

An installation view of Ha Chong-hyun's solo exhibit at Kukje Gallery K2 in central Seoul, running through Oct. 18

Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

Trinity of burlap, paint and Ha Chong-hyun

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Ha Chong-hyun, 80, is one of the first generation of "dansaekhwa," or Korean monochrome, painters. Despite his age, the artist never rests. He still spends six to 10 hours in his studio six days a week, challenging himself to try new things.

A solo exhibition underway at Kukje Gallery in downtown Seoul contains Ha's latest works from his "Conjunction" series that has lasted for four decades.

"Some may say why try something new at my age, but an artist should renew oneself constantly. Please enjoy the change in my new works," Ha said.

Born in 1935, Ha majored painting at Hongik University, one of the top art schools in Korea. His earliest works were geometric abstracts because he led an avant-garde movement in the late 1960s. However, Ha knew he had to develop a unique style because he was unfamiliar with Western styles of painting.

"I had to approach the concept of painting the other way round. So I had to push the paint from the back of the woven burlap canvas against common sense," Ha said. "I had to make my canvas with burlap that used to be used to transport relief goods across war-stricken Korea as well as oil paint of the right viscosity and tools in order to push the paint from behind. It all led to an unprecedented style."

The thick paint seeps through the coarsely woven burlap, creating textured surfaces. The oozing paint is the result of the labor Ha that invests into his work, which comes from a sense of spirituality and meditation.

"The artist cannot intervene in the shape of seeping paint. The paint decides it. The ascetic quality of my work comes from the concept that the artist does not determine the outcome," Ha said.

Joan Kee, an art history professor at University of Michigan who is the first scholar to approach Korean dansaekhwa in an academic way, said Ha is one of the few gifted artists who is able to "link monochrome and all its connotations of purity and autonomy with its opposite, in this case the feral, or even fecal, viscera from which the

monochrome is allegedly immune."

Kee elaborated on how the oozing inoculates the past and present. "To us it looks hard, like plaster. Its solidity has us recognize the space between where we stand and where the painting hangs, a space that is not so much a given than a field in need of activation. The oscillation between the visual and tactile was but one of the many challenges Ha set for himself in the course of producing 'Conjunction,' a series of paintings which he began in 1974 and has continued since," Kee wrote in the book "Dansaekhwa" published by the Grenfell Press.

In addition to repetitive action that results in primitiveness and modernity at the same time, Ha's monochromatic "Conjunction" series are mostly produced in grayish white, earthy brown or black.

"My paintings begin with burlap canvas as a ground color. So the paint has to go well with the color of hemp," Ha said. "The white color resembles that of Korean porcelain and the brownish color comes from the earth. The black is the color of 'giwa,' or Korean traditional roof tile. These colors can be easily found around us and goes well with any environment."

For Ha, the burlap, the paint and the action of the painter forming a trinity is the key to his work. "The color of burlap is simple and I paint in an uncomplicated manner with a single color. The monotonous nature of the materials makes things more intricate for me, including the selection of colors," the artist said.

The ongoing exhibition at Kukje Gallery features Ha's major works spanning four decades as well as his newest pieces. He experimented with soot in the series of paintings. "It did not come from nowhere. I worked with soot back in 1972, before starting my burlap canvas. It was just an experiment back then and I wanted to return to the idea," Ha explained.

Ha reconstructs the layers of paint with a series of actions resulting in adventitious shapes and colors. He pushes the paint from the obverse side of the woven hemp canvas as he did for decades, but gives off smoke on the wet paint before raking or making strokes with a brush. The new phase lends the painting a sense of being a natural act.

"The blackened canvas in soot is a part of nature. Every step of creating an artwork is becoming artificial and I wanted to put something natural to it, out of my hands," Ha said.

The dansaekhwa movement has come under the spotlight in recent years, Ha and other dansaekhwa artists were rediscovered at "Dansaekhwa" exhibit at Palazzo Contarini-Polignac in Venice, which ran from May to August as a collateral event of the 56th Venice Biennale.

Ha said shedding light on dansaekhwa could be a reaction to the crisis in contemporary art, in which painting is regarded as obsolete.

Yoo Jin-sang, curator and professor at Kaywon School of Art and Design, said recent interest on Korean dansaekhwa from the West stemmed from the fundamentals of paintings pursued in dansaekhwa.

"In the Western art history, there are key values for each form of art. In case of painting, it was all about how to apply paint. Dansaekhwa was spontaneous movement in Korea began in the 1960s, seeking the root of paintings even before Westerners did," Yoo said. "Dansaekhwa gives a glimpse of how the painting goes back to the basics."

Ha, who taught at his alma mater Hongik University for over 30 years, established the Ha Chong-hyun Art Award in 2001 with his retirement benefits given to encourage aspiring artists and critics.

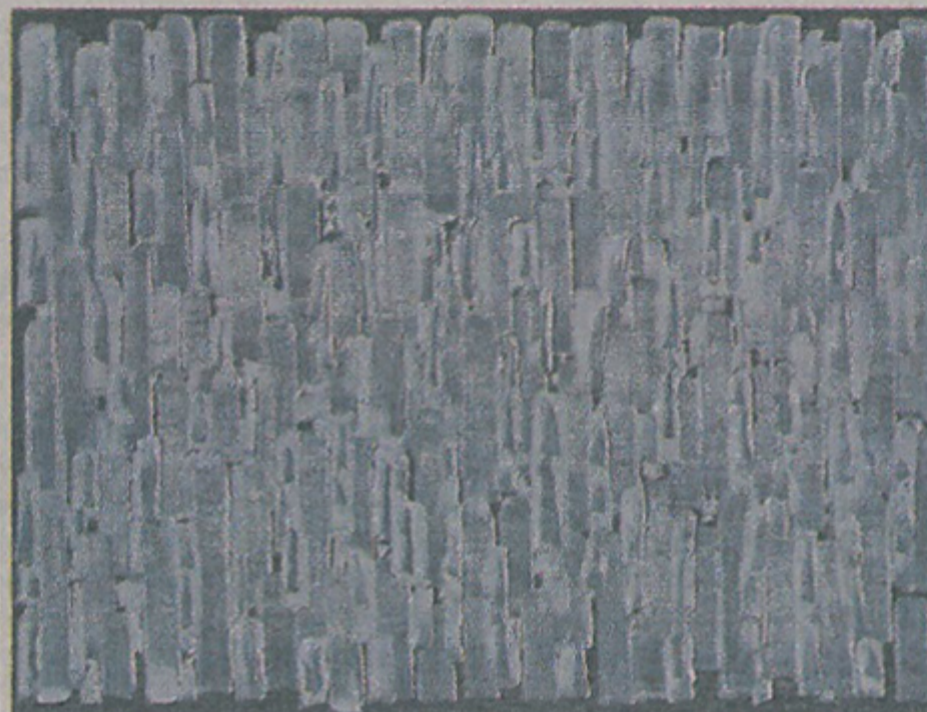
Ha believes that art theoreticians are as important as the artists in the art world to make progress. That is why Ha decided to award University of Michigan professor Kee and Guggenheim curator Alexandra Munroe this year, giving credit to their contributions in establishing the direction for research into dansaekhwa.

"There was no such term as dansaekhwa back in the '70s. The study of dansaekhwa is still in its early stages. There are more artists behind a few senior artists leading the movement now and dansaekhwa could be subdivided in detail," Ha said. "Critiques and research on dansaekhwa will breathe new life into this trend of art, keeping it alive."

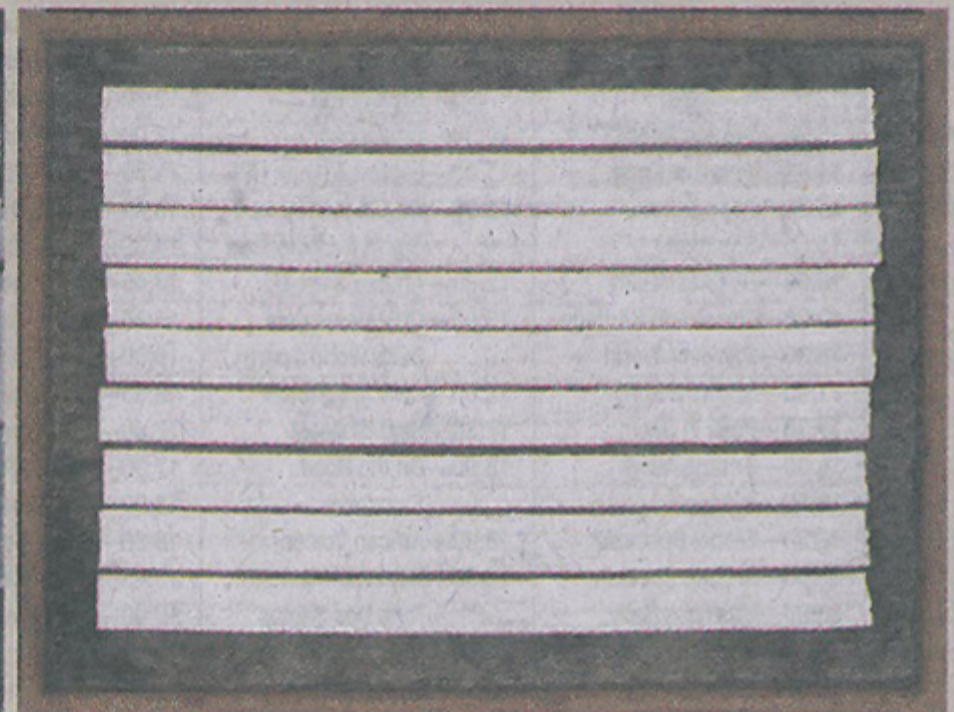
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Artist Ha Chong-hyun in his atelier



Ha Chong-hyun's "Conjunction 04-3" (2004)



Ha Chong-hyun's "Conjunction 15-201" (2015) Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery