

Ha Chong-Hyun Unveils New Works in New York

BY DARRYL WEE | NOVEMBER 11, 2015



Ha Chong-hyun. (Photo by Kim Sang Tae)

Shrewd observers may have noticed that the busy fall season of new exhibitions opening and ongoing in New York has turned the spotlight on several prominent, senior Korean artists associated with the so-called monochrome painting movement, or Dansaekhwa.

In addition to showcases of Yun Hyongkeun at Blum & Poe and Chung Chang-Sup at Galerie Perrotin, Tina Kim Gallery has just opened “Ha Chong-Hyun: Conjunction,” a comprehensive survey that focuses on Ha’s ongoing series of “Conjunction” paintings — a major lifework that has preoccupied the artist over more than four decades.

Using a signature process called bae-ap-bub (“back-pressure method”), Ha pushes viscous amounts of paint through the rear of his raw burlap canvases through to the front, creating highly controlled pictorial surfaces that make a striking counterpoint to the rustic texture of his chosen support.

Although a similar selection of works was also presented earlier this September at Seoul’s Kukje Gallery, where Ha also showed works from the Conjunction series as well as representative pieces from the 1970s, this showcase at Tina Kim has a more chronological slant. On display are some 25 paintings that date from the 1970s through to the 80s, 90s, and the present.

Now into his eighties, Ha still works with an energetic zeal, and speaks volubly and with considerable articulateness about the background behind his work. The artist kindly obliged BLOUIN ARTINFO with a series of personal, thoughtful, and intimate responses to questions about his life and work.

How did the work of the predecessors of Dansaekhwa, such as Kim Whanki during the 1960s, influence and pave the way for its development during the subsequent decade?

Ha Chong-Hyun: Given this late transformation, I think it is more helpful to consider him as a mentor rather than a predecessor, although his generation was prior to mine. In my opinion, artists who pursued Dansaekhwa mostly developed their own path, moving from realism to various abstract forms of painting — an evolution that was inspired by a variety of different reasons and experiences. Later, their experimental paintings (especially what has come to be labeled Dansaekhwa) were seen as containing the diverse philosophies of each individual artist.

Park Seo-Bo once said that he “could not accept being called a minimalist artist, because minimalism is the product of logic. It’s a conceptual approach.” Would you say that your own work is “minimalist”?

HCH: Everyone lives a different life, with different values in life ranging from food to material preferences. But despite this, I would say that everyone still possesses some kind of so-called minimalism in his or her life. It might be permeating through us to become a part of us, and might come through in our individual actions even without trying to be affected or influenced by it.

Minimalism is the preface of modernism. What aspect of life isn’t affected by this? For this reason, I don’t feel comfortable simplifying minimalism as a conceptual approach in contemporary art, nor would I define it as a product of logic. I would rather answer this question by referring to my personal vision of life: when we live together, a person’s own positive perspectives can sometimes influence others. This is how we live life, by inspiring each other, isn’t it?

Dansaekhwa has been receiving much critical attention of late. This year’s Venice Biennale, for example, featured an exhibition at the Palazzo Contarini- Polignac curated by Yongwoo Lee, organized by the Boghossian Foundation together with Kukje Gallery and Tina Kim Gallery, which included new site- specific work by Lee Ufan, as well as pieces by Chung Chang-Sup, Park Seo- Bo, and yourself.

Do you find that the recent and ongoing reassessment of Dansaekhwa tends to focus more on its formal and conceptual aspects, rather than the political exigencies — and sense of a void in society — that first informed its development back in the 1970s?

HCH: When it comes to Dansaekhwa today, many people would think of those artists that you mentioned. However, there were many more artists who were involved in Dansaekhwa at its outset.

As you correctly observed, Dansaekhwa has recently been reevaluated and highlighted. Instead, the early practitioners of Dansaekhwa explored distinctive practices in accordance with their own personal interests and evolved independently for years, or even for decades. The philosophy and perspective of each of these artists differed dramatically from one another, and their work was much more diverse than what is usually described when presenting the historical overview of Dansaekhwa.

Certain aspects hold similarities as the works inevitably reflected the social and cultural experiences of that time. I think it was a really unique group of artists in that it is difficult to compare with other cultures.

Dansaekhwa was not conceived from a single ideology, method, or discourse. It is encouraging that Dansaekhwa has been receiving more international attention, but I personally hope that there will be a new broader inquiry into the many artists and their works from this period. Overall, this is a generation that is not limited to being described in terms of modernism in Western culture.

Dansaekhwa was not a pre-organized or mandated movement, and we can see now that Dansaekhwa was an outcome of the impact that Western culture had on Korea, and of how Western modernism entered Korea and its traditions.

What drove these artists were their personal practices, not a specific ideology that they were all pointing to. I think that it is vital to approach Dansaekhwa by emphasizing the lives and ideals of each individual artist.

For this exhibition, you are presenting works from your ongoing Conjunction series, where you push layers of paint from the rear of the burlap support to the front, creating a painting with two surfaces or sides. Some have read this technique as an oblique reference to the political and cultural pressures faced by Korea in the 20th century. Would you agree with this assessment?

HCH: I work with burlap and was inspired by the social situation during the period after the Korean War. I often used burlap or barbed wire in my work: barbed wire is a product and symbol of war and oppression, whether it is physical or mental. It was also hard to afford materials back then.

I bought burlap sacks that were once used to ship grain from the United States to the U.S. army bases in Korea. They were cheap and easy to find in the Namdaemun Market — Korea's oldest market — so young artists like myself could afford them.

My personal experiences reflect the society then; through these points of reference, my work reflects the past by seeing it in the present. What I always emphasize is that I am firmly rooted: a critic or anyone else cannot influence the practice that I pursue. I believe that if you strive toward something, your veracity becomes evident.

But lately what I hope from critics and people that literally express phenomena is for them to evaluate contemporary artists more fundamentally and intuitively. It is understandable if a critique is expressed through the perspective of a certain discourse in a contemporary standpoint. Ultimately, I respect the various ways a work can be read, even critiques made without the understanding of a work's context.

Lately there are implications of discussions regarding increasingly specific values through timely perspectives and various approaches which I am happy about, and sometimes I think it is going in the direction I wish it to. With this I hope for interesting discussions not only concerning the contemporaries now, but also in reading the next era through my work.

"Ha Chong-Hyun: Conjunction" runs at Tina Kim Gallery through December 6, 2015.

URL: <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1276729/ha-chong-hyun-unveils-new-works-in-new-york>