

REVIEW - 25 OCT 2017

Kim Yong-Ik

Korean Cultural Centre, London, and Spike Island, Bristol, UK

BY TIM SMITH-LAING

It is easy to look at Kim Yong-Ik's best-known motif – the repeated polka dot, often on a plain background – and mistake him for a minimalist. As 'I Believe My Works Are Still Valid' makes clear, though, that is far from the case. Kim's first European solo exhibitions, co-curated by Spike Island's Helen Legg and the Korean Cultural Centre's Je Yun Moon, show an artist who has spent his career avoiding easy labels and the advantageous affiliations that often accompany them to produce a body of work that is by turns meditative and humorous to the point of deliberate daftness.

The works on display at Spike Island form a survey of Kim's career from the mid-1970s to the present, ranging from the draped canvases of *Plane Object* (1978-79/2015), through to the quasi-vaedictory works from more recent years, such as *Aerial Burial* (2015) and *The Coffin of a Hermit 'Despair Completed'* (1993-2014). Carefully selected by the curators in close collaboration with Kim, the works form an overview of an oeuvre that is wholly rich and unexpected. Taken together with the new site-specific installation at the Korean Cultural Centre (KCCUK) in London, the Spike Island show is a superb introduction to an artist few English viewers will know.



Kim Yong-Ik, *Aerial Burial*, 2015, installation view, 'I Believe My Works Are Still Valid', 2017, Spike Island, Bristol. Courtesy: the artist and Kukje Gallery

The earliest pieces at Spike Island date from a turbulent period in Korea's political history, following the assassination of President Park Chung-hee in 1979. Park – a former general and military strongman who had risen to the position of president via a coup in 1963 – was replaced quickly by General Chun Doo-hwan, who immediately imposed an expanded martial law. Chun's administration clamped down on universities, political dissent and freedom of the press until the mass pro-democracy protests of 1987. Kim's early work, while remaining in certain ways apolitical, bears the traces of the turbulence in its own muted way. His most open political gesture, instead, comes in the form of the three cardboard boxes that comprise 1981's *Untitled (Dedicated to the Exhibition 'Young Artists' in 1981)* (recreated 2011). The boxes were originally shipping crates for more Plane Object canvases; seeing them waiting to be unpacked, Kim instead decided to leave them as they were, in protest at the regime's censorship policies.

Elsewhere, there is the sense, reinforced by the artist's own statements and the curators' notes, that Kim conceived of both open protest and retreat into the closed world of Korean modernism as ways of letting politics have too much say over his practice or over his personality. As he writes on *Closer ... Come Closer ...* (1996–2013) – a white canvas sparsely punctuated by blue squares and rectangles, wrapped in transparent protective plastic – 'I am never an aggressive type, as all avant-garde has been'. Though his use of polka dots and colour plains makes clear his kinship with *danseakhwa* (monochrome) painters including his teacher Park Seo-Bo, or Lee Ufan, he refused both their occasionally steely aestheticism and the overtly political agenda of the *minjung* (people's) painters.



Kim Yong-Il, *Triptych*, 1970–2015, installation view, 'I Believe My Works Are Still Valid', 2017, Spike Island, Bristol. Courtesy: DSL Collection, Paris; photograph: Stuart Whipps

Instead, there is a sense, deliberate and very engaging, of what I can only call low-stakesness about Kim's work – courted and expressed in a series of visual, situational and verbal jokes. *An Installation Made of Damaged Two Pieces* (1998) and *Packing Materials* (2016) (2016/17) sits as a pile on the floor, masquerading as gallery rubbish. Visitors are invited to walk all over *Apocalypse of Modernism #17-3 and #17-4* (both 2017), composed of offcuts from the artist's studio floor.

The retrospective's title, taken from a 1997 work on paper of the same name, registers Kim's determination to continue ploughing his own furrow. This is reflected in the new installation at KCCUK, A recapitulation of his dots and rectangles, playfully slipping off their paper and canvas and onto the gallery wall, it holds its own pleasures; but, in its pristine state, the installation leaves out something the Spike Island show reveals as central to Kim's work: imperfection. This, as Helen Legg explains, is the vehicle by which the most minimalistic works at Spike Island become both homages to and parodies of the *danseakhwa* artists: they are annotated with remarks that draw attention to every smudge, error, and dribble of ink.



Kim Yong-Ik, installation view, 2017, Korean Cultural Centre, London. Courtesy: the artist and Korean Cultural Centre, London

It is a firm plank of Kim's philosophy – as inscribed on *Closer ... Come Closer ...* – that one of the five key qualities of a good artwork is that it 'would be okay if it gets torn, crushed, or dirtied a bit'. Dirt reappears throughout the show at Spike Island: several of the larger works have a background patina that is almost as characteristic of Kim's work as his dots. (So much so, that I felt the cleanliness of the KCCUK show as a kind of absence.) It comes from the artist's habit of leaving canvases outside his studio, proving his point that grubbiness does nothing to diminish their beauty.

Main image: Kim Yong-Ik, left to right; Untitled (second version 2017, after last original of 1986) and Untitled (second version 2017, after last original 1989), installation view, 'I Believe My Works Are Still Valid', 2017, Spike Island, Bristol. Courtesy: the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul