

Ha Chong-Hyun

Feb 12 — Mar 15, 2024 | Gstaad

Almine Rech Gstaad is pleased to present Ha Chong-Hyun's fifth solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from February 12 to March 15, 2024.

A major figure of Korean abstract painting, Ha Chong-Hyun (b. 1935) is a founding member of the avant-garde movement Dansaekhwa (whose name means “monochrome painting”) that came about in the early '70s in Korea. He has played an essential role in the international reconsideration of the history of abstraction and modernity. Within this new generation of artists, his formal explorations, primarily guided by material and volume, the surface of the canvas, and the frame, profoundly transformed the nature of Korean art, while also converging with movements or groups of Western artists with similar concerns, at least in the radicalness that characterized the time, such as Supports/Surfaces, Arte Povera or Post-Minimalism.

Born during the Japanese occupation, Ha Chong-Hyun experienced the major political and economic transformations in Korea after the Second World War: a fratricidal war with its neighbor to the north and the authoritarian regimes of the '60s and '70s, which were accompanied by significant economic growth and rapid industrialization, leading in particular to the whirlwind development of modern architecture. Ha countered the official figurative art of the regime and focused on colorful geometric abstraction whose lines echoed the urban grid of the rapidly changing city of Seoul (*Urban Planning Series*).

It was at this time that Ha Chong-Hyun began his *Conjunction* series, a group of artworks that soon became an ongoing source for his painting, an odyssey that he still continues to develop today and whose new and recent productions are presented in this exhibition. From the very first artworks in this emblematic series, Ha Chong-Hyun has boundlessly explored the materiality of paint and the issue of the surface, only using hemp canvas for its raw appearance and earthy tone. Since, the artist envisioned his work as a perpetual renewal of formal experimentations where painting is primarily the expression of its own material, in its close connection to the surface.

For his monochrome *Conjunctions*, Ha Chong-Hyun has invented an unconventional artistic technique that has become his signature. In his desire to free himself from the constraint of the medium, paint is not only applied to the front of the canvas. Ha also places it on the verso of the hemp fabric, pressing it so that it passes through the fabric. Subtle variations in light, texture, and color thus appear on the front of the canvas, depending on the size of the gaps in the weave and how tightly it is woven, and the amount of paint the artist chooses to force through by the strength of his gesture.

In this way, the wide blue vertical lines in *Conjunction 23-34*, which are serene and harmonious and made with a very thick application of paint, do not have exactly the same chromatic value, giving almost the illusion of a polychromatic painting. Composed at irregular intervals, they appear to have begun their trajectory outside of the frame from the bottom of the painting, and to have ended, with even more significant impasto, at the upper part of the canvas. Ha Chong-Hyun's abstractions very often have this sculptural, three-dimensional quality, a sign of his attachment to spatiality and volume. Among the many anti-academic experimentations that have shaped his artistic language, Ha Chong-Hyun has also been inspired by a process used in Korean ceramics, of which he is particularly fond. Using a piece of burning cotton, he embeds soot on the surface of the canvas to create an additional layer of color variations in a delicate interplay of shadows.

While materiality is essential in Ha Chong-Hyun's work, the specific processes that he devotes to it give a prominent place to the gesture. This is true, for instance, of *Conjunction 23-26*, another vertical work with a red palette, painted allover (except the edge) and composed of short diagonal, horizontal, and vertical strokes, which are all very energetic. The painting is dominated not by anarchy, but by an absolute arrangement of overabundance, where happenstance in the studio is an integral part of the work. Ha cannot know exactly how the fabric will respond to the paint and vice versa. In some of his paintings, the oily base can also create halos and shadows, whose exact appearance he cannot control.

In conclusion, the artistic conjunctions of Ha Chong-Hyun aspire to harmony by arranging encounters between materials (oil paint and hemp canvas), creative processes with a performative aspect, and the artist's inner state. Each of his paintings owes its existence to these combinations. A master of restraint, including in the colors he uses (white, gray, blue, and red), Ha Chong-Hyun is able to establish unexplored dialogues between the painted and unpainted surface, or to reinvent the brushstroke infinitely. Expressing subtle formal purity, his painting is intimately linked to a spirituality that is profoundly meditative, perfectly embodying philosophical quietude and serenity in a confrontation with time.

— Charles Barachon, art critic and writer