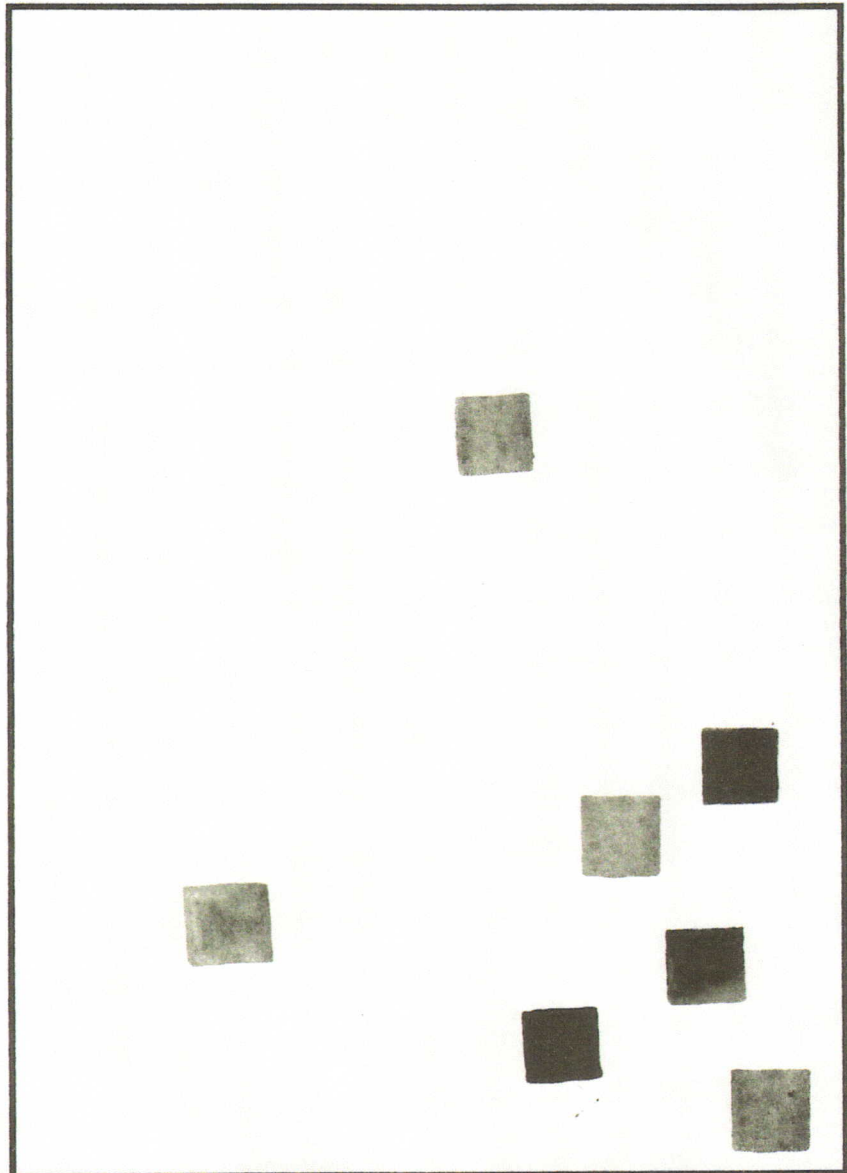


## "Each Moment, Only Once"

Kóan-Jeff Baysa

There's a long history of painters integrating Asian sensibility into contemporary Western-based art practice and challenging issues of tradition and modernity, content and form. James Jack is such an artist who studied Japanese language, eastern philosophy and Zen Buddhism. He spent a year learning *shodo*, Japanese calligraphy, with a master in Kyoto, Japan, following the eastern painting tradition of the well-rounded artist as also accomplished calligrapher. Calligraphy, *shu fa*, is thought to be most revealing of one's personality, about which he declares, "I am working to discover a precise language of emotive abstraction." His gridded Sumi ink calligraphy paintings, whether using a mop, brush, or palette knife, are more about technique than self-expression, painting with a precision of brush strokes, structural harmony, and spatial awareness. Some of the works in varying grid sizes demonstrate diligent copying, one of the tenets of calligraphy established in 500 AD by the Chinese artist Hsieh Ho. Diffusing ink blots and dry brush strokes, called *kasure* or flying white, are viewed as natural impromptu expressions rather than faults. To those who cannot read calligraphy, the works are enjoyed on another level, as pure abstractions, erasing the line between linguistic communication and abstract composition.

Recently, Jack has been working exclusively with an ink made from the husk of butternuts, a material readily available in Northern New England. Intimately involved in the process of creating the inks by gathering the nuts, separating the husks, grinding, boiling, and filtering them to produce the inks, he is taken with their qualities of smooth wetness, subtle tone, and quiet grace. Describing painting as meditation in action, he enjoys exploring space through the subtle use of simple forms that utilize the inks' tonal variation and earth-like saturation. By rejecting representation as a goal, he is able to concentrate on the purities of space, tone, composition and



James Jack "Untitled #23" Walnut Ink on Paper 30x22.5 inches 2003

shape, finding resonance with the works of contemporary Asian artists Guo-Qiang, Hasegawa, and Okada. The organization of space, equal weighing of neutral space versus active space, and unifying elements that integrate the works, seen as quintessentially traditional Chinese painting techniques, find commonalities with the works of contemporary Western abstract painters such as Motherwell, Louis, and Michaux.

In contrast to Chinese avant-garde Chinese painting where a disjunction is encouraged between *mo* (ink) and *bi* (brushwork), Jack's work is traditionally aligned and their relationship is one of gentility, compassion, and intimacy. "The brush is my vehicle for the ink's linguistic expression," he states, "often a spontaneous one, as a dancer's relationship with space." The ancient

Chinese artist Hsieh Ho also listed critical placement among the six principles of traditional Chinese painting, and Jack's calculated placement of forms in relationship to one another establishes a dialogue between them as well as the unmarked spaces comprising the remainder of the field. The artist is also finely attuned to the *liao*, or completeness of painting, forsaking excessive detailing and flourish, but allows his hand to be seen by the gradient of tones within the shapes that reflect action and inaction, strokes and rests. Despite the subtleties of forms composed in elegant schemes, the paintings pack the distilled emotional densities of dwarf stars. "My work is what it is, nothing more, nothing less" summarizes the artist, leaving us to ponder his timeless contemporary work, a reduction to ink and essence.