ALMINE RECH

Kim Tschang-Yeul
L'origine du vide

Mar 14 — Apr 12, 2025 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present 'L'origine du vide,' Kim Tschang-Yeul's third solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from March 14 to April 12, 2025.

Kim Tschang-Yeul has a history rife with struggle and exile. When he was only 15, he escaped his village in North Korea by night. He never saw his family again, including his beloved grandfather, who founded the village school and inspired him to be an artist and whose fate he never learned. Forced to serve in the army against the communists, the artist saw his friends perish and almost died at the front himself. Civil war and exile left deep wounds.

Influenced by postwar Korean art movements, for fifty years Kim Tschang-Yeul developed a remarkable oeuvre that is absolutely unique and focused on a single theme: water droplets. These droplets are not just the expression of an Asian sensibility connected to nature and the spirituality of Zen or Taoism. They also represent a process of purification, an effort to transform the trauma of war. The water droplet is not simply a void, but a still visible form of this original void, which will end up disappearing into the canvas, leaving behind a space of silence and light.

While Kim Tschang-Yeul's work evokes tranquility, its apparent serenity is the result of a long process of transmutation. At the very beginning of his career, the artist's Informal paintings expressed his obsession with bodily matter and fluids, themes that crystallized horror, violence, and war. Gradually, as seen in his sketchbooks as well as his most accomplished paintings, this visceral matter was transformed into a water droplet. Kim's admiration for Francis Bacon, a virtuoso of representing flesh and wounds, emphasizes this duality: while Bacon exposed the violence of the world head-on, Kim Tschang-Yeul absorbed it and dissolved it in the theme of the water droplet. This contrast reveals all the ambiguity of his work.

Kim Tschang-Yeul painted hundreds of thousands of water droplets, all the same and all different. Like an illusionist, with some variations in format and media, he developed an oeuvre of systematic precision that is uniquely focused. These drops of water are also a sign of his inner process, with each delicate, transparent droplet carrying within it the weight of his past and his suffering. In their infinite repetition, these water drops are an eloquent demonstration of Kim Tschang-Yeul's rigor and the precise attention to shadow and light in his work.

After 1971, he made no other kind of art. "This is what I must do," he said at the press conference at the opening of the museum in South Korea devoted to his work. He noted that these droplets have "no meaning," which also applies to the infinite repetition of this theme for fifty years. But while they have no explicit meaning, they are nevertheless a way for the artist to "live without fear" and to "purify" his soul of the horrors of the past. For Kim Tschang-Yeul, this quest for serenity meant easing his anguish by creating a void that was necessary for surviving the war and the wounds of the past.

The truth about the artist oscillates with the same variety as the water droplets that appeared over the years. Residing mainly in Paris, he was polite, reserved, and solitary. He liked to quote the monk Bodhidharma and was a great admirer of the work of both Lao Tzu and Jean-Paul Sartre. He could be as silent as a sphinx. But behind this apparent tranquility lay an obsession with horror and suffering that haunted him his entire life.

The artist's rare personal revelations show that these droplets served to "ease the anguish" of a life that was "uselessly complicated" and to "live without fear." They are a metaphor for a process of transmutation, where the thick, viscous matter of bodily fluids that he explored in his sketchbooks gradually became a weightless, translucent drop of water. This process of transforming matter into something light and delicate reflects the Taoist search for the natural human state, flowing and adaptable like water.

Kim Tschang-Yeul's work, at the boundary of dolorism and a form of mysticism, is both masterful and mysterious. The water droplet is not entirely a void; it is its still visible form, before disappearing into the canvas like a spot, and then leaving only the empty canvas. According to Kim, the empty canvas itself represents this original void that we find in Buddhism and Taoism: a void that, instead of nothingness, represents a potential opening to transformation, to the immensity of the invisible.

— Louma Salamé, Director of the Boghossian Foundation