ALMINE RECH

Ha Chong-Hyun
5975

Feb 14 — Apr 20, 2025 | Art Sonje Center, Seoul, South Korea

Art Sonje Center is pleased to present 'Ha Chong-Hyun 5975', an exhibition dedicated to the early works of Ha Chong-Hyun, spanning the years 1959 to 1975. Running from February 14 to April 20, this exhibition investigates how Ha's materials and techniques evolved in dynamic interaction with the socio-historical context of South Korea. His early works reflect the artist's response to the upheavals of Korean modern history, including the Korean War, rapid industrialization, and urbanization. Expanding his experiments with diverse materials and their materialities, Ha reimagined social realities and personal experiences, challenging the boundaries of painting and exploring its possibilities through experimental approaches.

'Ha Chong-Hyun 5975' explores four stages in the artist's career, from 1959, shortly after his graduation from Hongik University, to 1975, when he began the Conjunction series—now recognized as his most iconic body of work. The first section, titled "Informel (1959–1965)," examines how Ha's work, influenced by the Informel movement, captured the chaos, devastation, and uncertainty of the postwar era. The second section, "Urbanization and Geometric Abstraction (1967–1970)," focuses on Ha's geometric abstraction on themes of rapid urbanization and economic growth, along with his blending of traditional and modern elements in the Naissance series. The third section, "The Korean Avant Garde Association (AG)—New Art Movements (1969–1975)," highlights his experimental works through his involvement with AG. The final section, "Conjunction—The Back-Pressure Method (1974–1975)," presents early examples of his renowned Conjunction series. Tracing these stages, the exhibition reveals how Ha's early works evolved within their social and historical context.

Part 1: Informel (1959–1965)

When Ha Chong-Hyun began his artistic career in the late 1950s, he drew inspiration from the European Informel movement, which rejected standardized painting frameworks and emphasized materiality. Ha reinterpreted Informel within a South Korean context, employing thick paints, scorched surfaces, and dark tones to reflect the chaos and scars of postwar society. Through these materials and actions, he visualized the collective memories of war and social upheaval, laying the foundation for his later experiments with material possibilities and the expansion of painting's boundaries.

Part 2: Urbanization and Geometric Abstraction (1967–1970)

By the late 1960s, Ha Chong-Hyun began focusing thematically on the social changes driven by urbanization and economic growth. A premier example from this period is his *White Paper on Urban Planning* series, which used structured forms to present an abstracted rendering of the rapid industrialization and modernization under the Second Five-Year Economic Development Plan (1967–1971). Using bold colors and repeating patterns, Ha visualized the creation and transformation of cities, as well as the dynamism of the emerging urban landscapes. Around the same period, he also created his *Naissance* series, which reimagined traditional Korean *dancheong* patterns and mat-weaving techniques, merging them with a modern visual presentation to explore the harmony between tradition and modernity. His experiments extended to transcending conventional painting formats, such as cutting and pasting canvases or curving their lower edges. Both the *White Paper on Urban Planning* and *Naissance* series simultaneously show two opposing elements: the lost of traditions by modernization and the rise of new, modern structures.

Part 3: The Korean Avant Garde Association (AG)—New Art Movements (1969–1975)

In 1969, Ha Chong-Hyun joined critic Lee Yil and ten other artists and theorists to establish the Korean Avant Garde Association (AG). Through this collaboration, Ha expanded his artistic scope, engaging deeply in aesthetic and philosophical exchanges. AG aimed to push the boundaries of Korean contemporary art through experimental practices, including publishing journals and organizing exhibitions. With experimental works that made use of various everyday materials reflective of South Korean society—from wire to newspaper, plaster, and springs—Ha Chong-Hyun gave metaphorical representation to the rigid social climate of the time and its media censorship and social repression. This exhibition features a recreation of the artist's mirror-based installation work *Work* (1970), which survives only through records from the time and is being presented to the public for the first time since its debut at *1970 AG* exhibition. This work experiments with an avant-garde installation approach incorporating numerous mirrors and films showing cranial and pelvic X-rays.

Part 4: Conjunction — The Back-Pressure Method (1974–1975)

In 1974, Ha Chong-Hyun embarked on the series *Conjunction*, which began with the question of how it might be possible to transport the effects of his three-dimensional experiments onto two-dimensional surfaces. He devised the approach known as *baeapbeop* (the back-pressure method), which involved using loosely woven burlap sacks as canvases. Paint was generously applied to the reverse side and then pushed through the fabric using a large wooden scoop. The uniqueness of this technique lies in how a process initiated on the back of the canvas emerges as a result on its front. This approach of creating three-dimensional textures and depths as paint seeps through the burlap weave, transcends mere visual effect to embody a combination of materiality and the artist's physical engagement with the medium. The *Conjunction* series arose from Ha's ongoing efforts to experiment with two- and three-dimensional compositions and explore the boundaries of the painting medium. It remains an important series representative of Ha Chong-Hyun's body of work, which has been continuing since 2010 under the title *Post-Conjunction*.

Ha Chong-Hyun 5975 delves into the artist's early body of work in its historical context, focusing on how his original and experimental aesthetic language developed over the years. Rather than adhering to a single methodology, Ha continuously transformed his approach, responding to the shifting times he experienced. This exhibition showcases the enduring vitality of Ha's experimental spirit, evident in his reflections on vanishing traditions, responses to a changing social environment, and the development of a new aesthetic language through everyday materials. It also highlights his efforts to transcend the boundaries of two-dimensional painting by exploring diverse materials. As visitors engage with the historical messages and material explorations embedded in Ha's work, we hope they uncover the imprints of time and the stories woven into the materials he has left behind.

Curated by Sunjung Kim (Artistic Director, Art Sonje Center)