

Dansaekhwa artist's works experiment with 'hanji' as both material and method

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Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (2000s), left, and "Untitled" (1982) / Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Kwon Young-woo rejected the distinction between "Eastern" and "Western" art

When Korea gained independence from decades-long Japanese colonial rule in 1945, a debate emerged among artists about how to sever ties with the Japanese style of art that had once dominated the country's art scene.

Together with attempting to end colonialism's influence on art entirely, some put forth developing a new form of "national" art — whether by reverting to Korean traditional practices or by embracing the wave of Western Modernism and abstract art.

Kwon Young-woo (1923-2013), a student of Eastern Painting at the Seoul National University in 1946, was one of many artists who was engaged in this tumultuous shift. But from the start, he was convinced that distinguishing between so-called "Western" and "Eastern" art was meaningless.

"I thought to myself that paintings are paintings; we shouldn't try so hard to make unnecessary distinctions like 'Oriental' and 'Western,'" he was quoted as saying, adding, "It is more meaningful to start anew than to preserve and inherit tradition."



Artist Kwon Young-woo / Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

He rejected the conventional ink and wash approach to Eastern painting. Instead, his focus lied solely on working with "hanji," or Korean paper made from the bark of paper mulberry trees, where he explored abstract techniques reminiscent of Georges Braque's paper collages ("Papier colle") and Lucio Fontana's punctured and slashed canvases ("Concetto Spaziale").



Installation view of the exhibition, "Kwon Young-woo" / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Kwon's works from the 1980s to the 2000s, which reflect his versatile experiments with the paper both as a material and as a method are on view in Kukje Gallery's exhibition, "Kwon Young-woo." This exhibition is the gallery's third visit to the artist's oeuvre of "dansaekhwa" ("monochrome painting"), with his later pieces now unveiled to the public for the first time.

In his earlier works, he used his fingertips and handmade tools to repetitively cut, tear and pierce the white hanji, instead of drawing anything on it, embracing the unique materiality of the paper itself. This series reached its peak during Kwon's sojourn in Paris (1978-1989), reflected in the 18 works exhibited at the gallery.

After his return from Paris, the artist brought back the color and brush to his canvas. But his refusal to distinguish between "Western" and "Eastern" art is reflected again in his choice of paint: a mixture of gouache and "meok" (traditional Korean calligraphy ink).

"I do not make any distinction between them as others do, regarding them all as black," he once said.

While meok smudges and spreads, gouache coagulates on its own. Thus, a combination of these two counteracting elements left a unique, lasting impression on the surface of the hanji.

In the 2000s, he continued experimenting with paper, this time, by layering it on wooden panels. In particular, he used "hwaseonji," a tougher, rawer type of paper, to explore the changing density of white.

By simply varying the number of paper layers and the amount of glue, a new visual dynamic emerged in his pieces.

The exhibition, "Kwon Young-woo," runs through Jan. 30, 2022, at Kukje Gallery.