

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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LOS ANGELES

"From All Sides: Tansaekhwa on Abstraction"

BLUM & POE

Reified as the officially sanctioned face of modern Korean art in the late 1970s and '80s, *tansaekhwa*, which literally translates as "monochrome painting," recently received a much-needed reassessment. Having run concurrently with "The Art of *Dansaekhwa*" at Kukje Gallery in Seoul (*dansaekhwa* is the revised-romanization spelling of the term) and on the heels of a modestly sized show on the same subject at Alexander Gray Associates in New York last spring, "From All Sides" constituted the first large-scale overview devoted to *tansaekhwa* in the United States. Included were more than forty sizable paintings, mostly from the '70s, by six representative artists, selected by art historian Joan Kee.

For the most part, each room in the gallery was devoted to works by one of these six, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the particular methods and materials used by each artist, and additionally serving to emphasize the serial nature of the paintings on view. Unframed and suspended about a finger's length from the wall, the large ecru-colored expanses of Park Seobo's ongoing "*Écriture*" series (initiated in the late 1960s) seemed to hover toward the viewer, inviting closer inspection. The process for each work is the same: A canvas is thickly scumbled with pale paint, through which a looping or hatched pencil pattern is then lightly drawn, the different densities of the works' inscriptions creating a luminous depth within their diaphanous webs of marks. To create his series "From Point" and "From Line," both 1973–, Lee Ufan rhythmically applied paint to canvas in dabs or lines until the brush carrying it was depleted, at which point he reloaded the implement and began the procedure again. Most of the paintings feature cobalt or cadmium-red pigment (a reference to Japanese *nihonga* painting), though one instructive exception is *From Point*, 1976. Here the paint matches the color of the canvas, leading the viewer to attend more closely to the diminishing thickness of each mark and the fact of its discrete yet relational material existence, both within this painting and extending to the rest of the series.

Meanwhile, other works in the exhibition pushed the material and conceptual limits of painting, often to visceral effect. Darkness is a shaping force in Yun Hyongkeun's "Umber-Blue" series, 1974–2007, in which verticals built up from brown and blue oils block out swatches of canvas. In one example from the series, *Umber-Blue*, 1978, two dark forms hug the right and left sides of the canvas, framing a valley of raw cotton in the painting's middle and leaving a greasy halo of oil and turpentine around its edges. In Ha Chonghyun's "Conjunction" works, 1974–, viscous white or sand-colored paint is pushed through hemp or loosely woven canvas surfaces from the rear side of the paintings, effectuating marks created via extrusion and the pull of gravity rather than via gestural application. In Chung Sang-hwa's

mosaiclike paintings, after canvas surfaces are painted and dried, folded in parallel and perpendicular lines, and reattached to a wooden frame, bits from the surface are removed or repainted. Kwon Young-woo set down his brush altogether to "paint" abstraction by tearing, gluing, scraping, and puncturing white *hanji* paper, the traditional support of Korean ink painting, here mounted onto large pieces of panelboard.

The support of *tansaekhwa* artists by South Korea's authoritarian governments under Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, and the promotion of their work overseas as distinctly "Korean" art, caused lasting ideological divisions among those in the country's art world, some of whom harshly criticized the movement as disconnected from the social realities of the time. A close reading of the paintings, however, suggests the glimmerings of a different intent: By collapsing the institutionalized separation of ink and oil painting and refusing both the interiority of gestural abstraction and the symbolism of figurative representation, *tansaekhwa* artists sought to produce a position in between conventional systems of order, a space in which to situate (and thereby prioritize) the viewer.

—Kavior Moon

Yun Hyongkeun,
Umber-Blue, 1978,
oil on cotton,
90 3/8 x 71 1/2".
From the series
"Umber-Blue,"
1974–2007. From
"From All Sides:
Tansaekhwa on
Abstraction."

