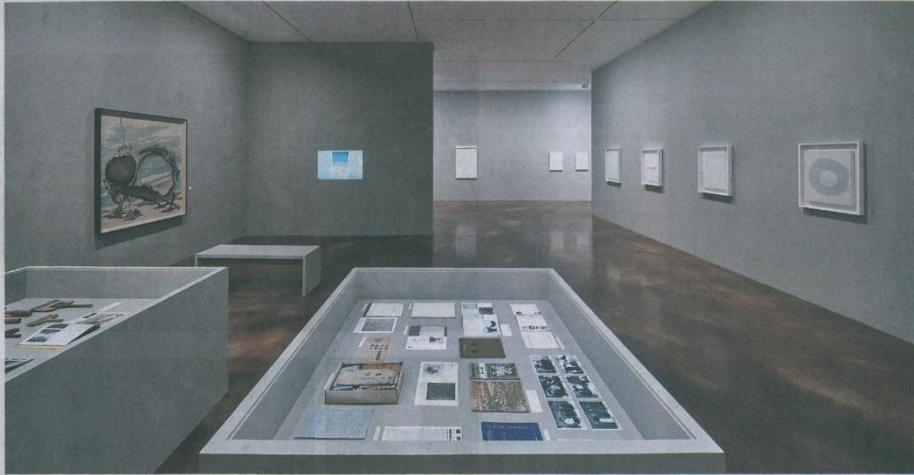


Kwon Young-woo discovers 'Koreanness' in paper

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An installation view of "Various Whites," a posthumous solo exhibition of Kwon Young-woo (1923-2013), at Kukje Gallery in central Seoul

Photos courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Artist discovers 'Koreanness' in paper

By Kwon Mee-yoo
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Korean artist Kwon Young-woo (1923-2013) spent his entire career pursuing the essence of Oriental painting, but not in the traditional ink-and-wash method. Instead, he devoted his life to exploring the unique properties of paper, especially "hanji" (Korean paper).

A posthumous solo exhibition "Various Whites" held at Kukje Gallery in central Seoul sheds light on Kwon's early years when the artist began experimenting with the nature of hanji. The title of the exhibit is derived from the

1975 Tokyo Gallery show "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White," featuring Park Seo-bo, Lee Dong-young, Heu Hwang, Suh Seung-won and Kwon, which laid groundwork for the Dansaekhwa (Korean monochrome painting) movement.

Thirty pieces of art are on display, from an ink-and-wash painting from the 1950s to his monochromatic abstract works using hanji. Most of the works are smaller ones, compared to those presented at Kwon's 2015 exhibit also at Kukje Gallery.

These early works do not have colors like his well-known pieces from the 1980s, representing the artist's experimentation with formativeness and rhythm rather than color.

Layers of hanji pasted on canvas create various shades of the achromatic color. Although all paper used is white, rough surfaces created by holes and lacrated patterns, different numbers of layers and discoloration caused by time give different depth and texture to each piece.

Kwon was in the first class to study Oriental Painting at the prestigious Seoul National University in 1946, but he has defied conventional approaches to Oriental painting since then.

He lived in Paris from 1978 to 1989 where his pursuit of paper bloomed. Despite the Western influence, Kwon's works have Zen-like qualities, completely different from strongly contrasted Western oil paintings.

To complement the understandings of the artist, the exhibit spared a section for archives. The most noticeable in the corner is an Oriental painting portraying a conch shell in a surrealist way. The 1958 painting "Seaside Fantasy" has won the Artist Award from the Minister of Education and Culture at the National Art Exhibition for blazing a trail in abstract painting in Oriental style. The same conch shell that inspired the painting is also on view.

A booklet for his first-ever solo exhibition at the Shinsegae Gallery in 1966 and photos from the opening of the exhibit give a glimpse of the artist's pioneering character.

Also on display are the tools Kwon used to make his art — wooden spikes used for piercing holes in the paper and uniquely shaped brushes — helping the viewers to visualize the artist's work procedures.

Kwon's correspondence with family and friends reveal the artist's quiet yet devoted-to-art character. He used hanji as the main material for his works even when he was in Paris and asked around for people who could carry the Korean paper to the foreign city.

The artist passed away in 2013, shortly before the Dansaekhwa movement grabbed international attention and the gallery produced a video clip combining Kwon's interviews to share his perspectives on art.

The artist said Oriental paintings are painted on "hwaseonji" (rice paper), but traditional painting did not agree with him. So he sought something of his own and discovered harmony from patches of papers.

"I thought to myself, paintings are paintings — we needn't try so hard to make unnecessary distinctions like Oriental and Western. Whether it has been painted with oil or follows the Western painting style, what I want to say is that if a painting emits an Oriental essence, it is an Oriental painting," the artist is quoted saying.

Song Soo-ryun, an artist and professor emeritus of art at Chung-Ang University who learned under Kwon, remembered Kwon as a lonely artist who pursued a singular path throughout his life.

"This exhibit has a strong resonance, compared to his 1990 exhibit Ten Years in Paris held at the Ho-Am Art Museum which was more overwhelming," Song said during the



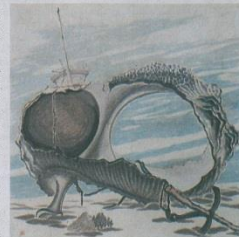
Artist Kwon Young-woo in his studio in the 1980s

opening of the exhibition. "Kwon was an artist who solely thought of his artistic career, instead of taking his eyes off for external issues."

Song said Kwon lived what he wanted to teach to his students, instead of telling them what to do. "During his life, Kwon said he could return to brushes anytime, but he chose paper. In the time when traditional landscape ink-and-wash painting was prevalent, his unprecedented style might have been very solitary," Song said.

Coinciding with the Seoul exhibit, Kukje Gallery will present Kwon's major works from his Paris era, mainly using blacks and blues on ripped and punctured hanji, as well as some archival pieces, at Art Basel Hong Kong from March 21-25.

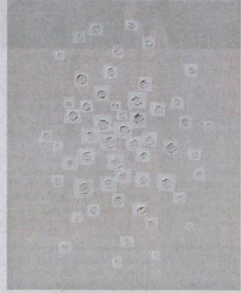
Kwon's works are recognized for its importance and currently in the permanent collections of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul; Museum of Art, Leuven; Samsung Museum of Art, and the British Museum in London.



Kwon Young-woo's 1958 painting "Seaside Fantasy"



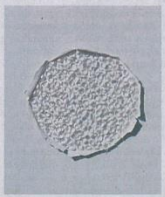
Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (c. 1980s)



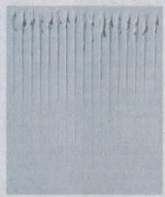
Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (c. 1980s)



Part of Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (c. 1980s)



Kwon Young-woo's "Untitled" (c. 1980s)



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