ALMINE RECH

Kim Tschang-Yeul
Water Drops

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Almine Rech London presents 'Water Drops', the first posthumous exhibition of Korean artist Kim Tschang-Yeul (1929-2021), opening on March 4, 2021. The exhibition will span the career of Kim Tschang-Yeul's work, conceived to celebrate the full scope of his artistic legacy.

The hyper-realistic waterdrops, synonymous with the Korean artist Kim Tschang-Yeul, stand alone. Glistening, plump and precious, Kim has a prodigious sensitivity to the poetics of water. To follow Gaston Bachelard, 'the material imagination of water is a special type of imagination.' [1] If an element has universally been ascribed the high value of purity, it follows that it must be powerful. As Bachelard said, 'It is not infinity which I find in waters but depth.' [2]

Kim's lifelong commitment to the element in its constituent form—the waterdrop—suggests a similarly profound connection. He invested in this motif beginning in 1972, following his relocation to France after a period studying in New York, and never changed course. Few artists have radiated such faithfulness or aesthetic monogamy. It is a tendency that seems to unite many of Korea's avant-garde who took from Art Informel in the early '60s, including Ha Chong-Hyun and Park Seo-Bo. In this generation of artists there is a ritualistic devotion to a chosen form, process, and, at times, colour. One could venture that, in the context of living in a volatile country ravaged by war, the security of immersion in a singular mode was an empowering choice, and may have been a necessary psychological counterpoint.

Indeed, Kim's first waterdrop work, *Événement de la nuit* (1972) was solemn. A stirring dark background was furnished with a tear-like drop. In this polished representation, which held in it a reflection of the moon, a sense of pain, loss and trauma was evoked. Originating as a late-night musing in the studio when Kim noticed a water pattern as he cleaned his canvases, this 'studio bricolage' was something of an epiphany. [3]

As Kim's practice matured, his glassy droplets, in a sense, became a portal. Embedded in each is the promise of a path to healing. Kim has stated that 'if I tried to make a water drop that was transparent, I would open something up.' [4] What Kim struck upon in these dewy drops was a confluence of philosophical tenets and personal resonance. It is not just that Kim's portly orbs are moored to Taoist principles aligning water—an element which gives and expects nothing—with 'supreme goodness.' It is also in the process of depicting water that Kim draws on Eastern ideology. To achieve the translucent beads, which sit ripe on the canvas, ready to be swiped, demands the patience associated with Zen Buddhism.

The painterly journey taken to make these drops was a vehicle for Kim's reclamation of internal peace. He has said that he arrived at a 'state of release as with Zen Buddhism.' Each of the works in *Water Drops* is part of a fastidious observational process. Sponges are soaked and dripped onto canvas, and water is splashed on surfaces, to achieve translucent pellets. At the beginning, these experiments were photographed and scrutinised. Kim dwelt upon the resultant studies, and from them has created a catalogue of cardboard waterdrops. These mockups are the material with which he deliberated. There was always potential that they may be shuffled about, placed according to the Renaissance Golden Section principles, or organised in a grid before his composition was resolved. And then it is on to paint. Kim's early adoption of an airbrush gradually gave way to brush painting. Watery pigment is the base, and added to it are flourishes of gold and white.

Kim's steadfast approach is devoid of ennui. Every painting has a distinct character. Where *Waterdrops* (1974) is minimal, and signals the Zen concept that 'one equals all', *Waterdrops* (1979) is thrumming. In each work, the waterdrop has a different persona, indicated by the intensity of the form and its interaction with the background and all that surrounds it. It is in his exploration of wetness that Kim's visual provocations reach their zenith. Kim sets up visual riddles. Sodden areas of the canvas are mystifyingly disproportionate to the drops close-by. In a work like *Waterdrops* (1980) it would be right to challenge the extent of their relationship, and question whether the liquid marks are linked at all.

This is also an exercise in aesthetic disjuncture. In bringing these different visual elements together, Kim deftly melded the worlds of abstraction and realism. The pools of water bear resemblance to an abstract expressionist gesture—intentional and physically involved. Each patch of liquid was created by saturating the back of the canvas with dilute pigment, either sprayed or dabbed with a sponge. Again, and perhaps unwittingly, we see an affinity with an early colleague in Korea, Ha Chong-Hyun, whose practice revolves around baeapbeop (back painting method). But whereas for Ha this is the foundation of his work, for Kim it is but one technique taken up to support his core interest: water.

As if sacrificing himself to his chosen form and showing the conviction of a disciple, his dedication is absolute: 'You do what has to be done with no concept of time, with no concept of finish.' If time melts away with this form, then Kim's series should be viewed as one. Kim's movement through different phases and the fundamental repetition of the form over an extensive period—some 48 years—is to echo the cycles that are fundamental to Zen Buddhism. Clues are found in his titles: *Recurrence* is just that. This type of work, characterised by a grid background of calligraphic characters taken from the Chinese text 'Thousand Character Classic,' ebb and flow across Kim's oeuvre. His work with newspaper is similar, as are his *Decomposition* pieces. Working in a cyclical pattern, Kim's styles are picked up, put down, and revisited.

With Kim's legacy there is no finality or end point in sight because the need to empty out and vanquish the ego is an eternal pursuit that is sought to be attained through the vision of water.

[1] Bachelard, G. (1983) *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation p. 6

[2] Bachelard, G. (1983) *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation p. 8

[3] Enrici, M (2019) *Kim Tschang Yeul*, Actes Sud p. 13

[4] Cohen, R (1993) *Tschang Yeul Kim*, New York: Hudson Hills Press p. 59

- Dr Cleo Roberts, writer and lecturer