

Kim Tschang-Yeul

Disparitions

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It was twilight when Kim Tschang-Yeul, then aged 42, discovered the droplet while sprinkling water over one of his canvases. This decisive moment marked the beginning of his ongoing research into this motif, whose countless variations the Korean artist obsessively explored until the end of his life. Crystal-clear and shimmering, these trompe-l'œil water pearls, which he had mastered to the subtlest detail, seem to evade time in their pristine perfection. The artist shattered the illusion of artifice, however, by exploring the tracks and traces behind his droplets beginning in the early 1970s. This previously undeveloped notion in Kim Tschang-Yeul's work links a group of pieces spanning nearly forty years of the artist's creative output, whose formal richness testifies to his inexhaustible creativity.

Solitary or serial, hazy or sharp, brown or grayish, a stain spreads across the canvas, sweeping diagonally across it or seeping into the paper. An ode to a moment's fleetingness as well as its eternity, like the Japanese haiku expressed. An emblem of the materiality of the canvas and the drops it bears, the stain also links two seemingly contradictory symbolic spaces: that of the real and the imaginary, which Kim Tschang-Yeul deliberately juxtaposes. "Raw canvas, sand, earth or wood are chosen as materials to give water drops a natural place, while painted water drops are like concepts or images," he wrote.

"Form is emptiness; emptiness is form." This Buddhist axiom also refers to the spiritual significance of water which is praised in the Tao te Ching for its suppleness and fragility, two characteristics inseparable from its omnipresence. The trace outlives the drop, formlessness outlives form, silence outlives speech. Belonging to the Korean Art Informel movement of the 1960s, Kim Tschang-Yeul used the drop to erode the traumatic images of the Korean War, the horror of which he had initially depicted through a violent treatment of his material. The tireless reproduction of this motif was itself rooted in a Zen meditative approach which sought to annihilate the ego.

For Kim Tschang-Yeul, emptiness is fullness rather than absence. Even when the canvas is entirely covered with sinographs painstakingly copied from the Thousand-Character Classic, the words are mute, devoid of meaning. He retained little of pop art following his stay in New York at the turn of the 1970s, instead his practice followed in the wake of Dadaism. He preserved the movement's mistrust of language, which is also expressed in the Zen Buddhist Koans. It is by inscribing oneself beyond symbols, in a state prior to speech and reason, that the wise person reconnects with the state of pre-consciousness and renounces one's subjectivity. At once that which precedes and that which remains, the trace embodies a milestone in this quest for enlightenment, which the artist himself had always pursued with the wonder of a child.

— Alison Moss, Arts journalist and Editor