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How Art Saved Our Marriage

Samuel Son · Wednesday, May 17th, 2017

My wife, Suyun Son, picked up the painter's brush again. The brush had been locked up in a storage box for ten years. Our third and final child was now in the hands of public school. Time, in large chunks, suddenly made itself available so my wife began to paint again.

One of her first paintings is "Genesis," capturing the childlike exuberance God must've felt when She was creating the world. She stretches the canvas of sky and earth, then throws colors at it, blues and whites of clouds and sun, yellows and reds of trees and flowers. God as a painter and creation as Her masterpiece, and as such, Genesis is not just about God's creativity but the artist's creativity. It is art about art. This is my favorite piece and it was exhibited with six other pieces in a solo exhibit on May 12th. As happy as I am to see the start of her career — not to mention extra cash as a local art collector bought her piece titled "Door" for his wife on Mother's Day — I am most glad for what art has done for our relationship.

She began painting and it saved our marriage.

For ten years we've only talked about parenting and kids. I'm sure we talked of other things, but all I remember is the hydra-like to do lists: bills, diapers, bills, school, bills, homework, bills. Yes, these things are necessary to family life, so important we forgot to talk about the unimportant things of life, like Van Gogh's color palette, T.S. Eliot's word palette, and going to museums and expressing our opinions on modern expressionism, these unimportant talks that make the necessary things of life meaningful, if not, tolerable.

Parenting can reduce love into a business partnership. It is constant negotiation of who drives, who picks up, who does the laundry. The negotiation gets more complicated when the little human sapiens get better at verbiage. Because our words are mainly used to get things done, our words and tone become cold. They lack the warmth of humor, the play of big ideas, the delightful surprises of small observations. When words become cold, relationships ice, then crack, then break.

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She wanted jump back into art with large works, a canvas larger than her and can

take her emotions. We went to cut lumber from Lowe's because a pre-made canvas is exorbitantly priced. We cut 47 inches height and 96 inches length. I drilled the frame and it surprisingly held up. We stretched the canvas fabric and staple gunned it over the frame. It took us hours. Even doing that we were arguing. We were at a point where we forgot how not to argue.

The canvas was blank for days. Then colors appeared. The colors had no distinct shapes. No roundness of a sun, or the triangles of trees. There were no hard boundaries. Everything was bleeding into each other. I didn't understand what she was trying to do but I enjoyed watching her paint. She was becoming a different person before my eyes.

Her painter's apron was blotted with paint drips. The dining table slowly turned into her work desk, holding plethora of paint tubes and two buckets of motley brushes. I thought brushes came in three sizes like my polo shirts: small, medium, large. I never knew that the artist selects her brushes the way a surgeon selects her instruments, with precision and for specific purposes. Each brush of different widths, strengths and fibers left different impressions. And she always had classical music on. No playlist, just what wafts out from the small alarm clock radio. She wants to be surprised, so she can believe the muse moves her brushes by moving the classical dj to play Tchaikovsky - Violin Concerto in D major, Op 35. By leaving the music to the the radio, she is opening herself to the muse. The transformation that happened when she put on the painter's apron was no less magical than Diana becoming Wonder Woman with a pirouette (based on the 90s TV series), from partner of domestic business, to a Bohemian. I wanted to leave the kids, trade in our Honda Odyssey for a Coupe and put some mileage in it.

"What is the title of the work?" I asked her.

"Genesis."

Though I would have never guessed that title, after she named it, there was no other name for it. The strokes are both wild and reserved. This is the balance nature endlessly orchestrates, chaos and order tugging at each other. One can call it wrestling or dancing.

I got so curious about her art, about her, like I've not been for 10 years.

I asked her, "Do you see what you want to paint? Or do you see as you are painting?"

"I am trying to see what's in the canvas," she answered. So unexpected. I hardly know her!

Her painting process, and our conversation on it stirred a poem in me. That night I jotted few lines. It was a couple's ekphrastic poem.

*how the paint brush and the flat knife
are like the archaeologist's brush and pickaxe
used to unearth what is hidden in the blank canvas.*



Painting by Suyun Son. (Click to enlarge.)

The first time I saw her, I didn't fall in love. I thought she was hot, and I lusted for her. Lust can lead to love, but only if the lust of the body becomes lust of the mind, according to my philosophy of love. I fell in love with her at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art when she stood still before Van Gogh's "Enclosed Wheat Field with Peasant." I never stood that long before a painting. There was so much others things to see and get checked off before catching the 7 train back to Flushing. So I pulled her hands but she didn't budge.

She told me Van Gogh never used the colors he saw with his eyes, but felt with his heart. It was a personal palette.

Why didn't I ever see it before? The sky was green, the wheat was burgundy, and the leaves were black and yet it looked as if they were the most natural colors. Van Gogh's palette was idiosyncratic yet universal, the colors I would have chosen if I had paid attention.

"He also uses," this woman I was falling in love with continued to explain, "large strokes that move. Not a single stroke is dead." And I stepped closer, my nose close as I can get without setting off an alarm and getting cuffed by the Museum security, and I saw each stroke shivering with energy, as if the paint hasn't dried yet. Then I stepped back and what I saw was surreal. I saw the clouds swirl, the wheat sway with the wind, and the peasant singing as he gathers the sheaves. We married August of that year.

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When she is painting, I am eager to return home, to see what she had unearthed from the canvas. It is one way of seeing what she sees, which helps me to see her.

In "Genesis," I see a playful God, who is discovering new things every day, because creation hasn't stopped.

*carefully brush away years of assumptions
chip away hidden sediments of sentiments
to see the hue of your eyes.*

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