

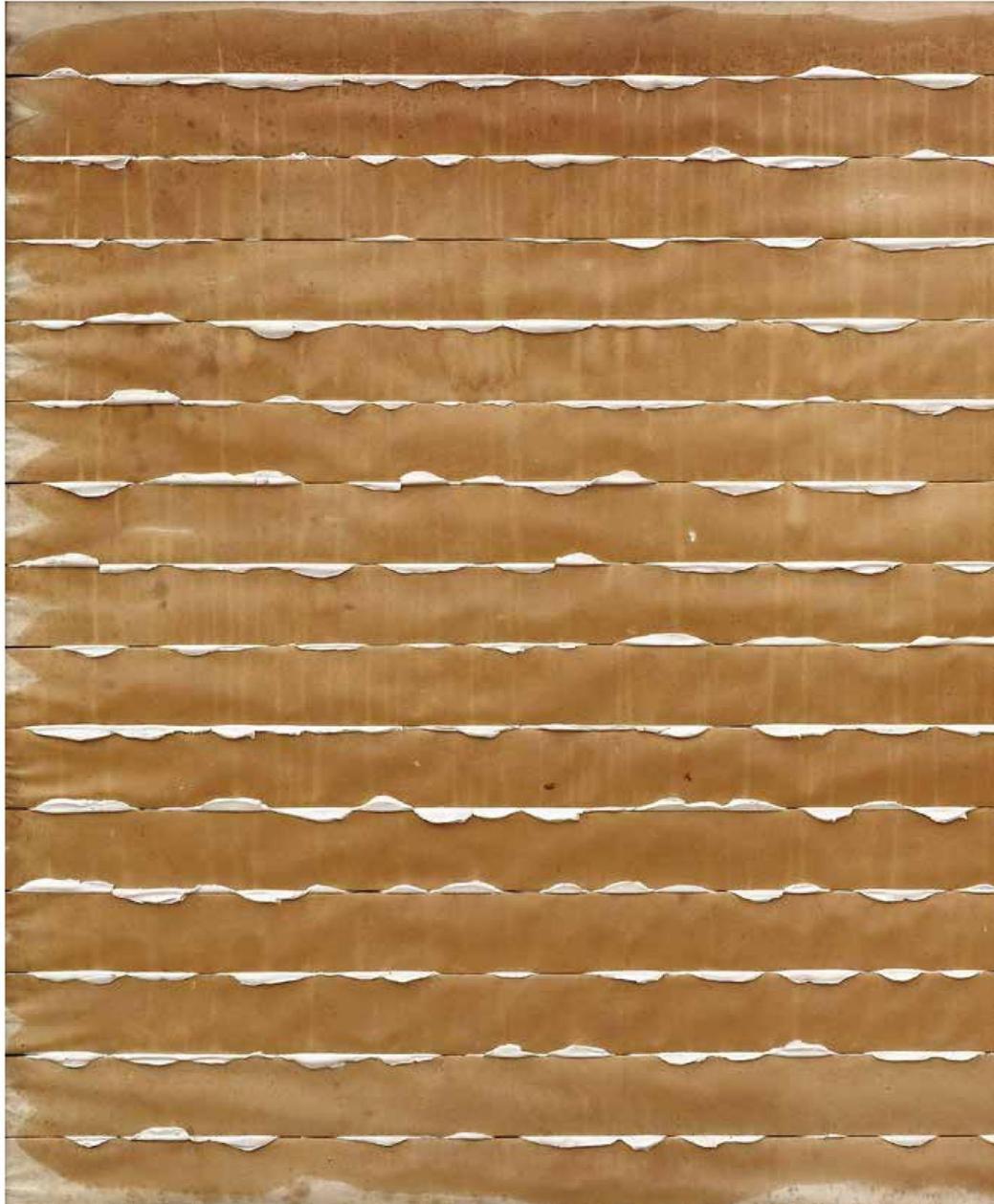
BIJUTSU TECHO

HA CHONG-HYUN : Convergence of Mass

March, 2016 | Taro Nettleton

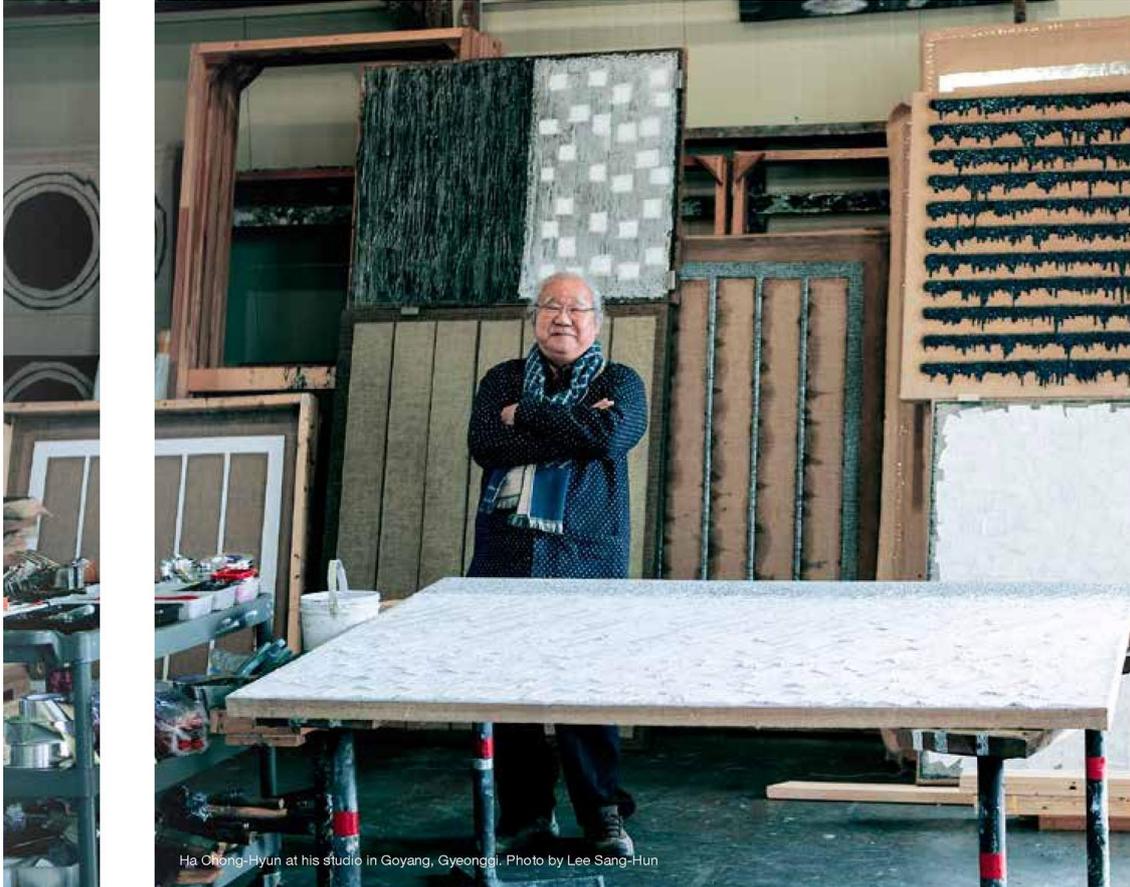
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WHY ASIAN ART NOW?





Ha Chong-Hyun,
Work 74-A, 1974,
oil on paper covered
wooden slats, 120 x 175cm
Courtesy
the artist studio



Ha Chong-Hyun at his studio in Goyang, Gyeonggi. Photo by Lee Sang-Hun

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HA CHONG-HYUN

Convergence of Mass

Interview by Taro Nettleton



“I wanted my paintings to stand on their own based on Korean standards, and not measured and torn apart by Western criteria.”

the pictorial structure.

In conversation, Ha is extremely articulate, funny, and forthcoming about his practice. He exudes a kind of rough-and-tumble casualness and humility.

As soon as we arrive, Ha graciously gave us a tour of his warehouse-turned-gallery, which houses a comprehensive selection of his life's works. The display starts with works from the 1960s, when he was a member of the A.G. (Avant-Garde) group. One piece comprises of two waist-high stacks of blank sheets of paper, which are stand-ins for the stacks of heavily censored newspapers distributed at the time. In keeping with his stated aim of destruction, Ha has relentlessly attacked painting for more than forty years. The next phase of Ha's oeuvre, from the early 1970s, is represented by a series of monochromatic paintings covered with barbed wire and springs. In another transitional piece, *Work 74-A* (1974), Ha laid white paint heavily on a wooden board, then applied wallpaper on top of the wet paint, allowing it to ooze out from beneath the strips of wallpaper. This incorporation of chance and process lead to Ha's most representative series *Conjunction*, which he has produced since the mid 1970s. In this series, Ha pushes oil paint from the back and through the hemp cloth. The viscous paint is then shaped into geometric, bar-like shapes and left in heavy accumulation at the end of the bars of impasto paint. The resulting minimal forms create strong contrasts against the untreated fabric. The intense materiality and nearly sculptural quality of the thick paint pushed through the rough, hemp must be experienced by seeing the paintings in person.

At the end of the exhibit, in which he places new works to assess if they stand up to his historical oeuvre, he quips, “I think we could end the interview here, no? We don't need to do the interview anymore, right?”

We respectfully insisted that we still had a couple more questions.

A Thrust from the Underside

HC: This was a warehouse, but I had no use for such a thing, so I made it into a viewing room. It makes it easier to understand the work, right? I made this space precisely for people like you!

— **Thank you. It's very much appreciated. Can you talk about these early works?**

HC: I used the barbed wire and hemp fabric, which I could easily find in the divided Korea, to represent my experience through the 1970s. They symbolize imprisonment and the profusion of military bases. I basically used stuff that was used in the war. Normally, hemp

Beginning to undertake an ongoing series of works entitled “Conjunction” in 1970 Ha Chong-Hyun has devoted his career to an experimental practice which resolutely grapples with the juncture between the pure language of painting and the physicality of the artist's body. Combining a concern for contextual materials, innovative techniques of paint application, along with a stoically subdued palette, Ha has consistently pushed towards defying simple categorization by Western standards, reclaiming a universal identity in distinctly local conditions.

Ha Chong-Hyun, who is 80-years old, is a seminal member of the Korean Dansaekhwa movement. In the early 1970s, he began working with hemp cloth canvases and barbed wire, incorporating the plentiful materials of Postwar South Korea into his abstract paintings. In these works, the support is frequently violated by the barbed wire, which may be lain over the surface, stenciled upon the canvas and even punctured through the fabric. Ha has stated that the aim of his practice is to reconstruct

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Work 73-13, 1973,
barbed wire on panel, 120 x 240cm
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.
Photo by Kim Sang-Tae

isn't readily available, but after the Korean War in 1953, there was no rice, and the US brought in grains held in these hemp sacks to store. US soldiers also rolled up the hemp and sold it at the Namdaemun Market [the oldest market in Korea]. I remember removing the remaining grains and bringing the hemp cloth home. The biggest size available was about 100cm x 80cm. So I couldn't make a large painting even if I wanted to. The work was a product of necessity and limitation.

—**So you chose the material for availability and symbolic value?**

HC: Yes, but there was another layer of meaning. I used these hemp canvases

to free myself from Western influences. I abandoned the traditional canvas because it was a support used in Western painting. Oil paint, brush, canvas—if I used these materials, the work would have been mostly Western due to its material origin and I wouldn't be able to articulate myself. Western critics have a bad habit of trying to fit me into a Western category, and comparing me to Western artists based on simple formal parallels, so I used hemp cloth to add complexity and make things more difficult for them!

—**Can you speak about the process of making these paintings, in which you push the paint from the back and through the canvas?**

HC: So for example, this painting [one of the *Conjunction* series] was included in "Korean Art Today" (Seoul Arts Center, Seoul, 1990). The canvas is untreated. I push the paint from the back of the canvas, I then go on to scrape the paint, and that's where the authorial control comes in. The paint and the hemp interact as I work upon them. So there's action. The canvas, paint, and my action are the three components that make this work. This looks easy, but what looks easiest is actually the most difficult to perfect. If I used color, it would be easy to make the painting look fairly good. Without color, it's more of a challenge which

never seems to improve. Even after decades, it's difficult every time. I only started incorporating color around 2010. If I suddenly change my method after decades, it won't work. This painting was made during a transitional period. It took me about five years and after the transitional period, I started using color in full. I travel overseas as well, to see if any other artists work in a way that's similar to mine, and also to see how I can position myself in the Western context. And the answer I had as I traveled overseas was that my work was seen as something very new. But to me, it's nothing new.

Globality in the Local

—**You've explained that Korean-ness is an important factor in your work. Have you ever found this close association between your works and a national aesthetic and identity stifling?**

HC: Most artists go overseas to study. Then they do their work there to gain recognition. That is the typical way an artist "makes it." Those artists would obviously work with materials found in the Western world. And their style is also Westernized. So they have to be totally Western to be recognized in the Western

world. I've taught many students who go abroad for study, and when they return, I see how Westernized they've become and how they've lost a sense of nationality in their works.

I'm not trying to be nationalistic, but by selecting what is most Korean, I know I can make the most globally relevant work. This color, for example, we call earth

“The paint and the hemp interact in the way that I work them. So there's action. The canvas, paint, and my action are the three components that make this work.”



Conjunction 84-10, 1984,
oil on hemp, 130 x 97cm
Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

color. This grey over here symbolizes traditional Joseon dynasty porcelain and that black is from traditional Korean roof tiles. So my understanding is that as long as I choose my palette very carefully from the Korean environment, it will work and be recognized globally. Secondly, I wanted my paintings to stand on their own based on Korean standards, and not measured and torn apart by Western criteria. I think Mono-ha experienced something similar with Western critics trying to understand it in their own terms. As you know, both Mono-ha and Dansaekhwa developed in the 1970s. I think that simultaneity had a particular significance.

— **Beyond their contemporaneity, what sort of relation do you see between Mono-ha and Dansaekhwa?**

HC: Some people have the misconception that Dansaekhwa and Mono-ha developed simultaneously as a result of cultural exchange, but the 1970s just happened to be a time when the East was freed from oppression from the West and was able to develop its own voice. One difference between Mono-ha and Dansaekhwa is that Mono-ha artists shared an ideology and purpose. They made a collective effort to make works now known as Mono-ha. I think the goals of their expression were similar. Dansaekhwa artists, on the other hand, did not intentionally get together, share a goal or set a target. It just happened that 30 or 40 Korean artists wanted to make works through a method of meditation. One day, they got together to share their works and realized, that although the works were varied, they could be called a group. Mono-ha and Dansaekhwa are very different, but they both represent an era.

— **It also seems reductive to categorize either Mono-ha or Dansaekhwa as a unified movement, since the works of various artists involved in both groups are actually quite varied. It seems to me that if there's a parallel between your work and Mono-ha, it's not with Lee Ufan or Nobuo Sekine, but rather to Noboru Takayama, who used railroad ties to symbolically refer to forced labor during WWII. There's actually strong symbolism in your work as well.**

HC: Because they are different, they can co-exist.



Conjunction 95-026, 1995,
oil on hemp cloth, 185 x 185 cm. Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul

An Economy of Means

— **Throughout your career, you've really deconstructed and even attacked the canvas from all angles, from both front and back, yet still demonstrating a commitment to the canvas. Another distinction between Dansaekhwa and Mono-ha is that the latter is primarily an installation/sculpture based movement. Your works, however have a strong dimensionality and materiality, which situates them between painting and sculpture. There's something very architectural, for example, in the earlier works, such as the barbed wire-punctured pieces, or *Work 74-A* (1974), in which paint oozes out from under strips of wallpaper. It's as if you're treating the canvas as a kind of wall, albeit a permeable one. Hung in the gallery space, they seem to even more strongly suggest a relation to the architectural details of the space. Were architecture and space concerns at the time?**

HC: Yes, I definitely had an interest in architecture and the city. Before the wire works, in my 1967 painting *White Paper for Urban Planning*, I also addressed the transformation of the Korean city's landscape as it shifted from the agricultural to the industrial and the modern.

With this work [*Work 74-A* (1974)], I took a thin board, applied paint, and overlaid strips of wallpaper to make the paint squeeze out from underneath. It was a

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very delicate procedure.

It's difficult for me to define Dansaekhwa at this point, because the artistic methods and materials vary greatly from artist to artist even within the group. The more you know about Dansaekhwa, the more complex it becomes.

This is my first piece [*Conjunction*, 1974] in which I pushed paint from the back. I also added color, which was another shift in my work. So this piece [*Post Conjunction 11-2*, 2011] is pretty significant in terms of changes in my practice. This is from 2011.

—**I wouldn't characterize your work as seeming easy at all. It actually seems very considered and deliberate. What about the relative importances of process versus finished product and the different degrees of finishedness in the earlier and more recent works? In some ways, your earlier works feel more open and your more recent works more completed, more deliberate.**

HC: I prefer work that's less done than overdone. It's a very critical decision for an artist. When to stop painting? My preference is always for the less done.

—**So that has been constant between the earlier and recent works?**

HC: Every time I explore a new direction in my work, it might be more worked, because I'm moving away from

a familiar method. That may create a difference from the viewers' perspective. I try to diversify my work style so that I'm not just seen as the artist that scrapes paint. I also try to be careful of adding too much, because that limits future opportunities for my work.

Recalling Origins

—**What about the institutionalization of Dansaekhwa and the criticism it received for being apolitical and hegemonic in the Korean contemporary art scene to the point of excluding other types of contemporaneously produced works?**

HC: Dansaekhwa doesn't have political ties or significance. It just happened to coincide with a politically charged period. In terms of its institutionalization, this has to do with how society defines us, because it's easy to label us as a group us. But it wasn't our intention to be grouped in this way.

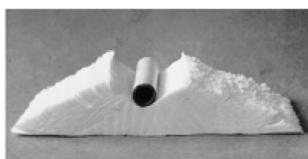
—**But, Dansaekhwa, as a movement, is experiencing a huge surge in marketability and popularity. Also, I want to underscore that this is not my opinion, but in a recent article published in the *New Yorker*, an auctioneer is quoted as saying that Dansaekhwa is easy for Westerners to collect because it's abstract and you don't need to study or understand context to understand abstract art! And this seems so tragic**



Installation view of the solo show at Kukje Gallery, Seoul, 2015
Both works are from *Conjunction* series, 2015
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul

HA CHONG-HYUN

Works



Work 72-7, 1972
Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe,
Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo



Conjunction 79-11, 1979
Courtesy the artist and
Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/
New York/Tokyo



Post Conjunction 11-2, 2011
Courtesy the artist studio



Conjunction 1504, 2015
Courtesy Kukje Gallery

Biography

- 1935 | Born in Sancheong, Korea
- 1959 | Graduated from Painting Dept. of Hongik University, Seoul
- 1969 | Chairman of A.G. group (~1974)
- 1988 | Commissioner of the 43rd Venice Biennale
- 1990 | Dean of Fine Arts College, Hongik University
- 1995 | Commissioner and advisor of the 1st Gwangju Biennale
- 2000 | Director of Seoul Museum of Art (~2006)
- 2002 | Solo show at Busan Museum of Art
- 2003 | Solo show at Fondazione Mudima, Milan
- 2004 | Solo show at Gyeongnam Art Museum
- 2012 | Solo show at National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (Gwacheon)
- 2014 | Group show "From All Aides: Tansaekhwa on Abstraction" at Blum & Poe, LA
- 2014 | Group show "The Art of Dansaekhwa" at Kukje Gallery, Seoul
- 2015 | Group show "Dansaekhwa" at Palazzo Contarini-Polignac, Venice

*Recently, Ha presented solo shows at Kukje Gallery (Seoul, 2015), Tina Kim Gallery (NY, 2015), Blum & Poe (NY, 2014). His works are included in "When Process Becomes Form: Dansaekhwa and Korean Abstraction" (through Apr.24th, The Boghossian Foundation, Brussels).

given the obvious complexity of works when considered in their particular socio-historical contexts.

HC: It may seem easy and abstract, but the philosophical depth of Dansaekhwa is only revealed when you consider it in full. I think it's difficult for the general viewer to realize.

—You explained how you selected color and material in order to distinguish your practice from the West. In terms of Korean artists, however, there is added complexity in its historical relation to Japan and its role as a filter for Western influences.

HC: Well, my work appears in the collections of many Japanese museums. The Japanese critic Yusuke Nakahara said to me one time when we were drinking, do you know why so many Japanese museums collect your work? I said no, of course I have no idea. He said many Japanese artists left Japan for Europe and the US to study and lost their connection to their roots. He commented that Japanese institutions collect my work as a reminder of the importance of keeping one's roots. Collectors feel that my work is unique for surviving the transition from

industrialization to modernization.

—Did you ever fear that the close connection to Korean-ness could become stereotyped or essentialized, particularly since Japanese critics, such as Soetsu Yanagi played a pivotal role in creating this strong association between Koreans and the color white?

HC: I think I managed to keep myself out of that trap. Nakahara has claimed that Japanese institutions like my work because it retains what is very Korean by nature.

Interestingly, however, I don't understand what he sees in my work that's so Korean! And that's how I've managed to escape being stereotyped.

I had an opportunity once to have tea at the Kamakura Gallery and introduce a painting for potential purchase. They asked for a small painting to hang in the room where the personal altar is displayed. I agreed, and as I was leaving, I looked back and realized that my painting harmonized really well with the room. That's when I realized what Nakahara might have meant by my paintings being distinctively Korean. ☺

It may seem easy and abstract, but the philosophical depth of Dansaekhwa is only revealed when you consider it in full.