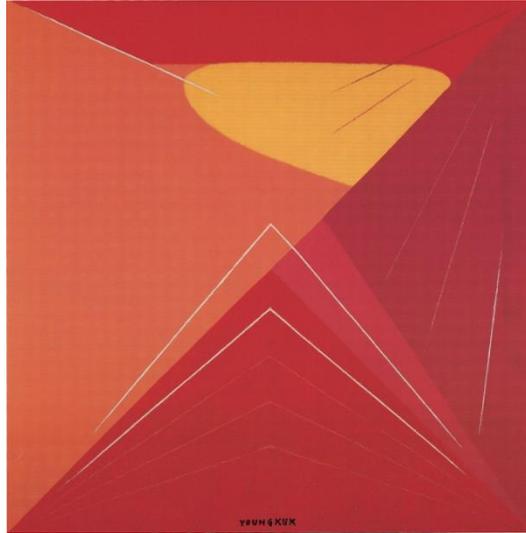


One of Korea's Greatest Painters Is Little-Known Internationally. Finally, Yoo Youngkuk Is Coming Into Focus.

December 10, 2020 | By Andrew Russeth

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Yoo Youngkuk, *Work*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 in. CHUNHO AN/YOO YOUNGKUK ART FOUNDATION

Any artist going through a rough patch—working a day job, not making art, struggling amid darkness—should take a huge dose of solace from the remarkable life of Yoo Youngsuk.

In 1943, after eight years in Japan, where he learned art and made abstract wood pieces while moving in avant-garde circles, Yoo quit the country in the face of new repressive measures. Then in his late 20s, he returned to the village of his birth, Uljin, on Korea's east coast, followed by the Tokkō secret police, and worked as a fisherman.

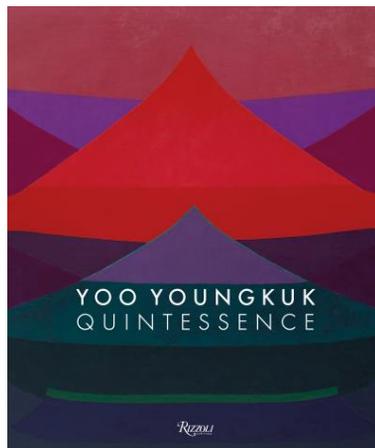


Yoo Youngkuk in the late 1930s or early 1940s while in Japan.
YOO YOUNGKUK ART FOUNDATION

Japanese colonial rule ended in 1945, and Yoo eventually got back to art, in Seoul, helping to form the New Realism Group, the first artist association in the country devoted to painting in pure forms. The Korean War's outbreak in 1950 soon ended that exhilarating period. He sold firewood to support his family and, when North Korea occupied the city, was drafted to help decorate a theater with portraits of Communist leaders. (He protested, rather bravely, that, as an abstract artist, he couldn't do it, so he was ordered to handle the clothing.) After fleeing the capital for the coast, he repaired his father's dilapidated distillery and produced soju to make ends meet.

But when Yoo was finally able to return to painting in Seoul, in 1955, he let it rip.

Sturdy abstracted landscapes rendered in oil on canvas—solid blobs of intriguing colors and thin black lines—quickly gave way to quick, slashing marks, rough-hewn surfaces, and shadowy passages. (Imagine William Baziotes spiked with delirious energy.) By 1960, Yoo had found his trademark subject, the mountains of Korea, whose forms he honed into hard-edged wonders in brilliant hues—searing yellows, enveloping purples, and glowing reds. They suggest that a kind of humble, calm spirituality, and even joy, is present in nature.



Yoo Youngkuk: Quintessence, edited by Rosa Maria Falvo. RIZZOLI

Yoo, who died in 2002 at the age of 86, is a canonical artist in Korea's postwar art history, a status confirmed by a 2016 survey at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Seoul on the centennial of his birth. But he remains little-known abroad. He has never had a solo show outside South Korea, and his radiant, sometimes mysterious paintings have appeared in group shows beyond its borders only sparingly. Blessedly, though, a sumptuous new monograph from Rizzoli with illuminating essays is an occasion for everyone to catch up.

Yoo Youngkuk: *Quintessence* was edited by the writer and curator Rosa Maria Falvo, who proposes that the artist's "entire oeuvre is part memoir and part poetic manifesto." To be sure, he walked a singular path. While he operated in the resolutely abstract vein of European radicals like Jean Arp and Piet Mondrian while in Japan, Yoo's art in postwar South Korea almost always evinces some trace of the real world. Noting the rapid, wrenching modernization underway in the country during Yoo's life, former MMCA director Bartomeu Marí muses that the artist's focus on age-old landscapes was "an exercise of resistance to this velocity and mechanization."



Yoo Youngkuk, *Work*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 51 x 64 in. CHUNHO AN/LEEUM, SAMSUNG MUSEUM OF ART, SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA

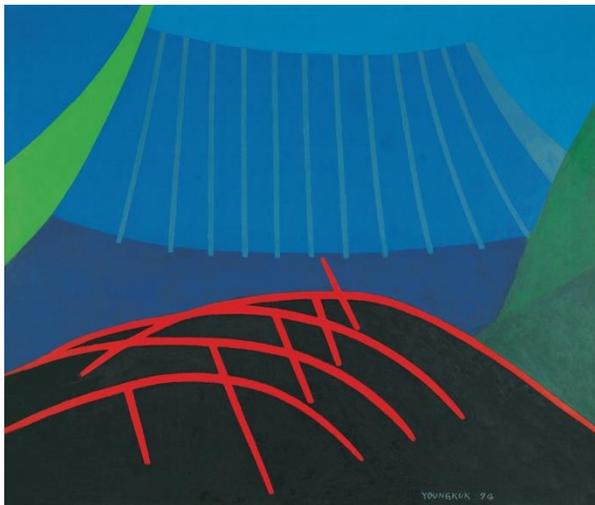
One satisfying outcome of this scholarly endeavor would be for Yoo’s paintings to enter a dialogue with those of global peers. Gabriel Ritter, a Minneapolis Institute of Art curator, makes intriguing aesthetic connections to Ellsworth Kelly and Sadamasa Motonaga in his essay. And the mystical tone that imbues some of Yoo’s most indelible work has loose formal links with figures as disparate as Forrest Bess and Hilma af Klint. (H. G. Masters has also noted the artist’s affinity to that other ingenious chronicler of mountains, Etel Adnan.)

Seeing Yoo included in more shows of postwar painting will be thrilling, but judging by the rich chronology assembled by MMCA curator Inbum Lee, there’s also an opportunity for a serious biopic. It would feature a debonair Yoo dancing in the Tokyo tango scene, surviving the depredations of war, and forming one forward-thinking artist group after another in Seoul. He left them all in 1964, around the time of his first one-person show, charting his own way. (He was 49, older than Willem de Kooning when he had his first solo.)

An early scene in that film might show Yoo leaving home in 1935, bound for Japan, with the dream of becoming a sailor and seeing the world. Instead, he became an artist, which he said offered “absolute freedom”—the opportunity to go on other kinds of journeys. His paintings are invitations to join him.



Yoo Youngkuk, *Work R3*, 1938. Mixed media, 26 x 35 in. YOO YOUNGKUK ART FOUNDATION



Yoo Youngkuk, *Temple on the Mountain*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 53 x 64 in. KRAUSE, JOHANSEN