

'Kim Tschang-Yeul, Influential Korean Artist Whose Water Drop Paintings Created New Possibilities for Abstraction, Has Died at 91'

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Kim Tschang-Yeul.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TINA KIM GALLERY

Kim Tschang-Yeul, the influential postwar artist whose groundbreaking water drop paintings heralded new frontiers for abstraction, died on Tuesday at the age of 91. A cause of death was not given. The news of his passing was announced in emails by his two galleries, Tina Kim Gallery and Almine Rech.

ALMINE RECH

Kim's most well-known paintings, in which droplets of water appear to protrude from monochromatic canvases but are in fact optical illusions, toe a very fine line between abstraction and figuration. These works, begun in the early 1970s, depict various volumes of droplets, ranging from single drops to dozens upon dozens of them. In Kim's hands, water droplets became entrancing, enlivened elements.

"The act of painting water drops is to dissolve all things within [these], to return to a transparent state of 'nothingness,'" Kim once said, according to a press release for a 2019 exhibition at Tina Kim Gallery that explored the artist's early career. "By returning anger, anxiety, fear, and everything else to 'emptiness,' we experience peace and contentment. While some seek the enhancement of 'ego,' I aim toward the extinction of the ego and look for the method of expressing it."

Kim Tschang-Yeul was born on December 24, 1929 in Maengsan, a county in the South Pyongan province, which is in modern-day North Korea and, at the time of the artist's birth, was under Japanese control in a unified Korea. Kim migrated to the southern part of the country after World War II to escape the communist regime that was taking hold in the north. He studied painting at the College of Fine Art at Seoul National University, between 1948 and 1950, but his education was cut short by the Korean War, which lasted until 1953.

In 1958, Kim established the Modern Artists' Association (renamed Actuel), and soon joined in the country's Art Informel movement, led by the pioneering abstractionist Kim Whan-Ki. The movement's other participants included Ha Chong-Hyun and Park Seo-Bo, who would soon be linked to the country's famed 1970s Dansaekhwa movement. Success for Kim came relatively quickly: he was included in the 1961 Paris Biennale, had his first solo show at the Press Center in Seoul in 1963, and participated in the 1965 Bienal de São Paulo.

But Kim, like many of artists of his generation, soon left Korea and began traveling around the world. He first went to New York in 1965 during the height of Pop art, and on the recommendation on his mentor Kim Whan-Ki he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to study at the storied Art Students League, which had close links to the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, between 1966–68.

"When I came to New York all I seemed to see was Pop Art," Kim said in a 2019 interview with Ocula Magazine. "Jasper Johns, [Robert] Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol. I didn't really like Pop Art, but in retrospect I can see that it influenced me. In New York I felt estranged by the materialism of society and by the art that embodied this society."

Kim befriended the artist Nam June Paik, but he left New York in 1969 and settled in Paris, where he lived for the next 45 years and hosted several of Korea's most important artists whenever they visited the city.

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Kim Tschang-Yeul, *Composition*, 1969.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TINA KIM GALLERY

It was around this time, in the late 1960s, that Kim began experimentations in abstraction that would distinguish him from other abstract painters of his generation. In New York, he began work on a series of paintings, many of which share the title *Composition*, that show bulbous forms on monochromatic backgrounds that take on the appearance of bacteria or amoeba. The artist called these works “paintings of the intestines.”

His breakthrough came with the 1970 work *Événement de la nuit*, in which a large drop of water is set against a stark black background. Soon, Kim began consistently painting water drops in various compositions: large ones that draw the viewer’s eye to a single point, small groupings of drops that create the beauty of a still moment, and dizzying abstractions with dozens of water drops that force the eyes to dart around the canvas.

“I discovered the water drop one morning after working at night,” he said in the *Ocula* interview. “Quite dissatisfied with myself, I had splashed some water with my hands on the back of the canvases. And I noticed that the water drops stayed there and were shining on the canvas. It was extraordinary. I thought: that’s what I have to do. I wondered if I could make art out of this.”

This subject matter also had a therapeutic quality for Kim, and it was part of a healing process related to the atrocities the artist had witnessed first-hand during the Korean War. Kim connected this process to Eastern philosophies like Taoism and Buddhism. “Painting water drops is to heal all memories, all anguishes, anxieties by water,” Kim once said, though he did not intend for viewers to read too much into the symbolism of the water droplets. As he told an interviewer in 2016, “Water drops mean nothing to me. If anything, they help me erase memories.”

ALMINE RECH



Kim Tschang-Yeul, Événement de la nuit, 1970.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TINA KIM GALLERY

Although his work remains underknown in the United States, Kim showed his art steadily in Europe and Asia throughout his career, and was he included in major group exhibitions like “Korea: Facet of Contemporary Art” at the Tokyo Central Museum in 1977 and “Korean Drawing Now” at the Brooklyn Museum in 1981. Major retrospectives of his work have been held at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in 2004, the National Museum of China in Beijing in 2006, the Busan Museum of Art in South Korea in 2009, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung in 2012, and the Gwangju Museum of Art in South Korea in 2014. In New York, his galleries have mounted solo shows of his work in recent years: Almine Rech in 2018 and Tina Kim Gallery in 2019.

Kim also received major accolades during his lifetime. His adoptive country of France awarded Kim the French Order of Arts and Letters in 1996, and his home country gave him the National Order of Cultural Merits of Korea in 2012. A few years ago, Kim donated 220 works to Jeju Island in the Korean Strait, where he was stationed during the Korean War. That gift led to the creation of the Kim Tschang-Yeul Art Museum in 2016.

Speaking during a press conference of the occasion of that museum’s opening, Kim said, “As I got older, living in a foreign country increasingly felt like being in exile. I always wished I had a final destination to settle down, and Jeju accepted me.”