

# Aesthetics of accumulation

28 March, 2016 | Kwon Mee-yoo



Artist Chung Sang-hwa working in his studio.

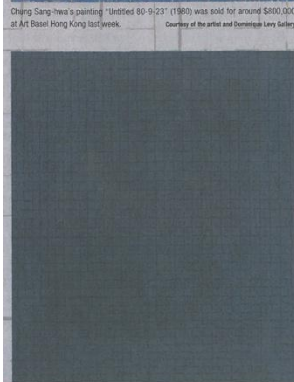
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery España.

## Aesthetics of accumulation



Chung Sang-hwa's painting "Untitled 00-9/23" (1980) was sold for around \$800,000 at Art Basel Hong Kong last week.

Courtesy of the artist and Dominique Levy Gallery.



Chung Sang-hwa's "Untitled 03-12-15" (1983).

Courtesy of the artist and Dominique Levy Gallery.

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This year's Art Basel Hong Kong, which wrapped up its three-day run Saturday, was a feast of contemporary art. A record 70,000 visitors — including directors and curators from leading international museums and institutions as well as art patrons and connoisseurs from across the globe — flocked to the fourth edition of Asia's largest art fair.

Among hundreds of works displayed at booths of 239 galleries from 35 countries, the works of Korean Dansaekhwa artist Chung Sang-hwa attracted attention. Dansaekhwa, or Korean monochrome, refers to a genre of abstract art that emerged in Korea in the 1970s and can be characterized roughly by its labor-intensive process and nearly monastic attitude toward painting.

The New York-based Dominique Levy Gallery presented a few major works of Chung, which can be described as repetitious vertical and horizontal lines created by folding the canvas, peeling off the paint and filling the uncovered patches with similar tones.

His work is equally about the process, the artist emptying himself into the painting, as much as it is about the final work. The process of painting, folding, cracking, stripping and repainting, becomes his guide to self-exploration and meditation," Emilio Steinberger, curator and senior director at Dominique Levy, said.

Steinberger said the recent interest in the Dansaekhwa movement is part of the rediscovery of a diverse vibrant group of artists and groups, working at the same moment of time internationally.

"The Dansaekhwa movement can be comparable to the recent interest in artists affiliated with the Zero group in Europe and the Gutai group in Japan," Steinberger said. "Dansaekhwa and minimalism do have a strong aesthetic connection, although Dansaekhwa comes from the traditional cultural aesthetics and philosophy of Korea, as well as the economic and political upheaval at that time in the country."

Chung was well-received at the fair, as a 1980 work was priced around \$800,000 and a 1983 work around \$200,000. According to Dominique Levy, the prices for Chung's works range from \$100,000 to \$1 million, depending on date and scale.

"We were pleased to continue the discussion about Chung Sang-hwa with many collectors in Asia producing a strong interest," Dominique Levy's marketing and communications director Mackie Healy said.

Impressed by Chung's works after a visit to his studio near Seoul, Dominique Levy is organizing an exhibit of Chung in New York in cooperation with the Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea.

The solo exhibition, slated for June, will be held at both galleries — the Dominique Levy focusing on works from 1969 to the present, ending with one work made especially for the exhibit and the Greene Naftali exhibiting all recent work including three monumental paintings measuring 102 inches in height.

### Pursuit of unseen

Born in Yeongdeok, North Gyeongsang Province in 1932, Chung majored in painting at Seoul National University and worked as an art teacher before studying in Paris from 1967 to 1968. He returned to Korea for his family and worked in Japan before moving back to Paris in 1976, where he stayed through 1992. Since then, the artist has been active in Korea.

Yoon Jin-sup, a Honam University professor and Dansaekhwa expert, deemed Chung as the closest in his approach to the essence of the genre among the Dansaekhwa artists.

"His extremely ascetic process largely involved creating a rectangular module pattern by pleating a canvas and then repeatedly inserting and removing paint within the pattern. His works are reminiscent of physicality or corporeality, which has been one of the mainstays of post-modernism since the 1980s.

"Chung has the characteristics of a pioneer. In a manner, the surface of his canvas is a sort of skin created through repeated acts, which can be likened to the physical terrain," Yoon explained.

Joan Kee, an associate professor specializing in the history of art at the University of Michigan, is one of the most important scholars of the Dansaekhwa movement and author of "Contemporary Korean Art: Dansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method."

She said Dansaekhwa was not just a movement and emphasized the individuality of the artists being recognized on their own specific terms as there are more solo shows happening than ever before.

"More important is how each artist explores painting as a function of method — how to paint took priority over what to paint," Kee said in an e-mail interview with The Korea Times.

Chung experimented with various methods of painting throughout his life, but the most well-known work among them would be his "grid" paintings.

"I think Chung approached painting not just as an object, but as a question of time: the labor he invested was a way of making that very clear. It takes a long time to produce a single work. Not only is there repetition, but there are long periods of waiting — waiting for paint to dry, to peel, to chip away, and so forth. His work may be described in some way as an aesthetic of accumulation. There is density of material, but also density of duration," Kee said.

*"The process of painting, folding, cracking, stripping and repainting, becomes his guide to self-exploration and meditation," Emilio Steinberger, curator and senior director at Dominique Levy, said.*

### Prospect on Dansaekhwa

Chung was not the only Dansaekhwa artist who was in limelight during Art Basel Hong Kong last week.

Kukje Gallery offered works by Kwon Young-woo and Park Seo-bo as well as Lee U-fan, whose pieces are installed at numerous Korean and international galleries. Paris-based Galerie Perrotin presented works by Park and Chung. Chung sang at its booth and held an exhibit for Park at Galerie Perrotin Hong Kong, which coincided with the art fair. The "Umbra Blue" series by Yun Hyong-keun were displayed at booths of Seoul's PSM Gallery and Los Angeles-based Blum & Poe Gallery.

Art professor Kee said that it is wonderful to see many older Korean artists being celebrated in galleries and collected by museums outside Korea.

"I firmly believe that this initial wave of success will lead to further recognition, not only for artists like Chung, but others seminal to the development of postwar Korean art. This is already starting to happen, with important museums and collectors in the U.S. seeking to learn more about modern and contemporary art in Korea. The next step would be a major museum show on Korean art before 1990, hopefully focusing on works made during the politically turbulent years between 1961 and 1988," Kee said.