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Park Seo-Bo has been called a revolutionist, master, genius, and pioneer in Korean modern art. As the founder of the Dansaekhwa movement, Park has changed the course of Korean art history and paved the way for the country to plant its own roots in the global art scene. For the past 60 years, his career has been synonymous with activism and change, leading numerous contemporary artist groups and nurturing generations of new local talent along the way. Before his works were exhibited at Galerie Perrotin, White Cube, MoMA, the Guggenheim, Art Institute of Chicago, and countless other places, Park was a struggling art student just barely surviving the aftermath of post-war Korea. Art is what spared his life during the North Korean invasion of the South—because he could draw, he was recruited by the People's Army to make maps and build stage sets for communist propaganda. He got by drawing portraits for deployed American soldiers and painting murals in restaurants and movie theatres. When the South Korean government tried to force him to enlist, he

## PARK SEO-BO

INTERVIEW BY ELAINE YJ LEE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIN YONG KIM

changed his name and went into hiding. In 1954, 23-year-old Park Jae-Hong grew a beard, put on a fedora, changed his voice, and became Park Seo-Bo. He would spend the rest of his life trying to understand his new identity, using art as a way to reach his reality and truth that the war had so viciously stripped away. For Park, Dansaekhwa was the most intuitive form of art to reach enlightenment and liberation. Literally translated to 'monochrome', Park's Dansaekhwa art is manifested in vivid colours and repetitive lines, which Park says are results of succumbing to nature and enforcing self-discipline. He fiercely rejects the English term, monochrome, because it inaccurately categorises his work under the monochrome movement of the West. Dansaekhwa stems from distinctly Korean ideas unique to the circumstances of his time. Out of Park's extensive body of work, his most well known is the *Ecriture* series, named after the French word for 'to write' or 'inscribe'. Now, at age 88, Park has a strange sense of time that is difficult to follow.

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'I was very sick the other day', he says, referring to his diabetes two years ago. He jumps around years as if they are days. But his memory can also be frighteningly precise, remembering every detail of a moment down to its exact date and time.

We met at Gizi, his five-storey gallery and residential building in Seoul. Gizi is filled with security cameras throughout, not to prevent or monitor theft, but to keep watch over Park's safety, lest he fall and hurt himself. Park, who can barely walk without his cane, welcomed me in his chair and greeted me with a fist pump. I could tell he was smiling behind his mask.

**How was it for you, going through the Korean War as a college student?**

The war broke out when I was a freshman. Before I knew it, I had become a junior without having learnt anything because of the war. At the time, Seoul was occupied by North Koreans and Busan was the temporary capital. When I went back to school there, my professors didn't come. I had to change my major from East Asian Art to Western Art because of the available professors.

**Even during the war, you kept working on your art. Did the realities of the war ever make you sceptical of the existence or necessity of art?**

I still wanted to draw. I only lived with one goal in mind. There was a refugee shanty town in Songdo where some of my friends lived. Since I had no money or a place to stay, I would go there to sleep or eat with them. There was a mountain in front where the US troops were stationed to take down oncoming aircraft from North Korea. They had a huge pile of trash from food rations, like boxes and cans. Ration boxes were made of extremely thick, layered, and coated cardboard so they wouldn't break apart if they landed in water. I would take a pair of scissors there and make myself a good batch of ration boxes to take back to school and use as canvases. My first self-portrait was on one of those boxes, but it got lost during a move. How regretful.

**How and why did you change your name?**

In 1954, when I was a senior in college, the government tried to snatch all the men away to war, even though there was an armistice. The government lied to us and started taking students by the truckload on graduation day. I escaped with a friend and asked someone

to give me a new name so I could disguise my identity. The government was looking for me, so I couldn't exhibit my work as Park Jae-Hong. I couldn't even visit my mother for 10 years. The person whom I asked for a new name gave my friend and me two options: Su-Hon and Seo-Bo. My friend was one year older than me, so I let him choose first. He liked Su-Hon because it flowed better with his last name, so I ended up with the leftover, which was Seo-Bo.

**In 1961, the UNESCO International Association of Art invited you to Paris to represent Korea among 60 other artists from around the world. How did your time there influence you?**

I went to Paris to participate in an international art conference. But when I arrived in January, I found out that the conference had been pushed back to October. The Asia Foundation was supposed to provide room and board and meals for me while I stayed there for a month, but I was left stranded for nearly a year. I only had \$40 with me, which was supposed to be extra spending money. It was absurd. Apparently, they sent a letter to the Korean Art Association, but no one could read it because it was in French. I was left with two choices: to go back to Korea without enough money to come back in October, or to just stick it out until then. I decided to stay, but I struggled a lot. It was normal to starve for three days. I couldn't pay rent, so I would run away from my landlord and sleep at a friend's house. At night, I rummaged through trash bins on the street to find material to use for my art. I would pick up women's pantyhose or machine parts. That experience taught me that poverty is the mother of creation.

**You are credited as one of the founders of Korean modern art, leading the Korean Contemporary Artists Association and pioneering the Dansaekhwa movement. As an artist who strives for individuality, what is the power and meaning of group action?**

That's a question for fools. We cannot change the world alone. We must establish a community and reform society together. No one, however smart, can confront society by himself. As artists, we must push for cultural innovation not only in cities like Seoul but in other cities, too. I pushed for every major city in Korea to hold their own contemporary art festivals so they could form a community



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and learn from each other. Regional activity also fosters pride, and culture must never lose pride.

**What is the difference between the Western monochrome movement and Korea's Dansaekhwa movement?**

The West tends to think that our art is influenced by them. They think of us as an extension of their work. But we are completely different. In the West, artists express themselves and their egos to the fullest, often showing off their techniques. Think of art from the Renaissance period: humans are the central subject, and nature only serves as a background to

and faithfully bow or depend on Amitabha and the Bodhisatva of Great Compassion to guide me']. She said if I repeated that for five years, or however long more, I would be cleansed and emptied. I thought she was teasing me, so I asked her if she had met Buddha this way. She said, 'Yes, and I can meet him any time I want. Because I am Buddha. Meeting Buddha is to realise one's self'. That statement has taken over my life.

So, now what? I realised that I needed to empty myself, but how was I supposed to apply that in my work? Years later, when my second son was three years old, I saw him trying to write in a notebook. Of course he



describe their context. In East Asian art, humans are drawn to be as small as rocks amid greater nature. Our philosophy for the past 5,000 years has been to accept nature and obey it. For me, drawing and painting are only tools to discipline and purify myself, like a monk meditating to cleanse his mind. Art is just the leftover garbage from that process.

**How does the process of creating your art emulate a monk cleansing his mind?**

In 1955, I went to see a monk to ask her how I could become a good artist. She told me to put a statue of Buddha at home and recite 'Namuamitabul Gwanseumbosal' to it over and over again, all day [meaning 'I take refuge

didn't know how to write, so he would erase what he wrote, rewrite something, and repeat the process until it looked right. After a few tries, the paper crumpled up and eventually ripped apart. Out of frustration and anger, he viciously scribbled all over the page, and then gave up. I thought, 'This is it'. I started to repeat the process of drawing lines, just like my son. The first drawing I made to mimic his notebook is in White Cube, London, right now. I will never sell it. We were supposed to exhibit it on April 20 this year, but it got pushed back to March 23 next year, because of coronavirus.

**In the past, you've been quoted as saying, 'How can you call yourself an artist if you only**

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**show tiny works? Is that why you choose to work with big canvases?**

When I was young, I used to lift canvases more than four metres wide and spin them up in the air. Now, I can't even lift ones that are less than two metres because I have no strength. I thought that I should work with big canvases when I had the energy. I used to draw 14 hours a day, every day for 50 years. I reduced my working hours to eight hours per day in 2009. Nowadays, I can barely do one task a day.

**The art industry has its own trends, just like fashion. With your most recent pastel Ecriture**

of innocent kids at a school? It's because of stress. Twentieth-century art was all about maximalism and showing off, and that kind of art only pains us more. We are exhausted and need to heal.

**Is that why you work with so much pastel? How do you choose your colours?**

In 2000, a gallery in Tokyo invited me to do a solo exhibition in celebration of my 70th birthday. I went to Fukushima's Mount Bandai with my wife, and the fall leaves were so red they seemed to be glowing. It felt like a great fire was going to swallow me whole. There, I realised again the greatness of mother na-



**series, you've been criticised as being sensitive to trends.**

Of course I consider trends. My style has changed because my surroundings have changed. An artist has no choice but to change according to the change in climate and the political, economic, and cultural conditions of his time. An artist's physical and mental condition will always show in his work. If the times are turbulent, that will show in the work.

**You've been an artist for nearly 70 years now. How has your work changed?**

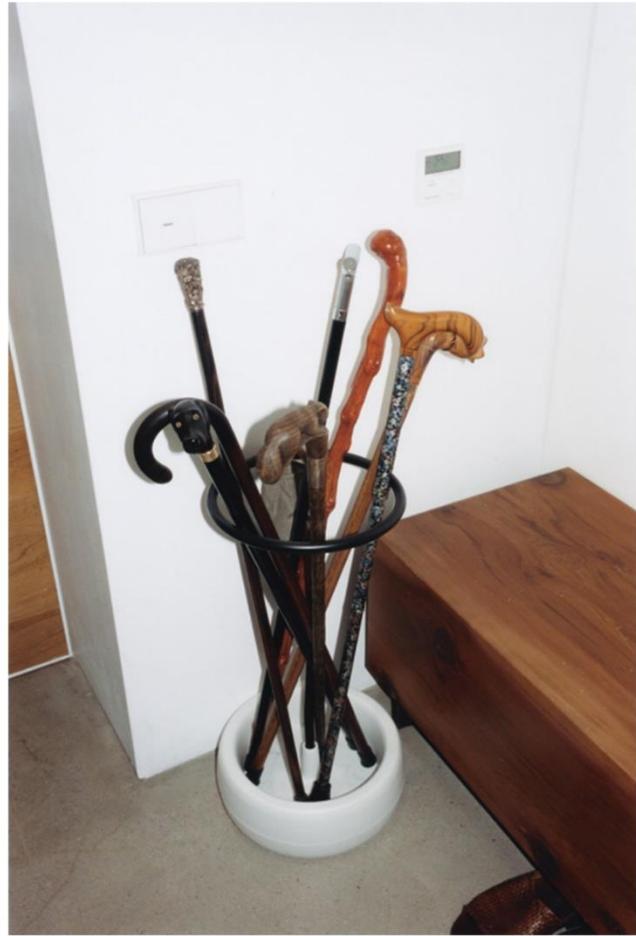
As we entered the 21st century, my focus shifted to healing theory. The earth is getting sick. Why would a man shoot a bunch

of innocent kids in this world? The red colours reflected on the lake and would constantly change with the sunlight. That was when I started to insert colours of nature into my work.

I make all my own colours by mixing them with a drill. I name them after elements of nature. My 'sakura' colour is pale because a sakura flower is almost white on its own. It only looks pink when a lot of them are together. I have a colour named 'air'; one day, I just found myself taking deep breaths in front of it, so I named it that. There's also forsythia, persimmon, maple.

**Have you ever thought about retiring?**

No. It still makes me happy to exhibit at new



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galleries. My work recently entered the Langen Foundation in Germany. It's an amazing museum designed by Tadao Ando—one of the best in Europe. It is a great blessing.

**You have had a decades-long friendship with Lee Ufan. What's your relationship like?**

We are not friends! We are five years apart, which is the difference between heaven and earth! He was still a high school student when I was working as a modern arts activist. I remember when he first came to see me in Tokyo. It was August 16, 1986. It was scorching hot, yet he dressed up in his best sweater, out of respect for me. His sleeves were so worn out, I could tell he was very poor. He showed me around Tokyo while I was there, and the more we talked, he was so different from other artists. It's because he was a philosophy major, not an art major. I wanted to help him, so I pushed hard for him to represent Korea in the 1969 São Paulo International Art Festival. That became his first big stepping stone to world fame.

**Is your new Gizi building inspired by your artwork? The ridged façade resembles your *Écriture* series.**

I didn't request the design. I let the architect do his thing. I actually told him not to reference my work, because I don't want to live in my own thoughts anymore. My architect also built my tomb. It's in Bundang Memorial Park. I was just there the other day. I love it. Very simple.

**Which is your favourite part of the house?**

My stone garden. It's covered in all-natural moss. I spend a lot of time here to sit and think and repent to Buddha. The gallery space next to it is separated by glass walls, so it changes as the garden changes. One time, Alexandra Munroe, the Guggenheim's senior curator of Asian art, visited this place and praised the garden. She said she'd seen nothing like it. I'm bargaining with someone right now to get a stone pagoda from the Silla period placed in the righthand corner. I also got these head sculptures of me made on August 26, 2006. This place will become my Memorial Museum of Art after I die. I spent a lot of money on this place.

**You said you repent to Buddha. What do you repent about?**

A man makes countless mistakes in his life-

time. That's how you become human. I lived a competitive life, so I know I must have hurt people along the way. I admit my wrongdoings and swear to never commit them again.

**What are your most prized possessions at home?**

I have a collection of Montblanc fountain pens. I don't know how to type, so I still write everything by hand. I'm a master at bargaining for them. One time, I cut the price of a pen from 13 million Korean won to 8.5 million. I buy any and all hats that I see. My favourite hat is my cashmere Borsalino one, the Italian mafia's favourite brand. It was gifted by my agents at Galerie Perrotin, Paris. I also love jewellery. As I got older and started to get more wrinkles, I wanted to distract people and get them to look at something else by wearing big crystals and stones. But, nowadays, I like what I see in the mirror. I think I look beautiful and lovely as an old man.

**Will you continue to work for the remainder of your life?**

I have to. I don't want to be remembered as a sloppy artist. I'm still ready to take over the world and swallow it whole.

apartamento - Park Seo-Bo

