

# **THAT PAINTING SOUNDS NICE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL READING OF THE VISUAL METAPHORS COMMUNICATED BY THE ARTWORKS OF SIR LEVI YU**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study explores the interplay of auditory and visual techniques of perception in art. To explore this connection, the hermeneutic circle under the phenomenology of Heidegger was utilized in reading three artworks of Sir Levi Yu. The experience with the artworks were dissected and reconstructed in order to arrive at a synthesis. The dynamics in experiencing the artworks demonstrates Heidegger's claim that emotions cannot be universalized; thus, this study presents an interpretative horizon of an artist reading another artist's work.

*Keywords: Phenomenological reading, Abstract Art & Heidegger*

## **That Painting Sounds Nice: A Phenomenological Reading of the Visual Metaphors Communicated by the Artworks of Sir Levi Yu**

The intentional act of consciously experiencing artworks leads to the notion of Heidegger that being is existence where the ontological priority rests in man as the subject. To function as the subject requires the presence of the object; thus, the conscious act of experiencing and interpreting concepts such as emotions and meaning conveyed in art benefit greatly from humanistic methodologies.

Art communicates through symbols. Signs, along with human perception and cognition make communication possible. Through sign systems, we are able to communicate, and come to understand ourselves, our experiences and things in general. This is because signs serve as an organizing factor, allowing us to manage language and with it, our thoughts. Essentially, phenomenologists agree that language becomes a vehicle for us to understand our experiences as we are "thrown into the world" which was discussed by Heidegger to mean "thrown-project".

To some degree visual meanings symbolized in artwork are not as concrete as spoken or written language because visual elements of color, image, and shape are understood based on subjective experience (Helmers, 2006; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). Moreover, conceptual systems and how these are categorized are constrained by how experiences are symbolized and perceived (Popova, 2003). These conceptual systems contribute to the difficulty of explaining cross modality in art using distinct terms if not treated phenomenologically. Therefore, visual images are *polysemous* allowing them to have multiple meanings blurring the possibilities for discrete definitions. Images in artworks are nothing less than visual metaphors conveying several sensory impressions but ultimately come together as a unique sensorium synthesis for each spectator. With that in mind, this paper is motivated by the interest to discover the merging of sensory modalities that convey polysemic attributes.

As an artist I have always been interested in fusing different art media together. This was brought about by my experience in painting when I hear the colors applied on the canvas. I assume that other artists also hear the colors they use. When the owner of the art gallery I am affiliated with told me about the style of Sir Levi Yu, I had been curiously drawn to his paintings.

Sir Levi Yu was born 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1980 to Emma Astudillo and visual artist William Yu. His family is based in Davao Oriental. He was introduced to the art world at an early age by his father who taught him everything about oil paints, brushes, and canvases. His early exposure to art techniques launched his art career at an early age of 15 by selling his first painting. In college, Yu took Business Management in San Beda Alabang because he wanted something to fall back on whenever he is not painting. With the encouragement of his family, Yu's art career flourished. He had several one-man shows and group art exhibits around Metro Manila and Alabang since 2001.

Looking at Yu's artworks purposefully, I began to associate the expressive aspects of the music as performed by the musicians revealed by Yu's titles. The fluidity of artistic media suggested by Yu's works highlights the relationship between color and sound. Another interesting, noteworthy experience when looking at these paintings would be the associations the colors convey. The plethora of associations make the artworks look pregnant with meaning. Hence, this phenomenological reading offers an approach for exploring the meanings roused by the essential features of the visual metaphors in the artworks of Sir Levi Yu.

The colors found in the artworks show that the paintings were created honoring the pervasive nature of symbolic meaning; thus, the artworks express the cumulative meaning-making achieved when visual codes illustrate layer upon layer of anchored significations. With this guidepost, this article serves to understand the associations that can be derived from the artworks to allow a deeper appreciation of the conceptualization of the paintings and attempt to bring the significations and myths behind them out into the open. Furthermore, using the phenomenological approach for analyzing artworks provides art enthusiasts and critics a reading of the symbols used in this art style.

If we believe the opening line of the song “If” by David Gates (1971), a picture paints a thousand words. Phenomenology provides an approach for reading visual media such as visual art, print advertisements and photographs just to name a few. Images are capable of communicating many ideas all at once and as meaning-making individuals, different views and interpretations are drawn by viewers from a variety visual media. Meanings do not exist in a vacuum. The paintings offer several layers of meanings that unfold dependent on the spectators’ consciousness. The phenomenological approach provides insightful realizations of what it means to be in the world as Heidegger puts it (Krell, 2008). Hence, the quality of experiencing the paintings rests in beholding their objective feature, as something that can be perceived by the senses, and a subjective feature which is a matter of interpretation.

Modern art explored the possibilities of transvestism among the arts as it tests “the limits of aesthetic construction”. As discussed by Albright, this is the tendency of modern art to pretend “to be another species of art altogether” which continued on to post-modern art (Albright in Leggio, 2002). Yu’s style expresses a similar modernist aim of blurring traditional distinct boundaries between art media. In effect, the artworks demonstrate how meanings evolve as layer upon layer of signification result in another form of expression. Like other abstract paintings in the modernist era, Yu’s artworks serve as a medium expressing the fluidity and interchangeability of artistic media despite the constant crisis concerning the boundaries between art media (Albright in Leggio, 2002).

Conveying a musical composition in painting is not new. This complex issue of sound and painting was embarked upon by Vassily Kandinsky (1866 – 1944) and Paul Klee (1879 – 1940) who both taught in the Bauhaus school of art and architecture. They experimented on the possibilities of manipulating elements of music and painting in abstract art. Following the Bauhaus objective of uniting all artistic disciplines together, both artists combined music and painting to conjure their masterpieces (Ione, 2004).

Kandinsky’s approach in art is based on a logical structure. He appreciates the analysis of structures as shown in his intellectual treatment of musical elements such as tonal harmony because he equates the creation of a work of art to the creation of the world thus leading to the idea of Cosmic art (Leggio, 2002). Kandinsky (1979) said, “Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos – by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments that symphony we call the music of the spheres (p. 101).” The music of the spheres, which originated from Hermetics, pertains to an ancient philosophical concept that considers the orderly movement of the cosmos as a form of music that we are incapable of hearing (James, 1993). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the science of arts to “reveal the compositional laws inherent in abstract forms” (Kandinsky, 1979). Following the tradition of respecting order and systematic approach to art, Langer contends that art composition is not done arbitrarily. Artistic expression, like painting and music, follows conventions and semantic rules because artistic expression is a result of an

intelligence to understand symbols in order to create new artworks and syntaxes (Eisner, 1971).

Klee, on the other hand, has an aversion to analysis of structures. His polyphonic images are more engaged in the process of becoming. For him, “forming, not form as a final appearance” is paramount to the dictates of academic theories on music and arts. For that reason, Klee’s practice is grounded on experimentation (Ione, 2004).

Three relatively recent artworks of Sir Levi Yu are used in this phenomenological reading. These artworks are: *What Hurts the Most* (2008), *My Sacrifice* (2008), and *This Time* (2009) claimed by the artist to represent the “Visual of Sound” for which he aptly labeled his style. The titles of his artworks are taken from music titles performed by group of musicians under the names Rascal Flatts, Creed, and Freestyle respectively. These artworks display the prevailing style of the artist’s symbolic inclinations. The readings on these three artworks include dissecting the experience with the artworks along with the musings on their effect and reconstructing the parsed units in order to arrive at a synthesis containing insights borne out of the experience. This process is called the hermeneutic circle under the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger (Heidegger, 1971; Littlejohn and Foss, 2007). Naturally, selected percepts are highlighted as posed by the limitations of selective perception.

In this study, illustrated diagrams will not be utilized. Diagrams have been useful for semioticians in understanding the signs’ constituents. Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes used diagrams to show the signs’ components because signs can only be discussed using other sign systems, elevating semiotics to a form of meta-language (Griffin, 2006; Walker, 2002). Conceptualists and art historians have always been interested in the compositions of artists and find diagrams useful in analyzing the content of these artworks. Although not illustrated in diagrams, the interpretations on the associations derived from the paintings are discussed in depth.

Since the focus of this study is the deconstruction of the “Visual of Sound,” the study only used the themes of the lyrics in the readings but the in-depth study of musical lyrics was reserved for future content analysis researches on the subject.

To differentiate, “Visual of Sound” style is not the same as sound art. Sound art has created a buzz in the art world by virtue of its unconventional execution. The term was first used in New York City, at an exhibit in The Sculpture Center curated by William Hellerman in 1983 (Hellerman & Goddard, 1983). At the heart of sound artistry is auditory stimulation and this is achieved in many ways. That being said, many sound art pieces are in fact hybrid artworks. The aural motivation can come from sounds derived from site-specific installations, electronics, audio media and technology, mixing or using environmental sounds. Unlike Yu’ visual of sound, most of sound art involves the environment where it is installed. As a visual artist conjures works of art using colors, the sound artist makes use of tones and audio effects in conjunction with image of the object d’art producing the sound to create multimodal art experience (Kahn, 2001; “Sound Art”; Ellis, 2010).

## **Demonstration**

### **“What Hurts the Most” Acrylic on Canvass, 20x30, 2008**

**Music performed by Rascal Flatts: Gary LeVox, Jay DeMarcus, and JoeDon Rooney**

Perception plays a key role in understanding the symbolisms suggested by Yu’s paintings. The polysemous nature of Yu’s art is evident in his myriad symbolic associations of sense modalities. When looking at Yu’s paintings, several visual elements attract one’s attention. Starting with the title of the painting, the suggestive power of the title immediately connects the artwork to music. With regard to the title of the artworks, the artist intentionally wanted viewers to make immediate associations between his artworks and music that inspired them. The titles of artworks offer, what Walker (2002) calls, extra-visual information. Although the titles of Yu’s artworks are far from being self-referential, these carry latent meanings that can affect the over-all reception of the painting. Barthes (1964) asserted that captions generate different inflections of meanings to images. The synthesis of the artwork’s title, the image and the represented song heralds purpose of abstraction.

Initially, the title draws the viewer to the conventional melody of a love song because that is the manifest suggestion of the painting’s title. Since I am familiar with the lyrics, I began to divert my attention to the sounds of the musical instruments as they play in my mind. It is important to note at this point that the attractive red color at the lower half of the painting triggers a feeling of sentimentality which leads to the realization that the feeling vibrates ideas associated with love songs. This kind of music harps the many colorful emotions stirred by this sentimental feeling but the most essential one, being red, is commonly accepted as the color of love after so much association with passion, warmth, and sex (Norris, 2001; Kandinsky in Alpers, 1992; Almalech, 2008).

Upon recall of the lines in the lyrics that obviously depict the genre of the song, the intended emotive function was achieved by prominent use of string instruments, particularly the violin. Conventionally, string instruments, because “of their proximity in range and tone to the human voice, are thought to be the most expressive group of instruments” (Kalinak, 2003).

As the music continuously plays in the head, the significance of the violins used in the song in achieving the emotive function becomes even more evident. The violin in the song stands out in order to invite the listener to recall the love relationships one has experienced and muse on their lessons. The violin and the slow tempo in the exposition dictate to the listener the song’s mood. To increase the emotional appeal, the song worked a crescendo accentuated by the drums at the chorus as the vocalist raises his voice to say the title of the song and the strings fade out to conclude the theme of lost love.

Looking at the painting closely, the piece’s execution of colors spread across the canvas utilized oxidized effects that make the paint appear corroded.

The rusty textures give the artwork an antique impression. This particular style closely resembles the works of Jack Bush and Gus Albor. At first glance, the artwork seems similar with some color field paintings of the Canadian artist Jack Bush who is also known to use music as an inspiration ("Jack John Hamilton Bush", par 1). However as one notices the layering technique and minimalist style of Yu's painting, the works of Albor come to mind sans the small molded squares detail ("Agusto 'Gus' Albor: Flouting trends in art, Manila Bulletin,"2008).

The artwork does not have a lot of blended colors in the composition. In fact the colors are very distinct on the textured surface of the painting. Textures in paintings make the artwork appear like a landscape with a love story to tell but in this case the story would be the sounds they signify. The "landscape" suggests mountains, hills, and valleys alluding to the journey that one takes to experience the highs and lows of their love story.

Also, the textures in the artwork visually remind me of a graphic equalizer that responds to the changing audio frequency of the song. The colors used in the artwork, on the other hand, are shown to be distinctly separate from one another except for the blended gold and crimson red colors at the lower left hand side. On the other hand, the color black was used as a base to create the oxidized effect. I perceive these colors as aural percepts that can refer to a number of musical elements such as pitch, tempo, volume dynamics, melody and rhythm. In the composition, the most striking component would be the contrast between the oxidized white and crimson red.

The white paint occupied more than half of the painting's dimension while the crimson red occupied the lower half. The white paint conveniently refers to the melody of the vocals and the high pitch of the string instruments because these elements are what the listeners would notice first. The crimson red below suggests the beat of the drums and theme of the lyrics. Furthermore, the theme of the lyrics is about frustrations in love, which can be attributed also to the black paint used as base. The sadness implied in the semantic extensions of the words in the lyrics communicates a certain emotional void or blackness. The voice of the lead singer, Gary LeVox, follows the conventions in expressing this emotional void.

More on the red, the dark value of the red juxtaposed to white and light gold colors in the painting draws much attention. The synesthetic experience looking at red suggests its reference to the beating sound of the drums in the song. The relationship of "red" and drums refer to the basic function of the drums as the heart of a musical performance. This significance is learned upon enrolling in drum lessons as I did. Drum lessons taught me that the drum beat functions as a timekeeper for the other performers and that the drums give the music life.

I imagine playing "What Hurts the Most" in concert halls or in large open spaces where the volume is amplified by subwoofers emphasizing the vibrations created by drumbeats. The auditory and haptic percepts from the amplified sound usually draw attention to the played music because the drumbeats animate the music making it possible to feel the music in the chest. Clearly consistent with this association, the crimson red area is at the base of the composition which suggests the placement of the heart of the painting.

A lot of literature has romanticized the positioning of the head over heart and that the heart is something to be ruled over, which in fact is one of the myths supported by the configuration of this painting. Interestingly, research on NeuroLinguistic Programming or NLP has revealed that oculesics or eye movements reflect and can trigger certain internal states (Parungao, 2011). Attitudes and thinking patterns are reflected in the direction where the eyes focus. For example, eyes looking at the left show that the person is recalling information. Eyes looking at the right side show that the person is conceptualizing, while a person looking down is accessing emotions. Using this knowledge, to access emotions means positioning visuals at the low eye level to effectively process emotions visually (Bavister & Vickers, 2010; James, 1993; Jensen, 2008).

Moreover, any one listening to the lyrics of the song would make the connection that the crimson red in the artwork points to the emotional undertones of the lost love theme, which is also suggested by the title of the song, along with lyrics that convey hurt, loss, and heartache. If the theme of the lyrics is not grasped by the listener, this striking color nonetheless functions as a representation of the emotional high vocals.

Coincidentally, and in a figurative manner, the paper of Sultzbaugh (2009) also discussed that the color red corresponds to low notes or low pitch while violet corresponds to high notes. However findings from another study showed that the opposite association applies to their sample. In the paper of Datteri and Howard (2004) where they studied the relationship between wavelength and frequency of light versus wavelength and frequency of sound, the inverse relationship between light wavelength frequency and sound wavelength frequency holds true. In this case, red, having a low frequency of 400–484 THz correspond to a high pitch sound. Obviously these studies show the shifting subjective account of this relationship, which suggests that the color red can also be experienced to trigger light and happy emotions in other contexts.

The sensorial journey into the painting brings one to revel on the association between red and heart. In this aspect, the association no longer applies to aural percepts. The idea becomes irresistible especially when thoughts of Valentine's Day and its symbolisms begin to emerge. For example, the color red and the emotions attached to the heart symbol dominate the scene.

Disentangling the signification assigned to colors, Almalech (2008) studied the paradox in color language in his paper on the semiotics of color. The basic assumptions state that:

The language of the colors has two forms of existence – verbalized and non-verbalized. The non-verbalized form of existence is when we use our visual perception. The verbalized form of existence is when we use the natural language and the color terms. (Almalech, 2008, p. 2)

Looking at a painting, when colors are non-verbalized, it becomes possible to perceive the colors all at once. The possibility of appreciating the holistic impact becomes apparent. On the other hand, when colors are verbalized, this subjects

them to the rules of structured text and thereby splits into context-free and context-dependent versions. In this case, making the colors represent pitch obviously fall under the textual level or context-dependent version of color bringing with it non-color meanings of the sign (Almalech, 1996; 2008).

The non-color meanings perceived when looking at the artwork's colors, apparently, do not refer to the idea of the physical form of the colors such as the length of the light waves. Here lies the irony, in as much as art composition is not arbitrary, the assigning of meaning to symbols is arbitrary (Langer, 1942; Fiske, 2002).

Nevertheless, the color system of the artwork can be interpreted to refer to the associations made by Van Den Doel (2003) and Sultzbaugh (2009) regarding color and sound mapping. Sounds and colors are both frequencies and vibrations with corresponding wavelength values measured in Hertz and Angstrom respectively ("Wavelength of Visible Light", 2009). This spurred studies that sought to understand cross-modal associations. Although white does not have a single wavelength, the study of Van Den Doel (2003) tried "to incorporate common associations between sound and color such as between white noise and the color white, and the associations between color and pitched sounds" (p. 2). In that study, bright colors have large cutoff frequencies or  $f_c$  while black has the lowest  $f_c$ .

Also apparent are the parallel lines painted gold at the right side of the painting. Looking at the parallel lines closely, they may allude to guitar frets since they are short. These lines can also signify the sound of string instruments since parallel lines do look like strings placed side by side. The emphasis on string instruments suggests the allusion to the steady tempo of violins in the song. This tempo is constant in the whole duration of the song, save for the building crescendo at the chorus.

Quite a number of Yu's artworks contain square patterns. The gold paint on these buttons signifies that the three square patterns are valuable since gold has always been culturally associated with value. The three square patterns in Yu's painting can be perceived to represent the degree how the artist favors this particular piece. After reviewing the other artworks of Yu following the color-sound art, not all his pieces have golden squares and not all of them have three squares. Some have two, while some have one square. Aside from the added aesthetic appeal which the gold squares offer, they can also be alluded to symbols of value like gold medals, gold bars and gold coins.

Apperceiving the totality of the artwork offers the realization that the sensorial synthesis is a product of selecting details and associations allowed by the viewer's present disposition. Hence, the association of the color red with Valentine's Day symbolisms, drum beats, human emotions and other non-color meanings and the connection between sound and color frequencies define a propensity to entertain the conventional basis of these symbolisms (Beardsley, 1992).

Unlike in figurative art, the painting does not aim to represent anything physical in the external world. Rather, the internal experience of the artwork gives



significance to relationships formed by these ideas and their visual associations on canvas.

**Figure 1: "What Hurts the Most"**



Source: Artist's Collection

**"My Sacrifice" 24x24, acrylic on canvas, 2009**

**Music performed by Creed: Brian Marshall, Scott Phillips, Scott Stapp, and Mark Tremonti**

Unlike the previous artwork, this painting was done on a large square stretched canvass. At first glance, the large concentric circles and the red paint on the vast expanse demand attention. Also, unlike the previous painting, the concentric circles in the composition conjure up sound vibrations or water ripples that are waves; nevertheless, letting the artwork give out sensate forms referring directly to movement. The whirling motion motivated by the psychological effect of the circles along with the copious use of red would agitate any spectator.

As one gazes upon the title of this artwork, immediately the first impression of this painting makes sense. "My Sacrifice" is a familiar song and judging by the way it sounds, indeed, it is characterized to have high dynamics. The large circles resembling seismic waves serve to visually amplify the high volume of the song. People looking at the painting would get impressions that the music played in high volume by the painting can permeate through walls.

This style for portraying loud volume by using colors to signify loudness was evident in for instance, Van Gogh's style. Van Gogh had a different approach to rendering noisy colors. In his painting, Yu employs ample shades of red and grandstanding concentric circles to connote high-volume sound. Van Gogh's on the other hand uses complementary colors to exaggerate the subjects in his paintings in order to create the over-all powerful impact. Boddy-Evans quotes Van Gogh:

To exaggerate the fairness of hair, I come even to orange tones, chromes and pale yellow ... I make a plain background of the richest, intensest [*sic*] blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky." ("Palettes and Techniques of the Masters: Vincent van Gogh", Boddy-Evans, n.d.).

As one recalls the sound of the music suggested by the artwork's title, the high volume played by the vocals, drums, and electric guitars suggests a forceful energy because the sound can be perceived as stimulating and revitalizing. Although the lyrics of the song do not hint any ideas on aggression, the baritone sound of the vocals give the song its roaring, energetic appeal.

To contemplate further on red and the circles used in this painting, the style employed by Yu resembles Klee's motivation to make visible the invisible (lone 150). In this case, the "loudness" was successfully rendered. Moreover, this particular painting exudes a pulse making it not only look loud but also stimulate crude emotions such as anger and anxiety which suggests that the colors contradict the actual message of the song's lyrics about nostalgic love and friendship.

Basic colors speak, more or less, a universal language. According to the studies of Rosche, et al. (1976), universal, trans-cultural, trans-ethnic categorization applies to colors. Along with Lakoff (1978), the Prototype theory discussing the universalities of colors is developed as a result. According to Lakoff (1978), "color concepts are embodied in that focal colors are partly determined by human biology, but color categories are more than merely a consequence of the nature of the world plus human biology" (p. 29).

This means that color categories are generated in two ways. One through the neurophysiological make-up of all human beings which yields universal kernel meanings to colors and the other through socio-cultural influences which give the non-universal connotations of focal colors (Almalech, 2008; Lakoff, 1978). Color categories only apply to primary colors plus green, black, and white. Almalech (2008) summarizes the kernel meanings: "for red – fire/flame; for blue – sky/sea;

for green – all plants; for yellow – the sun; for white – the light, snow and/or milk; for black – coals [sic], darkness.” (p.2).

The association of energy with red can also allude to fire since fire is a form of energy. This signification fits snugly in the Prototype theory and other eclectic disciplines. Religious and esoteric teachings attribute fire to the color red. Islam, Judaism, and religious teachings in ancient Greece and Rome all associate fire with this color (Almlech, 2008). The metaphorical extensions of red converge with the associations established in the field of esoteric arts. In this field, red is commonly associated with the fire element and the fire signs of the zodiac especially Aries (Farnell, et al., 2007; McArthur, 2008). Crystal experts also profess that certain stones vibrate with the color red and the fiery attribute. The stones associated with fire are agate, bloodstone, diamond, garnet, and ruby (Baggott & Morningstar, 1999).

In color therapy or color healing, the fiery characteristic of red is not something to be underestimated. People who practice color healing know all too well the physiological and psychological effect of this color. As Norris (2001) put it, “red is the colour of life itself, of fire and of blood, of danger, and sex, and without it our lives would lack vigour, warmth, strength, and passion” (p. 38). Red, when used in therapy, should be used to treat people with low energy and poor circulation. Red should be avoided by people with high blood pressure and by those who get easily irritated. This notion is anchored on the testimony that, like in all colors, red has both positive and negative attributes in the color healing practice. Interestingly, these positive and negative attributes also correspond to the connotations in Prototype theory of color semiotics.

In sum, the positive qualities of red include: energetic, vigor, vitality; while the negative qualities include: aggression, impatience, brutality, anger (Bonds, 2000; Norris, 2001). Therefore, the symbolisms in the artwork appear to adhere to socially constructed notions that naturalise the association of red with fire and energy.

But as one stares at the painting more intently another realization emerges. Judging by the way the colors are presented in this artwork, the combination of warm and cool colors of red and white respectively alluding fire and ice offer an equilibrium, a picture of being still where “stillness” comes with the knowing that there is action in inaction. This principle displayed by the painting, which is essentially Taoist, does not promote siding with extremes. The painting has both red and white, red with white and vice versa. This balance in “stillness” teaches that the discipline of going within reveals a spirituality unbridled by the baggage of the material world. The same effect was also employed by Greenbaum in her “Hollywood Squares” and “Spoiler Alert”. In a similar tone, her works also relate with music (Nickas, 2009). Her profuse use of yellow and black give that appeal of balance despite the noisy colors. Nevertheless, the balance achieved in Yu’s “My Sacrifice” does not connote feelings of nostalgic love and friendship.

In toto, experiencing this painting comes in two phases. The initial phase agitates the viewer. The grandstanding red and the circles that seem to emerge and extend out of the edges of the canvass wail at the viewers like what sirens do to

confuse sailors. In the second phase the warm and cool colors together invite the viewers to meditate on stillness like the calm after the storm, at the same time feeling the vibrations connoted by the circles. The experience weaves together the concepts of balance, stillness and that the synthesis of polarities reveals serenity.

Figure 2: "My Sacrifice"



Source: Artist's Collection

**"This Time", acrylic on canvass, 16x24, 2010**

**Music performed by Freestyle: Christopher Suzara, Jinky Vidal, Joshua Desiderio, Mike Luis, Rommel dela Cruz, Gerald Banzon, Richard Felix Rocha Suzara, and Nikki Cabardo**

The third painting that I chose to pay attention to was entitled "This Time." I was drawn to it because I am familiar with the song the title refers to and immediately from there, the experience looking at the piece brought me to the parallel dimension of its musical landscape.

Interestingly, when looking at Yu's works, the titles that he uses beguiles the viewer and every viewer will naturally be attracted to different titles based on what they know about it. It could be deduced that those viewers, who are not familiar with the titles, will be attracted more to the colors and patterns rather than

the titles. But once the viewer gets a clue of how the artworks are named, chances are, the connection of the titles and the painting will serve as a basis for discourse.

Upon auditory recall of the previous songs, this piece has a slower, more relaxed tempo. The vocalist for this song demonstrated a lot of vocal inflections. The vocal inflections give the song a more playful but soulful melody. With that in mind, I looked at how that was represented on canvas.

Looking at the artwork, the painting is clearly divided into two halves; one side is covered with cerulean blue with gradations leading to phthalo blue. Much of the left side is covered with yellow ochre layered with pale gold on a black base coat. The gold paint was applied on the black area using dry brush technique giving the paint a textured appearance. These colors and the technique used to apply them can be perceived to be associated with the vocal inflections in the song specifically with the varying shades of blue and pale gold. Moreover, these shades imply the varying pitch of the keyboards when they change organ presets in the song. Review of this song would reveal that the keyboards switch organ presets more or less five times in the entire duration of the song.

The vocals in this song, compared to the previous songs, have a higher pitch and are characterized to be more hummable. To represent that non-figuratively, the painting used more light colors compared to the previous artworks discussed. The light colors used are white, yellow ochre and cerulean blue. From this, it can be construed that light colors allude to pitch of the song being represented. To relate this with some concepts in chromoacoustics, these colors fall in a higher hertz frequency range than red and orange. Following the frequencies listed in the chart, red has the lowest mean frequency making it correspond to a pitch lower than the middle C or C<sub>4</sub>.

In layman's terms, middle C is the musical note C found at the middle of the piano keyboard. According to the chart, visible color wavelength starts with red and ends in violet with the highest frequency humans can perceive. Shades of yellow, such as ochre and pale gold, are positioned a little below the middle C while blue sits close to violet – the highest frequency. Thus, the signification used in the artwork supports the accepted relationship between color and pitch.

As I immerse more on the experience of the painting, I realized that the theme of the song which is, rather, inescapable. Anyone who knows this song must know its theme; the soulful vocals sing about hurt and love. To represent the character of the vocals, it appears that Yu had interspersed shades of vermilion and black at the upper left hand corner using the viewer's vantage point. Vermillion, being a gradation of red, can also refer to concepts associated with red. Many cultures have associated red with heated subjects such as passion, love, sex, lust, violence, rage, and anger to mention a few. On the other hand, black has been associated with gloom, sorrow, grief, tears, and death (Almalech, 1996; Farnel, 2007; Tresidder, 2003; Mallon, 2007). The combination of vermilion and black therefore implies a love problem which the vocals are aurally suggesting.

The shades of blue connote the light quality of the overall impact of the song's sound. To dissect what that means, the cool vocals, the sound of the keyboards, and the subtle drumbeats create relaxing sounds despite the semantic

extensions of the lyrics. Looking at the wavelength frequency value assigned to blue, this connection is not so farfetched. Aside from the commonplace reference to sadness, other literature, specifically those in chromotherapy, says that blue, symbolically, connotes the following ideas: coolness, pleasantness, calmness, tenderness, serenity, sincerity (Burgoon & Saine, 1978; Norris, 2001).

**Figure 3: "This Time"**



Source: Artist's Collection

On the other hand, Kandinsky discussion on the color blue sheds light on the artwork's allusion of blue to lightness. According to Kandinsky, "blue is the typical heavenly color, the ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest" (Alperson, 1992, p. 137). Thus, blue signifies attributes related to resting, an unburdened feeling which runs contrary to the lyrics' theme. With these contrasting significations, it is clear that the artwork's representation of this song may not have considered the semantics in the lyrics.

The experience of looking at this painting would not be complete without reflecting on the concentric circles situated at the upper right hand corner accented with white paint. Since the song was not intended to fire-up the nerves in the first

place, the mid volume is maintained throughout the song. Hence, the concentric circles signify volume that is gentle to the ears. Similarly, the white paint, also suggests feelings of lightness. The same connotations are specified in Almalech's (2008) color semiotics. From that article, other associations to white are: purity, brightness, spiritual, sparkling, clean and immaculate.

Clearly this painting is a representation of ambivalence. The calmness of the shades of blue and the problematic love affair signified by the vermilion and black coexist in a single artwork making the piece imply more than one mood. Hence, this painting is a symbol of tension. The kind of tension that is only revealed when the person looking at the artwork knows the song the artwork's title refers to.

Nevertheless, putting together these conflicting associations on canvas give the semblance of high and low notes of a musical piece. Tensions are evident across all forms of creative work and that it would be responsible to be aware of the presence of such tensions or ironies in art. Concatenating these many moods and connotations contribute to one big whole, although some moods may appear to be dominant.

## **Conclusion**

Artworks have many stories as far as techniques of perception are concerned. According to Heidegger, the reflection of the experience itself defines existence and because of this, emotions cannot be universalized. Therefore, to appreciate the myriad allusions of artworks, most especially non-representation artworks, the phenomenological approach is justified because in the relationship of artworks and the reader, the ontological priority rests in the reader's experience of the art. Everything in the world can only be understood based on one's own interpretive horizon; hence, a purely "objective" world is impossible (Hart in Irwin and Johnson, 2010; Littlejohn and Foss, 2007).

By conscientiously reflecting on my internal experiences while ruminating over Sir Levi Yu's artworks, the more I share Heidegger's contention that technology, although it has its many uses, poses a great threat to man's ability to appreciate the "interconnections among beings" (Wrathall, 2011; Lemay & Pitts, 1996). The paintings of Yu sound nice to me because they speak of colors and forms that relate to other meaningful connections. A certain haunting realization dawned on me that a lot of people rarely appreciate the beauty and significance of most things because their "artistic attitude" is blinded by the phantom necessity of being plugged in the Internet or to an electronic gadget such as the iPod (Lemay & Pitts, 1996). Since technology serves to homogenize lifestyles, it is logical to predict that the human being will morph into something else in the near future as portrayed in sci-fi films. Therefore, in order to understand more our own unique being, hermeneutics, especially applied to art appreciation, will be useful to maintain meaning giving capacity as human beings.

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