

Kukje Gallery, Seoul, Korea

In recent years, the narrative of contemporary Korean art – as told in the West, at least – has been preoccupied with the (predominantly male) practitioners of dansaekhwa. Reacting, in part, to the physical and psychological scars inflicted by the Korean War, as well as to the social realism prevalent across Southeast Asia at the time, from the late 1960s, the likes of Chung Sang-Hwa, Kwon Young-Woo and Park Seo-bo channelled neo-Confucianist concepts through flat planes, meditative repetition and a veneration of the colour white. As a roughly contemporary counterpoint, we should welcome the challenge of 'American Years 1960s–70s', a survey of two decades of work by Wook Kyung-Choi that introduces an uncharacteristically divergent painterly style.



Wook Kyung-Choi, *Untitled*, 1968, acrylic on paper, 80 x119 cm. Courtesy: the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery; photograph: Kukje Gallery

Relocating to the US from Seoul in 1966, Choi began to directly engage with Western modernisms. Take *Untitled* (1968), a frantic assemblage of orange, grey and white shapes, colours layered, edges thick with black paint, or *Le Commencement est le Conclusion* (*The Beginning Is the Conclusion*, 1965), a tumultuous mess of impasto oils balanced above a black expanse and a blood-red stripe. In contrast to the reflective erasure and mathematical mark-making of Choi's contemporaries (Park's series 'Écriture', begun in the late 1960s, is a good reference point), these works harness emotion rather than attempting to efface it. This is clear in *Untitled* (1966), *Reject* (1974) and *La femme fâché* (*The Angry Woman*, 1966), a *sturm und drang* composition of flailing limbs and wild splashes against a mauve/grey background. This is not Confucian reflection, no: this is an expression of rage.



Wook-Kyung Choi, *Untitled*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 59 cm.
Courtesy: the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery; photograph: Kukje Gallery

To further distance Choi's 'Western' expressionism from the 'Eastern' aesthetic of dansaekhwa, we could align her palette with that of Willem de Kooning or Alfred Leslie; we could perhaps assess the similarities between her line-work and that of Grace Hartigan or Franz Kline. Upstairs, however, such parallels stumble. Vibrant colour retreats into black Korean ink, bullish strokes are reduced to calligraphic utterances and form is no longer summoned via heavy colour blocks but through negative space. With *The Dance* (1976), for example, Choi wipes ink from an aluminium plate to reveal two swirling bodies; nearby, a female bust of untouched linen emerges elegantly at the heart of a collage and a reclining nude forms in the blurs of a charcoal sketch. If the previous works argued for the emotive capacity of excess, these demonstrate the beauty that can be found in reduction.



Wook-Kyung
Choi, *The Dance*,
1976, ink on
aluminum plate, 88
x 62 cm. Courtesy:
the artist's estate
and Kukje Gallery;
photograph: Kukje
Gallery

A final enclave introduces an unexpected aesthetic driven by the Vietnam War protests in the US, with gestures bowing to political buzzwords and iconography: FATE and PEACE are stencilled crudely, ruminations on the human condition are scrawled, and a 1968 pastel portrait depicts a soldier kneeling bloodied and bandaged. These are Choi's least convincing works – imbalanced and rushed, with a desire for readability that suffocates external interpretation. (It is interesting to note, however, that this politicized poppiness, so informed by American demonstrations, seems to prefigure that of the minjung (people's) art that emerged in Korea in the wake of pro-democracy uprisings in the 1980s.)



Wook-Kyung Choi, Fate, 1966, ink on paper, 22 x 28 cm. Courtesy: the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery; photograph: Kukje Gallery

Choi was relatively well known in Korea throughout the 1970s, which begs the question: Why has she faded from the Korean art history that is circulated in the West? Perhaps it relates to her refusal to don the monochromatic uniform of dansaekhwa, perhaps she has suffered at the hand of institutionalized sexism, or perhaps it is intertwined with the fact that in 1985, aged just 45, Choi tragically took her own life. Whatever the reason, this survey suggests that we could do worse than to review the period – for as Park, beneficiary-in-chief of dansaekhwa's recent renaissance, once advised: 'History nurtures only a few at the sacrifice of many others.'