ALMINE RECH

# Abstraction(s)
# Curated by Nicolas Trembley

## Jul 20 — Nov 17, 2019 | Song Art Museum, Beijing, China

Without a doubt, abstract art remains one of the most radical art movements of the early 20th century. Emerging in the West towards the end of Impressionism, it fueled a great many historical currents such as Cubism, Futurism and Constructivism, as well as its more contemporary successors like Op Art or Neo-Geo, an emanation of minimalism.

Abstraction is a specific system producing images that deliberately oppose figuration: it refuses the depiction or imitation of nature. It purports to develop shapes and colours through motions and rhythms that push the limits of modern art and shun painterly technique.

Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, a pioneer of the movement and one of its key theoreticians, saw it as an absolute art with a yearning for spirituality.

Kazimir Malevich's famous "Black Square", painted in 1915, or the black lines that delineate Piet Mondrian's geometric spaces of pure colours, have become historical icons.

Seldom has an art movement lasted so long: more than a century after its genesis, many contemporary artists continue to claim notions defined by abstraction as their own.

This exhibition brings together a selection of works by 13 artists from different generations. Between Vivian Springford - born in 1913, at the time abstract art appeared - and Alex Israel - born in the early 80's, when abstraction was challenged by so-called "neo-expressionist" figurative movements, more than 80 years elapsed. Each artist in the exhibition represents a decade, as defined by their date of birth:

Vivian Springford - 1913
Turi Simeti - 1929
Kim Tschang-Yeul - 1929
Ha Chong-Hyun – 1935
James Turrell - 1943
John Armleder - 1948
Günther Förg - 1952
Sylvie Fleury -1961
Anselm Reyle -1970
Mark Hagen -1972
Xu Qu – 1978
Jean-Baptiste Bernadet - 1978
Alex Israel - 1982

The chronology allows the exhibition to sketch out a subjective overview of abstract painting's evolution over almost a century, and the varied practices it instigated. Some of the artists claim a hybrid heritage, mixing conceptual art, pop art and even Chinese calligraphy, while others hold more radical, lyrical or even Zen positions or use light.

This confrontation of varied pieces reveals the current's heterogeneity: among the formal links that emerge, the guiding thread is the quest for colour, as the exhibition's Chinese title indicates.

From Asia to the United States and Europe, the artists in this exhibition embrace and renew the heritage of abstraction, thus evidencing its vivaciousness, diversity and relevance.

The works of **Alex Israel** (1982, USA), the youngest artist presented in the selection, opens the exhibition as a symbol of today's continuity in the abstraction field. His iconic "flat" series featured in this exhibition blurs the boundary between painting and sculpture through the intentional shaping of the canvas. This series draws inspiration from by the architecture of Los Angeles and might look like abstract sunsets.

**Ha Chong-Hyun** (1935, Korea) rose to prominence with his "Conjunction" series in the early 1970s. These early experiments have led him to build his signature style, pushing the paint from the back to the front of hemp cloth. As a leading member of the movement known as Dansaekhwa, or "monochrome painting", he has consistently used material experimentation and innovative studio processes to redefine the role of painting, playing a significant role bridging the avant-garde traditions between East and West. Ha's projects are highly physically demanding and time-consuming. In his most recent work, Ha has expanded upon his practice of transforming three-dimensionality into a two dimensional surface by experimenting with new ways to add materiality and a sense of volume to colour.

The same technique of pushing paint through rough burlap can also be found in the works of **Mark Hagen** (1972, USA). He pushes coloured paint through lengths of rough burlap onto glass planes supporting sheets of wrinkled wrapping plastic, lengths of packing tape, geometric configurations of cut tile, etc. Once the colour paint dries, the fabric is pulled from this textured surface, taking its negative imprint on what will be its facing side.

Hagen's penchant for pure tones such as red or yellow echos **Turi Simeti**'s (1929, Italy) sense of colour. His works have a sculptural aspect conceived with an oval shape made in wood that has been slipped under his canvas. It gives to the surface of his paintings different relief patterns that play with shadows and light over the pure colours of yellow, red or black that he uses for his monochromes. Employing this recurrent motif of the oval, he has attempted to develop an irregular writing system that liberates the surface of the canvas from the principles of materiality, allowing nothing but silence.

After studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Germany during the mid to late 1970s, **Günther Förg** (1952–2013, Germany) started producing monochromatic wall paintings, which echoed colours found in their immediate surroundings. He revisits a pantheon of references ranging from the works of abstract masters like Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Blinky Palermo to Robert Ryman. For instance, his so-called Grid Paintings (Gitterbilder) featured in this exhibition are based on a small watercolour work by Paul Klee from the 1930s, which Förg has blown up to monumental size. At the end of his life, the grids grew more organic or even ceding its place in favor of a constellation of colourful signs close to a scribble. In the courtyard, one can see bronze masks installed on pedestals that further reinforce the museum quality of the overall display by evoking the past century's early modernism.

Light as a material is often used in abstraction, and plays an important role in this exhibition, with a presentation of several works by the American Artist **James Turrell** (1943, USA). For over half a century, American artist James Turrell has worked directly with light and space to create artworks that engage viewers with the limits and wonder of human perception. Turrell, an avid pilot who has logged over twelve thousand hours flying, considers the sky as his studio, material and canvas. Informed by his training in perceptual psychology and a childhood fascination with light, Turrell began experimenting with light as a medium. He says, "My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking. What is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought."

**Sylvie Fleury** (1961, Switzerland) emerged in the early 90's as a significant female figure on the international art stage. Delving into the tradition of the ready-made and borrowing visual elements from Pop and Minimal art, in this new series the artist further explores the codes of femininity and those of art and fashion in the light of contemporary consumerism. With her monumental makeup palettes, Fleury questions the structures of desire and power attached to cosmetic objects and investigates the areas of a pictorial genre: the shaped canvas. These magnified makeup palettes could almost be perceived as compositions of geometric shapes, so much so that her practice oscillates between the abstract and the figurative.

In the same way, **Anselm Reyle** (1970, Germany) produces large-scale abstract paintings, found-objects sculptures, and installations with radiating neon colours. Exploring unconventional materials such as Mylar foil or mirrors, Reyle expands upon the prevailing aesthetics of painting and sculpture towards notions of decorative.

**John Armleder** (1948, Switzerland) influences both artists. First affiliated with the Fluxus movement, he has created, since the end of the 1960s, a polymorphic body of work, which encompasses performance, sculptures, drawings, and paintings. Armleder gained international recognition with his Furniture Sculpture series from 1979, bringing together iconic examples of design and abstract paintings, thus exploring the relationship between design and fine art. The artist is also recognized for his celebrated series of large Pour and Puddle Paintings created by randomly pouring paint on a vertical canvas or a canvas placed on the floor and gesturally mixing in a diverse range of experimental materials such as glitter or automotive lacquer. Here, the artist used Chinese textiles to separate his paintings.

In the same room as the works of Armleder, we can see the works of Chinese artist **Xu Qu** (1978, China), a former student of Armleder in Germany. Back in China, he has developed an eclectic and richly varied repertoire that displays an obsession with attraction to power relations. In the "Currency Wars" series, Xu Qu uses different watermarks of banknotes from across the world to create colourful abstract compositions. The resulting artwork therefore functions both as a cultural and financial vehicle, reflecting how the artwork often becomes a commodity.

**Vivian Springford** (1913-2003) is the most senior artist presented in the exhibition. As an American abstract painter, she provides a fascinating case study of a mid-century American woman artist. Working first in an Abstract Expressionist and then in a Colour Field vocabulary, she was active in multiple facets of the New York art world. By 1970 Springford had developed a manner of stain painting that was distinctively her own. Her use of thinned paint on raw or thinly-primed canvas, which she developed with her calligraphic paintings of the late 1950s, developed into more abstract and wash-like marks, with stained coloured lines expanding into floods of colour. The primary influence of her early work came from East Asian arts and letters, particularly Chinese calligraphy, Taoism and Confucianism.

Her works are presented alongside those by **Jean-Baptiste Bernadet** (1978, France), one of the youngest artists in the exhibition who also creates lyrical abstract paintings with a vibrant colour palette that makes references to light. His references range across a broad spectrum of art historical precedents, from Monet, Vuillard and Munch in the past to Joe Bradley and Josh Smith in the present. Like his forebears in colour painting, Bernadet uses the ways that colours, and their interaction, both activate the senses and allow the viewer to reflect back on the nature of that sensory activation. Bernadet produces his paintings through a deceptively simple technique: he builds up a field by taking a thin brush and, progressively and systematically, if not intuitively, lays down a flurry of quick marks in his bright, almost pastel palette of oils. His paintings might suggest abstract skies or fields.

Last but not least, another Korean artist featured in the exhibition is to be found in the museum's salon space: **Kim Tschang-Yeul** (1929, Korea). He settled in Paris in 1969 where, he began to nurture, over a period of forty years, a unique motif: the water drop. The water drop is the starting point for a singular and iconic body of work, which stands at the confluence of lyrical abstraction, Pop Art and Chinese calligraphy. This simple and limpid œuvre subtly fuses Taoist wisdom, modern conceptual irony and the tragedy of war in his country. Combining the restrain of Zen practice with the skill of an Old Master, Kim Tschang-Yeul perfects a balance between Eastern and Western influences, reflecting the various art movements he has witnessed over the course of his lifetime.

As we can see, all these artists from different generations and geographic locations have different practices but are all devoted to the renovation of abstraction, and thus their pieces create a dialogue together. Abstraction(s) with an 's' in English means the plurality of different approaches to abstraction, with colour, this fundamental theme in contemporary art, being the focal point of the artists in this exhibition.