

Dansaekhwa master's ceaseless endeavor to reach selflessness in painting

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Dansaekhwa master Park Seo-bo speaks during a press preview for his solo exhibition, "Park Seo-bo," at Kukje Gallery in Jongno District, Seoul, Sept. 15. Yonhap

Park Seo-bo replicates nature's colors in paintings that absorb viewers' anxiety

By Park Han-sol

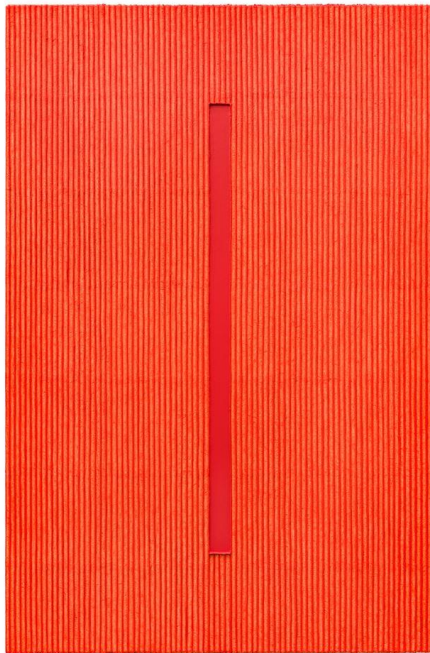
It was one casual trip to Mount Bandai in Fukushima, Japan, during the colorful autumn of 2000, that became a defining moment for the 89-year-old trailblazer in Korean modern abstract art, Park Seo-bo.

As soon as he looked down the deep ravine engulfed in the blazing red foliage of Japanese maple trees, he couldn't help but let out a scream that echoed through the valley.

Shocked by the grandeur of nature, he decided then and there to capture on canvas that precise moment seared into his memory.

His hiking companion for the day doubtfully asked whether such a feat would be possible, to which he replied, beaming with confidence, "It is for me. You just wait and see."

Those words indeed went on to become reality. "The color of red I used, born from that experience, became unlike any other red seen in other paintings," recalled Park, smartly dressed in an all-white suit, at Kukje Gallery, where his recent "color-Ecriture" series, inspired by nature's vibrancy, is on display.



"Ecriture No. 080821" (2008) by Park Seo-bo / Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

As one of the founding members of the formative Dansaekhwa ("monochrome painting") movement that emerged in the early 1970s, Park's name has long been synonymous with a living legend of Korean modern abstract art.

But the artist has noted time and time again that Dansaekhwa does not simply refer to a painting featuring a single color. Rather, it is layered with an emphasis on the meditative aspects of art production that come from the purposeless and endless repetition of activity, to the point of "emptying oneself out" — similar to a Buddhist monk reaching a state of selflessness while repeatedly meditating or chanting prayers.

"Without reaching that spiritual realm, the painting becomes something that's merely pretending to be Dansaekhwa," he said.



An installation view of the exhibition, "PARK SEO-BO," at Kukje Gallery / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

The "color-Ecriture" paintings currently featured in the exhibition, "Park Seo-bo," in central Seoul belong to the latest stage of Park's decades-long signature "Ecriture" series.

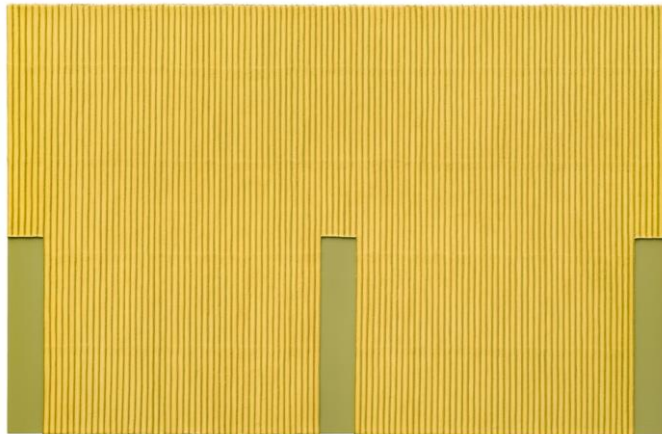
The series first began in the early 1970s as "pencil-Ecriture," inspired by his three-year-old son's crude penmanship. In 1967, he watched his son practice handwriting with a pencil, writing down hangeul characters and erasing them repeatedly, until frustration filled his tiny body and led him to scribble lines all over the paper.

The sense of resignation that the artist witnessed was a missing piece in his attempt to empty his mind via his paintings. Park began imitating his son by applying countless graphite lines on a canvas coated with wet, white paint. At that time, color was of secondary importance, since his focus lay more on tracing his contemplative hand gestures.

But while it was his young son who guided the artist during the pencil-Ecriture phase, nature itself became his mentor during the latest color-Ecriture stage.

To be more precise, it was the sumptuous hues and composition of the landscape — both natural and man-made — that Park experienced firsthand and that he transferred onto the canvas.

Since 2000, elements like the ocean meeting the sky on Jeju Island on a clear day, the columns of a shimmering Han River bridge at night and even the seasonal fashion in shop windows in Seoul have all served as sources of inspiration for the artist.



"Ecriture No. 140410" (2014) by Park Seo-bo / Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

Park first applies several layers of hanji (traditional Korean paper made from the bark of mulberry trees), which has been soaked in water for over two months, on the canvas. He then uses thick pencil or other flat-edged tools to draw vertical lines repeatedly, causing the wet hanji to form narrow ridges. When the surface dries up, it is finally time to add acrylic paint.

Nature's influence has even taken over the name of his color palette: red is known as "maple leaves," orange is "ripe persimmons" and gray is "air." Other hues like "cherry blossoms," "canola flowers," "wine" and "golden olives" echo throughout the gallery, filling the space with vitality.

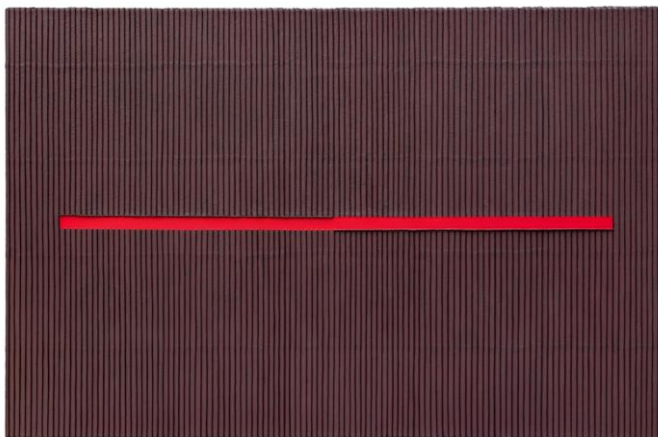
"To Park, the sense of serenity provided by his rhythmic use of color, produced through his efforts to reach a state of "selflessness," is a pathway to achieve the art of healing, something he states that art of the 21st century should collectively strive for.

"In the digital era of the 21st century, the incredibly fast pace of change means that countless people are falling behind and plummeting to their doom. The earth, full of these people who are experiencing immense stress, is becoming more and more like a hospital ward."

He argues that the expressionist art of the 20th century was aggressive and ruthless to viewers.

"Artists would pour out everything they felt onto the canvas in the name of 'expression,'" he stated. "People would purchase these paintings, hang them in their house and choose to be assaulted by the images that those artists had vomited out every day. That's not right, in this day and age."

Instead of paintings that threateningly approach viewers and "excrete" their messages, Park strives to produce works that absorb the onlookers' anguish and anxiety so to put them at ease — like blotting paper.



"Ecriture No. 120715" (2012) by Park Seo-bo / Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

Nearing the age of 90, Park now feels his physical limitations at every moment while painting in his studio-cum-residence, Gizi, in Seodaemun District, Seoul. The past days when he would position a large-scale canvas on the ground and lie flat on his belly to paint are now unthinkable.

"I've grown so old that my legs can't support my body. I keep falling down. Just a few days ago, I tripped and ended up having to get stitches on my face. The same thing happened with my right forearm a while ago," he said.

Nevertheless, he still chooses to paint five hours a day in front of an easel, supported by his elegant wooden cane, until his legs go stiff.

"I don't have a lot of time left on this earth. I'm doing my best so that I don't go to my grave with any regrets," he stated, expressing his singular determination to continue capturing the palpable density of color as a material on his canvases.

The 2.6-meter-wide painting that he began working on in 2019 will be completed this year, and unveiled next April at the Venice Biennale in Italy.

The exhibition, "Park Seo-bo," runs through Oct. 31 at Kukje Gallery.