ALMINE RECH

Forming the Monochrome Masters of Dansaekhwa

Mar 21 — May 23, 2026 | Paris, Matignon

Almine Rech Paris, Matignon is pleased to announce a group show highlighting major figures of the Dansaekhwa movement. Featuring works by Ha Chong-Hyun, Lee Ufan, Park Seo-Bo, Yun Hyong-keun and Chung Sang-Hwa, it will be on view from March 21 to May 23, 2026. The exhibition is organized in celebration of the 140th anniversary of diplomatic relations and friendship between France and Korea (1886–2026).

The prominence of the *Dansaekhwa* movement is partly due to its particular place in the history of South Korean art. In the second half of the 1950s, a handful of innovative artists decided to seek inspiration in Western avant-garde movements. Their break with academic painting was one of the founding acts of contemporary art on the Korean peninsula. However, the influence of Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism meant that these artists were often perceived only as imitators of preexisting international movements. It was not until the 1960s and especially the 1970s that new creative approaches to painting were interpreted as expressing an inherently Korean sensibility and aesthetic. Several artists—some of whom had led the way in the innovations of the 1950s—then stepped away from gestural abstraction. They explored new pictorial possibilities marked by a pared-down aesthetic, repetition, and creative processes that were sometimes long and complex. These painters did not form an organized group as such, but their work presented enough shared features for them to be considered as paving the way for a new movement: *Dansaekhwa*, which means "monochrome painting." Although not wholly accurate as a description of their art, this name was established due to their sparing use of color and the simplicity of their methods.

The approach of these artists has clear connections with minimalism, which at the time was thriving in the United States. This similarity has raised the question of whether the Korean phenomenon should be seen as a local variation of an international movement or as an indigenous creative approach updating an aesthetic inherited from the Joseon era (1392–1910). There were certainly borrowings from the Western art world, such as the focus on abstract easel painting. However, the extensive assimilation of American and European art underway since the 1950s allowed the Korean artists to express their own voices while exploring a new shared foundation. The art produced on the peninsula stood out for its powerful contrasts, vivid colors, and the legibility of the forms. In this way, it was distinct from most American minimalism and from the deconstructive approach used by groups such as Supports/Surfaces. Composition and strong visual effects were less important to Korean artists than establishing processes for new kinds of interactions with tools and materials. However, these new interactions, although they broke with previous technical habits, still partly relied on a traditional understanding of painting, culminating in what the eminent art critic Lee Yil (1932–1997) called "non-pictorial painting."

Ha Chong-Hyun (born in 1935) and Chung Sang-Hwa (born in 1932) produce canvases stretched over frames, but they deny the artworks' status as two-dimensional images, emphasizing the process itself and the work's materiality. Ha Chong-Hyun applies paint to the reverse side of the canvas and presses on it until the paint seeps through the weave of the fabric. Chung Sang-Hwa folds the canvas, dividing it into grids and then applying, removing, and reapplying layers of paint. We find a similar interest in repetition in the work of Park Seo-Bo (1931-2023), who covers his still-wet paint with pencil marks, and Lee Ufan (born in 1936) who repeats a single gesture in his series *From Point*, allowing the ink on the brush to be gradually used up. With this methodical approach, Lee Ufan questions his status as creator, which he perceives as a Western misconception. For him, art is not so much a godlike act of creation as an encounter with the canvas by means of brushes. Lee Ufan has also emphasized the way in which space is understood in different terms in Asia and the West. For him, space is a central theme, and his work is structured by the concept of relationships, with a special focus on the void. It is important to keep this in mind, as *Dansaekhwa* art may appear easy to interpret through categories that obscure its roots in an Eastern tradition. The work of Yun Hyong-keun (1928–2007) can easily be perceived as abstract geometric compositions, without grasping the importance the artist grants to the interaction between the medium and the paint, which is diluted with turpentine, or the significance of the pigments. Umber and ultramarine, thought of as symbols of earth and sea, respectively, evoke the pairing of "mountain and water" that forms the foundation of Asian landscape painting.

These potential misunderstandings facilitate exporting *Dansaekhwa* beyond the Korean peninsula. They also satisfy an aspiration now common in developed countries for a kind of spirituality and simplicity. Thus it was only natural that these artworks received so much institutional and commercial attention and interpretation in the 2010s that they are now the leading examples of contemporary Korean art. Moreover, *Dansaekhwa* has been considered apolitical due to the autonomous creativity claimed by these painters. Several major members of this movement have thus had successful careers within Korean institutions. While continuing to paint, they have taught the next generation, which has sometimes helped their aesthetic and their principles to live on. This is another major reason for the success of *Dansaekhwa*: for over half a century, it has managed to preserve its energy and productivity and is still sustained and enriched today by new artists and new ideas.

— Mael Bellec, Curator, Head of the Chinese and Korean collections, Musée Cernuschi