

Chung Chang-Sup Brings Dansaekhwa Back to Its Home in Korea

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Chung Chang-Sup's "Meditation 91108," 1991. (Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery)

Continuing the current global reevaluation of the Dansaekhwa movement, Seoul's Kukje Gallery is mounting a solo show by Chung Chang-Sup (1927-2011), one of the genre's primary artists, in the country where the style began, South Korea.

The show, which opens today and features over twenty works by Chung, runs concurrently with exhibitions of other Dansaekhwa painters worldwide — including two dedicated to Park Seo-bo, at London's White Cube and at Galerie Perrotin Hong Kong, and a third dedicated to Yun Hyong-Keun at Antwerp's Axel Vervoordt Gallery.

The Dansaekhwa (which roughly translates as “monochrome” or “single-color”) movement refers to a group of Korean artists who combine American Minimalism with a distinct Korean sensibility. Severely limiting their palette to colors mainly derived from nature—shades of earth, sea, stone, the night sky—Dansaekhwa artists create work that in its simplicity is extremely contemplative, their creative practice becoming a sort of meditative act.

Like the work of his fellow Dansaekhwa luminary Park Seo-bo, Chung Chang-Sup's work makes use of traditional Korean materials to bring Korean cultural history to Minimalism, a genre traditionally seen as an Anglo-European phenomenon. As artists practicing in the post-American-Korean War era, Park and Chung's use of Korean materials to generate art in the Minimalist style associated with their country's former aggressors was a powerful statement.

Both created work using hanji, a paper derived from the bark of the mulberry tree that's been used in Korean crafts and carpentry for centuries. From there, however, Chung began to use tak, a paper pulp that is a component part of hanji, as he also moved to a darker color palette of indigos, burgundies, and browns. He would divide his works into grids, echoing hanji's traditional use as a window cover. These pieces eventually became his 1990s “Meditation” series, which is well represented in the Kukje exhibition.

Chung's “Meditation” paintings later became limited to just white and black, as the painter attempted to evoke a sense of silence and a respect for the raw Korean materials in his work, leading to pieces, as shown in this exhibition, that are at once thoroughly Minimalist, thoroughly Dansaekhwa, and thoroughly Korean.

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