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Kwon Young-Woo, the Pioneer of Korea's Dansaekhwa Movement, at Kukje Gallery

BY ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE | OCTOBER 31, 2015



Untitled work on paper by Kwon Young-Woo, on view at Kukje Gallery, Seoul
(The artist's estate and Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Photo Copyright (c) Sang-Tae kim)

[Kwon Young-woo](#) (1926-2013) was part of the first generation of South Korea's modern artists, and the first class of Seoul University's art school (1957); he also pioneered the monochromatic art movement, the Dansaekhwa. Trained in traditional Chinese ink painting, Young-Woo built bridges through his art between Korea's avant-garde and Western movement of Abstract Expressionism. Working on traditional materials, such as hanji paper, he developed a personal style that used fingernails to scratch and tear the painting surface.

Seoul's prestigious Kukje Gallery recently opened a show of Young-Woo's art, featuring 30 of his works on paper from 1976-1996. Zoe Chun, the gallery's Communications Director, spoke to BLOUIN ARTINFO on the show, Young-Woo and the gallery's role in nurturing Korean art.

The Dansaekhwa movement arose at a historical juncture when young Korea wanted to escape the colonial past yet hoped to engage with Western modernism. Today, those conditions don't exist. How does contemporary Korea relate to the Dansaekhwa philosophy?

To understand the artists today who have the benefit of fundamentally being Korean in culture, it is vital to examine the roots of Korean contemporary art — which would include the first contemporary artists, and the culture they were surrounded by — in order to better understand today's artists and their work. Besides, I hope for a wider exchange of Korea's art movements following Dansaekhwa.

I think it is important to note Korea's past political, social and cultural aspects that are being discussed through Dansaekhwa. Instead of limiting this as a phenomenon solely for Korea or a culturally specific region, a distinctive point is that by revisiting this past culture, we are able to re-evaluate our present. Rather than placing juxtapositions of Western or Eastern, the artists and their works need to be read in a modern perspective through its original era.

Is there any other latter-day art movement that the Dansaekhwa has influenced and been instrumental in shaping?

While it is not quite right to state that it is a direct aftermath of Dansaekhwa, Minjung Art (literally "people's art") arose after Dansaekhwa. It arose directly in reaction to the political scene of Korea, and is radical rather than academic. It can be read as a documentation of the military dictatorship and the rapid change in the social system to capitalism. Today's Gwangju Biennale can be seen as a result of the Minjung Art and the civil movement of that period.

There has been renewed international interest in the Dansaekhwa art. How would it help sustain the movement in present times?

Rather than being renewed, I think it was a natural occurrence with the flow of time, and it's also encouraging. As Korean contemporary art is difficult to pinpoint in regards to styles or a natural point of reference in comparison to the contemporary arts of China and Japan, I think Dansaekhwa has become a starting point.

Currently, there is a wide array of intriguing cultures and happenings all around Asia, from East Asia, to Middle East, and to South East Asia. In the perspective of the West's modernism, there are rather vague topics that need further emphasis and elaboration. I look forward to new perspectives on these topics from the West to become points of active conversations and interactions.

Has the gallery engaged with the art of [Kwon Young-woo](#) before?

Through conversations with his family, we are trying to have [Kwon Young-woo](#)'s work become part of

major collections and exhibited in the direction that the artist would have wanted. As a member of the first class to study Oriental Painting at Seoul National University, his investigation of paper was very unconventional and very experimental, transforming it into an important style and philosophy as calligraphy was the major style at the time. Containing the gestures, repetitions, and performative aspects of Dansaekhwa, [Kwon Young-woo](#) was pivotal in expanding the base and stepping stone in the next generation of artists' formal experimentations. He was able to make the critics assert the same statement through his work as well.

Does the gallery have a dedicated program to promote, nurture and archive Dansaekhwa art?

Kukje Gallery has been concentrating on introducing major artists not only in exhibitions, but in published catalogues and through other multi-faceted approaches as well. This includes supporting the individual artists' intensified activities following their participation in the collateral exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale, publishing a collection of essays by leading international art historians and professionals, organizing a roundtable discussion on living and late artists, and recording and distributing these activities. An internal archive is in process as well; we are planning to open these references to professionals, collectors, researchers and other people visiting our gallery with these interests. Outside of the gallery's conventional commercial purpose, we are striving to build networks and connections for actively practicing Korean artists and their works that have directly or indirectly been supported by the rise of Dansaekhwa in numerous art fairs.

— The exhibition runs through December 6 at Kukje Gallery, 54, Samcheong-ro, Jongno-gu, Seoul.
www.kukjegallery.com

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