

PLUS

12

A PIONEER OF KOREAN ART

Photograph by Jae Hyun Kim

HA CHONG HYUN'S EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO PAINTING



PLES

14

As an artist who undeniably paved the way for Korean art to flourish, Ha Chong Hyun consistently uses material experimentation and innovative studio processes to redefine the function of painting. He has played a vital part in connecting the avant-garde traditions between East and West. Ha is one of the leading members of Dansaekhwa, a movement that grew out of the turmoil after Korea's independence from the Japanese (1945), and the end of Korean War (1953). Dansaekhwa means 'monochrome' in Korean, however it refers to a diverse set of artistic traditions that focus on process, tactility, and surface.

During this period of dramatic social change, Dansaekhwa artists were committed to redefining modern art and disregarded scholarly mainstream patterns. For Ha, this provided him with an opportunity to challenge his art practice, creating works that question spatiality and political culture. His choice of materials also reflected this time: in his paintings, Ha began experimenting with wire and buriap, a woven material used in deliveries of grains from the



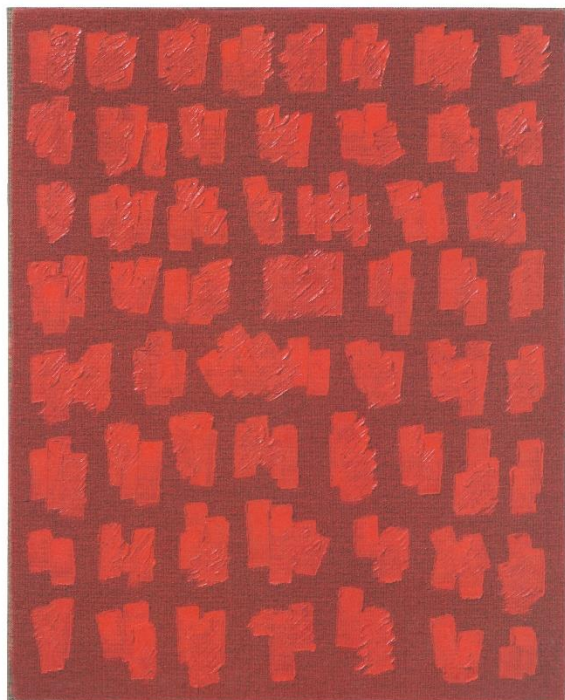
United States Army after the war. It was in this time when Ha intentionally isolated himself from Western influences as he was embarking on his style of Dansaekhwa, resulting in the 'Conjunction' series.

Decades later, Ha's oeuvres are receiving the global attention they have always deserved. One of his revered works from the series, "Conjunction 74-26" (1974), is presently on show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In his mid 80s, he still paints to this day, finding an approach through which possibility seems unlimited. We chat with him in his studio in Ilsan about his exploration of materiality and how the artists and their artworks act as a cultural bridge creating a culture for one's country.



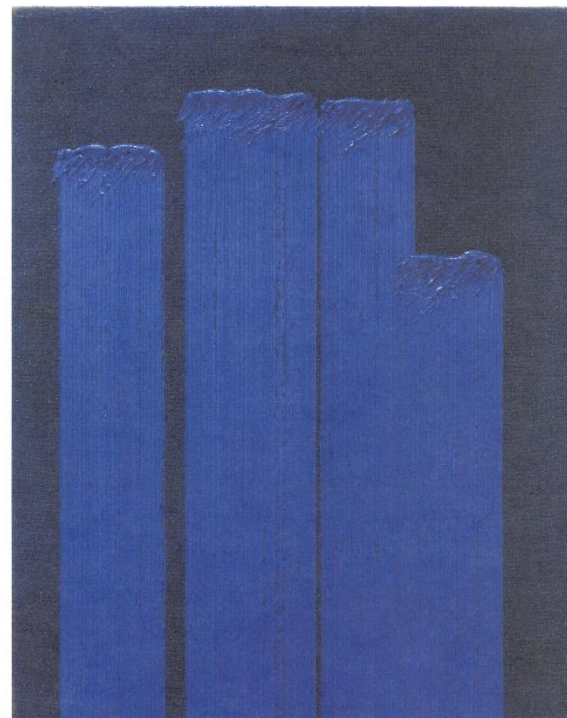
PLES

16



Conjunction 18-53, 2018
Oil on hemp cloth, 162 x 130cm
Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery

17



Conjunction 19-26, 2019
Oil on hemp cloth, 162 x 130cm
Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery
Photography by Sebastiano Pelloni di Porsano

PLGS

18



PLGS

19



P: How did you begin your art practice? And over time, how has the meaning of art evolved for you?

HCH: There was no specific occasion, but I grew up hearing from my peers that I had a talent in handcrafting. I was also in an environment where most of my colleagues were good at art. So, it was a natural phenomenon for me to delve into this route, and this led me to study at Hongik University. During this time, there was no proper system given nor a clear sense of direction in the art scene. This allowed the creative industry to have endless growth and it provided me with an opportunity to venture in various ways. I kept on learning, not to satisfy myself, but to mitigate the lack of information about Korean art.

I have to say, it was a time of confusion, but at the same time, it was a period when history could be reorganized to set a clear vision for the future. Since nothing was defined about the Korean art, it was, and still is, the responsibility of myself, my fellow Korean artists, authors, and scholars to recognise the need for establishing our aesthetics, culture, and theory.

P: Your work has gained a worldwide reputation because of its holistic and meditative process, rather than focusing solely on rationality and logic.

HCH: I personally believe that my originality is expressed through my own unique way of working. My processes and the materials that I use do not belong to a certain artistic movement but relate to my own ways of finding new methods and techniques. Through this process, I feel deep gratification to myself.

In my works, you can see that as the objects are introduced into the three-dimensional work on a flat plane, the resemblance of the body and the action through the work is actively intervened. Every single one of these gestures are visually represented and revealed in each of the works.

P: Unlike the other Dansaekhwa works, you have a signature style, where you create your own canvas with a loose weave of coarse burlap and push the paint from the back to the front; a unique technique. Also, you painted the canvas with smoke and tried to see the paint out between several wooden boards. Through these processes you must have been inspired to learn about other elements that you haven't even thought about.

HCH: When I set my mind on trying something new, I just start to experiment. This is similar to baking or pottery. The key is how to choose from what has already existed and to give myself absolute freedom of choice as well.

The story behind working with the loose weave of coarse burlap was that during that time in my past, this material was commonly found during the Korean War and it struck to me as an exciting new material to work with, as well as a representation of the situation of the times. The wire that was used in my early works can be seen as a similar context.

When I first tried the smoke method, the paint actually dropped and fell on my hands, burning them. All of this trial and error is just a part of the process and I feel the greatest excitement about my experimental attitude; it reflects greatly through my works.

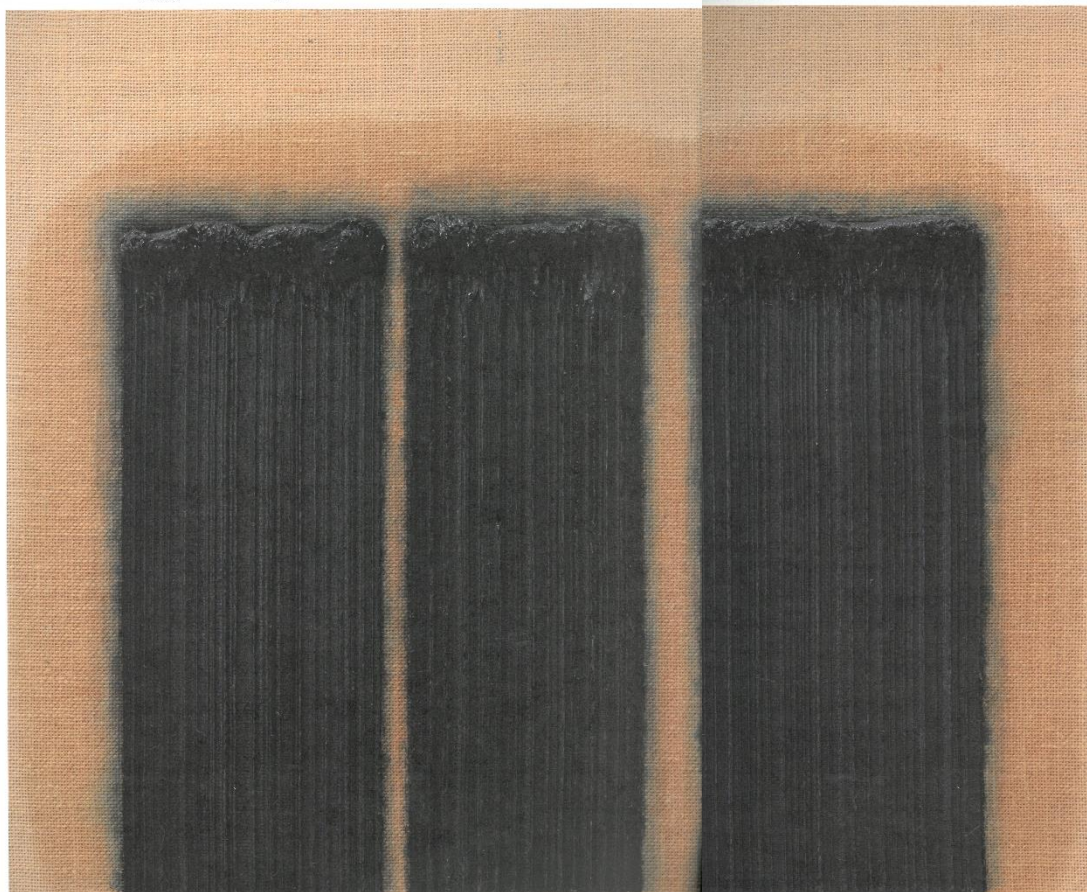
P: Can you talk about your 'Conjunction' and 'Post Conjunction' series?

HCH: The works of the 'Conjunction' series are the decisive moments that allowed me to



PLUS

20



21

belong to the Dansackhwa movement. All of my adventurous and experimental attitudes are inherited in this series, and it also reflects my motivation towards the new challenges ahead of me.

The 'Post Conjunction' series also stands in the context of an endless challenge and motivating attitudes that are reflected through my works. It can be seen as the result of the inspirations of my dreams.

P: It seems that the way of working and the meaning of the work have changed throughout your career. How does the idea of change relate to your work?

HCH: Change is difficult but I have always stayed open minded with my art practice. Whether this exploration takes me into a new state or with unfinished work, it will always provide me with new lessons and ideas. Most importantly, to accept changes and challenges within them, you have to step back and take time to trust your instinct.

Conjunction 18-40, 2018
Oil on hemp cloth, 73 x 91cm
Courtesy of the artist and Kujje Gallery
Photo by Sebastiano Paltori di Pennino

PLES

22

