

Forgotten abstract painter Choi Wook-kyung revisited

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Choi Wook-kyung's "Reject" (1974)

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Forgotten abstract painter Choi revisited

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Artist Choi Wook-kyung (1940-1985) was a person with rare intelligence in the Korean art scene of the 1970s.

She was an outsider in the Korean art community, while the Dansaekhwa (Korean monochrome painting) and the sociopolitical Minjung art prevailed. Her position was unrivaled then as well as now since she was responsible for expanding the scope of Korean abstract art, especially Abstract Expressionism.

An exhibition titled "American Years 1960s-1970s" at Kukje Gallery K2 in downtown Seoul sheds light on the highly gifted artist who died young. The exhibit features 70 paintings and collage works solely from the period when Choi resided in the United States between 1963 and 1978.

Kim Sung-won, artistic director of Asia Culture Center in Gwangju, organized the exhibit as a guest curator.

"Choi achieved her own style in the States, but her works were unappreciated in the Korean art scene which was split between the avant-garde artists of Dansaekhwa and performance and more conservative groups who sought the National Art Exhibition," Kim said. "Choi tread a solitary path because she did not and could not take sides with any of them. The time is ripe for us to rediscover this artist who blazed a trail in Korean abstract art."

Coming from a wealthy family in Seoul, Choi showed artistic talent from an early age and was taught by renowned artists such as Kim Ki-chang (1914-2001). After graduating from the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University, Choi went to the U.S. and entered the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1963 to pursue her career as an artist.

While in the States, she absorbed the strong and bold impact of Abstract Expressionism, the post-World War II art movement in America led by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning. Choi accommodated the interna-

tional art trend, but she continued to experiment on it with Korean aesthetics and colors.

Her earlier paintings use bold colors and complimentary contrast, while her works in the '70s employ softer colors such as pink and yellow. Her residency at the Roswell Museum in New Mexico made the artist explore more natural images and organic shapes. She also incorporated traditional Korean elements from dancheong (multicolored paintwork on wooden structures) and minhwa (folk painting) as well.

Choi was a prolific artist who created over 500 paintings and 1,000 drawings. The exhibit presents two different ways Choi artistically unraveled her thoughts — her paintings are abstract, taking away concrete details, while she pasted reality as it is into her collages.

Influenced by pop art, her collages use newspaper clippings that directly reflect social issues such as anti-war sentiment or racial discrimination. This is an example of tireless artistic experiments Choi conducted throughout her life.



Artist Choi Wook-kyung

Korea Times file

Choi met an early death at 45 when she had a heart attack. She didn't leave a will, but bequeathed an unforgettable legacy in Korean abstract art.

The exhibit runs through Oct. 30. Admission is free. For more information, visit kukje.org or call 02-735-8449.