

What Abstraction Can Face Up To

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Page 1 of 6

Ha Chong-Hyun has survived the many catastrophes that have befallen Korea during his lifetime, and his work is inextricable from his life.



Ha Chong-Hyun, "Post Conjunction 2011-49" (2011), mixed media, 47.24 x 70.87 inches, signed
(image courtesy the artist and Tina Kim Gallery)

Ha Chong-Hyun (b. 1935) is one of the central figures in the Dansaekhwa movement, along with Lee Ufan (b. 1936), Park Seo-Bo (B. 1931), and Yun Hyong-keun (1928–2007). The term, which means "monochromatic painting," is applied to a group of abstract painters who emerged in Korea in the early 1970s, around the time that Park Chung-hee, the third president of South Korea, declared martial law in 1972, virtually ensuring his lifelong dictatorship. His repression of political rivals and denial of personal freedoms only started to end with his assassination in 1979 by Kim Jae Kyu, his lifelong friend and trusted member of his small inner circle.

For this generation, which had already lived through World War II, Korea's struggle with Japan for independence, the Korean War, and the division of the country into separate entities, Park's repressive regime seemed like the ultimate betrayal. Whether the artists responded to it directly or implicitly, their work was haunted by this history of brutal repression. However, by moving beyond Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism into something unique to their historical, cultural, and personal circumstances, while not being limited by them, these artists cleared a wide and particular space for Korean art within the international art world.

Ha's relationship with postwar movements, such as Op Art and Process art, as well as his use of different mediums and loaded materials, such as burlap and barbed wire, is one of the high points in Korean art. In all of his explorations, which began in the mid-1960s, before he was associated with Dansaekhwa, it is clear that he never lost sight of Korea's cultural identity and history.



Installation view of *Return to Color: Ha Chong-Hyun* at Tina Kim Gallery (image by Dario Lasagni)

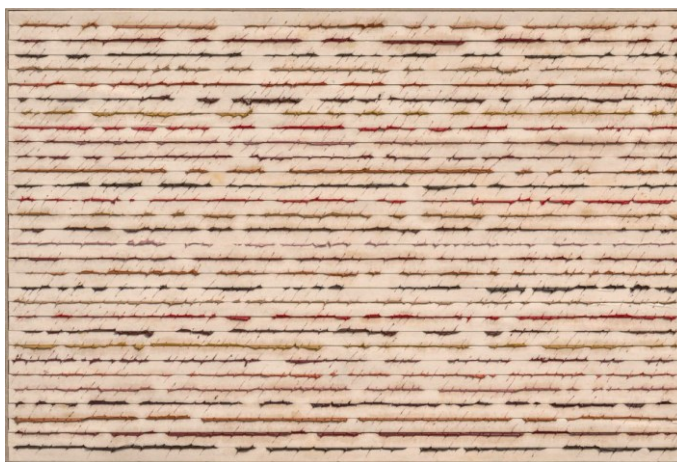
Ha's exploration of the structural components of a painting, as both surface and object, parallels Robert Ryman's inquiry into painting's open-ended possibilities. The difference is that Ha's investigations are beset with memories while Ryman's are not. This dissimilarity is something viewers should keep in mind when looking at Ha's work, particularly the 12 abstract paintings in the exhibition *Return to Color: Ha Chong-Hyun* at Tina Kim Gallery (May 8–June 30, 2021).

The paintings are from two different periods; two were done in 2011 while the rest are dated 2020 or '21. It is clear from the recent works that age has not slowed Ha down and that he continues to make physically intense, visually compelling works that invite close scrutiny.

In the gallery press release, Ha states:

An artist should constantly grapple with color. And I thought I would be able to finally complete the puzzle of my art when I fill in the missing color.

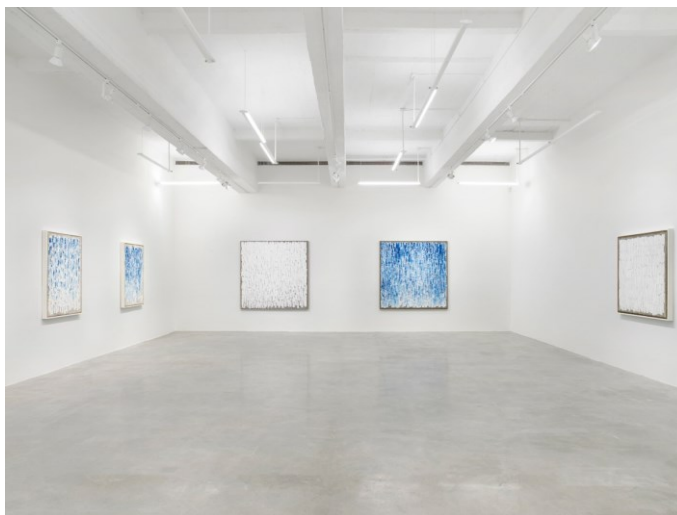
Although Ha used color before he was affiliated with the Dansaekhwa painters, he gained wider recognition for his juxtaposition of white paint with a rough-surfaced, loose-weaved hemp cloth. His statement suggests that he is circling back while acknowledging that time is pulling him forward.



Ha Chong-Hyun, "Post Conjunction 11-4" (2011), mixed media, 47.24 x 70.87 inches, signed
(image courtesy the artist and Tina Kim Gallery)

"Post Conjunction 11-4" (2011) harkens back to an earlier, darker period in the artist's life. It recalls "Work 72-C" (1972), in which Ha wrapped barbed wire around a panel to form a series of horizontal lines. In "Post Conjunction 11-4," he has stretched canvas around identically sized strips of wood, which are stacked horizontally. He then pushes red and different shades of earth-toned paint into the crevices from behind, until they form a series of jagged ridges, with spaces between them, on the painting's surface. Once he finishes this step in his process, he goes over the uneven surface with a wire, making a series of thin diagonal lines with the paint.

In reconsidering his earlier work, it seems that Ha is transforming his memories of a decade of governmental repression, from Park's declaration of martial law to the Gwangju uprising in May 1980, which resulted in 600 deaths when the South Korean army fired upon its citizens. Isn't Ha also looking forward, knowing he will never shed these painful memories? Doesn't the paint that has built up along the seam suggest associations with scar tissue and decay? I do not think one can say definitively yes or no, because to do so would be reductive. I believe memory is not a fixed thing, and that it can persist and change in different, unexpected ways.



Installation view of *Return to Color: Ha Chong-Hyun* at Tina Kim Gallery (image by Dario Lasagni)

This is one of the powerful currents running through Ha's work. He recognizes that he has survived the many catastrophes that have taken place in Korea during his lifetime, and that his work is inextricable from his life. For him, I think there is no such thing as pure joy, even when he is doing what he most loves, which is making art. For "Post Conjunction 2011-49" (2011), with its vertically arranged, canvas-covered strips of wood, was it a purely aesthetic decision to dye the canvas red? What are we to make of the thick ridges of paint that ooze through the crevices and the groove lines cutting across them, made by a wire? The way that Ha underscores paint's malleability calls to mind two unexpected associations: Willem's de Kooning's claim that "flesh is the reason that oil paint was invented" and Alberto Burri's traumatized surfaces. Yet Ha's work is more abstract than either de Kooning's or Burri's.

In the recent paintings, Ha also employs a carefully considered, multiple-step process, which results in works that reward close looking. Using hemp cloth, whose weave is open and mesh-like, he pushes paint from behind, until it forms a rectangle within the rectangle of the picture plane. This inner rectangle — a rough-surface carpet of charcoal gray unevenly flecked with beads of partially white paint — becomes the surface on which the artist applies vertical swaths of thick paint using an instrument he has devised. If one looks at the unpainted hemp, particularly around the edges, the traces of ash are evidence that Ha has applied fire to the canvas's obverse side before pushing white paint through the hemp. While I do not know the exact mechanics of the process, the beads of paint that help form the ground look as if they are emerging from a bed of black.



Installation view of *Return to Color: Ha Chong-Hyun* at Tina Kim Gallery (image by Dario Lasagni)

The multiple and different material states Ha merges together in this series of paintings, collectively and aptly titled *Conjunction*, can be read both formally and metaphorically. Their beauty goes beyond their skin, which is what distinguishes them from their more formal counterparts.

At the same time, the bluntness of the vertical swaths is a refusal of the calligraphic and painterly, while the repetition never becomes mechanical. The conjunction of labor and pleasure, the visual and physical, ash, hemp, and paint, blue and white against charcoal gray and brown, as in "Conjunction 20-61" and "Conjunction 20-71" (both 2020), seems to be about time and change, birth and rebirth, sky, earth, and fire. And yet, even as I formulate this reading, I feel the work's resistance to any enclosing narrative, the artist's desire to move beyond any single story. Ha wants to be in the moment of making. His open-ended exploration of paint's materiality and innovative processes are the central hallmarks of his greatness.

Return to Color: Ha Chong-Hyun *continues at Tina Kim Gallery (525 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 30.*