

Kim explores uncanniness in modernism

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Artist Kim Yong-ik

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

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By Kwon Mee-you
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Korean artist Kim Yong-ik holds a special place in Korean modern art history. He made an early debut, blazing a trail out of traditional canvas, and pursued his own aesthetics throughout his career.

Kim is a pupil of renowned Dansaekhwa artist Park Seo-bo who first discovered Kim's talents.

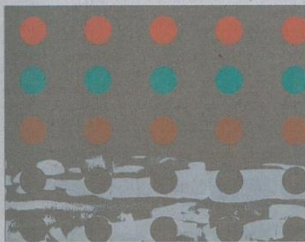
"When I was in university, I had this hunger for knowledge and read art magazines to satisfy such thirst. Back then, Korean art students all painted traditionally on canvases. I knew and understood what contemporary art required from what I read and it resulted in the Plane Object series which applies airbrush on cloth," Kim said in an interview with The Korea Times on Nov. 22.

With full support from Park, Kim took part in the first Ecole de Seoul exhibit organized by Park at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and the 13th Sao Paulo Art Biennial in Brazil in 1975.

"I was on the up and up. My works were favorably received by galleries and critics and I was able to hold overseas exhibitions, which was rare back then," the artist explained.

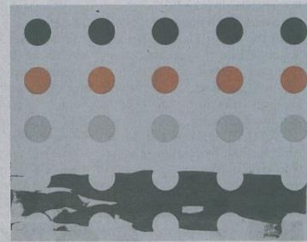
As a human, Kim defines himself as a non-radical person pursuing normality, but he is full of whims as an artist.

"In 1975, the young artist Kim Yong-ik thought contemporary art was logical — my artistic idea should be perfectly translated into an artwork and the meaning should be conveyed without distortion. As of painting, it should be an illusion on a piece of cloth," Kim said. "However, contemporary art is chaos for what I am now. I don't want to be bound by



Kim Yong-ik's "Thinner...and thinner...#16-83"

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery



Kim Yong-ik's "Thinner...and thinner...18-85"

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

any logic. Art cannot be defined beyond a bunch of scattered concepts."

Such thoughts give an account of the changes in Kim's artistic world as he maintained his independent stance amidst Korea's dominant artistic movements from the Modernism of the 1970s and conceptual art and Minjung art in the '80s to the rise of public art in the '90s.

"I respond to the art world I face of the time. It's not an ideology or a theory but the scene I reflect. It's an existential reaction to the art scene," Kim said.

Kim recently held a major retrospective titled "Closer... Come Closer..." at the Ilmin Museum of Art in Seoul from September to earlier this month. The exhibit looked back on his career spanning over four decades from the "Plane Object" series that brought him to stardom to dotted abstract paintings and his public art pieces.

The exhibit shed light on Kim's oeuvre, presenting how the artist moved onto different styles by wrapping up a series of works.

"Triptych" (2015) is literally three

coffins for Kim's previous works as the artist accepted his fate as a modernist and recognized his artistic path as a part of history.

"I consider this my posthumous work. It includes a self-portrait from undergraduate years to dot paintings and I added other images and texts on the box. However, it does not mean I am dead. It's my way of moving onto another venture," Kim said.

Re-appropriation of his works

Kim's signature polka-dot paintings emerged in the 1990s, as a metaphor for the artist's relentless thoughts on modernist paintings through a simple yet geometrically perfect icon — the circle. Kim's latest works on display at Kukje Gallery in central Seoul until Dec. 30 are re-edits and re-appropriations of those dotted paintings.

The 69-year-old artist is still active, producing paintings daily at his studio. The exhibit consists of some 30 of his latest works, painted in recent years.

"The original dots were there to cover the painting beneath. Now the

dots speak for themselves," Kim said.

In Kim's '90s dot painting series, the artist created an elaborate abstract expressionist art in the background, which could be a great painting for itself. He painted dots over an abstract painting, contradicting the abstract expressionism.

Now the artist thinks "art today can no longer be politically or ethically correct and artistic production inevitably results from editing rather than creating," and thus he re-edits his previous works to impart a new meaning. He creates the dot paintings by applying paint with a palette knife on a canvas where circle-shaped sheets are placed on a grid pattern.

"It represents the moment I am passing through as re-appropriating polka-dot paintings in November 2016. It cannot be the same as the dots of the 1990s," he said.

The "Utopia" series grapples with the contradictions that art faces today. "It's a contradictory combination of light brightness and vague emptiness," the artist said. "I will work on more dot paintings for now, though I don't know where it might end up."