ALMINE RECH

Ha Chong-Hyun

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Almine Rech Paris, Matignon, is pleased to announce Ha Chong-Hyun's forth solo exhibition with the gallery.
Ha Chong-Hyun's name as it is known in English is emblematic of his place within modern Korean history. The consonant ㅈ in his given name that follows his surname Ha (하) is far closer to the "j" sound rather than the "ch." Under the current revised romanization of Korean that went into effect in the year 2000, his name would have been spelled Ha Jong-Hyun. But with McCune-Reischauer, which was used in Korea since 1937, becoming the official system from 1984 until 2000, Ha would have adopted the spelling as we know him by today. It is not that I have any interest in proposing a new spelling for Ha's name, but for those who do not speak Korean, I wonder if we could, in the space of this text, get to know the sound, tone, and texture of how Ha would be called in his own country, what he would have been called by his mother, father, and friends: 하종현.
I mention this because it has great bearing on my encounter of the artist. Though he is an art historical figure as well as a contemporary artist to be reckoned with, I approach him first as I would an elder and therefore, my instinct in writing about Ha is to begin with his name. In Korea, names are deemed so sacred that it is seen as an obscenity to utter the name of an elder, whether teachers, parents, grandparents or other ancestral relations, directly. Therefore, when absolutely necessary to mention the name of such a person, it is an etiquette to repeat each syllable in the given name, followed by the word "자 "for character, thereby relaying the name as a linguistic notion rather than as a singular proper noun. Ha himself is an artist who is sensitive to names and language around how his and the art of his contemporaries were talked about. In speaking about the term Korean Monochrome versus Dansaekhwa, he has stated, "I believe we cannot allow the West to name a Korean creation. It is indeed a somewhat unfamiliar name to us, but the works we do and the name Dansaekhwa share a certain tone and character." Ha Chong-Hyun was born in Sancheong of Gyeongnam province located in southeastern Korea during the Japanese occupation. Though his early years were spent in Moji in southern Japan, he would return at age 10 after Korea gained its independence, and would spend most of his life in Korea, graduating from Hongik, a prestigious fine arts university in Seoul, six years after the end of the Korean War that led to the subsequent division of the peninsula. Just one year after his graduation was the 19 April Movement, a student-led uprising which caused the inaugural President of South Korea, Syngman Rhee out of office and into exile. A new democratic government was short-lived, and in 1961, Park Chung Hee led a military coup and came into power, and remained South Korea's dictator until his assassination in 1979.
It was in this tumultuous socio-political climate that Ha would participate in the 2nd Paris Youth Biennale (1961), in the 4th Biennale de Paris (1965), and in the 9th São Paulo Bienal (1967) while actively showing in Korea. He founded the AG (Avant Garde Association) in 1969, which is not happenstance that it coincided with the year that the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art opened, an event that Ha spoke out about as "belated yet fortunate," as he had been a critic of Korea's lack of institutional support for artists and the conservative national exhibition system that hindered experimentation among young artists. AG would have served as an antidote to these institutional failings, hosting exhibitions and interventions as well as publishing a journal in which Ha himself contributed. It is important to emphasize that hunger and poverty characterized Korean life following the Korean War. Not only had Koreans come out of oppression under the Japanese regime, living as second-class citizens in their own land, but unrest following Japanese surrender left the country in devastation. While rice is a staple in a Korean meal, there was hardly any, so Koreans had to rely on grains brought in by the United States stored in hemp sacks. Ha would remove any remaining grains and begin experimenting with the hemp, creating what would later become his Conjunction series. The largest sacks were about 100 by 80 centimeters, which were the scale of his paintings at the time.
Ha creates the Conjunction pieces by pushing oil paint from behind the hemp surface, which leaves marks on the front. Ha then works and manipulates these traces with various tools such as a palette knife or brush. In Conjunction 22-19

(2022), streaks of white oil paint descend vertically down the light creamy beige hemp surface. While a streak of this kind could trick the eyes as one of paint flowing downwards, gravity is flipped as the top portion is where a thicker sediment of paint is seen, and the even control of the paint that appears to have been dragged down from this mass of paint betrays one's assumption of a gestural, expressive act of the painter with his brush. The negative spaces between the paint speak to the meeting of the paint and the hemp weaving. The word Conjunction in Korean is 접합 (jeop hap), a word with a basis in Chinese characters 接合, 接 which means "to connect" and 合 means "to combine." For Ha, this conjunction is not about its effect but the act of it, the precise moment where the two elements, in this case the paint and the hemp connect and combine, not to create a combination, but to facilitate a phenomenological experience of the two.
Due to the pared down palette of his early work, often using white paint against an earth tone hemp, Western critics have interpreted Ha's work under the categories of calligraphy, Zen Buddhism, and perhaps even the minimalistic aesthetic of Neo-Confucian Korean society. Ha and his peers rejected these interpretations and rightfully so, contemporary critics, curators, and art historians have worked to build foundational context to argue against such reductionist readings. However, these arguments could lead the reader stuck in between viewing Ha Chong-Hyun as a key figure in Korean abstract art, who may have been drawn to certain materials more for their formal qualities, versus Ha who was keenly responsive to the conditions of his country, a radical reactionary whose work served as political defiance. The Korean critic Lee Yil, who was an early champion of Ha Chong-Hyun's work and his close friend, noted that Korean avant-garde artists were not making art of rebellion or protest, but one of participation. I dare to add, that in the economic, social, and political conditions that defined most of Ha's life, rebellion is not sufficient, or even applicable in the way of Western understanding. All Koreans of Ha's generation speak of their nagging hunger and poverty, a reality that could not be escaped. Therefore, it was active participation that inspired Ha and his contemporaries to support each other, to be able to eat, source materials, and to create a community where freethinking, as much as it was censored, could be possible. It was this participation that allowed Ha to engage with his materials in their formal qualities and make up, while understanding their social implications. It was always this hybridity that Ha is invested in, in order to forge a language of abstract art that he could call a Korean form.
– Diana Seo Hyung Lee, writer