ALMINE RECH

Choi Myoung Young
Conditional Planes

Sep 7 — Oct 7, 2023 | Paris, Matignon

The Creative World of Choi Myoung Young: Controlled Monotony, Infinite Variations

Korean modernist painting, or dansaekhwa (monochrome painting), holds a central position in Korean art history. Within the discussion and context of Korean modernism, Choi Myoung Young is indispensable. Born in Haeju, Hwanghae-do, in 1941, Choi defected to South Korea during the Korean War and grew up in Gunsan and Incheon. In 1957, he began studying art at Incheon National School of Education (now Gyeongin National University of Education) under master artist Chung Sanghwa after which he entered the Hongik University College of Fine Arts in 1960 to study painting. There, he built his artistic foundation through practical courses taught by artists Han Mook, Lee Bongsang, Lee Kyu-sang, and Kim Whanki, as well as theoretical courses taught by art historian Lee Kyung-sung, Korean art historian Choi Soon Woo, aesthetician Cho Yohan, and Buddhist philosopher Rhi Ki-yong. Choi once mentioned that the creative attitudes preached by Lee Kyu-sang and Kim Whanki back then served as a signpost in determining his artistic orientation. Such academic encounters with these artists on the flow of Korean modernism and its tangents served as a major impetus behind his course of work.

After graduating college in 1964, Choi spent the remainder of the decade as a member of the art groups Origin Society (1963–1993), Korean Avant-Garde Association (A.G., 1970–1973), and École de Seoul (1975–1999), and participated in the likes of the Paris Biennale (1967) and São Paulo Biennale (1969) to set his foot in the art scene as an emerging artist. In the 1970s, he partook in the art movements led by AG and Ecole de Seoul while shaping and developing the context of his works, which would go on to be discussed as part of the Korean trend of dansaekhwa . Describing his creative practice as “controlling behavior (series of conditions) as the most basic requirement for connecting to (reacting to) given materials (media),” Choi states that his actions “penetrate and dissolve into the media to reveal their transparent existence through empty spaces, as a way of investigating the essence of the flat surface.”

Since the mid-1970s, Choi has persistently explored using his body and the relationship between the canvas plane and the medium of paint under the theme of “conditional planes,” repeating and varying physical actions on top of the flat surface to understand painterly existence. In the mid-1970s, the artist produced what are known today as the “sandpaper” and “fingerprint” series. The former entailed repeatedly sanding down a painted surface until the overlaid paint blended in with the texture of the canvas and almost disintegrated. For the latter, Choi achieved a similar effect by repeatedly rubbing paint onto the canvas with his fingertips. After the mid-1970s, Choi used the standardized title Conditional Planes for most of his works and went on to consistently expand his productive and compositional methodologies as he continued to develop his art practice. His “roller” series produced in the mid- to late 1970s, for example, were constructed by applying dozens of paint layers to a flat surface with a roller, whereas in the early 1980s, he used hanji (traditional Korean paper made from mulberry tree bark) which he then penetrated from both sides with an awl to stimulate one’s tactile senses. Choi explored various production methods to practice his artistic asceticism through the surface of the canvas.

Throughout the mid-1980s and the 1990s, Choi’s repetitive movements took on vertical and horizontal orientations to settle as his unique methodology and style—according to the artist, such movements explored “the existential extent of creation and extinction by means of the repetitive undulation of the vertical (weft, history) and horizontal (warp,

reality).” His methodological experimentation continued into the 2010s. In 2014, he presented finger drawings produced by repeatedly dabbing paint onto gridded paper, and in 2015, he produced works with exposed canvas surfaces that sought to “visualize painterly existence—constructing something that is immobile yet harbors motion—by melding the material and spiritual through selection and repetition.”

Choi often uses the expression “monotonous” to describe his works. Creating superficial space composed of regular units—by performing repetitive actions within the frame of the blank, quadrilateral canvas—can be seen as a daily act of validating existence. Thus, the “monotony” of his work is both a condition and an attitude that begets infinite variations until no component is identical. The media and actions that are either conceived or extinguished on the canvas allow boundaries to expand. The canvas as a background no longer distinguishes or restrains art and life. Just as the body and the mind are no longer subjects for distinction, the conditional plane is now an existential “platform,” an infinite space that serves to intertwine and reveal the artist’s repetitive actions. This is precisely why Choi’s creative world is a demonstration of “controlling monotony,” something that ceaselessly flows toward infinite variations.

— Kim Hyoungmi, Curator of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA, Korea)