



Exploring the Historical Origins and Inner Logic of Abstract Art from the Perspective of the Convergence between Philosophy and Art History

Loy Luo

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Abstract

This essay investigates the philosophical and historical origins of abstract art through an inquiry into the convergence between Western art history and metaphysical philosophy. It argues that abstraction did not emerge merely as a formal reaction to modern technology or the invention of photography, but as a logical and spiritual continuation of Western art's pursuit of "truth." From Plato's theory of forms to the ultimate collapse of representational realism, artists progressively shifted from the "truth of appearances" toward the "truth of ideas." Abstract art thus becomes a visual philosophy — a response to Plato's ancient challenge that art cannot reveal truth. Through this return to metaphysics, abstraction reclaims art's capacity to reveal the spiritual essence of reality. The essay further contrasts Western metaphysical traditions with the Chinese absence of such a foundation, exploring why abstraction remains culturally misunderstood in China, and concludes by redefining abstraction as both a spiritual redemption and a metaphysical necessity within art's evolution.

Keywords

Abstract art; philosophy of art; metaphysics; Plato; truth and representation; modernism; spiritual aesthetics; Chinese and Western art comparison; cultural logic; abstraction and transcendence

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Biographical Note

Loy Luo is a contemporary artist based in New York. Her practice explores the philosophical and cultural dimensions of abstraction through painting, sculpture, and writing.

Banner image: Detail from a view of the of a work of Loy Luo: Untitled Memory-2.

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Loy Luo, **Root-1**, 2015, Oil on Canvas, 150×120 cm.

1. Editor's Note:

I have interacted with Loy Luo for many years. Her unique perspective and her tireless dedication to intellectual inquiry have always inspired me. Since the opening of her first solo exhibition in the winter of 2015, we have often met at ACE CAFE in the 751 Plaza of Beijing's 798 Art District to chat over tea. Sometimes, a pizza topped with eight-inch sausages would conveniently serve as our dinner. Occasionally, we'd even lighten the intensity of our brainstorming with a touch of light-hearted gossip. We always had much to talk about, and these conversations, without our realizing it, gradually formed a kind of series. The topic of this particular essay is a rational analysis of abstract art.

Luo told me that for many years she has been trying to examine the internal logic of abstract art through the lens of the

convergence between art history and the history of philosophy. She believes that, at its core, the birth of abstract art is the inevitable outcome of Western art history's pursuit of "truth"—a natural progression that emerged when figurative art's quest for "representational truth" reached an impasse. In her view, the "truth" of the figurative era was an "objectivity" derived from mimetic representation under the guidance of scientific positivism. When this extreme positivist demand collapsed within the field of art, artists—almost as if guided by fate—began to recall the ancient notion of "truth in ideas," thereby initiating a turn away from the "truth of appearances" in search of a "truer truth"—that of abstraction. The long-standing and deeply rooted metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy, originating in Plato's theory of forms, provided abstract artists of the early 20th century and beyond with a robust theoretical foundation, which ultimately enabled abstract art to gain widespread public acceptance.

For similar philosophical reasons, although the Chinese encountered Western abstract art almost as early as Westerners did (as evidenced by the timeline of Chinese students studying abroad), the absence of a metaphysical philosophical foundation has meant that even after a century, the general public—and even many art professionals—in

China still lag far behind the West in their recognition, understanding, and appreciation of abstract art. One could say that the fundamental issue facing the Chinese art world today remains the widespread need for aesthetic education among the broader population.

Luo said that not only is there a widespread misunderstanding of Western abstraction in China, but even the theoretical practices of the early pioneers of Western abstract art may have misled people's understanding of abstraction. She gave the examples of Kandinsky and Mondrian, whose works evolved from figuration toward abstraction, and argued that true abstraction is not the geometric transformation of figurative subjects, but rather a leap beyond the figurative—a direct path toward spiritual purity and pure abstraction.

When it comes to certain Western theorists who claim that the collapse of metaphysics signals the end of modern narrative—or indeed the end of all narrative—Luo disagrees. She believes that no matter how radically politics, philosophy, or religion may be overturned, God has never withdrawn from the realm of human art. No matter how diverse and experimental the conceptual forms of art may be, art must always concern the human spirit; it must be an art that transcends the material world. Abstract art is an art in response to the truth of ideas—it is an art that draws closer to God. Regardless of whether it meets the demands of the mainstream public, abstract art will always remain a vital experience in the spiritual redemptive function of art.

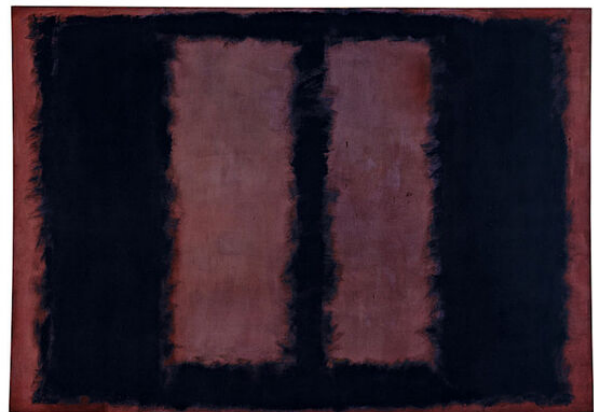
Today, Luo reflects on the current state of Western philosophy—fragmented and

banal in the aftermath of metaphysical decline—and wonders whether this condition is a sign that we need to reclaim the once-precious values we have lost. Much like Cézanne, who once wrestled with the question of whether something solemn and monumental needed to be recovered from within the dazzling colors of Impressionism, Luo contemplates whether we now must recover a sense of profundity and meaning from within this philosophical malaise.

2. The Historical Logic Behind the Birth of Abstract Art

Q : Hello, Luo. Both your paintings and sculptures exhibit a minimalist aesthetic. Some people say your work evokes associations with certain Western abstract masters.

LUO: Yes, I do admire Suprematism as developed by Malevich, and also masters like Rothko. But I believe that the temperament of an honest artist's work always differs significantly from others—and such differences can be clearly perceived by sincere viewers.



Rothko's work

Q : What is it about these masters that you particularly appreciate?

LUO: Personally, I feel that their abstract art is more pure—more aligned with the internal logic of how abstract art was born and developed. In other words, their work resonates with the metaphysical trajectory of Western philosophy.

Q : So you're suggesting there's an intrinsic connection between Western metaphysics and Western abstract art?

LUO: Let me ask you—after studying Western art history, how do you view the rise of abstract art?

Q : Usually we're taught that the emergence of abstract art was a response to the invention of the camera in the 19th century, which rendered realism obsolete—since there was no longer a need for artists to depict so-called “reality” with a brush. So, people had to find new forms and directions for breakthroughs.

LUO: That's the common interpretation—it's what art history teachers typically explain in class. But I believe that abstract art didn't abandon the Western tradition of “seeking truth.” On the contrary, it was a radical breakthrough within that very trajectory.

Q : Why do you say abstract art is a breakthrough within Western art's pursuit of truth?

LUO: People often speak of “truth, goodness, and beauty.” Broadly speaking, Western philosophy has always been

entangled with the notion of truth, while Chinese philosophy has long wrestled with the idea of goodness—which means what is better, what is more appropriate or fitting. Truth seeks to determine what is right or wrong, to uncover the nature of things. But ultimately, both traditions must return to beauty, for true beauty encompasses both truth and goodness. (Of course, this concept of beauty is not the kind of narrow, banal “aestheticism” that some theorists reduce it to in order to suit their arguments, but rather a form of sublime beauty that transcends scientific or utilitarian considerations.)

In parallel with its philosophical lineage, Western art history—over an extended period—has also been a quest for truth. This is thoroughly illustrated in E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, where he shows how artists pushed the limits of their craft to achieve ever-greater visual verisimilitude. The collapse of this pursuit of realism is often attributed to the invention of the camera in the 19th century, since photography could simulate reality with even greater precision. But embedded in this seemingly simple logic is a profound misunderstanding.

Returning to art history, we see a long, passionate pursuit of “truth” by generations of artists. For instance, the invention of perspective was originally meant to depict more accurately the visual effect of things appearing larger up close and smaller in the distance. Later, when this method made images seem too rigid, Leonardo da Vinci developed *sfumato* to create softer, more natural transitions. Then artists realized that the light in their

paintings was artificial, whereas in reality light is diffused, dynamic, and comes from all directions—thus the Impressionists began painting outdoors in natural light, still striving to depict a truth that was as “real” as possible. Yet in the process of capturing the richness of color in natural light, the Impressionists lost the sense of weight and volume—the tactile, substantial presence of things in the world—which contradicted the way we physically perceive and experience reality.



Cézanne's work

Thus, Cézanne sought to resolve the conflict between volumetric structure and natural light within the pictorial space. He admired the work of Poussin, whose paintings possessed both thematic grandeur and formal solemnity—qualities absent in Impressionism. Yet he also acknowledged that the Impressionists had achieved a superior use of color. So, Cézanne attempted to merge the two. In fact, many historical breakthroughs have occurred precisely when artists have tried to forcibly reconcile seemingly irreconcilable elements.

Cézanne ultimately succeeded in combining a sense of weight and volume with radiant color. But in doing so, he sacrificed the

fidelity of form: he emphasized parts that were not normally visible by deliberately distorting them, which in turn led to the emergence of Cubism.

Post-Impressionist Van Gogh challenged the long-standing “truth-seeking” trajectory of Western art from a different angle. He argued that the external appearances pursued by previous artists did not correspond to the truth he felt inwardly. For Van Gogh, the truth of the inner world—the truth of the spirit—was more valuable. This marked another major rupture.

If Van Gogh pursued “truth” through emotional expression, then Cézanne sought to reconstruct “truth” through rational structure. Gauguin, on the other hand, painted the human figure not merely as a person, but as a symbol, a metaphor—he attempted to explore the truth of the world within a conceptual, even mythic, realm.



Van Gogh's work

From that point on, the trajectory of painting began to shift. This change was not merely a result of external technological forces, like the invention of

the camera, but an inevitable outcome of the internal logic of art's own development. One might say that photography, as a scientific invention, merely offered a timely paradox—an instance of science undermining itself with its own tools. **The historical logic is this: it was precisely artists' extreme efforts to achieve perfect visual realism that ultimately led to the collapse of the very notion of "reality" in art.** As a result, people began to question the nature of "truth" itself, growing skeptical of a truth based on positivism, on scientific empiricism, on material observation. This eventually led to the disintegration of the empirical view of truth in art history. A new question arose: If the pursuit of material realism in representational art is fundamentally flawed, then what is real? Where does real "truth" reside? And so the ancient philosophical tradition of truth as idea—nearly two thousand years old—was resurrected. The old philosophical case in which art was expelled from Plato's Republic for failing to grasp the truth was once again brought to court for a retrial.

3. Abstract Art finally answered Plato's challenge about the true

Plato's most famous verdict on art was that art cannot represent truth. For even the physical table we see in the phenomenal world is merely a shadow of the ideal "Form" of a table. Therefore, art—which imitates the shadow—becomes a shadow of a shadow, and thus has no value. On this basis, artists were to be banished from the ideal republic.

Two thousand years later, after artists had pushed scientific realism to its limit and

failed, they found themselves returning to that ancient trial. And this time, they proposed to discard the burden of mimetic representation and allow painting's pure visual elements—form and color—to confront spirit directly.

When this spirit is directed toward the artist's own subjective psyche, the resulting work is called Abstract Expressionism. But when that spirit points beyond the image, toward a higher realm of truth—toward the world of ideals—the resulting work is what we typically call cold abstraction, geometric abstraction, or Suprematism, with stronger philosophical undertones.

In abstract art, only the "spirit" that transcends appearances is considered real. And this understanding of "real" precisely corresponds to the concept of truth in the history of philosophy. At last, two thousand years later, artists have used abstract art to answer Plato's challenge: art can reveal the truth of the world. Artists have finally reclaimed their rightful place in the ideal republic.

Q : That logic makes sense—after representational art had exhausted its possibilities for depicting "truth," people turned back to philosophy to ask again: What is truth, really? And conveniently, metaphysical philosophy had already provided an answer: there is no truth in the world of appearances—only in the world above form, the world of "Ideas."

LUO: Exactly. Abstract art no longer points to "the shadow of a shadow," but confronts the original truth of the world directly. That's my personal summary. In fact, later developments in abstract art

increasingly sought a freer and truer spiritual world through the purest use of form and color.

As we know, Plato's notion of the "Idea" eventually evolved into theology. The Idea became God. God is the absolute Idea—the only Truth. So rather than being a supplement to religious art, abstract art might actually be closer to the original intent of God. In a way, it is a correction or restoration of what religious art was originally meant to be.

Q : The line between philosophy and religion seems very thin.

4.Reasons Behind the Compromise of Early Christian Art

LUO: Indeed. Plato's theory of Ideas was directly adopted by early Christianity. Early Christian art shared the same ideals—it forbade the making of idols, stating "God is formless and cannot be represented in human form." This is entirely consistent with Plato's metaphysical view of reality.



Early Christian art

Q : If the realm of Ideas cannot be

represented in specific images, then God should also be unrepresentable.

LUO: That's right. Later on, God's image was allowed to be roughly rendered in human form—but only as a temporary measure to help illiterate people, the uneducated masses, understand. It was an expedient solution. But over time, this expedient became a convention, and eventually the image of God became fixed in human shape. By the time of the Renaissance, Christian art began depicting God more and more like a real human being, pursuing extreme representational realism. In fact, the more God was rendered in the likeness of a real person in the secular world, the farther divinity and spirit retreated from us.

So the deepest understanding of abstract art must begin here: the truth that abstract art seeks is aligned with Plato's Idea—it is aligned with the formless, ever-present God.

Q : In that sense, the internal logic of the development of art history and philosophy history seems to be fully aligned. The rise of abstract art in the West was not arbitrary—it had a philosophical framework supporting it. So, abstract art is in fact the natural outcome of a higher philosophical pursuit of truth.

LUO: I've often said that for a long time, there was no true abstract art in the Chinese art world—because very few people have delved into the internal connection between Western philosophical tradition and the development of Western art history.

Eastern philosophy does not possess the same metaphysical foundation as Western philosophy. Without that cultural background and logical structure, it becomes very difficult for people to understand how pure blocks of color could represent the human spirit. Promoting abstract art in China has always been a difficult task.

You often hear people in China claim that we also have abstract art, citing examples like xieyi ink painting or decorative motifs, which are indeed abstract in appearance. But this confuses abstract art with the abstract qualities or abstraction found in artistic imagery. This confusion remains widespread in the Chinese art world—even among many renowned artists.

So when some foreign friends or collectors resonate deeply with my work, I'm not surprised at all—because that resonance is grounded in a shared conceptual logic.

Q: So once the “logic” becomes clear, the work is no longer obscure—it reveals itself naturally.

5. The spirit of early abstract art is impure

Luo: Exactly. It's like a memory being triggered. The moment it's touched, it unfolds. That's why, from the birth of abstract art until now, there have always been artists continuing to search, to explore—to push toward deeper and freer realms.

However, even some of the early Western pioneers of abstract art fell into the same traps as Chinese artists. Their works and

writings reflect early conceptual blind spots. Personally, I'm not a great admirer of Kandinsky's abstract art—I feel it lacks spiritual depth.



Piet Mondrian Broadway Boogie Woogie, 1942–43 © Public Domain / MoMA

Q : Is it because history must proceed gradually—that abstract art had to evolve from figuration before it could return to pure abstraction?

LUO: Perhaps in the beginning, a certain degree of tentativeness and concealment was necessary. But I think it ultimately comes down to a matter of philosophical depth. While Western artists carry this cultural foundation in their blood, it doesn't necessarily mean each individual possesses that level of philosophical cultivation.

I've read Kandinsky's writings. He benefited from the findings of visual psychology, but visual psychology is still a product of scientific positivism—fundamentally grounded in the material realm. He also drew inspiration from music, which is inherently abstract, and that's why his works have a strong sense of abstract rhythm. However, the majority of his paintings evolved from figurative

origins. His method of transforming concrete objects into abstract forms—points, lines, and planes—reveals that his understanding of abstraction was still hovering near the threshold. Personally, I'm not fond of his work. I find it fragmented, lacking in spiritual depth. That's my view. Though he had religious faith—and was influenced by mystical religion, which lent a certain spiritual quality to his work—his overall artistic temperament is not one I appreciate. His reliance on figuration for abstract inspiration shows that he was still operating at a relatively early stage in abstract exploration. That said, this also aligns with Plato's view: when individuals with weaker spirits forget their original home in the realm of Ideas, they may still recover some "memory of home" through encountering certain images in the material world.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913. © Public Domain / Tretyakov Gallery

Perhaps Kandinsky and others made their most significant contribution by helping an era of weakened spiritual vitality recover some memory of our original spiritual homeland—thereby pointing the way back home for those who followed.

6. Abstraction is abstraction. There is no such thing as semi-abstraction.

Q : Which abstract masters do you admire?

LUO: I admire the later generation of abstract artists. I believe even Mondrian made the same mistake as Kandinsky—seeking the origins of abstraction through figuration. That, to me, is a fundamental error.

Abstraction is abstraction. There is no such thing as "semi-abstraction." True abstraction must leap directly beyond the figurative and arrive at truth. The relationship between matter and spirit is not one of gradual approximation—there is a rupture, a leap. Spirit is inherently pure. If you still need the assistance of concrete forms, it only shows that your abstract thinking isn't yet strong enough, that you still lack a deeper level of philosophical cultivation.

I admire Malevich's Suprematist art. I feel the metaphysical spirit in his work reaches an extraordinary level of purity. But in truth, Malevich only achieved this in a particular phase of his practice. Later, for political and other reasons, he lost that purity.



Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915. © Public Domain / State Tretyakov Gallery

Q : At that time, the political climate in Russia didn't allow Suprematist art to pursue absolute spirit.

LUO: That's one reason. But another is that Malevich himself lacked sufficient philosophical grounding. He was no firm enough—he didn't fully realize the height he had attained.

Later came Rothko, whose spiritual depth was greater. Rothko was one of the few artists who studied both philosophy and religion. His works are composed entirely of color fields, and he believed that color fields alone could express absolute spirit.

So when you mentioned earlier that some of my works bear traces of Rothko, that's because we are working within the same philosophical framework—it's natural that there may be some overlap. There's no need to avoid that entirely. But what I have, he may not; and the spiritual temperament between us is undoubtedly different.

Q : Right—you carry your own Eastern heritage, which Rothko did not.

LUO: Yes, I'm an Eastern person. I could never completely discard the philosophical tradition I come from.

7. My study of abstraction actually began with a critique of Wu Guanzhong.

Q: When did you begin your study of abstract art?

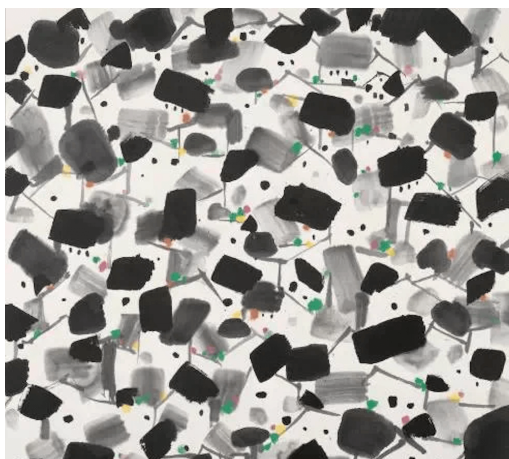
Luo: It began with a critique of Wu Guanzhong.

Q: A critique of Wu Guanzhong?

Luo: Yes. For a while, Professor Fangzhou asked me to help organize some of his writings. I read through his early essays that advocated for formalism—I went through all of those pieces with great care. He even joked that I deserved a "Best Reading Award."

But after reading them, I began to critique. I came to believe that Wu Guanzhong could never truly enter the realm of abstraction. At most, he was a formalist—what he achieved was a superficial fusion of Western formalist construction and the Eastern concept of poetic atmosphere (yijing), but it lacked any true unity of spirit and form. He never touched the spiritual core of Western abstract art. What he practiced was simply constructivism, which remains on the surface. The use of points, lines, planes, and color may have support in visual psychology, but without an inner spiritual elevation to sustain it, such attempts at abstraction ultimately miss the mark. The spiritual intensity in his work is diluted.

I personally suspect that Mr. Wu Guanzhong's understanding of Western abstract art was also misled by early Western abstract theories and practices. However, while Kandinsky and others had successors who continued to refine these theories, the soil for abstract



Wu Guanzhong, *Yangtze River*, 1980s.

© Courtesy of Wu Guanzhong Art Foundation

thinking in China has been poor, making our path to exploring abstract art slower and more arduous.

Q : Wu Guanzhong's advocacy for formalism in the 1980s caused quite a stir, with both supporters and critics.

LUO: Yes, his ideas were soon overshadowed by the momentum of the '85 New Wave, which itself tells us something important. Without a deep and fitting cultural foundation to support it, the call for formalism and its practice lacked profound persuasiveness and therefore struggled to have lasting influence.

That said, even though I criticize Wu's "East-West synthesis" as a superficial patchwork, he nonetheless opened the chapter for Chinese artists to explore modern abstraction. Although this chapter was interrupted by the urgency of the '85 New Wave, once the voice was raised, it was like a seed dropped into the soil—eventually it will take root and sprout.

Q : So can we say that abstract art

found broad acceptance in the West because it had a suitable cultural soil for sustained growth and development?

LUO: Exactly. The reason abstract art was born and thoroughly developed in the West lies in the philosophical and cultural soil. Western civilization has always been on a trajectory of seeking "truth." Early on, it stood at a very high level, exploring truths beyond the material world, so much so that philosophy even provided theoretical grounding for religion and nourished the spiritual source of faith. During the era of scientific positivism, Western culture passionately pursued the utmost objectivity of the empirical world. Yet after the collapse of materialism, it was able to transcend material limitations and critically reflect on scientism itself, continuing to seek a "truer truth" on a new, higher plane.

8. God never truly left the realm of art

Q : But some say that "abstraction" no longer seems mainstream in contemporary Western art. Can this be logically explained by developments in Western contemporary philosophy?

LUO: First of all, there have always been voices trying to declare the demise of abstract art. But in reality, even at the height of Pop Art in the 1960s, serious artists like Rothko steadfastly pursued abstraction. Many contemporary artists who don't label their work "abstract"—like Tapes—have in fact absorbed and digested the nutrients of abstract art. In

Barnett Newman's work

truth, abstract aesthetic taste has long since permeated deeply and become the mainstream aesthetic preference of Western audiences.

The main argument used to declare the decline of abstraction is an apocalyptic narrative: the death of metaphysics leads to the end of abstract art, modern narratives, and even all art itself. Their reasoning is that abstract narrative must inevitably end because the metaphysical philosophical system has collapsed. Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" is essentially a widespread announcement of the death of metaphysics, since God embodies the metaphysical Idea. If God is dead, metaphysics is dead, so abstraction naturally has no basis for existence. But within such an argument lies a great peril. Next time, we can discuss in detail the potential interactions between philosophy and art development after metaphysics.

Today, I just want to quote Kant, who said—even if we cannot scientifically prove the existence of God, we can still understand the necessity of God's existence from the perspective of moral practice. Based on similar logic, I believe: God has never died in art. He continuously supports people in seeking spiritual salvation and relief through art. No matter what, the essence of art

remains closely connected to the human spirit.

Q : So you mean that even though the metaphysical philosophical system collapsed after Hegel, the pursuit of metaphysical spirit in abstract art will continue indefinitely?

LUO: Of course. This pursuit will go on. The quest for a spirit that transcends the material is not only the mission of abstract art, but indeed the common pursuit of all art toward the metaphysical spirit.

Q : So even though metaphysical philosophy has been declared bankrupt, spirit still flows within art?

LUO: Whether philosophy is completely bankrupt, or is undergoing a negation of the negation, remains to be deeply understood by philosophers. After all, resolving dualisms cannot mean the total annihilation of spirit.

Moreover, the metaphysical tradition must survive in art, because the lifeblood of art itself is metaphysical. This is why I have always believed that no matter where God "dies," He has never left art.

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