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## “DANSAEKHWA” SHOWS CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING IN VENICE COLLATERAL EVENT

BY Martin Gayford | June 30, 2015



Park Seo-Bo (1931-) *Ecriture(描法)No. 89-79-82-83*. 1983, Pencil and Oil on Hemp cloth. 194.5 x 300cm (Courtesy of the artist and Kukje Gallery)

Context is everything, even in abstraction. That is the message of an intriguing exhibition titled “Dansaekhwa,” which is currently at the Palazzo Contarini-Polignac, Venice (a collateral event of the Biennale). Dansaekhwa is a Korean word meaning “single color painting.”

The artists involved were mainly born in the 1920s and 30s, making them contemporaries of westerners such as Yves Klein (1928 – 1962) or Frank Stella (born 1936). In several ways — a use of a highly restricted palette of one color or, at most two, and a complete elimination of the illusion of space — the paintings in Dansaekhwa look quite like the more austere varieties of occidental abstract painting.

But the same paint-mark can mean something quite different in another cultural tradition. In eastern art, calligraphy and painting have always been closely allied. A single gesture of a brush may be form a letter (or part of one); or a similar mark might represent, say, the petal of a lotus. This is the background to the art of the seven Korean artists in the exhibition.

A work by Lee Ufan in the show from his series “From Line” (1979) consists of a series of parallel, vertical strokes, running from the top of a canvas to the bottom. It looks, and is, minimalist. It is also,

however, a remarkable exercise in painterly control. Each stroke begins at the top with a fully loaded brush, then — as the pigment slowly runs out — it becomes thinner and thinner, and traces of the individual bristles appear.

Simultaneously, almost imperceptibly, the color changes from a solid blue at the start to wispy yellow at the lower extremity. Each of these long streaks of paint looks as if it was achieved with one continuous movement of the artist's arm — and, in fact, Lee Ufan, never requires more than three for a single paint line. Executing such a work is an exercise in meditative concentration.

The strokes are all fundamentally the same, but endlessly varied in the detailed striations made by the brush within each larger stripe. In this way picture puts you in mind of classical Chinese paintings of bamboo. Each cane and leaf in such a picture is, naturally, rather like the rest; but conversely every single one has its own distinctive energy and identity.

Internationally, Lee Ufan (born 1936) is the best-known of these artists. But the others have similar qualities. Kwon Young Woo (1926-2013) used traditional oriental media such as ink and paper to abstract effect, although some of his works, too, have a look of bamboo. Chung Sang-Hwa (born 1932) folds his canvas to crack the paint layer, creating random lines. Of course, an appreciation of the effects of chance — in the dribbles of glaze on certain Japanese ceramics, for example, has long been an aspect of Eastern art.

In a quiet contemplative way, this is an intriguing exhibition: a demonstration of how eastern and western artists — like those brushstrokes of Lee Ufan — can be at the same time similar, and utterly unlike.

“Dansaekhwa” is on view through August 15 at Palazzo Contarini-Polignac, Venice.

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