

TOUCHING THE SUBSTRATE

Tactile 'seeing' and Korean Dansaekhwa painting

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The eyes want to collaborate with the other senses. All the senses, including vision, can be regarded as extensions of the sense of touch – as specialisations of the skin. They define the interface between the skin and the environment – between the opaque interiority of the body and the exteriority of the world.

Juhani Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 42

Such is the secret of his making: the painting is not before his eyes, but in his hands.

Mikel Dufrenne, 1987, p.148



Dansaekhwa installation view k2 5

Dansaekhwa – which means ‘monochrome’, ‘monotone’, or ‘one-colour’ painting in Korean – is a stylistic term employed as a way of drawing attention to a tendency in Korean art that came to the fore in the 1970’s and 1980’s, but the tendency continues into the present, though proponents have been overshadowed by artist adopting more overtly technological media. *Dansaekhwa* artists often use large formats, earth-toned or white and off-white colour, simple all-over compositions that are organised without evident representational meaning, and their works convey a pronounced sense of being the record of a process.

But as I walked through the galleries of the exhibition ‘Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting’ at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Gwacheon, South Korea, in early 2012, encountering such paintings for the first time *en masse*, and now, more recently, on seeing the exhibition at Kukje Gallery, ‘The Art of Dansaekhwa’ [1], I was struck above all by how the surfaces of the paintings were worked very differently from those of Western monochromes. They evoked raw materiality and tactility, and the artists who made them seemed to be involved with communicating a heightened awareness of proprioception – of stimuli relating to the position, posture, equilibrium and internal conditions of both the maker and the viewer. It was as if the paintings’ substance, the worked or palpated paste of colour and the pliability or rigidity of the surfaces, required of me not so much a visual imagination as a *tactile* one. I was being invited not to enjoy the play of colours and forms unfolding before my eyes, nor to engage in the interpretation of some symbolic content, idea, or theoretical context, but rather to experience a heightened sense of the use and practice of the hand.

I don’t mean to suggest that Western paintings lack tactile qualities. Of course not. The ‘painterly’ style that emerged with the late works of Titian foregrounds ‘impasto’ – the potential of oil paint to consolidate the materiality of a surface. From Impressionism onwards, and most especially in post-war *tachism* and Abstract Expressionism, or the work of more recent artist such as Antoni Tàpies or Robert Ryman, to name just two, the substrates of paintings evince a pronounced physical solidity and palpability. For Western artists, emphasis on surface facture implied concern with broadly four things: the desire to communicate a more fluid and dynamic experience of the visual; the critiquing of the ‘well-made’ painting through emphasis on ‘raw’ texture; the re-assertion of the objecthood of the work – the two-dimensionality of the picture plane; the foregrounding of indexical signs, drawing attention back to the maker of the work.



Dansaekhwa installation view k3 1

Similarly, the all-over monochrome effect in Western painting seems to head in two diametrically opposing directions: “opening up some kind of back door in the mind, an expanding, pulsing awareness of the visual process itself”, as Rosalind Krauss puts it (1991, p. 123), or asserting that “(m)eaning would no longer be a function of illusion, of an imagined ‘inside’ or ‘behind’ the surface” (ibid. p. 125) – that is, monochrome implying transcendence or monochrome as physical objecthood.

I felt that something else was going on in *Dansaekhwa*. For while the strategies evident in these paintings certainly signal engagement with Western modernism, they also reveal the artists’ immersion in East Asian culture, and specifically, *Korean* traditions. Korean art and artifacts are noted for being more ‘natural’ than the Chinese or Japanese, displaying greater vitality and spontaneity. The makers are seemingly less interested in ‘perfection’, and are unconcerned with displays of overt ‘refinement.’ [2] While heavily influenced by Chinese civilisation and the regional religious conventions of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, Korean culture is also marked by the influence of indigenous shamanism. This, so it is claimed, serves to explain Korean art’s preoccupation with dynamism, disorder and ecstatic states.

Dansaekhwa artists announce such cultural allegiances by showing, for example, an evident lack of concern for ‘finish’ or ‘refinement’. Thus in his earlier works Park Seo-Bo scratched into a dull paste of oil, while Ha Chong-Hyun (or Jonghyun) squeezed earth-toned oil paint from the reverse side of canvas. Furthermore, in the traditional East Asian manner, several *Dansaekhwa* artists worked on their surfaces horizontally rather than vertically. Chung Sang Hwa folded dry-primed canvas at regular intervals and then removed the fragments from the cracked lines, filling the voids with acrylic paint. Some used *hanji* – Korean paper made from the bark of the mulberry tree – instead of canvas, or as well as canvas. For example, Chung Chang-Sup laid *hanji* in a collage-like fashion on canvas, while Park Seo-Bo in his later work built *hanji* up into a pronounced terrain of parallel stripes. Paint was applied in emphatically process-based ways; for example, the now most internationally well-known of the artists associated with *Dansaekhwa*, Lee Ufan, when he was associated with the tendency in the 1970’s and 1980’s, used a brush loaded with paint comprised of stone pigment and glue and progressively depleted the amount of paint deposited through repeating a sequence of horizontal or vertical brush-marks.

A complex, and to Westerners (and today also to younger Koreans), unfamiliar weave of ideas underpins *Dansaekhwa*’s value as a specific genre of advanced painting. As the artist and critic, and curator of the exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Joon Jin Sup writes in a recent exhibition catalogue essay: ‘The core of *Dansaekhwa* is revealed in its spirit, tactility, and performance’ (2014, p. 23). In what follows I want to think specifically about tactile ‘seeing’ and its relation to the substrates of *Dansaekhwa* painting. By ‘substrate’ I refer not only to a work’s material surface but also to the underlying substance or ‘support’ to which the painted surface is attached, and which serves as the underpinning or bearer of some medium.



Chung Chang-Sup - Return one 80b

I will be drawing on *Western* thinkers who seek to challenge or re-contextualise the cognitive and ontological paradigms that dominate Western ideas about art. In particular, I am interested in those thinkers (and artists) who explore the concept of the embodied mind – or what the philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call 'the cognitive unconscious': "how our physical being – flesh, blood, and sinew, hormone, cell, and synapse – and all things we encounter daily in the world make us who we are." (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 568) Another point of reference are theorists such as François Jullien (1995; 2009), who seek to confront Western thought with its 'other', in this case East Asian thought. These context highlights the fact that I will be using *Dansaekhwa* in order to relativize the cultural norms with which we Westerners are familiar, and disseminate imperialistically. I am interested in a specifically Western problematic, though because Westernization is now a global phenomenon it is also an issue that increasingly embraces far more than just the West, having enormous implications for South Korea itself [3].

This problematic is clearly stated by the theorist Paul Virilio when he emphasises that Westerners have historically derived their sense of superiority from the belief that they possess technical superiority. As a consequence, Westerners have shown "a determination to treat the rest of the world as nothing more than an object predestined for their machinations." (2000, p. 32) Such delusions of grandeur derive from a peculiar fantasy: that it is possible to escape from the tyranny of nature, a fantasy emboldened by the promise held out by technology. Indeed today, the Western and *Westernized* subject is so intimately wedded to technology, and obsessed with the speed and efficiency of visual and verbal communication that, as Virilio writes (2000, p. 10), "it is man who gives himself wildly extravagant dimensions and the earth that reveals its limits."

Familiarity with the natural and organic cedes to that with the synthetic, the virtual and immaterial, and we withdraw further and further from direct contact with things. As a result, Intimate, 'tactile' knowledge is increasingly de-valued. We are danger of loosing a sense of how creative energy and the imaginative life grow from contact with the material, tangible world. We are loosing a sense of what the philosopher Gaston Bachelard called in a memorable phrase, "the *cogito* of kneading" (1987, p. 80); that is, we are loosing familiarity with the primal 'paste', as he called it, an archetypal symbol signaling the vital combination of physical resistance and malleability intrinsic to working imaginatively. 'Kneading' means working, massaging, shaping, molding, or squeezing with the hands, and is often associated with preparing foodstuffs, such as bread, or working with clay in order to produce pottery. As Steven Connor (2004, p. 223) writes: "In between the neutral *cogito* of mere self-knowing and the more active kind of self-recognition which arises in the 'phenomenology of the against' [Bachelard], the sense of straining and striving against things, and perhaps before both of them, there is 'a *cogito* of kneading'." It is the relationship of this '*cogito* of kneading' and the tactile sense that I want to think about.



Kim Guiline *Visible invisible* 1988

Touch in Painting

Unlike the verbal medium, the plastic arts (which also include newer mechanical media like photography, film, and video) require finite and material substrates in order to exist, and this means that psycho-motor skills are necessary in the production of a work in addition to cognitive and affective skills. Paintings are essentially composed of two parts: they are something physically made and materially present – a surface (including the support and the paint applied to the support) – and they are also something materially absent – which is the virtual part, site for imaginative transformations. A painting is thus both artifactual *and* fictive, tangible and intangible. It is a material thing that has been prepared for the task of generating images, illusions and representations, setting in train clusters of memories, associations, reveries and psychological projections. The painter will no doubt have a more pronounced and persistent awareness of such an artifactual status than a viewer because they have been obliged to use their hands in order to make their work, perhaps touching the surface itself, though probably holding a brush in order to manually coat it with coloured pigment. But especially in the West, the artist often colludes in encouraging the viewer's forgetfulness of the 'brute' labour that was involved in the work's making, although even the most determinedly 'licked' on of painted surface will on closer inspection show that it is not as smooth as a print, a photograph, or a computer screen, which are our contemporary benchmarks for flatness – the material correlatives for something that has not been made by human hands [4].

Tactile or haptic engagement foregrounds the artifactual, tangible aspect of painting. It will involve perception at close range, while a predominantly retinal response necessitates viewing a work's surface from a certain distance. In the haptic mode the effect will be such that "the form and the ground lie on the same plane of the surface, equally close to each other and to ourselves", as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes (2003, p. 123). As frontal or proximal viewing are essential, as a result a rigid link is made between the eye and the hand, and to make physical contact with – to palpate – an object is actually to gain clarification. For touching confirms and demystifies.

Touch in fact engages two bodily functions – the tactile and the kinaesthetic. The former brings direct physical contact, providing information about location, surface, vibration, and temperature, while the kinaesthetic is involved with knowledge about position, orientation and force. The accumulation of knowledge gained through touch may be slower than through visual perception, but the sense of touch is more difficult to deceive. While sight facilitates a general conceptual knowledge through offering spatial detachment from what is perceived, touch verifies and brings conviction by providing specific knowledge revealed intimately through close contact. The haptic helps build a stronger and more authentic awareness of a three dimensional and temporal world than the sense of sight [5]. Indeed, as the architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa (2005, p. 10, 11) writes: “All the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense”:

[T]he senses are specialisations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching and thus related to tactility [...] Touch is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves. Even visual perceptions are fused and integrated into the haptic continuum of the self; my body remembers who I am and where I am located in the world.

Tactile ‘seeing’ thus brings into play greater awareness of body movements – stimuli relating to bodily position, posture and equilibrium that come from a more immersive engagement – and also of the changeable, multifaceted and synaesthetically varied nature of perception. The obdurately material status of a painting belies the possibility of treating it as a purely retinal and cognitive experience, engaging the synaesthetic potential of the imagination. For, as the philosopher Mikel Dufrenne emphasises (1987, p. 73): “synesthesias are the lot of all perception. The flesh is polymorphous and polyvalent. The sensuous must allow itself pluralisation.” A painting is therefore always more than just a visual ‘sign’, a terms that derives from the study of verbal language. It is an accumulation and substantiation of embodied activities occurring in time and space [6].



The art of Dansaekhwa pr images worklist full images

Touch and World-Views

But as Deleuze notes, touch takes place within ‘darkness’, and it is therefore suspect and degraded within the Western world-view committed to the *cogito* based on “clear and distinct knowledge”, as Deleuze writes, quoting Descartes (1992, p. 155). This becomes evident when we step outside its restricted and restricting paradigm.

In *The Geography of Thought* (2005) the social psychologist Richard E. Nisbett argues that it is possible to identify two world-views or ‘cognitive styles’ distinguishing the West from East Asia, ways of thinking that are deeply inscribed within cultural traditions, and whose clear benefits explain their recursiveness. Within these two world-views we find fundamentally different evaluations of touch. The Western model prioritises what Nisbett calls ‘analytic thought’, which elevates the sense of sight over the other senses, as so “dissects the world into a limited number of discrete objects having particular attributes that can be categorised in clear ways” (2003, p. 157). Thus processes of knowing involve separating into elemental parts and reorganisation into new wholes, and Westerners value discrete, clear and distinct ‘building blocks’ for thought. Truth is understood to be bright and clear, and a mode of thinking is promoted that aims to be uninfluenced by personal feelings or opinions when considering and representing facts, thereby ensuring grounds for a publicly verifiable objectivity that is freed from affect. The discursive approach therefore predominates, and thought is understood to proceed to conclusions through logic, reason, and objective analysis, rather than through intuition or other mental processes. Because there is a differentiation of both intellect and psychology from the somatic dimension, the intellect is understood to inspect and process the visual field modelled on retinal images, and so, the sense of touch, like the other senses, is relegated to an inferior status as a potential source of valid and valuable knowledge about the world. Indeed, the other sensible data of the world – colour, taste, sound, odour and touch – are downgraded due to their alleged delivery of a ‘merely’ subjective and private experience, and as these properties are also closely connected with the emotional and valuing tone of experience, emotions and values are also demoted. This fosters an intellectual attitude that is preoccupied with mental activity and values. As a result, this cognitive style prioritises experience that “lends itself to being captured in language”. Epistemologically, ‘analytic thought’ leads to dualism, and ontologically to the notion of a self existing independently from the world it perceives. There is a separation of the ‘cogito’ or mind from the body, while metaphysically, this world-view fosters transcendentalism, and divides the world of matter from that of spirit.

While Western thought came to emphasise the importance of rational argument and analysis at the expense of other cognitive styles, it mediated the artist as someone separate from the world, fostering a sense of artistic autonomy and the idea that art is a subjective addition to the world. In contrast to the objectivity fostered in other epistemological fields, this subjective, ‘creative’ element was encouraged as a constitutive part of artistic consciousness, emphasising the idea of individual freedom of expression. Furthermore, the dominance of the visual, mimetic function

occluded art's artifactual dimension, and so the dominant Western cognitive style encourages standing-back and the adoption of a detached attitude in viewing art. Indeed, because of the influence of such a narrowly visually-oriented culture, a Western viewer isn't likely to spend much time consciously considering the 'lower' sensations, and the relationship of touch, taste and smell to the imagination. In relation to fine art, we have been forcefully entrained to attend to a work of art's optical dimension and to spend time contemplating its relationship to intellectual, linguistic superstructures.

In contrast there is what Nisbett calls the 'holistic thought' of East Asia. This seeks to incorporate into cognitive processes the data derived from through awareness of the body's position in time and space. 'Holistic thought' means non-dual or monistic, which implies the notion of the self as existing in the midst of things rather than being external to them. East Asians, writes Nisbett, "responds to a much wider array of objects and their relations, and [...] makes fewer sharp distinctions among attributes or categories." as more attention is paid to affect – to *pathos* – as a component of knowledge, this leads to the acknowledgement of the value of non-verbal understanding. By being more somatically oriented, greater attention is paid to affect than in the West – to *pathos* as well as *logos* as a valid component of knowledge. This leads to the acknowledgement of the value of non-verbal understanding. As a result, East Asians feel that experience of reality "is less well suited to linguistic representation", than Western subjects (2003, p. 211). Nonconceptual practical thinking is encouraged, which is fundamentally concrete. 'Holistic thought' considers what exists in relation to some material or physical form, and processes of knowing are not separated out into elemental parts and then re-organized into new wholes, as they are in the West. Some important knowledge is thus construed in what to Westerners seems to be 'esoteric' or 'dark' terms.

Metaphysically, this world-view fosters the idea of an immanent spirituality, occurring in the here-and-now. In relation to art, the self is understood to be immersed in a living, corporeal and participatory context, and distinctions between 'subjective' and 'objective' – self-expression and convention – therefore have less value. Intimate connectedness is valued over individual independence and autonomy. Awareness of process predominates over the search for essences or fixed and finite forms, and this cognitive style fosters the search for complementarity rather than dissimilarity in art. It offers the spectator a greater sense of being united with a trans-personal whole. For, as it is somatically oriented, the self is regarded as immersed in a living, bodily and participatory context which the art work embodies.

The Sinologist and philosopher François Jullien argues that these divergences in what he terms 'Chinese' and 'Greek' thought, are best understood through positing two profoundly different ways of conceiving of the subject's connectedness to the outside world: *perception* and *breathing*. "There are two ways in which my existence is continuously connected to something outside", Jullien declares (2009, p. 134): "I breathe and I perceive". As he explains (2009, p. 124): "I can privilege the gaze and the activity of perception, the Greek choice, which led them to grant priority to a conception of reality as an object of knowledge: the mind moves upward from visual sensation to the construction of essences, and vision is corrected, structured, and at the same time transcended by reason." As a result, writes Jullien (1995, p. 218), "[o]ne could say – metaphorically, at least – that Greek thought was marked by the idea, at once tragic and beautiful, of 'measure' attempting to impose itself on 'chaos'." In contrast, the Chinese became sensitive early on to "the regular, spontaneous fecundity stemming simply from the alternation of the seasons" (1995, p. 218), and as a result their conceptualisation of the world was founded "not on the activity of knowledge but on respiration." (2009, p. 134) Chinese philosophy and art proceeded "from the fact that I am alive, breathing in-breathing out." And from this awareness "I deduce the principle of a regulating alternation from which the process of the world flows" (2009, p. 134).

As a consequence, East Asian painting was traditionally construed as opening onto a dynamic field of energy (called *qi*, *gi* or *ch'i*, as the Chinese is variously translated). Artists used techniques that to Western eyes seem explicitly designed to to emphasise the process of making, and often to demonstrate the relinquishment of conscious control. They proclaimed that they were creating an 'artless art', or the 'technique of no technique' as it was known in Taoism. In order to further the imaginative entry of the viewer into their work, paintings were often characterised by pronounced qualities of suggestive abbreviation and empty spaces, and by the juxtaposing of disparate, contrasting and imperfect elements which demanded that the viewer 'complete' the work. "When you paint", advised the Chinese scholar-artist Tang Zhiqi (c.1620), "there is no need to paint all the way; if with each brushstroke you paint all the way, it becomes common." (quoted in Jullien, 2009, p. 72) The technique known as 'flying blank' developed, for example – the sparse hairs of a worn brush left unmarked spaces as it traversed the surface – while the style known as 'flung-ink' painting aimed to loosen the hold of fixed form and determined meaning through the artist consciously relinquishing control of the painting gesture.

But what to Western eyes registers as lack of finish or refinement, sketchiness, and a sense of incompleteness, were actually highly valued because *qi* was closely associated with expressions of spontaneity. To a much greater extent than Western art before the modern period, East Asian art points towards a depicted subject (a landscape, for example) but also towards the artist's own body, whose presence is recorded through the trace of the brush upon the physical substrate. A painting's substrate mediated a heightened awareness of time and space, and the artist made the viewer feel as if he or she was watching them at work in 'real time' by involving them in a synesthetic experience. Such paintings employ what the art historian Norman Bryson (1983, p. 94-95) terms the 'deictic' (meaning 'to show') mode – that is, they are contextual, and an image cannot be "taken in all at once, *tota simul*, since it has itself unfolded within the *durée* of process." A viewer is thus able to visually track the lapse of time and sequence through the traces that the painter has left on the substrate of paper or silk as if they have participated or witnessed the process of making. This implies a performative and indexical relationship between work and maker, an acknowledgment of the "carnal, corporeal body, with its gestures and physical presence" (Bryson, 1983, p. 95).

The media and substrates used in East Asian painting also signal fundamental differences. While in the West oil on canvas became the norm, in East Asia the usual substrate was paper or silk, and the paint medium was ink or water-based colours. As a result, East Asian pictures have far less overt surface variability than Western painting – they are smoother and more homogenous. In contrast, Western paintings – even when 'licked' on – are more textured and irregular. As a consequence, East Asian works register as more intangible, delicate, diffuse and immaterial.

Rather than understanding the world as primarily an object of vision, traditional East Asian painting expressed a sense of immersion. Artists emphasised the role of the hand and eye together, recognising knowledge gained through bodily perceptions in general and not just through sight. It fostered an attitude that saw painting as expressing an intrinsic overlap between self and the world of others, and aimed to evoke the synesthetic experience of being absorbed by tones and atmosphere, or of having an intimate tactile or haptic connection to the world. Creativity was understood to arise from interactions, and the body was centrally involved in mediating the self and the world. This way of experiencing does not see a collection of discrete parts to be divided up and analyzed when confronted with a work of art, but rather construes it as a whole linking maker and viewer. East Asian art was less concerned with looking *with* the eyes than with developing a kind of indirect observing – a looking *through* the body.



Yun Hyung-Keun Burnt umber and ultramarine blue 1978 160x130

Dansaekhwa

Approached from within a broad context of cultural comparison *Dansaekhwa* can be regarded as hybrids that borrows traits of Western modernism and detour them via traditional East Asian – and specifically Korean – concepts. The – to Westerners – unusual uses of the discipline of painting make it clear that these artists were aiming to evolve a practice in relation to traditional East Asian art as well as Western modern art. In *Dansaekhwa* the haptic unfolds within a different cognitive paradigm to the West.

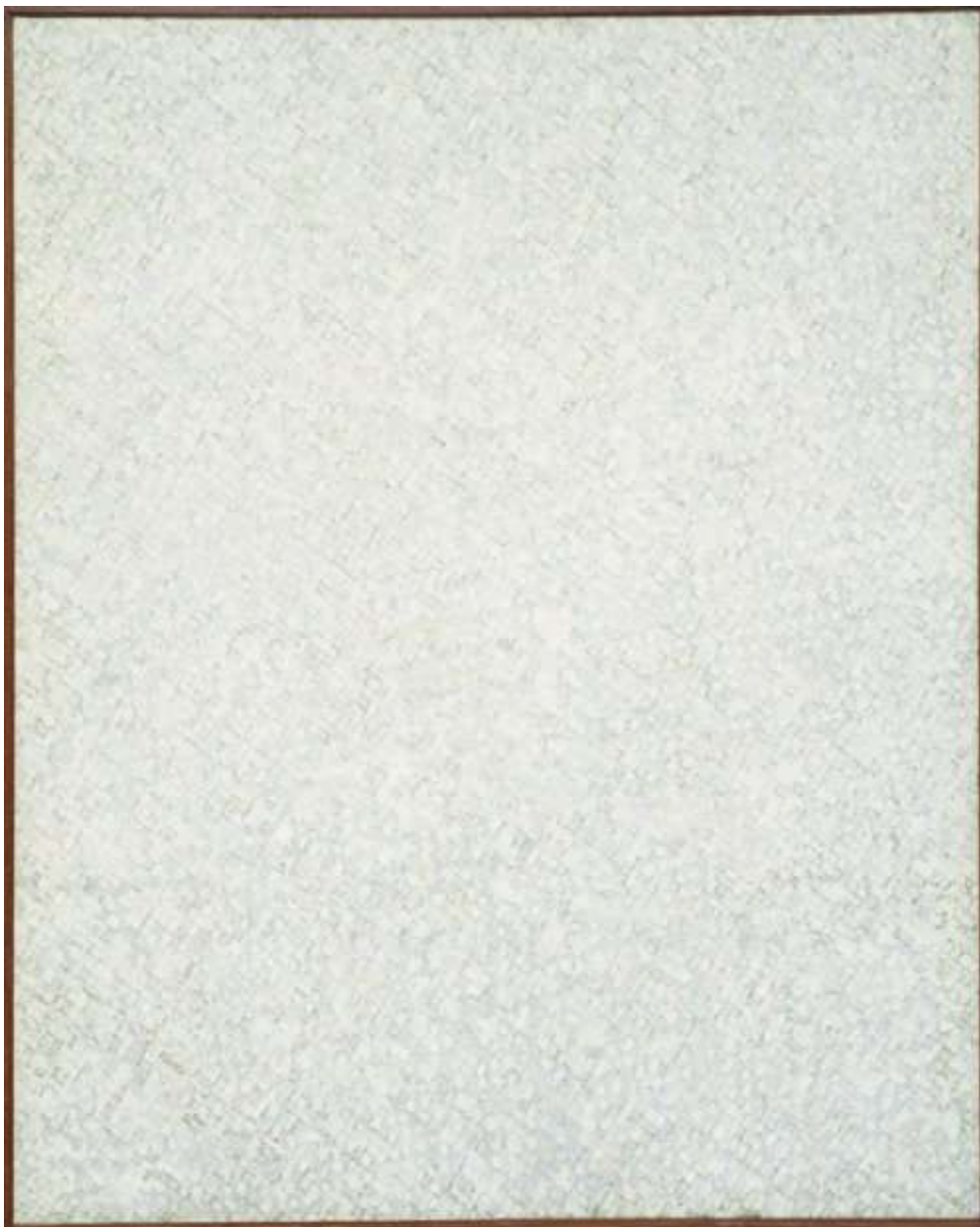
The warp and woop of canvas, the impastoed terrains of oil paint stuck East Asian artists as an overtly and obdurately material kind of painting, one that could derail the mimetic agenda of Western painting promoted since the renaissance. Especially for the generation of *Dansaekhwa*, modern Western art meant just this drawing of attention to such textured structure – exemplified by *tachism* in France and Abstract Expressionism in the United States. *Dansaekhwa* artist appropriated this augmentation in the potential of painting to directly evince a sense of material surface and tactile qualities, but detoured it via a sensibility schooled in a very different understanding of what such materiality implied. This different sensibility centred on a pronounced emphasis on physical engagement – on the studied use of the hand and measured control of the movements of the body in harmony with thought. They were working from within a consciousness bound closely to a more positive evaluation of the relationship between the synaesthetic body and cognitive processes.

The substrates of *Dansaekhwa* paintings communicate more subjective, 'dark', empathetic and transient cognitive processes grounded in greater awareness of sensory-motor experience – tactile or haptic qualities derived from the holistic dialecticism central to traditional Korean and East Asian culture. As a consequence, *Dansaekhwa* artists devised ways of manipulating materials and employing surfaces that have no real precedents amongst Western artists, while their practices intersect with Western art through being played out on a common art world stage which was becoming globally hegemonic during this period.

Such drawing attention to painting's artifactual status also suggested an alignment with the artisanal activity of pottery making. This would provide a context within which to shift Korean painting away from both the traditions of East Asian 'literati' painting, and also traditional Western art's preoccupation with mimesis, while at the same time serving to parallel certain aspects of the modernist Western formalism that was becoming increasingly known to Korean artists.

Within the context of globalised modern art, the specific focus of *Dansaekhwa* artists on the markedly material, tactile object, and on the performative dimension, can be interpreted as aiming to produce points of resistance from which to both revitalise traditional East Asian conventions and also to deconstruct the Western world-view. Multi-sensory intimacy, conveyed by the notion of a 'tactile' relationship to the world, one in which there is greater awareness of the embodied nature of mind, lies at the heart of the traditional East Asian thought upon which *Dansaekhwa* artists drew.

The emergence of *Dansaekhwa* in the 1970's, and in South Korea in particular, suggests a context within which some Korean artists encountered the liberating example of Western modernism and sought to break with their own heritage and to assimilate and emulate Western modernism's styles. In this sense, Korean monochrome painting is one of the many symptoms, manifested globally according to different time-frames in different countries, that signal the end of indigenous art and culture characterised by harmonious evolution – by repetitions, emulations and incremental departures from the norm – and by a sense of holistic embodiedness. But while *Dansaekhwa* artists adopted procedures and underlying assumptions from the 'analytic' Western tradition – such as seeing art in terms of artistic autonomy, as highly subjectivized, and as characterized by overt demonstrations of the freedom of expression – they also sought to cleave to key characteristics of the traditional 'holistic' Korean culture which were fast disappearing. The raw, earthy quality of *Dansaekhwa* evokes the experience of an agrarian society in which immersion in nature and tending the land is central. It is here also that we should seek the origins of Bachelard's 'cogito of kneading' – in the awareness of the mind as something embodied in the 'flesh' of the physical world.



Chung Sang-hwa Untitled 75-10

Conclusion

As the philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue, “human thought processes are largely metaphorical” (1980/2003, p. 6), and while these metaphors are fundamentally motivated by sensory-motor experience, the bias is conditioned by recursive cultural norms. In the West the dominant conceptual metaphors regarding the experience and meaning of paintings pertain to vision, while in *Dansaekhwa* these are supplemented by those pertaining to *touch* or *kneading*. This is an art that is more about *doing* than seeing.

Another way of framing the distinction I have made is suggested by one of the *Dansaekhwa* artists themselves – Lee Ufan, The concept of ‘encounter’, means an interface or dialogue taking place in the animated space between the beholder and the work “Rather than my work defining me or the other way round, something different grows in the mutual interaction and response and suddenly comes into existence.”(1996, p. 120). Such an ‘encounter’ is encouraged by the tactile sense, as it brings the two parties into more intimate contact.

During the time when these Korean artists were exploring such an overtly tactile kind of painting, South Korea was experiencing unprecedentedly fast social and economic change, transforming itself from an overwhelmingly agricultural economy to an industrialized capitalist one. In 1944 the percentage of urban population was 13.2, and by 2000 80 percent of Koreans were living in conurbations (Kwon), and today South Korea is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. This modernisation project also meant the rationalisation of Korean society around instrumental, ‘analytic’ goals. It was also a period in which the nation was ruled by a repressive military government, when direct criticism or dissent was difficult, and in this sense, *Dansaekhwa* artists chose a kind of silence over gestures of overt protest.

But during this period social, economic and political change was so rapid that these painters still had one foot in the paddy fields and in the humiliating period of Japanese colonization, as well as the horrors of the Korean War and the division of the peninsula. *Dansaekhwa* can thus be seen within the specific context of the dilemmas posed by rapid Westernized modernization and liberalization, and by Cold War politics. Meanwhile, as Nisbett and other social psychologists have demonstrated through their empirical research (Nisbett, 2003; Heine, 2007), variations in cognitive style between East Asia and the West continued to persist despite such transformations, although the shift from agrarian to urban society was transplanting the context of the East Asian world-view from the natural world to the technological, with profound and still difficult to assess consequences.

But one thing is for sure: within a society frenetically embracing the fetishes of capitalist-style progress modeled on the Western ‘dream’, it proved to be too much to hope that the dialectical engagements explored by *Dansaekhwa* artists could be sustained. Nam June Paik seems to have already recognised this, and so in the 1960’s threw himself into the midst of the technological maelstrom, inventing video art in the process.

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Footnotes

[1] The 'Dansaekhwa' exhibition ran from March 17 to May 13, 2012, and 'The Art of Dansaekhwa' from August 28 to 19 October, 2014.

[2] I discuss this cultural context in more detail in 'Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting', *Third Text*, Volume 27, Issue 2, 2013, where there are also references to key works on Korean art.

[3] From a contemporary East Asian perspective, the value of referring to something called 'East Asian culture' may seem spurious, to be judged synonymous with reaction and the failure to embrace modernity or dismissed as mere exoticism and romanticism. But I am not interested in reversing privileged distinctions so that East Asian culture becomes, for example, the source of all 'goodness' and the West of all 'decadence'. Nor am I indulging in what Edward Said calls 'Orientalism' (1978), or if I am, then it is of the kind that J.J. Clarke (1997, p. 9) suggests is also available and viable. 'Orientalism', Clarke writes, "cannot simply be identified with the ruling imperialist ideology, for in the Western context it represents a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organized one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power." So what I am doing – I admit it – is referring to a "characteristic family of attitudes and approaches that Europeans have taken to it [East Asia]" (Clarke, 1997, p. 10) in the hope of constructing a set of representations of East Asia that, it is explicitly understood, are "in pursuit of Western goals and aspirations." (Clarke, 1997, p.10)

[4] One of the defining characteristics of much contemporary art, in contrast, is to mimic just such inorganic substrates, a process that usually involves the use of, for example, masking tape, aluminium supports, and the mechanically assisted application of paint.

[5] It is no coincidence that in English we resort to a tactile metaphor when seeking to express the intimate, 'dark' reality of our emotions: we 'feel' sad, rather than 'see' sad. On the other hand, we say "I see what you mean" ...

[6] Bernard Berenson, the art historian and connoisseur, argued that the allure of Renaissance paintings lay in the fact that we imagine what the depicted things or people feel like beneath our fingers as if they were real. A painter's "first business", wrote Berenson, "is to rouse the tactile sense, for I must have the illusion of being able to touch a figure, I must have the illusion of varying muscular sensations inside my palm and fingers corresponding to the various projections of this figure, before I shall take it for granted as real, and let it affect me lastingly." (1896, p. 4-5) Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 166) directly challenged Berenson's assertion, arguing "he could hardly have been more mistaken; painting evokes nothing, least of all the tactile". He continued: "What it does is much different, almost the inverse. It gives visible existence to what pro-fane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a 'muscular sense' in order to possess the voluminosity of the world. This voracious vision, reaching beyond the 'visual givens,' opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae. The eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house." Merleau-Ponty's principal target was Cartesianism, still dominates the Western cognitive style, proposes that the self, or *cogito*, is real and discernible through immediate intellectual intuition, and so we must distrust all the senses other than sight and believe that reason alone can provide knowledge of objective innate ideas. Within the ocular construction central to the Cartesian world-view – which remains still today the dominant paradigm in the West – space becomes isotropic, rectilinear, abstract and uniform. As Martin Jay (1988, p. 11) observes, Cartesian 'perspectivalism' assumes that all sight is identical, universal and transcendental, so that any differences must be deemed to be error or imperfection. The visual in painting is monocular, static, unblinking, saccadic (jumping from one focal point to the next rather than panning) and disembodied, because the viewer is construed as standing outside the viewed scene and to be capturing an eternal moment (Jay, 1988, p. 5-7). Thus in Cartesian dualism, concepts – as part of thought – are pitted against the senses and feelings, which are denigrated as tied to the body. As the philosopher Mark Johnson (2007, p. 216) puts it, the dominant Western paradigm therefore "aligns meaning with the cognitive and thus dismisses quality, feeling, and emotion from any account of meaning" (italics in the original). This fact is especially debilitating in relation to the interpretation of the plastic arts. Johnson notes (2007, p. 216), for here "it is images, patterns, qualities, colours, and perceptual rhythms that are the principle bearer of meaning, but he nevertheless remained tied to Cartesianism's valuing of vision above the other senses, and his dismissal of 'tactile values' foregrounds the essentially visual bias of his phenomenology. As Mikel Dufrenne notes, Merleau-Ponty remained wedded to the idea of the imagination as fundamentally *visual*, even as he emphasised that our perception is not made up of separate visual, tactile, auditory data, but rather is undivided and perceived through our total body. As Dufrenne writes, Merleau-Ponty "wanted to bestow a radical privilege upon the visible." (1987, p. 74) Indeed, despite the 'denigration' of vision in Western thought charted by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes* (1994) Western aesthetics struggles to do justice to the fundamentally *synaesthetic/kinaesthetic* nature of the embodied imagination.

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