

'KIM TSCHANG-YEUL (1929–2021)'  
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Kim Tshcang-Yeul

Korean artist Kim Tschang-Yeul, who was widely known for his “water drop” paintings, which he characterized as a way of erasing his ego, died January 5 at the age of ninety-one. Along with Nam June Paik and Lee Ufan, Kim was one of Korea’s most influential artists of the past century.

Born in 1929 in Maengsan, in what would come to be North Korea, Kim in 1945 moved south, where he studied under Lee Kwae-dae, eventually enrolling in the art program at Seoul National University. Following the interruption of the Korean War (1950–53), Kim, with Park Seo-Bo, Suh Se-Ok, Ha Chong-Hyun, and Chung Chang-Sup, led Korea’s burgeoning Art Informel movement, whose concerns with nonrepresentational abstract art paralleled those of their counterparts in Europe and America. Kim’s work and that of his compatriots would prove to have an enormous impact on the artists of the subsequent Dansaekhwa movement. Kim’s work of this time earned him spots in both the Paris Biennale of 1961 and the Bienal de São Paulo of 1965.

That same year, Kim received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation enabling him to move to New York, where he studied at the Art Students’ League between 1966 and 1968 and became fascinated with Pop art. In 1969, he moved to Paris, where he would spend the next five decades focusing on his iconic water-drop works, moving from vibrant multihued canvases to muted works of refined hyperrealism. Paris gallery Almine Rech, which represented the artist at his death, has described these paintings as standing “at the confluence of lyrical abstraction, Pop art and Chinese calligraphy. This simple and limpid oeuvre subtly fuses Taoist wisdom, modern conceptual irony and the tragedy of war.” For Kim, the paintings represented a kind of escape. “Thinking about transparent water drops is an act of making bad things go away,” he told the Yonhap News Agency in 2016. “I’ve dissolved and erased horrible memories by painting them countless times.”

## ALMINE RECH

“With Jasper Johns’s ‘flag’ paintings, we see that they are and aren’t flags, which opens a space for speculation and reflection,” wrote John Yau in a Hyperallergic review of a recent survey held at New York’s Tina Kim Gallery. “With Kim’s water drops, the gap between what is and what isn’t also opens a space of introspective consideration.”

Kim was the subject of major exhibitions at Jeu de Paume, Paris (2004); the National Museum of China, Beijing (2005); National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung, (2012); and Gwangju Museum of Art (2014). His work is held in the collections of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea; Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, among other institutions. He was awarded the French Ordre des Arts et Lettres and South Korea’s National Order of Cultural Merits. In 2016, the Kim Tschang-Yeul was established in his honor on the island of Jeju, South Korea.