

Park Seo-bo tirelessly pours himself into art

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WEEKENDER

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Pioneer of abstract art

Artist Park Seo-bo speaks during an interview with The Korea Times at the G21, or Park Seo-bo Art Base, in Yoonhui-dong, Seoul on May 14.

Korea Times photo by Choi Woe-ook

Park Seo-bo tirelessly pours himself into art

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Though now a respected figure in the Korean art world, Park Seo-bo, 88, was not always a gentle lamb in the herd. Once a rebellious artist, he is a pioneering figure of abstract art in Korea.

In the early 1950s he won prizes at the National Art Exhibition of Korea, which was a major gateway for aspiring artists to debut. However in 1956, he made a statement blasting the institution, boycotting it.

Park's 1957 work "Painting No.1" is considered the first informal art in Korea, a term for abstract art with gestural and improvisatory characteristics. He led the formation of the dansaekhwa movement, the campaign for emphasis on the meditative aspect of art production, which emerged in the 1970s.

Park cultivated Korean contemporary art not only as an artist but also as a critic, administrator and educator. He taught at his alma mater Hongik University for about three decades from 1962 to 1994 and served as the dean of the College of Fine Arts.

"I've been driving a boat of diversity throughout my life, taking all kinds of people on board. Now I arrived at a port and the port is glowing with sunset. I am just an 88-year-old man now," Park said during an interview with The Korea Times at the Gizi, or Park Seo-bo Art Base, on May 14.

Park's Gizi triples as the artist's home, studio and gallery, where he still paints 10 hours daily.

"It was cumbersome to take out, unwrap and show my artworks when curators and gallerists visited my old house. So I made a gallery in my new house. This building will become the Park Seo-Bo Art Museum when I pass



Park Seo-bo's "Woman in Bikini" (1968)



Park Seo-bo's "Primordials No.1-62" (1962)



Park Seo-bo's "Painting No.1" (1957)

away," Park said.

The 88-year-old artist is well aware that he does not have much time left. He already selected a phrase for his epitaph — "Those who don't change will perish, but so will those who do."

"It means you have to change well. If not, even a master can plummet to a small-time artist in the blink of an eye," Park said. "You have to work diligently to change. As for me, I usually test new techniques and methods for at least four or five years hidden from the public gaze. I don't come out with something new unless I have confidence."

A major retrospective of the artist opened earlier this month at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA), Seoul. This is Park's second retrospective at the MMCA after his 1991 exhibit at the MMCA Gwacheon.

Titled "Park Seo-bo: The Untiring Endeavorer," the exhibit sheds light on the artist's career with 160 pieces carefully selected from his oeuvre, from early figurative works to the lat-

est ones finished shortly before the opening of the exhibit.

constant change of viewpoint was rather confusing for me, so I quit that style," Park explained.

"Then the pencil, the beginning of Ecriture, came to my mind. It is pencil ecriture (French for writing), but it should be a reinterpretation of my previous works. So I painted the canvas and drew millions of lines with pencil on the base color. For me, it is going back to my contemplative nature."

Since the artist cannot move around freely, it took him four months to complete this new painting. He is likely to produce less than 10 works a year, but Park nailed his colors to the mast. "I don't know how much time I have left, but I will continue painting 'till I die. I've already painted a 2.5-meter-by-2-meter canvas and will work on it with pencil. It might take months, but I will do what I can," Park said.

Born in 1931 in Yecheon, North Gyeongsang Province, Park hit a rocky patch as he entered the College of Fine Arts at Hongik University in 1950, when the 1950-53 Korean War broke out.

Riding out a few crises during the war, Park went to Busan to where the art school temporarily moved. He originally majored in Oriental painting, but due to the lack of professors during the war, he changed his major to Western painting, which was taught by Kim Whan-ki (1913-74), now known as Korea's most expensive artist. "I didn't have money to buy supplies for oil painting, so I sold the American G.I. watch I earned in exchange for drawing portraits of American soldiers. I bought the cheapest oil paint, but could not afford canvases and palettes. So I put the paint in plastic bags and got a piece of planed wood board for a palette," Park recalled.

"At first, I was thinking of making a patchwork of 'hanji' (traditional handmade mulberry paper), inspired by 'jogakbo' (traditional patchwork). However, I suffered cerebral infarction in 2009 and cannot stand for a long time to paint the way I did before. So I placed the canvas on a table and rotated around the table with small pieces of hanji, but the

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Park Seo-bo's late Ecriture works, featuring colors as the artist believes that art should be a tool to heal anguish and anxiety of modern people, are on view at the "Park Seo-Bo: The Untiring Endeavor" exhibition at MMCA Seoul.

Courtesy of MMCA

Trailblazer in abstract art vows to explore world on his own

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He headed to a valley near a U.S. artillery unit to pick up ration boxes, which was his idea of a substitute for canvas.

"My first-ever oil painting was my self-portrait, wearing a red beret. I was backlit against the setting sun. The teaching assistant asked me whether I had painted in oils for the first time and when I said yes, he told me I was a genius," the artist said.

"I thought he was just teasing me, but Professor Kim Whan-ki picked my painting while reviewing students' work and was surprised to know that it was my first oil painting. It was nothing technical, but painted in a way reflecting my feelings. Kim told me to keep the painting for a lifetime, but I suspect it was thrown away while moving house, stuck between other sheets of paper."

Park has a knack for using colors. Even Kim spoke highly of his sense of color, saying he hadn't seen anyone who handles white like Park.

"Back then, oil paint was too expensive, but it was impossible to build thick layers with cheaper paint. So I bought pigment powder and mixed it with linseed oil. That's how I made my white," he said.

Instead of accommodating himself to the mainstream art world, Park revolted against the National Art Exhibition. "I didn't have money to print out the declaration, so I handwrote it on a piece of paper and put it in front of the exhibition hall. I wondered whether I could survive in this career after the boycott," he said.

By the next year, Park helped establishing the Hyun-Dae Artists Association and urged his colleagues to study and create abstract art. After the 1957 "Painting No.1," Park worked on the "Primordials" series, a pre-eminent example of Korean abstract art.

The artist experimented with pop art and optical art elements in his Hereditarius series, combining geometric abstraction with traditional Korean color sense in the late 1960s.

"I think the 1960s was a difficult time for artists to survive. New trends such as pop art and optical art popped up and yesterday's truth became tomorrow's falsehood. The time



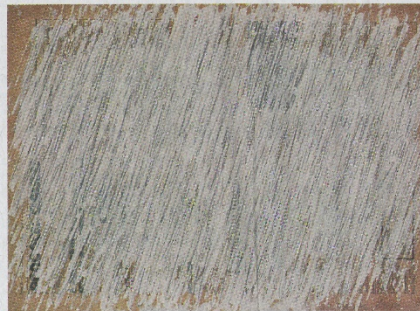
Park Seo-bo Korea Times photo by Choi Won-uk

killed geniuses who couldn't keep up with the pace of change," he said.

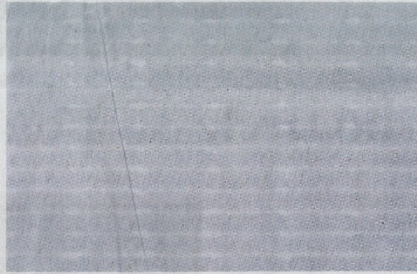
Another notable work on view is the installation piece "Void Space," consisting of hardened garments positioned as if they are running in the same direction. It was created originally for the Korean Pavilion at Osaka World Expo 1970, but demolished and removed for "being anti-government." This is the first time for the installation to be exhibited since 1970, giving a glimpse of Park's versatility.

Ecriture

Park's best-known series, *Ecriture*, started with him clearing his mind, which connects to the meditative nature of the painting process.



Park Seo-bo's "Ecriture No.01-77" (1977)



"Ecriture No.190411" is one of the latest works by the 87-year-old artist.

Courtesy of MMCA

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"Back in the 1960s, Korea was going through rapid change and then-President Park Chung-hee was crying out for Korean-style democracy and broadcasters showed Korean images such as 'saekdong jeogori' (Korean traditional jacket with multicolored stripes) and 'dancheong' (traditional multicolored paintwork on wooden buildings). But it made me wonder what Korean is," Park said.

"I realized that tradition is not something you can see or touch, but it is more spiritual. I knew I had to explore the world on my own, instead of just inheriting tradition. In the course, I had to empty myself completely as a way to meditate and control my mind."

The *Ecriture* series can roughly be divided into three parts — early *Ecriture*

works were inspired by his son practicing penmanship and he used pencil, after which *Ecriture* employed zigzag style. In the later stage of *Ecriture*, he brought colors back to his canvas as he believes art should be a tool to heal the anguish and anxiety of people living in the 21st century.

In 1967, Park watched his three-year-old son practicing handwriting on gridded paper with pencil, writing and erasing numerous times to fit letters into the grid but ending up frustrated and scribbling furiously all over the page.

"I realized that such resignation and abandonment are what I was seeking in art," he said.

At first, he drew grids on canvas and imitated what his son did with pencil — applying innumerable pencil lines on the canvas painted in white. Park discovered the performative process incorporating materiality and spirituality as a tool for self-cultivation.

Then Park became fascinated by hanji for its durability in 1982. As he explored the material qualities of hanji, he put down the pencil and rubbed, scraped and pushed paint on hanji before it dried, creating a zigzag style coming from the free directionality of hands.

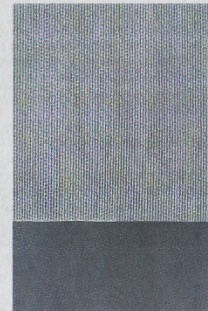
In the 1990s, Park shifted the style of his *Ecriture* works, creating regular intervals of furrows using instruments such as sticks and rulers, instead of free hand movements.

He also started to use bright, vital colors for *Ecriture* pieces after a visit to Japan in 2000, where he was inspired by the colorful autumn foliage.

"The autumn colors were impressive — the leaves changed colors every minute as light and wind moved constantly. I was shocked by the grandeur of nature and decided to paint the impact I received from the scenery," he said.

Upon the beginning of the new millennium, Park thought deeply about how he could survive in the fast-moving digital age.

"I lived for 70 years in an analogue era and cannot keep up with the speed of this digital age," he said. "The art of the 20th century is the artist pouring out one's thoughts and ideas onto the canvas. The viewers are literally getting hit by the image, created by the artist. It is not suitable for 21st century art."



Park Seo-bo's "Ecriture No.071021" (2007)