

Blouinartinfo.com: 'Ha Chong-Hyun's Meditative Masterworks at Almine Rech London', by Nicholas Forrest, June 16, 2017



Installation view

Korean artist Ha Chong-Hyun is arguably one of the most important artists of his generation. The importance of his role in developing a distinctly Eastern mode of abstraction that transcended the Eurocentrism of the Western Abstract Art movement is greatly underappreciated. Almine Rech Gallery is currently presenting an exhibition of Ha Chong-Hyun's work at its London space that is undoubtedly a significant step towards wider acknowledgement of this artist's important contribution to art history.

Emerging as one of the first of his generation to embrace the abstraction in the 1960's at a time when Korea was entering two decades of dictatorship following the country's occupation by Japan and its devastating war with its Northern region, Ha Chong-Hyun was one of the pioneers of the monochrome movement that is now commonly known as Dansaekhwa. He came to prominence in the 1970's with his signature "Conjunction" series for which he is best known.

Ha Chong-Hyun's "Conjunction" series is characterized by its hemp cloth basis and the "back-pressure method" (bae-ap-bub in Korean) of painting that he invented – a method by which he pushed the paint from the back to the front of the coarsely woven hemp. The paint that emerged on the front of his first "Conjunction" of the 1970s was left unmanipulated, but as he experimented and developed the technique he began to mark the front of the works with his hands and other tools.

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The success of Ha Chong-Hyun's practice, and in particular his "Conjunction" series, is the incredible relationship with and the amazing harmony he creates between material and process. At the same time reinterpreting the traditions of Korea's artistic heritage within the conventions of Western abstraction and vice versa, Ha Chong-Hyun engenders works that are at once meditative and evocative, minimalist and gestural – pure expressions of materiality.

To find out more about his exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery in London, which is on show until July 29, BLOUIN ARTINFO's Nicholas Forrest asked the artist a few questions.

What motivated and inspired you to embrace abstraction in the 1960s and what did the abstract art movement in Korea at the time aim to achieve and promote?

At the time, generally speaking, the art scene in Korea was divided into two: figurative and non-figurative. When we say "figurative", we are talking about the traditional figurative paintings and sculptures that visualize the landscapes, people, animals, and objects. Traditionally artist had been educated to practice the figurative art, and this too the major part in the category in the art scene. On the other hand, the creation of "non-figurative" art works were led by Informel which was a tendency that swept the European art scene after the World War II. Japan lost the war, and some of the European countries also lost the war, and even the countries that won the war was filled with people who were suffering from the tragic and ugly remnants of the war. The artists could not picture the idealistic beauty any more. In this sense, the artists in Korea also embraced the ideas of Informel and many of them including me did not want to create traditional figurative works any more. But at the same time, I did not want to participate in creating further Informel works that did not seem like it had future in it. This is why I constantly experimented to find something other than figurative and Informel.

To further explain, I don't think the artists had any particular or universal goals at the time. It was a confusing time for everyone. Many artists were influenced by the European trends to explore abstraction, and they were all exploring different things. Because everything looked so hopeless, we had to find something individualistic to express what each one felt.

Why and with what motivations did you start working in a way which is now known as the Dansaekhwa movement and what was the nature and character of the works that it inspired and motivated the artists involved to produce?

Like the question itself reiterates, Dansaekhwa is a word that was created by the art critics and historians almost forty years after these Danseakhwa works were being created. It is a term that brings together the works that lie within the frame of Dansaekhwa's concept, and it is much rooted not in the techniques but in the spirit. All of us (Dansaekhwa artists) at the time were not keen on exchanging our ideas about what we were doing, but we were busy doing our own things. Each of us found the material that we thought that was the most appropriate material to further explore and kept doing the same things over and over.

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In this sense, I can only talk about the nature and character of my works. I started working on these Conjunction series in the early 1970s. Before then, I was experimenting with installations using various materials that could be easily found around us. After being involved in the A.G. movement, I became much more enthusiastic in creating works that were new but Korean. I wanted to create abstract paintings that were not European-oriented but Korean. I found burlap to be the material to use, simply because I could not afford buying canvas. Nevertheless, I also embraced this material because it inherently told the story of the environment that I was living in. The UN was giving out food in the burlap sacks, and I could easily source this at the markets and on the streets. I also wanted to use both sides of the surface. I did not like the idea that the paintings should be only worked on from the frontal surface. Then I started to push the paint from the back to the front. I also tried to find the limited range of colours that are as natural as possible to my surroundings. The colours I use can be easily found in the nature and especially in the traditional architectures and countryside of Korea.

How did abstraction arise and become known in Korea and what were the circumstances in the country at the time you embraced it?

The abstraction in Korea came originally from Japan which was much influenced by Europe. Nevertheless, the artist in Korea at the time were self-reflective and very much wanted to separate themselves from the art from the overseas. They did not want their works to be recognized and evaluated as the imitations, copies, or studies of the European or Japanese abstraction. This effort started from the bottom parts of the art scene, from the young artists at the time like me and other Dansaekhwa artists. We tried our best to discover “korean-ness” in abstraction in our own way. This is why there is something that unifies our works although you recognize the immediate differences and independent/individualistic tendencies.

Through our efforts, from around the mid 1970s, abstract art works began to receive prizes in National Art Exhibitions which were recognized as being prestigious in the country. Before then, only the figurative works were awarded in National Art Exhibitions. The abstract art works also began to receive prizes in various contests.

Nevertheless, now I look back, I don't think there was any diversity in the art scene in Korea at the time. Korean people are very trendy, and abstraction was fashionable. The abstraction meant “change” to people who had the strong urge to move away from the past and to move forward to the future. The art scene was simplistic at the time, and everyone wanted something new and something avant-garde.

The exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery includes works from your ongoing “conjunction” series. Could you explain the ideas and concepts behind this series and what forms the works take?

I started working on the Conjunction series from the early 1970s. Although it was not until the late 1970s that this series took a mature shape, I began to experiment deeply and seriously with the burlap and oil paint. I started with pushing the paint between the cuts of the papers. This gave me an idea to push the paint from the back to the front. Since I was experimenting with the wires on the canvas, I think I was interested in creating the three-dimensional on the two-dimensional surface. I was also interested in working on the back and also the front of the works.

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The exhibitions at Almine Rech Gallery show the early development of this Conjunction series as well as my recent explorations with adding smoke to Conjunction series. The barbed wire piece and the shadow of the barbed wire piece reflect on my old experiments while the most recent piece with the narrow horizontal lines on the smoked surface show how this Conjunction series is still in the process of evolving.

The burlap in the background, the paint that sips through the burlap from the back to the front, the performance/action that I make with the paint on the frontal surface, and my spirit all become combined in the Conjunction series, and this is why they are all titled the Conjunction series. It has been almost fifty years since I began to work on Conjunction series. However, I still do not think that I am done exploring with the materiality and the limited colour palette that I chose to work with.

What are the main themes, ideas, concepts, motifs, and characteristics that define and contextualize Korean abstract art and in particular the works of the Dansaekhwa movement?

Each artist considered to be part of Dansaekhwa has a unique philosophy, but there are many overlapping concerns that unite our works. There is a strong aesthetic ideal focused on the unity between artist and nature. Also, there is a very refined approach to mark making. I think that we lived through the tumultuous times in which we struggled to find post-war Korean identity, and each of us worked in our own way to create works within the native cultural realm but with the formal and conceptual links to the parallel abstract movements in Japan and the West.