

Yoo Youngkuk's abstract world of colorful nature revisited

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Installation view of the memorial exhibition of Korean abstract art master Yoo Youngkuk, "Colors of Yoo Youngkuk," at Kukje Gallery in central Seoul / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

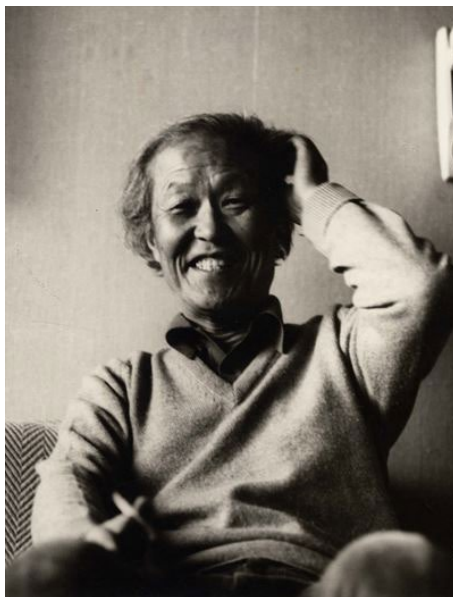
Exhibition marks 20th anniversary of artist's death at Kukje Gallery

Dubbed as a "magician of colors," Yoo Youngkuk (1916-2002) is best known for distilling the Korean natural landscape — characterized by roaring waters, rugged mountains and the blazing sun — into the basic formal elements of dots, lines, plane and color.

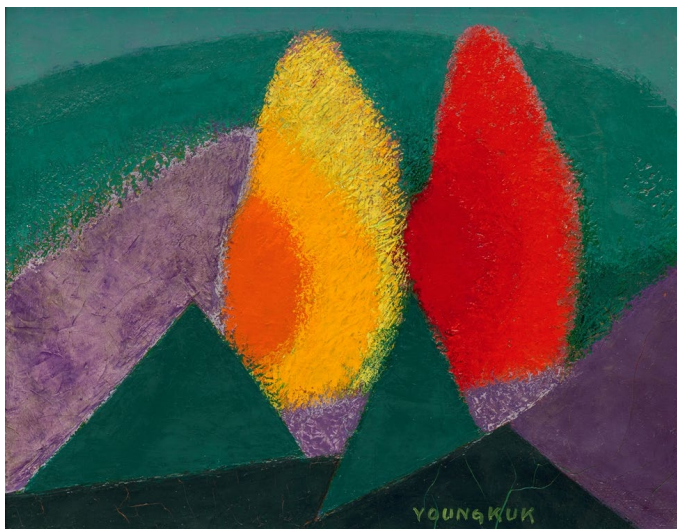
While nature was undeniably his muse, he made no attempt to depict these elements realistically. Instead, his dynamic visual vocabulary focused on portraying the essence of nature through brilliant, abstract aesthetics.

In commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Yoo's death, Kukje Gallery in central Seoul is hosting a panoramic survey of the work of the pioneer of Korean abstract modernism at its exhibition, "Colors of Yoo Youngkuk."

As its title indicates, the show aims to trace the painter's trajectory of life within modern Korea's tumultuous history and the decades-long artistic tenacity he showed to develop his own vibrant vocabulary through its key focus on color.



Painter Yoo Youngkuk in the 1970s / Courtesy of Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation



Yoo Youngkuk's "Work" (1977) / Courtesy of Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation



Yoo Youngkuk's "Work" (1992) / Courtesy of Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation

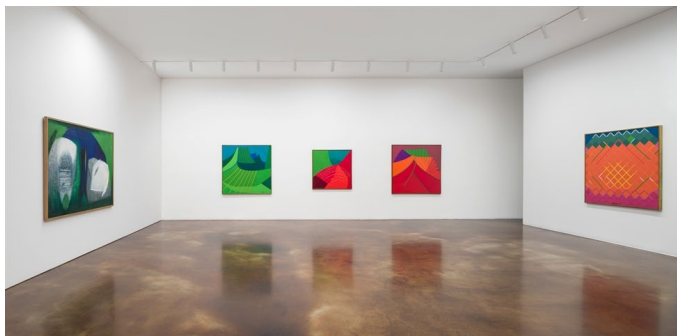
"Essentially, it's an exhibition that centers on Yoo's iconic usage of colors (that continued to evolve throughout his lifetime)," Lee Yong-woo, an assistant professor of cultural studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the guest curator of the show, said at a press preview held last week.

In addition to 68 paintings that represent different stages of the artist's career, sprinkled throughout the gallery space is an extensive archive that offers a multifaceted glimpse into Yoo as a persistent painter, father, husband and first-generation "modern boy."

Some of the notable items from the archive include postcards featuring Yoo's early works produced between the mid-1930s and early 1950s — the majority of which were lost due to the 1950-1953 Korean War and a series of natural disasters — and rare drawings and preliminary sketches, as well as original photographic prints taken by the artist in 1942 during his time in Japan.

It was in the 1930s when Yoo, who had been born and raised in the hinterlands of southeastern city of Uljin, North Gyeongsang Province, went to Japan to pursue art. He returned to his homeland in 1943 at the peak of the Pacific War, and for the next two decades, led a life divided between his artistic passion and the need to put food on the table for his family through fishing and operating a distillery.

During this time, he led a number of different early avant-garde art associations in Korea, such as New Realism Group, Modern Art Association, Contemporary Artists and New Figures Group.



Installation view of "Colors of Yoo Youngkuk" / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

"The artworks created in this period of transition have a different feel from Yoo's vibrant, signature paintings that most are familiar with today," Lee said.

"While he began transforming natural elements into abstract composition, the pieces emphasize the *matiere* or texture of oil paint. The color was then of secondary importance to him, compared to shapes and forms."

The turning point came in 1964 when Yoo, at the age of 48, cut his ties with all art groups and held his first solo exhibition, announcing his new life of solitude and abstinence as a full-time artist.

To make up for what he referred to as "the lost period," the artist religiously followed the same routine to give life to hundreds of sumptuous paintings, spending his time — often with his wife sitting in silence by his side — in the studio, day in and day out.

On display at the gallery are works of art, mainly in hues of green, blue and ultramarine, produced during this period, which Lee saw as "reflective of Yoo's youthful, high-spirited determination as he began his journey as a full-time painter."



Installation view of "Colors of Yoo Youngkuk" / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Since then, Yoo employed a masterful use of a diversified palette that included the primary colors as well as green, purple and black, while also shifting his focus from amorphous abstraction to highly geometric compositions.

His exploration of basic formal elements — lines, shapes and different shades of color — that visualized his attempt to "return to nature" achieved its aesthetic zenith during this time. The lush lyricism centering on mountains, trees, ocean, hills, horizons and sunset transferred the essence of nature's sublime energy directly onto the canvas.

Lee compared the experience of viewing Yoo's seminal masterpieces to "an afterimage of an intense color lingering even after closing one's eyes."

It is remarkable that many of these serene and lyrical paintings were created during the artist's decades-long struggle with illness in his later life, as he was teetering on the brink of death with a cardiac pacemaker inserted in him.

"When I look at his painting, I feel as though I am in a conversation with my father," Yu Jin, chairman of the Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation and son of the artist, said. "I would say that his vibrant use of colors seems more fitting to the present era than during the time he worked as an artist."

"Colors of Yoo Youngkuk" runs through Aug. 21 at Kukje Gallery.