

Park Seo-bo's daughter releases memoir on father

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Park Seung-sook, an art therapist and daughter of the Dansaekhwa (Korean monochrome) artist Park Seo-bo, has released an English version of a biography of her father online for free.

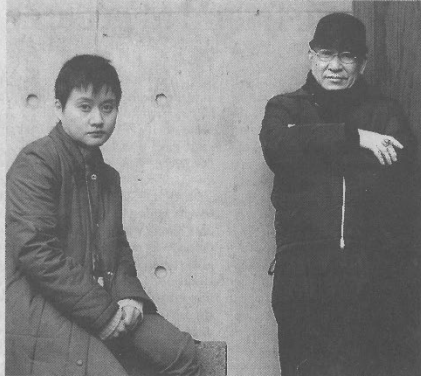
Titled "Park Seo-bo's Art & Life," the book chronicles Park's artistic career and personal life in the context of Korea's turbulent modern history.

Park was born in 1931 in Yecheon, North Gyeongsang Province and entered the College of Fine Arts at Hongik University in 1950, just before the outbreak of the Korean War. He was the country's first artist to pursue the Art Informel movement in Korea and later taught at his alma mater Hongik University for about three decades from 1962 to 1994 and served as dean of the College of Fine Arts.

He is best known for his "Ecriture" series, which can be characterized by connecting meditative practice to the painting process. As his works were revisited along with the rediscovery of Dansaekhwa in the 2010s, Park became one of the Korea's most expensive living artists.

"I did not like my father nor did I know him well. Back in 2018, around the time when he completed Gizi, or Park Seo-bo Art Base, he didn't feel well probably due to his old age and the big event of moving. So I temporarily stepped in as his assistant," Park Seung-sook said in a phone interview with The Korea Times, Tuesday.

Park Seung-sook, who studied psychology and art therapy at the University of California, San Diego and School of the Art Institute of Chicago, respectively, helped her



Park Seung-sook, left, with his father and artist Park Seo-bo in 2000

Courtesy of Park Seung-sook

father respond to interview requests from overseas, reflecting a heightened interest in Korean art, especially Dansaekhwa.

"As I translated his answers, I understood why he was criticized in art circles and some of his remarks were logically incoherent. I probed into such issues, asking him questions repeatedly, and found out his weakness of not accepting himself getting old," Seung-sook said.

"At some point, he felt very strange and I realized that I knew nothing about my father and his life as he looked like an old man who is not related to me. That's when I decided to write a book about my father to learn more about him and understand him. Art is not isolated from the artist's life, the times they live in and their relationships," she said.

Park Seung-sook said she was sur-

prised that she didn't know much about how her parents got married.

"I vaguely knew that they met at an art class where my father taught my mother. So I thought there might be some romance between them, but it was more of a practical decision. My mother spent her life saving money and providing a studio for my father and his studio influenced his style as well," she said.

"For instance, after he failed to get reelected as the president of the Korean Fine Arts Association, he built a studio in Anseong, Gyeonggi Province to concentrate on what he believed to be his signature style — early 'Ecriture' series drawing pencil lines on painted canvas. However, the studio was far from his home and school, and he could not reside there. After years, he found out that the surface of the pencil Ecriture

series had cracked and he embarked on a journey to find a more durable material when he found hanji (traditional Korean mulberry paper)."

Park interviewed him for about two months and took another two months to write the book, published in Korean in the summer of 2019.

"The most surprising part for me was how the Korean War influenced him. The war had different impacts on different regions of Korea and each person has different memories of the war, but my father was someone who went through the war severely. When I interviewed him, he still talks about those days so vividly and I was amazed how the times are stamped on his memory. Such experiences explain the rebellious, unyielding nature behind his work," Seung-sook said.

As she felt it was her job to provide correct information about her father to the world, Seung-sook decided to translate the book into English.

"Nowadays, he has contacts with foreign galleries and many visitors from abroad who are interested in his work. You have to know the times he lived to understand his work and I am doing this on behalf of my father who could not advocate for himself in English," Seung-sook said.

"He doesn't even like that Dansaekhwa is typically translated into English as Korean monochrome since the Korean art movement does not imitate Western monochrome paintings. However, he could not convey his opinion in English."

It took about a year-and-a-half for the English edition to come out, in the form of an open access book.

"This book is not to make money, but to help people learn about my father. So I decided to go for a web book, instead of physically publishing it," she said.