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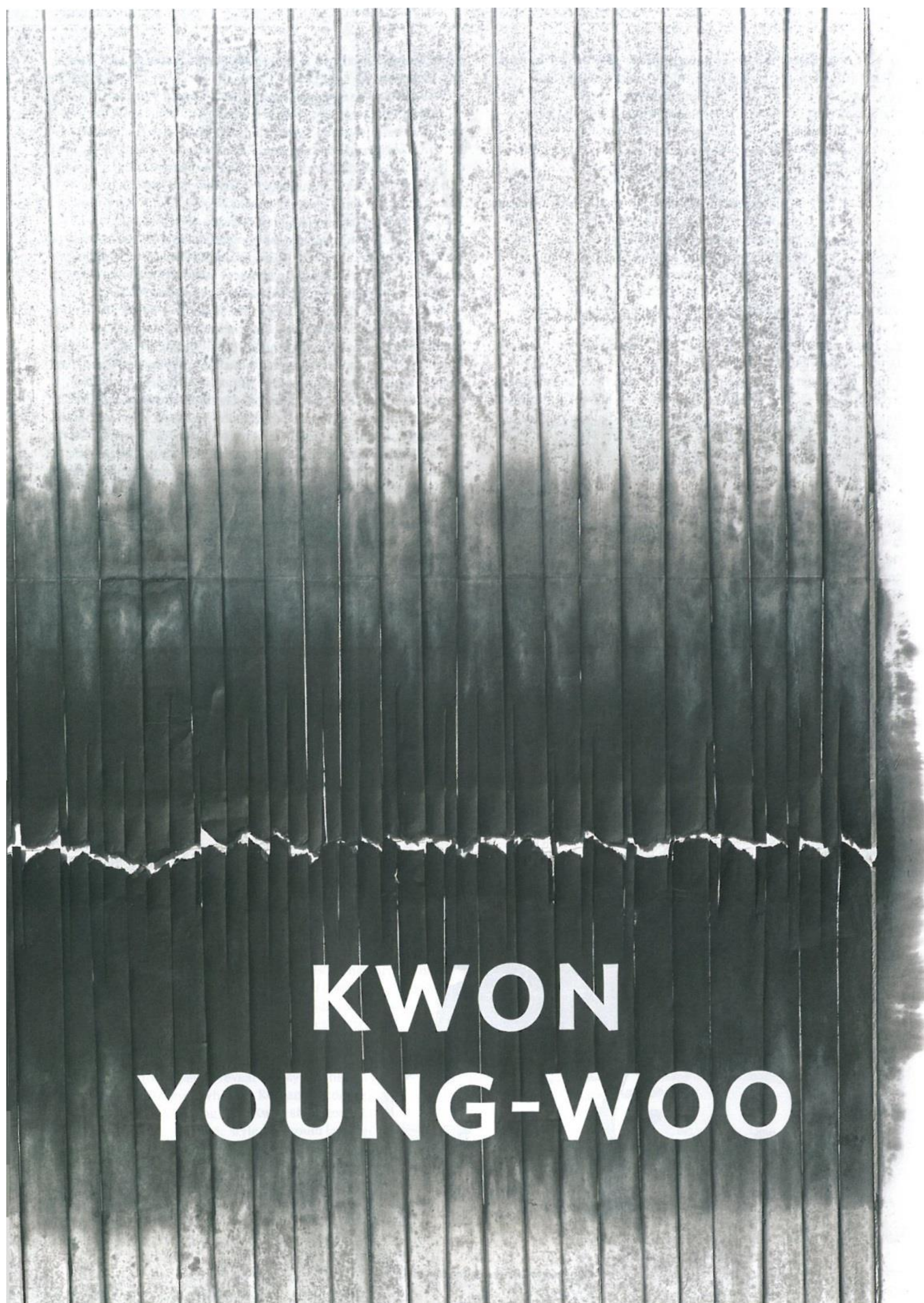
Painting Between Past and Future


KWON
YOUNG-WOO

Despite his many artistic transformations, Kwon Young-woo (1926–2013) managed to provoke several versions of the same response over the course of his six-decade career. At the 1954 National Exhibition in his native South Korea, the young artist showed with a group of ink painters who were described in the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* daily newspaper as "the new avant-garde of Eastern painting," a tendency critics saw in works such as *Sculptor's Studio* (1954), an ink-on-paper rendition of a room cluttered with easels and half-finished, semi-abstract sculptural forms. More than 40 years later, when Kwon was awarded the 1998 Artist of the Year prize at Korea's National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, curator Junmo Jung once again presented him as a modern literati painter, an artist who transforms our "seemingly stopped, traditional aesthetics . . . [into] a constantly progressing tradition." The works in the accompanying exhibition, however, bore little resemblance to what Kwon had produced in the 1950s. For this show, the National Museum was bathed in white: the walls were hung with large-scale works consisting of ordinary objects—clothes hangers, nails, license plates—arranged neatly on flat surfaces and encased in bright, white layers of mulberry paper. Outside were sculptures made from discarded plastic rice-wine bottles, densely stacked to form translucent, white masses.

Throughout his career, Kwon struck a rare balance between tradition and the avant-garde, developing a style that embodies the themes of national identity, rupture and continuity—themes that have served as touch-points for the Korean art world since the early 20th century. Kwon went further, though, than just enacting Asian traditions with a modern sensibility: his work sought to nullify the distinctions between East and West, and between disparate genres of art, while maintaining certain core aesthetic values. His development over the decades leading up to the all-white exhibition at the National Museum can be seen as an extension of this kind of philosophy of tradition: beginning as a representational ink painter and systematically removing representation, and then ink itself, from his work, Kwon proposed a medium—in his case, paper—as the primary source of aesthetic value. This innovation would also position Kwon as a leading figure in Dansaekhwa, the monochrome-painting movement that emerged in South Korea in the 1960s whose continued impact can be seen in the many exhibitions promoting it in the United States and Europe over the past three years.

Kwon began his career at a time when traditions of visual representation, particularly their connotations of national identity, were under scrutiny. Japanese colonial rule of Korea had ended in 1945, Seoul National University was founded in 1946, and the following year, at the age of 21, Kwon left his family home in Yangju to begin his studies at the university. He enrolled in the Eastern Painting department, which existed alongside the oil-on-canvas-focused Western Painting program. The teachers and students in the Eastern Painting department were faced with the difficult task of reestablishing standards for Korean painting that were distinct from the styles developed under Japanese colonial rule, without reverting to an antiquarian interest in traditional Chinese methods.

One of Kwon's teachers, Chang Woo-sung (1912–2005), was among a number of artists at the time who had turned away from Japanese academic styles toward a form of pastoral lyricism in search of uniquely Korean subject matter, producing works such as *Returning Shepherd* (1935), a paint-on-silk depiction of a boy leading a cow across a field. In Chang's composition, emblematic of his mature style, the boy and animal are pushed close to the picture plane and rendered with exacting detail, drawing attention to the boy's straw shoes, simple white clothing and other elements emphasizing the humble, everydayness of the scene, which could not be mistaken for the highly formal imagery of Japanese painting.

As Chang's student, Kwon took on the task of reinventing Eastern painting from another angle, looking outward to other genres and methods of representation for a way forward: without abandoning his medium, Kwon began to look toward Western techniques of art-making. One such early work, the above-mentioned *Sculptor's Studio*, created in 1954 while Kwon was completing his master's degree at Seoul National University, uses the calligraphic line of ink painting to depict an interior that references the developments of modern European sculpture: the forms in the room, in various states of completion, resemble works by the likes of Constantin Brancusi or Henry Moore. Furthermore, the lines of the stools, easels and windows emphasize the painting's rigid perspectival scheme, a Western strategy of representation that, to Kwon's instructors, may have seemed out of place in an ink painting. While Kwon's

approach to reinvigorating the traditions of Eastern painting was different than his teachers', his work was engaged with many of the same questions as theirs: what does it mean to work in a so-called traditional medium after a period of colonial rule during which traditions had been destroyed, fabricated or tainted by appropriation? Can one make a clean break with a troubled past while still maintaining a set of consistent values?

These questions took on a new resonance in the 1950s as Korea once again faced a crisis of identity, split by an ideological division that led to the Korean War (1950–53). While most artists either suspended their work or left Korea during this time, Kwon and some of his colleagues were able to continue practicing. The dean of the art department at Seoul National University was friendly with the Air Force Chief of Staff, and together with several professors they formed the Military Art Academy, which supported its members to continue working as wartime artists. *After the Bombing* (1957), based on a sketch Kwon made during the conflict, fulfills the organization's purpose of testifying to the state of a country at war. The burnt-out remains of Seoul's Yongsan Station—whose switchyard was bombed in 1950 by United States forces to slow the advance of North Korean troops—can be seen depicted in a light gray wash of ink in the background. Cutting horizontally across the upper third of the paper are the remains of a locomotive car rendered in black ink. Twisted metal beams and debris form a surreal landscape, and the heavy application of ink, in a technique similar to that of *Sculptor's Studio*, gives the work a material weight. Like his teacher's *Returning Shepherd*, Kwon's *After the Bombing* combines traditional methods of Asian painting with non-idealized subject matter. But whereas *Returning Shepherd* expresses nostalgia for an agrarian past, *After the Bombing* exists firmly in the present. This presence is underscored by the immediacy of ink-on-paper as a medium: the paper registers Kwon's gestures and the movement of his brush, providing a record of the artist's own process of digesting scenes of war.

Kwon's reputation as a progressive ink painter grew throughout the 1960s, with his work regularly appearing in the annual National Exhibition. Several other Korean artists were taking an experimental approach to ink at this time, most notably Suh Se-ok (father of contemporary artist Do-Ho Suh), who founded the Ink Forest Group in 1959, a collective of Korean painters interested in stripping ink painting of old connotations and exploring its potential for abstraction. Kwon resisted alignment with this group, however, and in 1962 he contributed pieces to the National Exhibition that seemed to declare his separation from ink altogether: the works consisted of undecorated paper that was torn, layered and scratched apart by the artist's fingernails. Kwon did not title these works, a practice he would employ from that point on; instead, he assigned them ordinal numbers based on the years in which they were made.

For the next several years Kwon developed his technique of working in paper on paper, and he elicited a strong critical response in 1966 when he mounted a solo exhibition of these works at Shinsegae Gallery in Seoul. The works were pared-down, consisting simply of white paper glued on brown panels, using only the most austere abstract language. His work *Untitled* (1965), for example, has a simple layout: its surface consists of individual squares of rice paper overlapping to form a grid. The squares are arranged in a way that emphasizes the rice paper's translucency and pliability: some areas of the grid consist of multiple layers, appearing more opaque, and others are torn open to reveal the layer beneath. Works such as this pushed the limits of what the Korean art community was willing to consider "Asian painting," but Kwon shrugged off the question of national identity and artistic style. He would later tell the Korean daily newspaper *Chosun Ilbo*, in 1977, that he considered himself "neither an Eastern nor Western artist," and referred to his works simply as "white paintings."

The fondness for white that appears in Kwon's work from the late 1960s and early '70s was seen as symptomatic of a larger trend in Korean art at the time, what came to be known as the

(Previous spread)
KWON YOUNG-WOO, *Untitled* (detail), 1984, gouache, Chinese ink on Korean paper, 162 x 130 cm. Courtesy Estate of Kwon Young-woo and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

(Opposite page)
KWON YOUNG-WOO, *After the Bombing*, 1957, ink on paper, 146 x 183 cm. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA). Courtesy MMCA.

(This page, top)
CHANG WOO-SUNG, *Returning Shepherd*, 1935, painting on silk, 145 x 178 cm. Collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA). Courtesy MMCA.

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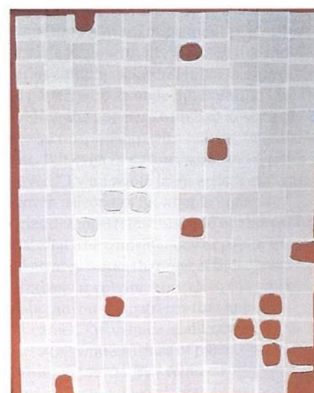
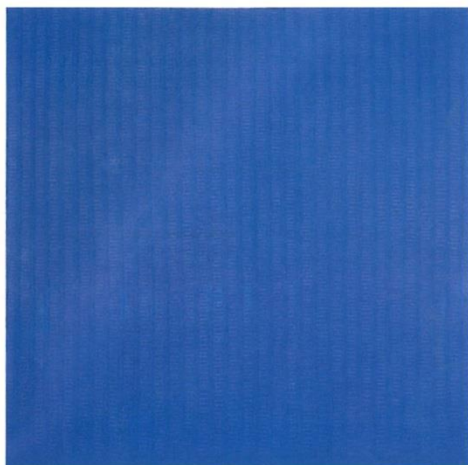
KWON YOUNG-WOO, *Untitled*, 1965, Korean paper on panel, 130 x 110 cm. Courtesy Estate of Kwon Young-woo and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York.





Dansaekhwa movement. In 1975, Kwon's work was included in "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White," an exhibition of all-white, monochrome paintings by Korean artists, held at the Tokyo Gallery in Japan. Also included were Park Seo-Bo, Hur Hwang, Suh Seung-Won and Lee Dong-Yeop; Kwon was the eldest in the show, and also the only one to work primarily with paper rather than oil and canvas. "Five Korean Artists" did not represent an artist-initiated movement as much as it was a curatorial attempt—heavily facilitated by Lee Ufan, who had lived in Japan since 1956 and had supported a number of the artists' first exhibitions in the country—to identify the defining characteristics of Korea's emerging contemporary art scene. The many exhibitions and critical responses that took their lead from "Five Korean Artists," though, began to give Dansaekhwa the characteristics of a more deliberate artistic movement, with Park Seo-Bo taking a leading role in theorizing and promoting the movement within Korea.

But as with the Ink Forest Group before this, Kwon was not interested in aligning himself with a coterie of artists working under a single aesthetic program; in fact, Kwon was beginning to seek out other artistic scenes at this time. As part of the Invitational Prize he received at the 1974 National Exhibition, Kwon had begun to travel to Paris, a destination that held connotations of prestige for artists in Korea, and in 1976 he had his first solo exhibition in the city at Jacques Massol Gallery. Two years later he resigned from his position as professor at Chungang University and moved with his wife and two sons to an artists' village in Torcy, 25 kilometers outside of the French capital.

By this time Kwon had arrived at a tentative answer to the earlier questions of his teachers: if contemporary enactments of tradition could not rely on older forms of representation, they could at least turn toward material—the basic element underlying representation—as a new source of aesthetic value. The works he had shown at Jacques Massol Gallery enacted this stance, consisting of bright, white layered paper, scraped and torn in an exploration of the material's physical properties. Kwon's treatment of his medium fit into the renewed interest in materials seen in the work of various Post-Minimalist artists such as Richard Tuttle. The American artist was widely exhibiting in Europe during these years, having drawn considerable attention with pieces such as *W-Shaped Yellow Canvas* (1967), a span of unstretched canvas dyed, cut and sewn into an abstract geometric form roughly resembling an upturned "W"—the traditional Western support apprehended as a raw object. The American painter Edda Renouf, another expatriate working in Paris at the same time as Kwon, was also focusing on surface. In *Resonance I* (1979), Renouf systematically removes threads from a linen support, forming a textured, overall composition as the paint catches on the disturbed cloth. Kwon's material experiments in France, evolving from his initial experiences in postwar Korea, fit into what was by now a widespread, international artistic investigation.

Other Korean artists, in addition to Kwon, were also moving along this trajectory. For a brief period he and the painter Chung Sang-hwa lived in the same building in Paris, and both continued to send new pieces back to Seoul for exhibitions. Like Kwon, Chung favored large, systematic compositions. Working in many layers of paint, Chung would create rough, grid-like patterns by carefully cutting into and stripping away the accumulated medium on his canvases. Their works appeared alongside one another in exhibitions in Korea that elaborated on the monochrome tendency first highlighted in "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White," including "White Exhibition: Eight Contemporary Korean Artists" at Seoul's Institut Français in 1984 and "Black & White in Korean Art Today" at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in 1987. Throughout the '80s they, and other Dansaekhwa artists, continued to play off of the observations and interests of the Korean art world while engaging with developments abroad.

While Kwon's first works in Paris continued to use pure, unmarked rice paper—which he brought over in batches from

(This page)
EDDA RENOUF, *Resonance I*, 1979, acrylic on linen with removed threads, 215 x 215 cm. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London.

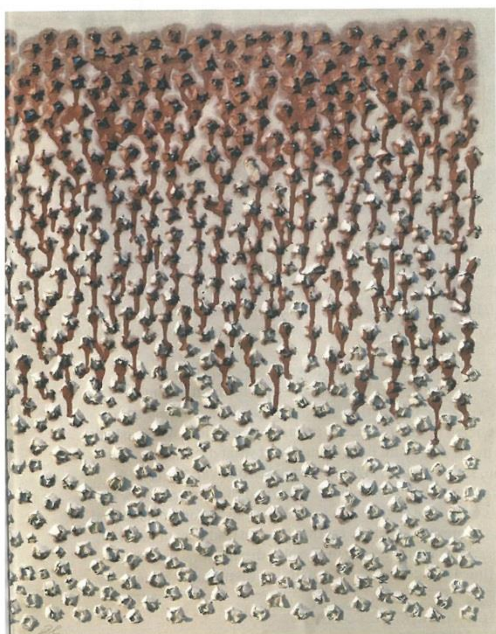
(Opposite page)
KWON YOUNG-WOO, *Untitled*, 1988, gouache on Korean paper, 65 x 55 cm. Courtesy Estate of Kwon Young-woo and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

"My work is to discover, select and fix what is in nature."

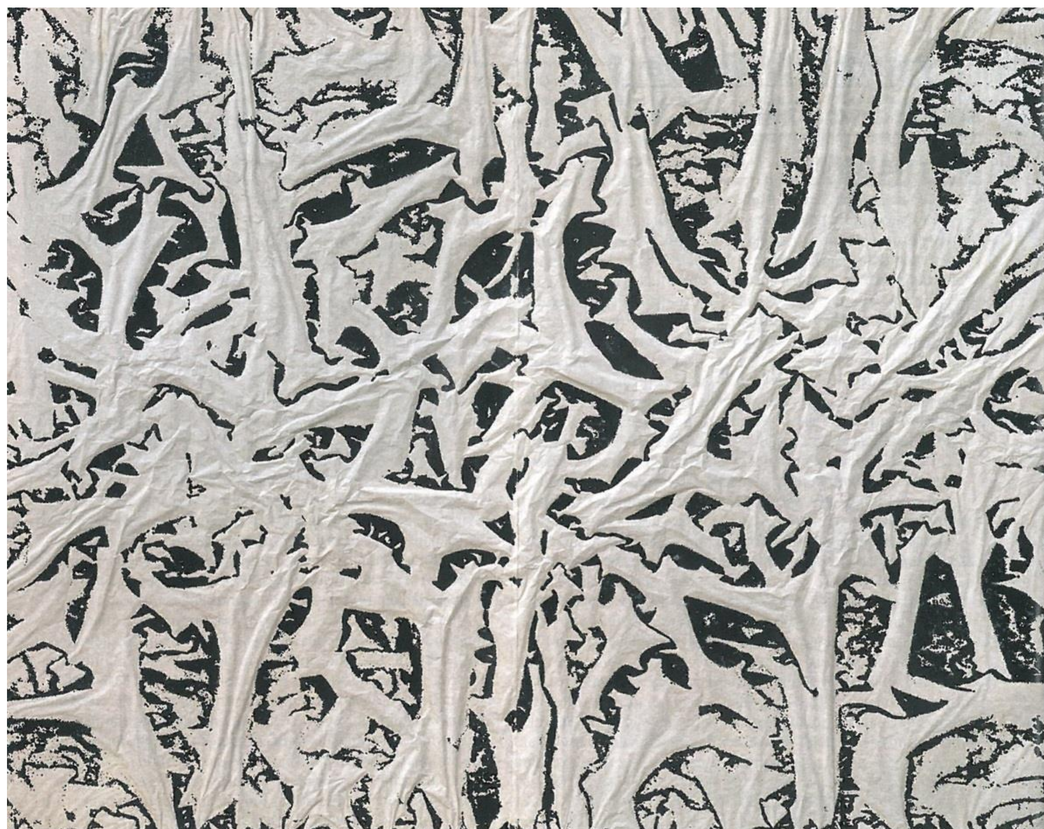
Korea—he soon reintroduced ink and other wet media. In some cases, Kwon applied ink to surfaces similar to those of his white paper works from the late 1970s. In an untitled work from 1988, for example, Kwon begins with a large paper surface perforated densely, the torn edges of the holes jutting out toward the viewer. Onto this surface he applies a rusty brown combination of Chinese ink and gouache, adding the liquid more densely in the top third. He then applies another layer to the upper portion of the work, dabbing the surface with a heavily soaked brush and leaving drips of ink running down the paper. From a distance the paint appears to ooze from the holes, with the surface of the paper appearing wounded.

Kwon's persistent sense of order, however, prevents his work from reading as overly visceral or mournful. While the actions that Kwon explores in this work are destructive—puncturing and soaking paper—he carries them out with an extreme degree of control. In 1977, on the occasion of his fourth solo exhibition, Kwon criticized himself for his predilection for tidiness, saying: "I tend to arrange my works too neatly. I blame my personality for that." However, it is this restraint that often leads to the most dramatic effects in his work. In another untitled work from the same year Kwon prepared a large paper surface by incising into it several parallel vertical lines and then tearing it across the middle, soaking the ragged edges in gray gouache. The tight arrangement of vertical cuts creates a clean environment for observing the dynamics of water and paper. Each strip of paper registers a unique interaction, and when dozens of these interactions are displayed side-by-side they begin to resemble an artifact of a scientific investigation. The work records the same event carried out repeatedly under controlled conditions.

After more than a decade abroad, Kwon returned to South Korea in 1989, setting up his studio in rural Yongin, 40 kilometers south of Seoul. The following year, he was given an exhibition showing more than 100 of his works from his time in Paris at the Ho-Am Gallery (now the Leeum Samsung Museum), the city's most esteemed exhibition venue. The show was praised by the *Joongang Daily*, which described his work as "going beyond the forms and conventions of Eastern painting to seek a new world of abstraction." Shortly after this Kwon began to produce his next series of works, as he continued his explorations into the interaction of paper with wet media. For these works, such as his series from 1992, Kwon would fold or crumple a large sheet of rice paper and lay it over a large panel that had been set on the floor and covered in a layer of paint. The paint would permeate the paper in the places where it came into contact with the panel; Kwon would then press more of the paper onto the panel, creating a pattern of pigment that echoes the topology of the paper's surface. As with his works in ink and gouache from Paris, this series combines natural processes (the absorption of pigment into paper) with a single intervention into the material (crumpling and folding the paper). Kwon had described his working process as a reciprocal relationship with nature. "Nature is truly beautiful and plausible. But even in nature, some parts seem awkward or could be improved," Kwon wrote in an artist's statement in 2011. "My work is to discover, select and fix what is in nature." Kwon's process in these series demonstrates this kind of approach; he finds a basic trait of a material (the translucency of paper, its interaction with water) and creates works that reveal those traits in their most basic forms, selectively involving himself in the process in order to draw out and elaborate on the patterns that appear.



In the last decades of his career, Kwon once again removed ink from his artwork, returning to the white surface of paper that had been the focus of his work from the 1970s. The removal of pigment coincided with a shift toward sculpture; Kwon began to use objects in his work, which he had done occasionally in the 1960s though not nearly as exhaustively. He favored simple, everyday objects: disposable spoons, plastic bottles, nails. He would arrange these objects across a flat surface, most often into neat rows or packed into an allover pattern, and encase the whole arrangement in a layer of fine, bright white paper.



The way Kwon dealt with objects in these works still resembles some of the strategies of representation used by his teachers: like Chang Woo-sung's *Returning Shepherd*, Kwon's mixed-media compositions take evidence of ordinary life and rearrange it with precision, pushing these details to the surface of the picture plane and toward the viewer. At the same time the arrangements fall into the vein of Pop art, re-presenting mass-produced articles. Kwon's use of paper, though, lends these arrangements an air of reverence: he adored the unique way that light interacted with the surface of paper (a gentle dispersal of light rather than the more direct reflections of paint), and he used these objects to create a three-dimensional surface to draw out the interaction of light and paper. One untitled work from this series, an arrangement of crushed bottles created in 2000, achieves this effect strongly: the objects are abstracted twice, once through being crushed and again through being encased in white paper. The resulting surface is thickly contoured, with some areas bearing crisp impressions of bottle caps and others crumpled into abstract forms. It combines plays of light and shadow, flatness and depth, abstraction and legibility.

If the question of the distinction between Eastern and Western painting is what defined the first half of Kwon's career, it was the distinction between painting and sculpture that drove the second half. For his exhibition for the Artist of the Year prize in 1998, at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, in Gwacheon, Kwon underscored this change in his practice, showing mostly works that combine objects and pure, white paper. Even at age 73, he seemed to be implying that he was not done refining and reinventing himself. But just as this exhibition declared a radical turn in style, it also served as a celebration of the medium that had always been the guiding thread of his work.

Despite the number of times Kwon pushed himself in new directions, paper provided a fundamental aesthetic orientation. It was a way to engage with tradition and maintain consistency without being bound to a single canon or worldview. When asked in 1982 by art critic Kim Bok-young about what drew him to the medium, Kwon replied: "When one shakes off everything and returns to white paper, the viewer is invited to consider a new world. Isn't this what true abstraction means?" Paper, before it is marked, bears no content that can be ascribed to one tradition or another; Kwon used this multivalence to dissolve distinctions between places, times and genres while remaining identifiably himself.

(Opposite page)
KWON YOUNG-WOO, *Untitled*, 1992, gouache on Korean paper, 170 x 224 cm. Courtesy Estate of Kwon Young-woo and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

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KWON YOUNG-WOO, *Untitled*, 2000, objects, Korean paper on panel, 162 x 112 cm. Courtesy Estate of Kwon Young-woo and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York.