is the light source?” I contend that Fujimura accomplishes the same effect as Da Vinci but instead of drawing the viewer into the narrative, Fujimura allows the viewer to create their own. The resulting meanings -- communicated through dialectics -- are transcendent in that they move the viewer well beyond his or her own sphere of experience.
Makoto Fujimura has stated, “Art is inherently about communication and invention of a new language.” His language of art speaks to the human condition. Times passes and change is inevitable. By using nihonga materials as metaphorical representations of these concepts he emphasizes that they can be experienced as precious and beautiful. Sara Tecchia described how Fujimura’s paintings represent hope, a distinctly human notion. Hope is a kind of faith that implies unseen, better things to come. The unique and mysterious aspect of the beauty that Fujimura creates is evocative of such optimistic expectations. Certainly the captivating qualities of his expression -- the complex spaces, the intense colors, and the shifting light -- provokes a sense of awe that is spiritual and reflective, in a manner reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s. Fujimura’s concept of the “grace arena” exemplifies such expression and suggests the power of imagined possibilities.

Fallibility – another human quality – is represented in stains and drip marks that signify human presence whereas gold implies divinity. The fact that so much of Fujimura’s technique is based in free flowing water implies a kind of existential acceptance of, and respect for, things that cannot be controlled. On the other hand, I have identified that a definite structure exists in Fujimura’s compositions by revealing

1 Makoto Fujimura e-mail to author, January 22, 2007.
dialectical formal elements of light, form, space, movement and technique. These strategies reveal that a spirit of inquiry in his work initiates dialogue through an examination of dynamic tensions and contrasts. The anchoring devices that he places in his paintings as recognition points are a key aspect of his structure in that they provide a starting point for questioning and exploration.

In 1957 twentieth-century art historian Meyer Schapiro wrote an essay titled “Recent Abstract Painting” in which he describes the difficulties of interpreting abstract art because abstract artists create hidden meanings that “resist an easy decipherment.” He refers to the importance of the viewer’s disposition, explaining that the artist’s meanings will remain inaccessible “unless you achieve the proper set of mind and feeling towards it.” By creating structural elements of communication in his abstract art I argue that Fujimura strives to create “the proper set of mind” in his viewers regardless of their predisposition. The essence of his communication is that he prioritizes a meaningful connection with the viewer over his own self-expression. It’s this aspect of his work -- using his art as language -- that makes his abstract painting distinctive.

Schapiro’s essay also can also help explain the link between art and peacemaking – Fujimura’s stated goal. Schapiro explains how abstract painting and sculpture

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communicate by “inducing an attitude of communion and contemplation.” About modern artists Schapiro writes:

They offer to many an equivalent of what is regarded as part of religious life; a sincere and humble submission to a spiritual object. . . It is primarily in modern painting and sculpture that such contemplation and communion with the work of another human being, the sensing of another’s perfected feeling and imagination, becomes possible.

This is a valid description of how Fujimura’s paintings inspire transcendent communication. “Communion with another human being” suggests harmony and peace. In this thesis I have portrayed Fujimura as precisely that type of artist that Schapiro describes. Fujimura articulates the connection between creation, imagination and imagined action by showing a keen sensitivity to the symbiotic relationship between the eye and the mind. Through the richness of his timeless art, Fujimura creates the pictorial equivalent of humanist possibilities, of which peace is central.

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3 Schapiro, 224.
4 Ibid.
Figure 1. Makoto Fujimura, *Water Flames: Azurite* 2005. Azurite, malachite, silver and oyster shell white on *kumohada* paper, 89” x 66”.

Figure 2. Makoto Fujimura, *Golden Fire*, 2006. Gold leaf, ground minerals on *kumohada* paper, 124” x 89”.
Figure 3. “Gold Fire Exhibit,” 2006. Sara Tecchia Gallery, New York, NY.

Figure 4. Makoto Fujimura, Cloud Voices: Azurite, 2006. Azurite, gold leaf on kumohada paper, 20” x 20”.
Figure 5. Hasegawa Tōhaku, *Shorinzu Byobu* (Pine Forest), sixteenth century, *sumi* ink on paper, pair of six fold screens, 156.8 cm x 356 cm. Tokyo National Museum.

Figure 6. Makoto Fujimura, *December Hour*, 1998-99. Mineral pigments, gold and tarnished silver on *kumohada* paper, dimensions unknown.
Figure 7. Makoto Fujimura, *Water Flames: Silver*. 2005
Oyster shell white and silver on *kumohada* paper, 89” x 88”.

Figure 8. Kanō School, *Hawk in Pine Tree*, Seventeenth century, three screens, color on gold paper, 207 cm x 478.5 cm, Nijyo Castle.
Figure 9. Ogata Korin, *Yatsuhashi* (Eight-Planked Bridge), pair of six-panel folding screens, ink and color on gilded paper, each 70 1/2 in. x 12 ft. 2 1/4 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 10. Makoto Fujimura, *Columbine on Silver*, silver leaf and mineral pigment on paper, 50” x 36”.

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Figure 11. Kayama Matazō, *Gekko Sanrei*, (Mountain Peaks in Moonlight), 1990, ink with color on silk with gold and silver. Private collection.
Figure 12. Makoto Fujimura, *The Hudson #17*, 1995-1996. Mineral pigment on paper, 66” x 90”.

Figure 13. Makoto Fujimura, *The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #66*, 1995. Mineral pigment on Japanese screen, 72” x 72”. 
Figure 14. Makoto Fujimura, *Fire*, 2000. Mineral pigment on paper, 89” x 132”.

Figure 15. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (White, Blacks, Grays on Maroon)*, 1963. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.
Figure 16. Makoto Fujimura, *The Trinity*, 1994. Mineral pigment and gold on Japanese screen, 70” x152”.

Figure 17. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 69” x 50 1/8”. 
Figure 18. Makoto Fujimura, *The Twin Rivers of the Tamagawa #65*, 1995. 71” x 71”.

Figure 19. Mark Rothko, *Gethsemane*, 1944, Oil and charcoal on canvas, 138.1 by 90.2 cm.

Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel
Figure 21. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495-98. Tempera and oil on plaster, 13’2”x 29’10”. Wall painting in the refectory of the Monastery of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy.

Figure 20. Lewis Purdue, Photograph of *The Last Supper*, 1981. by Lewis Purdue. Image Source: *The Da Vinci Crock* [web log]; available from http://davincicrock.blogspot.com/2006/04/happy-birthday-leonardo.html; Internet.
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Articles, Electronic Documents, Interviews, Visual Media


Interview by author, 22 January 2007, e-mail correspondence. Personal papers of Ann DuCharme, Terrace Park, OH.

Interview by author, 8 March 2007, e-mail correspondence. Personal papers of Ann DuCharme, Terrace Park, OH.


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