

Choi Wook-kyung's powerful, abstract world unveiled

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Installation view of Choi Wook-kyung's solo exhibition at the newly renovated Kukje Gallery / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

By Kwon Mee-yoo

Artist Choi Wook-kyung (1940-85) lived a short but fierce life. She is best known for her bold abstract works influenced by her time in Korea and the United States.

An exhibition at Kukje Gallery in downtown Seoul sheds light on Choi's early experiments in painting and collages, created mostly from the 1960s to 1975 when she was in the U.S. This is Choi's third exhibit at the gallery following shows in 2005 and 2016.

Choi, who graduated from Seoul Arts High School and the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University, went to the U.S. in 1963 and studied at Cranbrook Academy of Art and Brooklyn Museum Art School.



Choi Wook-kyung / Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

The Korean art world was dominated by Dansaekhwa (Korean monochrome painting) and the avant-garde movement in the 1960s, but Choi ventured further into uncharted territory.

The first part of the exhibition showcases Choi's more colorful works in which she strived to develop her own style through various experiments under the influence of Abstract Expressionism.

Choi used diverse media from oil paint, acrylic and charcoal to conte, oil pastel and ink. She also collaged newspaper clippings and other materials, reflecting the social issues of the times. Some of her works are playful — she misspelled balance as "valance" and corrected her typo in the painting and some have phrases such as "I only like strawberry ice cream."



Choi Wook-kyung's "Untitled" (c. 1960s) / Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

"My experiences, as a woman and a painter, serve as a daily source for the creative inspiration necessary for my work," Choi once said.

"My paintings are collaged bits of time from my past and present experiences. Each work has its own life as the forms grow and I convey my feelings into a visual language. My paintings are about my life but I am not simply telling stories. I am trying to express, visually, my experience of the moment lived. I hope to share, to communicate, and to create an empathy for the experience."

The second room is darker as it mainly features ink paintings in black and white. Choi's bold brush strokes remind of Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline as well as East Asian calligraphy in terms of the significance of negative space.

Most of the paintings on display are on glossy paper, but the only titled work "The Raven of Death and Resurrection," inspired by her trip to New Mexico, is painted on canvas.

Choi later returned to Korea and taught at Yeungnam University and Duksung Women's University before passing away at a young age from a heart attack in 1985.

The exhibition is on view until July 31.



Choi Wook-kyung's "The Raven of Death and Resurrection" (1975) / Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

Art meets lifestyle in gallery

Choi's exhibit marks the reopening of Kukje Gallery's main space K1 after two years of remodeling.



Yang Hae-gue's "Sol LeWitt Upside Down — Open Geometric Structure 2-2, 1-1, Expanded 22 Times, Mirrored" is installed at the Restaurant of the newly renovated Kukje Gallery. Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Yang Te-o of Teo Yang Studio designed interior of the Restaurant and Wellness K. The interior design was inspired by art collectors' homes as if appreciating artworks displayed in the comfort of their own living rooms.

"The aim was to highlight the inherent modern aesthetics and spacious design that are unique to Kukje Gallery," designer Yang said in a statement.

Meanwhile, the gallery's iconic outdoor sculpture "Walking Woman on the Roof" by Jonathan Borofsky remains on the top of the building.

The gallery, founded by Lee Hyun-sook back in 1982 in Insa-dong, moved to its current place in 1987 and added two annexes in 2007 and 2012. It also opened a Busan branch in 2018, which currently hosts a solo exhibition of Gim Hong-sok titled "Short People."