

HA CHONG-HYUN

March, 2016

SEOUL

Kukje Gallery

HA CHONG-HYUN

Opposite page

GORDON BENNETT
Death of the Ahistorical Subject (Vertigo)
1993
Acrylic on linen, 182 x 182 cm.
Photo by Richard Stringer.
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This page

HA CHONG-HYUN
Conjunction 15-106
2015
Oil on hemp cloth, 260 x 194 cm.
Photo by Sang-Tae Kim.
Courtesy Kukje Gallery, Seoul.

Encountering Ha Chong-Hyun's "Conjunction" series for the first time is a striking experience. There is something impactful about his works of oil on hemp cloth, where paint is pressed through the canvas from the reverse side to produce a one-of-a-kind visual effect on the front. Ha's art is a form of repeated performance—cultivated as part of Dansaekhwa, the seminal monochrome movement active during the social turmoil of 1970s and '80s Korea—in which the visual elements seen on his earth-toned canvases are like lotus flowers sprouting from murky waters, representative of the meditative artist's own blossoming.

Ha has been continuously making new editions of "Conjunction" over the years, honing his concept by adopting new colors and innovative techniques. In late 2015, a selection of 30-odd works from two specific periods, the 1990s and 2014–15, was exhibited at Seoul's Kukje Gallery. The show revealed the careful executions that are characteristic of Ha's practice.

Setting the tone in the gallery's first room were five of his latest "smoky" works—paintings that Ha exposes to flickering smoke and thus "dyes" with soot. Smoke is one of the final touches that Ha applies to the works displayed in this section, in addition to thick yet composed horizontal stripes that are colored atop the pushed-forward protrusions of paint. Such binary inputs—front and back, substantial and insubstantial—produce a refined presentation of pale white, azure and tea-green tones on his canvases. Taking a step back from studying the behavior of paint and the surface treatment of Ha's canvases, one can see that his work is conceptually rooted in tradition,

seemingly putting forth abstract visions of rural Korea. The homely colors realized on his hemp-cloth canvases evoke countryside scenes, such as stone pots boiling atop fireplaces and peppers drying in the sun. The application of smoke adds a temporal yet critical weight to such visual allusions, creating textures and tones that cannot be forged artificially. In *Conjunction 15-104* (2015), the mixture of the hemp's earthy brown hue with shades of faded green paint creates a particularly captivating effect.

Located further in the first hall were massive canvases featuring dashing brushwork. Using variously sized knives and brushes, Ha has applied textured paint in ways that accentuate the curious *matière* that typifies his works. On one wall was *Conjunction 15-04* (2015), a painting portraying what resembles streaks of water shooting up like a fountain. In these deceptively simple productions, in which thick paint has been swabbed in straight lines, what matters is not only how the strokes achieve the look of a floating wave but also the way in which certain elements are left behind, like faint paint scraps interspersed among a smattering of negative spaces. On the next wall were *Conjunction 15-209* and *Conjunction 15-106* (both 2015), where it appears that the artist had immersed himself in them by smearing the canvases repeatedly with paint, creating wildly expressive layers that seem to be in constant flux.

In Kukje's two-storied second hall was a wider selection of works that displayed the artist's strong commitment to "Conjunction." On the first floor were his works from the 1990s, which are marked by a repetition of shapes and a diversity of color. From early on, properties of three-dimensionality and ever-changing appearances were fully exploited in Ha's paintings. In *Conjunction 94-03* (1994), dry dashes of blue-black initially appear to have a violent appearance, like raw scars; but, as one continues to look at the painting, it soon begins to reveal a thoughtful, more measured nature. Upstairs, Ha's newer works demonstrated his tireless experimentation, ranging from paintings made by lathering and wiping the canvases to ones printed with patterns and wildly smeared over with paint.

Ha describes the makeup of "Conjunction" as a combination of paint, hemp and the artist's input. While he humbly places the importance of his role at the last of the three, there is indeed something profound in his self-effacing, "impersonal" art. As in the case of his use of swirling smoke, the artist allows the elements to speak for themselves. With his works, viewers have the rare and delightful opportunity to witness a veteran artist earnestly celebrating his materials—or, according to Ha, "inventing [his] own language."

JOO HAN

