

STILL VALID: Interview with KIM YONG-IK

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Page 1 of 8



KIM YONG-IK. Photo by Keith Park. Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol.

Kim Yong-Ik is known as the artist who sought to define his own trajectory beyond the two movements that dominated South Korean artistic thought throughout the 1980s—*Dansaekhwa* (“monochrome” painting) and the opposing, populist *Minjung misul* (“people’s art”). Kim was also an activist who protested Park Chung-Hee’s dictatorship in the 1960s and in 2011, he published a book titled “Why Do I Art? – How the Political is Connected to the Conceptual.” His illustrious artistic career, which spans 40 years, is being introduced to UK audiences for the first time through a two-part retrospective at Spike Island, Bristol, and London’s Korean Cultural Centre. The exhibitions reflect the artist’s renegade qualities, wry humor and commitment to contradicting others as well as himself. He rebels with the conventions of art, often changing his paintings on a whim and encouraging audiences to walk all over his work. *ArtAsiaPacific* spoke to Kim on the occasion of the landmark exhibition about the evolution of his practice

This is your first solo show in Europe—what significance does it hold?

I am unsure about the reception of the works here and still cannot tell how the audience in the UK and Europe will perceive the showcase. Having to introduce my oeuvre almost in its entirety in a different geographic location is significant in and of itself, but how it will shift my work from here on out remains a question. Only time will tell. I hope the two exhibitions will expand my scope. For now, they have served as valuable opportunities to look back.



KIM YONG-IK, Triptych, 1976–2015, acrylic on canvas, oil on canvas, cloth, cotton, wood, ink on paper, coin, incense burner and oil-based ink on acetate film, 157 × 226 × 16 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.



Installation view of **KIM YONG-IK**'s "I Believe My Works Are Still Valid" at Spike Island, Bristol, 2017.
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

Your works often include Korean script. For example, Vowing Rebirth (1993–2015) features Baek Soek's poetry in the margins and across the center. Can the pieces realize their full impact if a viewer cannot read the text?

When I produced the works I did not have this show in mind but I understood that having text in the compositions could be a limitation to non-Korean reading audiences. At the same time, I hope that viewers can overcome this boundary through a sensory experience of the work's other elements such as its visuality, which is more immediate. It is inevitable for any artist that the context of display shifts the artwork. This delicate discrepancy serves as a source of inspiration for me.

Now looking back, can you separate certain thematic periods in your work, and has the tone of the language incorporated in the paintings changed?

There is no correlation between the evolution of my work and the development of the texts. The writing sometimes overlaps with the images but my processes for creating the two are totally different and are unpredictable. It depends on what I am focused on in the moment. For example, when I started working on the "Coffin" series, I was very ill and was feeling melancholic and sentimental. That is why the text in these works comes across as more poetic.

You are often described as an activist. How does your activism interact with your work? Do you see the two as independent or linked?

My identity as a writer, activist and artist don't necessarily overlap. I don't feel my activism is seen in my artistic practice and my writing doesn't necessarily complement my artwork. I think we are all conglomerations of different texts and ideas, which pass through us. I do not want to distinguish my voice from your voice in any way. I feel it is impossible.

How do you see the art market and what position do you take in it? I am thinking of Special Offer Set (2011–15), which comprises five canvases in a wooden box, each inscribed with a price and text on the back that addresses a potential collector.

I have an ambivalent stance. When I was producing this work I thought it should sell, but at the same time I was trying to create a satire about how an artwork serves as a consumer product. When people see the work and text they often think it is very amusing because of the absurdity of the offer and the increase in price I propose every year.



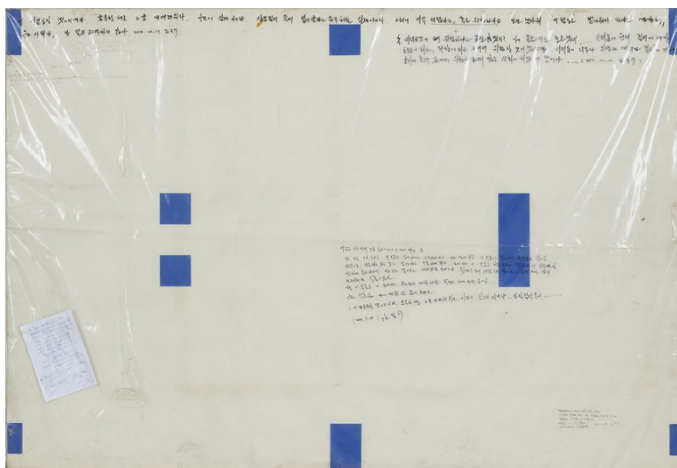
Installation view of **KIM YONG-IK's** *Special Offer Set* (2011–15) at "I Believe My Works Are Still Valid," Spike Island, Bristol, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

Your mixed-media piece Closer. . . Come Closer. . . (1996–2013) includes five written guidelines for creating the ideal artwork. You stipulate that good works are those that require minimal amounts of energy and money to produce, and that it should also be easily reproducible, easy to transport and open to damage—are these rules still relevant or were they ever?

They are still relevant because if you read to the end of the text it says all these conditions are very important but then the exact opposite of these five rules are also valid. They apply either way!

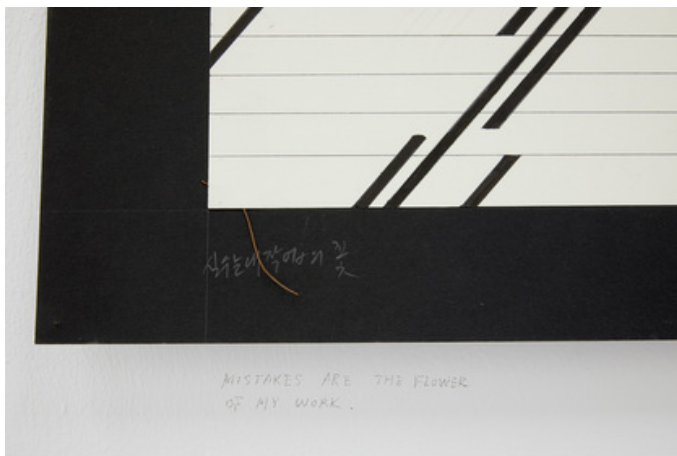
But are the five rules more important than that final line?

Within my own practice, the five rules have been and continue to be key. Of the five stipulations, the one I value and adhere to most consistently is that artwork should have low production costs. Even now, when engaged in the production process, every decision I make is guided by the five rules. When I wrote them, I wanted to subvert the way that things were being done. They are my way of keeping an avant-garde stance.



KIM YONG-IK, *Closer. . . Come Closer. . .*, 1996–2003, mixed media on canvas, 150 × 218 cm.

Photo by Keith Park. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.



Detail of **KIM YONG IK**'s *Oblique Lines*, 1982/2015, two drawings with ink and pen on paperboard, dimensions variable.
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

In regards to these points, why is it acceptable for an artwork to get damaged or torn?

For the freedom of an artwork! And I also want to liberate myself from having to worry about the work; is it going to be ok, is it going to function properly, will it be handled in a correct manner? Though this is maybe not great for curators!

Do you see yourself as working toward a certain ideal and do you ever reach a conclusion in your works?

As an artist there is the pressure to conceive the perfect idea that can be perfectly materialized in a perfect form—that is impossible. I read a quote somewhere, which I always keep in mind. It basically said, "Because I don't have a destiny, I don't have to fear losing my path." Because I never dreamt of success, I don't have to fear failure.

My work is never perfect or complete. That is why I constantly change the titles and I continually add layers to my paintings. Nothing is ever fixed—not my thoughts or my work. This idea of flux is taken from ancient Chinese philosophy, which I reference in *Triptych* (2015).



Installation view of **KIM YONG-IK**'s "Utopia" at the Korean Cultural Centre, London, 2017. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

You speak of the "politics of ambiguity" when describing your work—what do you see these politics as and what do they allow you to do as an artist?

The role of an artist is to constantly engage in self-doubt—to pose questions, be curious and also produce works, which do not offer clear answers. That is the reason why even if I showcase a piece of artwork, it sits in a realm where it is questionable whether it is complete. I am always able to go back and add layers and change aspects of it.

You said it only takes 30 seconds for you to get to your studio, which is your living room, and that the closer your work is to your life the better. If this is true, will this trip to the UK be reflected in your subsequent work?

While I want my work to be close to my life, you also have to see the two like a married couple—it is always good to be close to each other but having too much time together can also create disaster. Sometimes you need time off. Spending time away from my production studio can be very beneficial.

At the same time, all the people and places that I have encountered on this journey in the UK will impact my work in some way. I have been very restless every night with a lot of ideas and I can't wait to get back to the studio to work. When I was in the city of Oxford, I was particularly overwhelmed. It was the architecture, history, the portraiture, doors—every aspect of it. I couldn't shake this feeling of great despair, pressure and burden. It will take some time for me to rearrange that experience.

Kim Yong-Ik's "Utopia" was on view at the Korean Cultural Centre, London, from September 26 to November 4, 2017. "I Believe My Works Are Still Valid" is on view at Spike Island, Bristol, until December 17, 2017.

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