

How 'the school of white' became auction favorites

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When Korean-born Lee Ufan returned to Seoul in the early 70s, and met a group of like-minded painters, the country was ruled by a military dictatorship with a chokehold on freedom of expression.

Under these conditions, Lee and his compatriots developed a particular form of "negation." They held an ambition to reduce artistic creation to its fundamental elements, that Lee says reminded him of the Japanese artists who he had spent the 1960s shoulder-to-shoulder with in Tokyo.

"Within this context these artists were expressing something that was devoid of being," explains Lee, now 79-years-old and the movement's best known alumnus, "and which neither represented an image or a message."

Instead, Lee would paint single-color abstract paintings using repetitive processes -- slowly dragging lines down a canvas or dotting the paint-soaked brush against its surface until the paint ran out. The group, many of whom painted monochrome canvases, earned the name Tansaekhwa (or "Dansaekhwa") -- sometimes translated as "the school of white."

Very little can mean a lot

Lee's work from this period is characterized by a dedication to his materials and a meticulous methodology. He would use ink brushes in an effort to minutely slow down the process by which he could pass a brushstroke.

For the paintings on display recently at Pace gallery London, he mixed ground mineral pigment and glue made from animal skin, to create crystalline paint. 40 years on, the strokes still glisten softly under gallery lights.



Lee Ufan

This obsessiveness is emulated by young, emerging artists, influenced by Lee and his contemporaries. A recent exhibition also at Pace gallery by Japan's rising star Kohei Nawa made for a fascinating comparison -- Nawa, especially, shares later Tansaekhwa artists' interests in the properties of synthetic and natural resins.

This is likely no coincidence, recognizes Lee: "I believe my ideas have influenced artists of my generation and those of the younger generations in Japan and Korea," says Ufan, adding that the articles he wrote as a prominent essayist of the time undoubtedly also had an effect.

"I do think my works are used as one of the references when modern artists deal with process, materials, performance arts or space," says Lee, of his impact on artists outside of Asia.

Although radical reduction provided a starting point for Tansaekhwa, this period is one Lee describes as "remarkably positive." Each mark made here is essential, he explains: connected to the one that preceded it, and the one that follows, in a system of "appearing, disappearing, reappearing, and disappearing again."

For Lee, this controlled minimalism marked "the point of departure in order to propose something new." He identifies it as the beginning of a constantly developing system of marks that is continuous with his work today.

Fresh acclaim

After decades where Lee's artist contemporaries Ha Chong-Hyun and Park Seo-Bo say they could hardly afford

to support themselves by art sales alone, Tansaekhwa is now seeing bumper auction sales. A sale by Christie's in New York this October listed six and seven-figure prices for works which, a few years prior, traded hands for little over \$10,000.

Critics have revisited the movement, too: an exhibition of Tansaekhwa at the Palazzo Contarini-Polignac in Venice this summer attracted glowing reviews.

Lee, himself, never spent the years in obscurity that others did. Before his involvement with Tansaekhwa during the 70s in his native Korea, he had gained renown as a key theorist and art practitioner in the influential "Mono-ha" movement in Japan. Since the 80s he has spent decades alternating between Tokyo and Paris, his art now in the permanent collections of the MoMA, Tate, Guggenheim and Centre Pompidou.



A "chaotic" painting from the series "From Wind" contrasts with the "highly organised" painting "From Line"

Recent recognition has included a 2011 retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, which lauded his contribution in both Asian and western artistic traditions. And last year Lee became the seventh contemporary artist, after the likes of Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, to be invited to exhibit on the grounds of the Versailles Palace, outside Paris.

The recent London show "From Point, From Line, From Wind" captures Lee at a crucial point in his artistic development -- from the "highly organized" process of the dot and line paintings to the "more and more disorganized" and "chaotic" images he named "From Wind." On the other side of the world, an exhibition at Pace's Hong Kong gallery is presenting new minimal works of vivid color in watercolor and oils.

Lee and Tansaekhwa

The Tansaekhwa artists never formed an organized group and, although Lee accepts his paintings can be counted as part of the movement, he says his interests were crucially different.

While contemporaries were interested in exploring the space of the canvas in monochrome colors, he wanted to "allow one to feel the passage of time" through his repetitive processes.

Lee does not identify as belonging to the "Mono-ha" movement, either, and rarely associates himself with minimalist artists from the West -- although he does admit a debt of inspiration to American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman.

Instead he says his practice draws from an early education in traditional calligraphy -- of which the dot and line are the basic components -- and his study of philosophy.

In a review of this summer's show in Venice, critic Martin Gayford urged viewers familiar with Western abstract art to not make straight comparisons between Tansaekhwa and similar-looking minimal canvases by American and European artists. He urges viewers to look for the minute variations in each of Ufan's marks, claiming "every single one has its own distinctive energy and identity."

For Lee's part, he says that being an artist is "a lonely path" and although he acknowledges artist friends, they are each doing things in "a unique way."

"Some think that I belong in the "Mono-ha" or "Dansaekhwa" group, but I am just doing things my way," he says, "and ultimately, I am alone."

More than the price

There is no single agreed reason as to why Lee's early paintings, along with the other Tansaekhwa artists, have suddenly gained a fresh following and value.

Alexandra Munroe, the curator of Ufan's 2011 retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum, claimed in the *New Yorker* that the movement has found itself at the center of a "perfect storm." Among the forces in

play she identifies new, powerful collectors from emerging economies, the art world's increasingly global outlook, and curators' growing interest in scouring the 20th century for underappreciated movements.



Works of Tansaekhwa art are still good value compared to Western abstract minimalism, say experts

Tansaekhwa works still remain a fraction of the price of works belonging to the Mono-ha and Abstract Expressionist movements to which they are often likened, explained Christie's specialist Yunah Jung, at the auction house's Hong Kong gallery earlier this month.

"The paintings are very sophisticated, but price-wise, they are really cheap compared to Western art."

Ufan says he is pleased for his contemporaries' auction house successes, but reminds them, now mostly in their eighties, not to lose their critical bent.

"I am glad that the fellow Korean artists from the 1970s are getting their due respect. I do hope the artists will focus more on the issue at hand rather than the commercial value of the artwork."

Lee Ufan "New Works" at Pace Gallery Hong Kong runs until 9 January.