

Art From the Ashes: How Korean Minimalism Stormed the West

December 06, 2016 | RACHEL CORBETT

page 1 of 2



Ha Chong-hyun at his studio in Seoul in 2016. (Photo by Rachel Corbett)

It's about as common for art dealers today to "rediscover" older artists and movements as it is to discover new ones. Blockbuster sales for works from the 1970s Japanese avant-garde artists of the Gutai and Mono-ha groups in recent years has some speculators predicting that Korean monochrome painting from the same decade known as Dansaekhwa is next. In many ways, the conditions are perfect: a hunger in Korea to reclaim its art history after decades of political erasure and an ongoing hunger in the West to capitalize on new narratives.

Seoul's Kukje Gallery has spearheaded the Dansaekhwa revival both at home, with its landmark 2014 exhibition "The Art of Dansaekhwa," and abroad, partnering with blue chip galleries like Blum & Poe and Almine Rech to show its artists in the US and Europe. Kukje founder Hyun-Sook Lee says that historically, when her gallery sold at art fairs, "the proportion used to be 70 percent Western art, but over the past couple years there have been more clients asking where the roots of the new generation of Korean artists come from. That's why we started to introduce and strengthen the history of Korean art" and paved the way for the resurgence of Dansaekhwa.

The austere, process-based aesthetic of Dansaekhwa is reminiscent of prison-made art — that of someone who has all the time in the world but few resources: canvases of rough hemp; muted colors, like gray on white; paint that is methodically, obsessively dripped or streaked; and repetitive pencil lines like the hatch marks inside a cell.

The comparison isn't coincidental. The economic and political conditions under which many Dansaekhwa artists worked was dire. "I found objects from the remains of war," says painter Ha Chong-Hyun, who has a show at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles through December 24, and will stage concurrent exhibitions at Almine Rech in Paris and London this June.

His auction record today is \$232,000. "It was difficult to get a proper canvas or oil paints," he says, and "we also wanted to avoid Western tools." So he incorporated barbed wire, applied paint by "pushing" it by hand, and substituted hemp for canvas, which was widely available from the bags of imported food rations.

Ha's contemporary, Park Seo-Bo, whose work began commanding seven figure prices at auction this past year, once had a similarly makeshift practice. "When I was poor, I had no money to buy wooden frames," he says, "so I bought Styrofoam and cut it into blocks" to mount the works a few inches off the wall. "It is still one of my trademarks to this day." Without a market, the process supplanted the product. Like "a monk who chants all day at a Buddhist temple to empty himself," says Park, the rhythm of oil painting is similar in that it's "an action that has no purpose."

But as Dansaekhwa increasingly circulates in the West, Ha asks that observers "not compare me to Western artists" — nor does he compare himself to Korean artists either, he says, adding, "I'm a man of freedom."