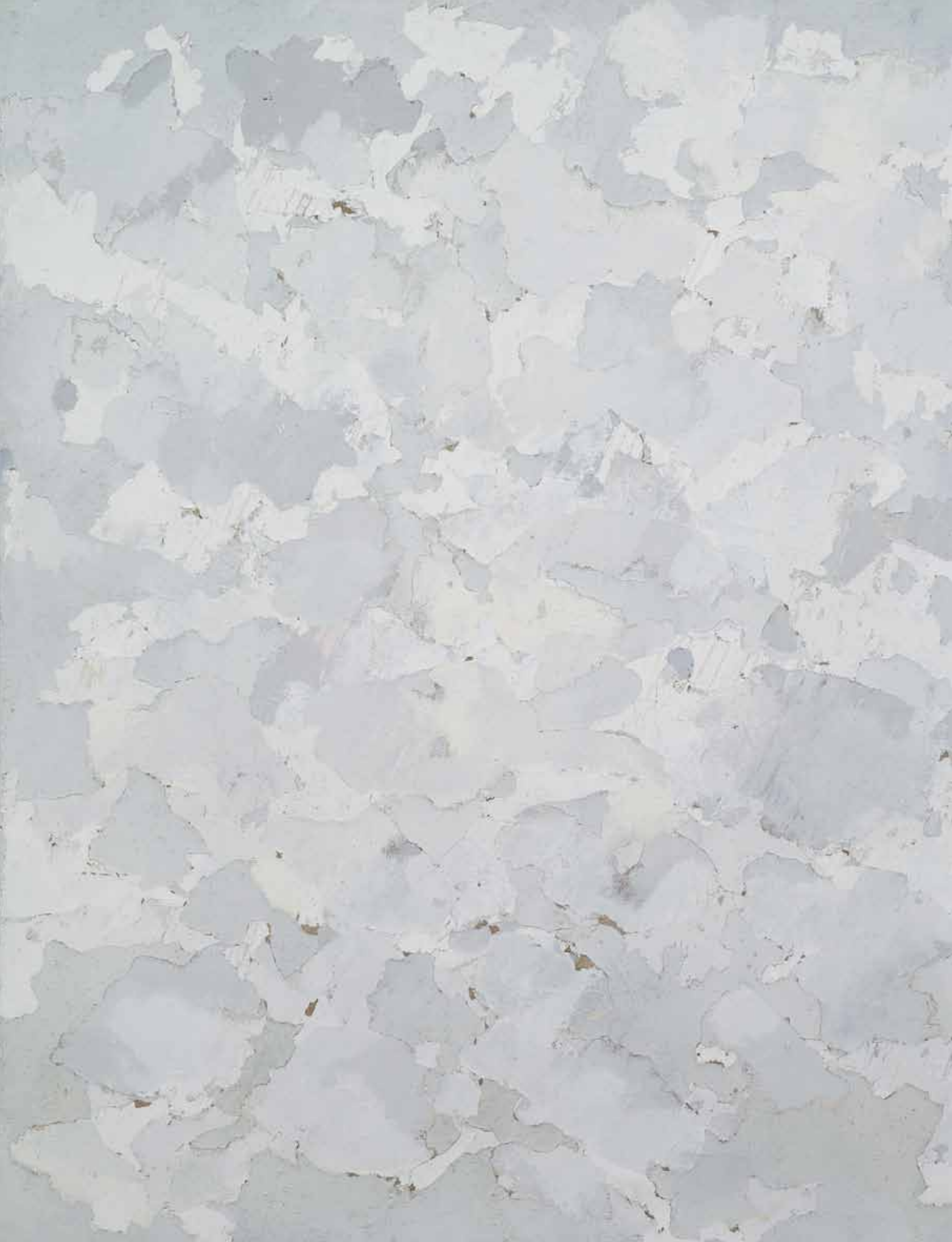


# Skin & Surface

Dansaekhwa, or ‘Korean Monochrome Painting’, is the name ascribed to a style of painting practiced by a loosely affiliated set of Korean artists who came to prominence in the 1970s. Three recent exhibitions — at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and Kukje Gallery, Seoul — have, for the first time in a generation, brought this work to an audience outside of Korea, while a presentation of Dansaekhwa will be shown as part of the 56th Venice Biennale in May this year. We asked the curators of these exhibitions — *Sam Bardaouil*, *Till Fellrath*, *Joan Kee* and *Yoon Jin Sup* — to reflect on the key factors that led to the development of Dansaekhwa’s unique aesthetic and what its legacy is today.

Chung Sang-Hwa  
Work 73-1-9, 1973,  
acrylic on canvas, 1.6 × 1.3 m

Courtesy  
Kukje Gallery, Seoul



It is difficult to define the Korean monochrome painting style known as Dansaekhwa (or Tansaekhwa, depending on which Romanization system is used). Many would argue that it wasn't even a movement. It certainly didn't have a manifesto, a core group of artists with shared ideas or a publication through which to disseminate those artists' opinions. In terms of a Korean Avant-garde, groups such as Space & Time and Avant-Garde, who were active before the Dansaekhwa artists, should be seen as more closely fitting that description. It's also important to remember that the leading Dansaekhwa artists – including Park Seobo, Yun Hyong-keun, Chung Sang-Hwa, Chung Chang-Sup and Kwon Young-woo – were primarily seen as practicing Informel, which held sway from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. During the troubled period following the Korean War (1950–53), these artists tried to express the calamity of the conflict by taking an existential perspective and by using material forms. By the mid-1960s, however, their activities – which centred around the Hyundai Mihyup (Association of Modern Artists) – had become disorganized both ideologically and practically. It was out of this disordered context that the Avant-Garde and Space & Time groups forged a new philosophy, which would go on to influence Dansaekhwa.

By the late 1960s, the first signs of Dansaekhwa had begun to emerge and the style slowly began to take root in the early 1970s. Certainly, it is possible to identify a Dansaekhwa approach in the works of Lee Dong-Yeob and Hur Hwang in the first exhibition of 'Indépendants' in Seoul in 1972. A close relationship developed between the group of artists who participated in the 'École de Seoul', an annual exhibition series founded by Park in 1975, while the artist Lee Ufan's frequent travels between Korea and Japan had resulted in the dissemination of the ideas of Japanese Mono-ha in Korea, with Lee's status and popularity ensuring his artistic influence was broad-reaching. By the mid-1970s, Dansaekhwa had become a dominant force in Korea and was prominently promoted in Japan through exhibitions such as 'Korea Facets of Contemporary Art', held at the Tokyo Central Museum of Art in 1977, as well as the 'École de Seoul' and 'Seoul Contemporary Art Festival' exhibition series in the Korean capital.

Yet, despite these examples of the style's official recognition, Dansaekhwa in the 1970s was characterized by diverse formal languages and materials exploring themes of tactility,

spirit and performance. For instance, Jin Ok-Sun based her works on the repetition of geometric patterns, Kim Yong-Ik experimented with illusion by emphasizing the material quality of fabrics and Park Jang-Nyun explored the effects of creasing through monochrome paint on canvas. Of all the Dansaekhwa artists, Chung Sang-Hwa's pioneering work most clearly embraced the style's core concepts; his repeated application and removal of paint, using the cracks created from the folding of canvas, formed powerfully austere statements. It is in the physicality of his works that I have unexpectedly found the physical analogy of the 'body' vitally important in understanding Dansaekhwa.

The surfaces of Chung's canvases form a kind of skin, created through repetitive actions that combine to build up a highly textured surface akin to a weathered landscape. This interest in the relationship between skin and the surface qualities of painting was shared by other artists: Kim Guiline, for example, repeatedly sprayed dozens of layers of black paint over the surface of his canvases; Choi Byung-So drew lines on newspaper with a ballpoint pen until the content was completely obscured; and Lee Dong-Youb left subtle traces of grey paint on his white canvases.

The use of repetition and the emphasis on the physicality of materials can be seen in the recurring rhythmic lines drawn with pencil on gessoed canvas by Park Seobo, as well as in Ha Chonghyun's use of loosely woven hessian, or *Baeapbub*, through which he pushed thick oil paint from the back. It is also identifiable in the work of Yun Hyong-Keun, who spread smooth watery pigments of deep brown and blue onto rough cotton, creating a surface reminiscent of traditional ink-wash painting. The physicality of the painting surface is exaggerated in the work of Chung Chang-Sup, who formed shapes by sculpting thick Korean paper pulp with his hands after pouring it over the canvas. The basics of calligraphy, point and line, which Lee learned as a child, are essential motifs in his practice; Lee's work also reflects the philosophy of the *I Ching*, which purports that the universe starts and ends at a single point. Kim Guiline's black paintings resemble the scorched chimneys found in traditional rural Korean houses while Ha's obverse style of painting reminds us of the ancient building techniques used in Korean adobe houses. These painting methods originate in the unique cultural traditions of Korea and it is no surprise to find the Dansaekhwa artists adopting approaches that differ from the emphasis on vision which underpinned Western abstraction and Minimalism.

From a Western perspective, the ideas and materials used in Dansaekhwa may seem novel or even radical. But given that

the second generation of artists working in this style continues to maintain the group's original ideas – drawing now on the materials of a post-industrial society – it seems undeniable that Dansaekhwa is still a vitally important school. It is because of this ongoing vitality that I believe it is necessary to explore the historical differences between the relatively short-lived period of Minimalist vocabularies in the West and the very different painting experiments happening in Korea at the same time. Dansaekhwa's formal vocabularies of austerity and simplicity shouldn't be viewed as mere curiosities or as evidence of that archaic term 'Orientalism'. Following a recent spate of Dansaekhwa exhibitions around the globe, the conceptual and formal rigour seen in the historical works of these artists has finally spread to an international audience. I am thrilled about this nascent appreciation, as it crystallizes some important points of East-West contact in the history of postwar visual art.

In my introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition 'The Facet of Korean and Japanese Contemporary Art' at the Gwangju Biennale in 2000, I chose to refer to this school of painting as Dansaekhwa rather than Korean Monochrome Painting. I thought that by evoking the 'monochrome', which to me suggests something neutral, I risked losing the distinctive qualities that define Dansaekhwa; nor did I wish simply to assign a local flavour to an international phenomenon. As the school finally achieves wider recognition, this becomes an important distinction and, with many Western art specialists now showing an interest in Dansaekhwa, we find ourselves presented with a momentous opportunity to re-evaluate history.

*Translated from Korean by Park Hee-Jin.*

*Yoon Jin Sup is a freelance curator, art critic and artist who lives in Seoul, Korea. He curated 'Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting' for the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, in 2012, and 'The Art of Dansaekhwa' at Kukje Gallery, Seoul, in 2014. He is currently President of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) International Congress, Korea.*

Ha Chonghyun  
Work 74-06, 1974, oil on  
hemp, 1.5 × 1.1 m

Courtesy  
the artist and Blum & Poe,  
Los Angeles



*Dansaekhwa was characterized by diverse formal languages and materials exploring themes of tactility, spirit and performance.*

YOON JIN SUP



Firstly, it should be stressed that Tansaekhwa was never an official movement; there was no consolidated group of artists who consciously worked together toward actualizing a particular set of ideas. Certainly, the artists to which this rubric was retroactively applied (it's worth remembering that it was critics like Lee Yil and Nakahara Yusuke who first discussed the idea of a 'Korean monochrome painting', not the artists themselves) exhibited in the same shows – such as the 'École de Seoul' series – graduated from the same schools, namely Hongik University or Seoul National University, were often friends (Chung Sang-Hwa and Kwon Young-woo had studios in the same building in Paris in the late 1970s, for example) and even occasionally painted together (there is a wonderful shot of Park Seobo and Lee Ufan working side by side in Park's studio in Seoul in August 1972). But there was no manifesto. If Tansaekhwa was a movement it was one that was largely invented to fulfil various agendas, most of which had very little to do with abstraction – or even painting, for that matter. In fact, what all these very different artists had in common was a commitment to thinking more intensively about the constituent elements of mark, line, frame, surface and space around which they understood the medium of painting.

Many artists now classified under the Tansaekhwa rubric began to exhibit their works publicly in 1973. At that time, there was a profound uncertainty about the country's social system and how to operate within it; less than a year earlier, South Korean president Park Chung-hee had declared martial law. Aside from what might be described as the terrifying arbitrariness of outright dictatorship, even more fundamental, perhaps, was the resulting societal instability. In whom – or what – could you actually trust?

In the art world, much of this anxiety played itself out in the discussion over what exactly the modern and the contemporary entailed. The wonderfully diverse range of works being produced at the time – including, but not limited to, early examples of Tansaekhwa – could be seen as the result of a lack of consensus about what it actually meant to make art for a present whose goalposts seemed to shift constantly.

We need only think of the extent to which artists like Kwon Young-woo or Yun Hyongkeun challenged received notions about particular media. As artists who had been educated in the 1940s and '50s, just after Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, they contended with the legacy of a Japanese imperial bureaucracy that very clearly distinguished between media based on their constituent materials – oil painting vs. ink, sculpture vs. printing etc. This taxonomy was not easily ignored. Even well into the 1970s, painting – specifically, oil painting – took pride of place; sculpture still hadn't shaken its pejorative associations with menial labour. At the same time, by the early '70s the old arbiters of value such as the Kukjŏn – the annual government



1  
Yun Hyongkeun  
*Burnt Umber & Ultramarine Blue*,  
1978, oil on linen, 1.6 × 1.3 m

2  
Chung Sang-Hwa  
*Untitled 73-7*, 1973,  
acrylic on canvas, 1.6 × 1.1 m

Courtesy  
1 the artist and Blum & Poe,  
Los Angeles •  
2 Kukje Gallery, Seoul

salon first held in 1948 and modelled along the lines of the imperial Japanese salon – had lost most of its clout. Also, there was no real viable commercial market in Korea for anything other than figurative ink painting, ceramics and, to a much lesser extent, figurative oil painting. Thus, even in some of the darkest days of Korea's postwar history, there was a peculiar, and perhaps unexpected, sense of freedom that made it possible for artists to think around and between the distinctions that had been vigorously policed for many decades by institutions like the Kukjŏn.

Tansaekhwa artists regarded themselves as painters, yet their kind of painting had little to do with any pre-existing rhetoric, nor did they believe that painting had to live up to any obligation to be allegorical. This is not to say that representation didn't matter to them, only that their paintings weren't legible in the way their most ardent champions wanted them to be. While terms such as 'naturalism', 'Koreanness' and 'Minimalism' are frequently invoked vis-à-vis Tansaekhwa, the works themselves highlight the limitations of verbal description.



Born broadly between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, the Tansaekhwa artists were only too aware of the physical and psychological devastation wreaked by the Korean War, which began in 1950. Their understanding of concepts such as permanence, durability and time is strikingly different from that of the next generation. There's a specificity to how they manipulate paint and its properties that exceeds the kind of decision-making ascribable to taste or strategy; their mark-making verges on a form of self-commemoration, almost as if they fear they may not live to see their works completed.

That work by artists such as Park Seobo or Ha Chonghyun has now been defined as Tansaekhwa implies a shift in the promotion and reception of contemporary Korean art – as though the movement has become

a form of branding tool. It also points to the emergence of a discrete body of contemporary Asian art, in which Japan-based critics and institutions have played an enormously important role. Yet, the concerns these paintings raise in and of themselves deflect such considerations by getting us to look long and hard at what actually stands before us.

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*Only too aware of the physical and psychological devastation wreaked by the Korean War, these artists understand permanence, durability and time in a way that is strikingly different to the next generation.*

JOAN KEE



Dansaekhwa was the result of an organic process: one of many philosophical, political and artistic negotiations and discussions by a number of artists of a certain generation, who found themselves intertwined within a complex network of conflicted histories, geographies, artistic lineages and, ultimately, loyalties. One of the central issues that the Dansaekhwa artists were facing at the time was the oscillation between national identity and artistic identity. This was probably best illustrated by Lee Ufan's comments at one of the roundtables that coincided with the 1968 'Contemporary Korean Painting' exhibition, held at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and intended to offer a panoramic representation of the latest Korean art. In response to a discussion about what contemporary Asian art could be, triggered by a number of reviews that had accused the artists of following the latest art trends of New York and Paris, Lee expressed his frustration at reconciling the gap between what was expected of him as a Korean and what he aspired to be as an artist.

Discussions around notions of the colour white, monochrome and 'Koreanness' became either a deliberate topic for Dansaekhwa artists or an ongoing association foisted on the group. Various exhibitions reinforced this: 'Modern Art 73' at Myongdong Gallery, Seoul, in 1973; 'Five Korean Artists: Five Kinds of White' at Tokyo Gallery in the Ginza district of Tokyo in 1975; and 'Korea: Facet of Contemporary Art' in 1977 at Tokyo's Central Museum of Art, organized by the prominent critic and curator Nakahara Yusuke. Korea's participation at the 1978–79 'Secondes rencontres internationales d'art contemporain' (Second International Encounters of Contemporary Art), at the Grand Palais in Paris, also comes to mind. Not only did these essentializing evaluations emanate from local Western critics, but also from some Korean journalists. One denounced the works as derivative of Western trends and as failing to adequately represent a country with thousands of years of artistic tradition. Shows that followed years later – 'Working with Nature: Traditional Thought in Contemporary Art from Korea' at Tate Liverpool in 1992 or 'Les peintres du silence' (Painters of Silence) at the Musée des Arts Asiatiques in Nice in 1998, for instance – were still somewhat burdened by such associations.

1  
Lee Ufan  
From Point, 1983, oil on  
canvas, 1.9 × 2.6 m

2  
Park Seobo  
Ecriture No. 881106, 1988,  
mixed media on hanji paper,  
1.3 × 1.9 m

Courtesy  
1 Kukje Gallery, Seoul •  
2 Alexander Gray  
Associates, New York

An interesting parallel exists between the political disposition underpinning Dansaekhwa's emphasis on process (action) and the move away from figuration, and the concurrent political framing of Abstract Expressionism in the US as a distinct American counter-position to the Social Realism that was predominant in most postwar communist nations. At the height of the Cold War, leading American critics and historians such as John Canaday, Harold Rosenberg, Meyer Schapiro, Leo Steinberg and, of course, Clement Greenberg, celebrated and promoted Abstract Expressionism as the culmination of a pure art; a marker of rebellion against both political and aesthetic agendas. The CIA's International Cooperation Department was one of the most active divisions in the agency, playing a leading role in promoting 'American' Abstract Expressionism, but also introducing the US public to similar artistic manifestations elsewhere as an indication of a form of 'Internationalism', thereby relegating the cultural impact of communism's Social Realism to the margins. This could not have been truer than in the case of South Korea, with its North Korean communist counterpart right next door. It should come as no surprise that the US State Department's International Cooperation Administration organized the 1957 University of Minnesota show 'Contemporary Korean Art' and many other similar cultural exchanges.

While the US was recruiting the agency of art to counter the cultural impact of communism by promoting Abstract Expressionism, it was also providing military and economic assistance to President Park Chung-hee's political regime in exchange for sending South Korean troops to help with the war in Vietnam. As such, by choosing to abandon figuration, Dansaekhwa artists made it more challenging for the regime to coerce their work into clearly discernible visuals of political propaganda, while still participating in major national exhibitions: a form of subtle revolution from within, perhaps? This is an aspect of Dansaekhwa that merits further investigation.

Although the term 'monochrome' has long been associated with Dansaekhwa, we embarked on an interesting discussion with Lee and Yoon in a symposium at Kukje Gallery last September in which we challenged its relevance. We proposed the term 'process' rather than monochrome. From speaking to Dansaekhwa artists, or referring to what they have left behind in their writings and other accounts, none of them seems to have been primarily concerned with colour, but rather with the process of a physical action that occupied a period of time and took place in a set space; one that centred on repetition, rhythm and an uncompromising acknowledgment of the materiality and act of painting. It would be interesting to explore the validity of such a term, if not as a substitute then as an equally indicative expression of what

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SAM BARDAOUIL AND TILL FELLRATH

Dansaekhwa attempts to do. Questioning the term 'monochrome' provides us with a platform for critical reflection on the association of Dansaekhwa with abstraction. We see abstraction as, arguably, a consequence of the artists' approach to painting and not a primary formalistic concern or end. Painting to these artists is an act of physical movement and interaction with the canvas and materials rather than a gradual process towards the abstract representation of physical things.

Our interest in Dansaekhwa stems from our ongoing investigation into Modernity and the negotiation of its premises and foundations in different parts of the world. Modernity cannot be viewed simply as a Western construct that was imported to other places only to be simulated to a less successful extent. If European Modernism owes the regeneration of its pictorial and stylistic language at least in part to the influx of the cultural objects of the Other (against a contested colonial backdrop), why can it not be argued that Dansaekhwa is an example of a similar act of negotiation and appropriation? In other words, if European Modernism's adaptations and reformulations of aesthetics different to their own have been hailed as Avant-garde, why is any discussion about a similar, non-European counterpart almost always framed within a rhetoric of imitation and nationalism? This is a critical question to be explored further when contemplating new avenues or frameworks for how to speak or write about Dansaekhwa. ♦

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