

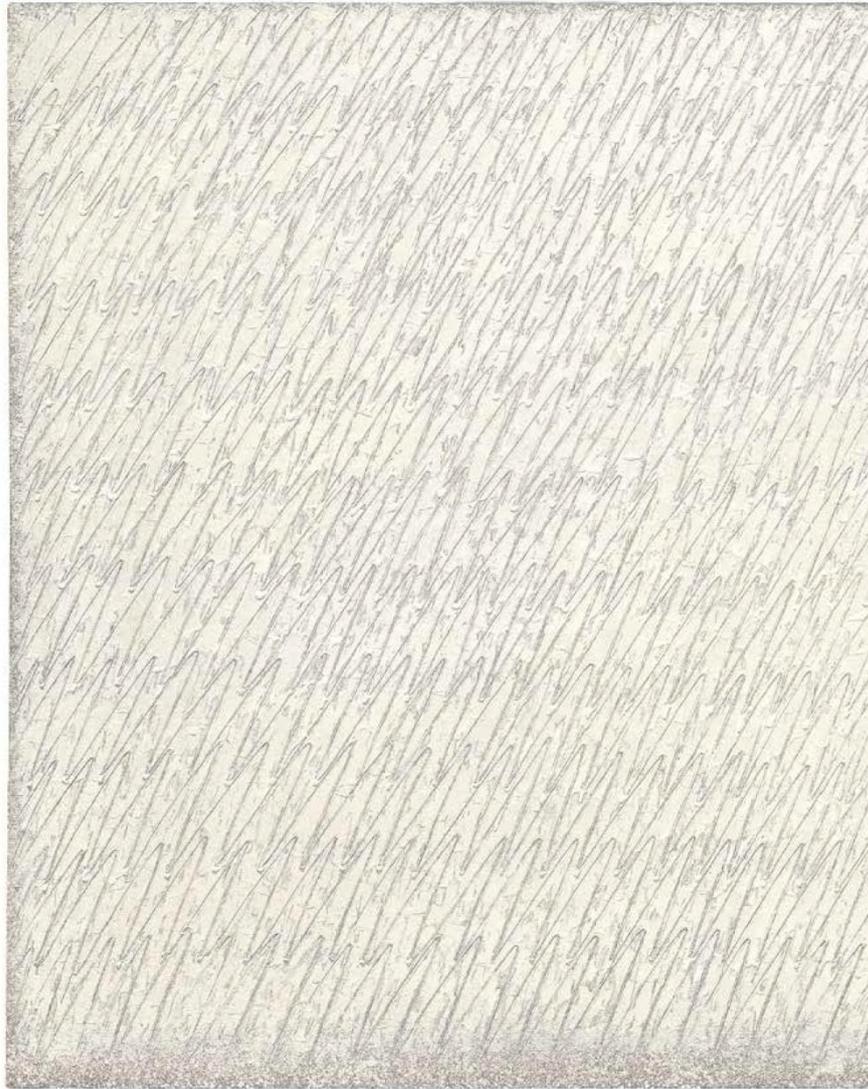
BIJUTSU TECHO

Park Seo-Bo Emptying the Self

March, 2016 | Taro Nettleton

page 1 of 8

WHY ASIAN ART NOW?



Park Seo-Bo, *Ecriture No. 69-79-82-83, 1983*,
pencil and oil on hemp cloth, 194.5 x 300 cm
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery





Interview 2

PARK SEO-BO

Emptying the Self

Interview by Taro Nettleton

It's an action of emptying myself,
of freeing myself from everything
that may hold me back. ”

*Hailed as the father of the Dansaekhwa movement, Park Seo-Bo is an iconic figure of Korean abstraction and is particularly renowned for his *Ecriture* series of drawing on paint. Here he reasserts his relevance in the information fueled contemporary age and claims a purity of action and aesthetic, which, in synchronization with nature, leads further away from the creator's individual subjectivity. Whilst having contributed to the formal recognition of Dansaekhwa, Park also disputes its terms and certain political narratives and here outlines his own vision of what Dansaekhwa should be.*

Park Seo-Bo, who is now 84-years-old, is a leading practitioner of Korean "Dansaekhwa" painting. Though literally meaning "monochrome painting," Park suggests that the three essential elements of Dansaekhwa are "the absence of an identifiable figure behind the work; the repetition of action; and materiality." The definition works well with his description of his own practice. His stated aim in painting is to empty himself (and thus

absent the self) through the repetitive actions in which he manifests the essential qualities of the materials he uses. In the current production process, however, a dozen or so assistants execute his paintings, seemingly complicating this concept of painting as meditation and self-emptying.

Over four decades since the late 1960s, and identification of Dansaekhwa in the 1970s, Park has continuously produced a series of works titled *Ecriture*. There are however, at least four major phases of development in this series. In the earliest stage, Park produced a series of paintings by using a pencil to inscribe an off-white-painted canvas whilst still wet. Until the mid-1970s, the penciled diagonal lines were of similar length and used to produce rectilinear forms that more or less echoed and referred to the shape of the canvas itself. In the later 1970s, however, he introduces curvilinear marks that evoke flowing, roman-alphabet handwriting. Despite their abstraction, these works demand consideration within the context of the veritable dictatorship instated by South Korean President Park Chung-Hee, who



Park Seo-Bo at his studio in Seoul. Photo by Lee Sang-Hun

declared martial law in 1972.

In the 1980s, he begins to work with *hanji*, traditional Korean paper, which he applies to canvas and incises and scores with repeated lines. Until the early to mid 1990s, Park uses lines and brush marks to create complicated overall patterns on the paper surface. In the mid 1990s, he begins his black and white period in which he continues to work with the same scoring oil-on-paper-on-canvas process, but to produce his most minimalist and geometric canvases to date. The recurring form of pinstripes punctuated by solid rectangular forms employed in these years continues through the current stage marked by the introduction of color at the start of the 21st century.

A Respite from the Digital Age

Head closely shaven and dressed all in black except for the gigantic violet rock worn on his index finger, Park Seo-Bo cuts a formidable, and conspicuously patriarchal, figure despite his compact frame. As soon as we walk

into the storage area of his foundation, he candidly revealed that he considered suicide at the turn of the century out of a fear of losing relevancy in the digital age. Our conversation, however, is repeatedly punctuated by his cell phone ringtone—popular Korean hip-hop artist Gaeko's hit "Shame," which was inspired by, and also opens with, a quote from Park himself. The refrain, sung over the warm, looping organ-played notes emotive, "The past is gone and the future is unknown." This, of course, is a call to be in the present, the purported aim also of Park's painting practice.

PS: I was in Japan in 2000, when I turned 70. It was the end of the analog age and the start of the digital age. I didn't think I could survive the digital age. I contemplated suicide, and all kinds of things, but that would sadden my wife and I'm the person who my grandchildren most look up to. Without that symbolic figure, their future would be uncertain. So I determined to continue living. In 2003, Japanese critic Yusuke

WHY ASIAN ART NOW?

Nakahara came to Seoul. We are the same age so we decided to drink a bottle of wine together, and once we got talking one bottle became three. He told me that he'd never heard the things I told him from any other artists or critics. He asked me to tour Japanese universities and lecture. I told him I wasn't interested. In the analog age, you retired at 60.

—And how was your work affected by the turn of the millennium?

PS: That same year in 2000, for my 70th birthday, I had a solo exhibition at the Tokyo Gallery. I had told the gallery's co-director Yukihiro Tabata that I wanted to go to Japan when I could see the last of the maple foliage. The day after the opening, we went to Bandaisan in Fukushima and the leaves were red like they were on fire. They burn a fierce red from the front yet a myriad of colors can be discerned depending on the light. I was astonished, and this inspired me to make color paintings. I'd been exclusively producing black and white paintings since the early 1990s. I told Tabata that I would start incorporating colors, but it would still undoubtedly be Dansaekhwa. I felt my painting could be therapeutic for people who are stressed by the digital age. That small park over there, as another example, is filled with cherry blossoms in the spring, and the petals also change in the light. From afar it looks pink, but individually, they

appear white. I'm like a shaman, this kind of natural inspiration comes very directly to me.

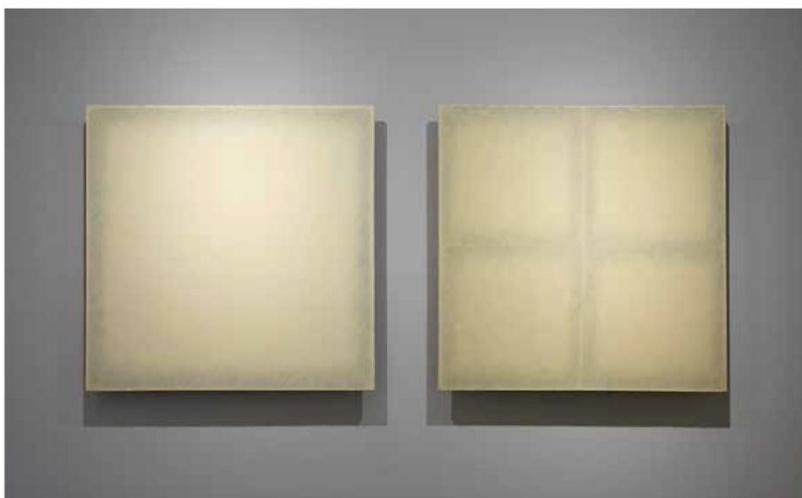
—And the paintings themselves appear very differently based on distance. That seems to relate to what you're saying about the cherry blossom petals. The paintings vibrate at a certain distance and stay still at another. Up close, it's the materiality and structures of the lines, and seen whole at a distance, they have a very different effect.

PS: Last November, I had an exhibition in Paris and the director of the Musée Picasso asked how I make the paintings appear differently from various angles. I said, ah, well, that's just how you see it, and I ran away trying not to answer the question!

—Well, can you speak about how you produce the corrugation on the surface of the *Écriture* paintings that you've created since the mid 1990s?

PS: The corrugated surface is produced through repeated action, which I do all day as a monk spends his days chanting prayer. It's a process of self-emptying. Many Westerners mistake my process, thinking that I scrape to get these valleys. In fact, I just repeatedly make lines, and the paper creates the elevated line, so it's a byproduct rather than a product of intentionality.

And repetition is one of the three defining elements of Dansaekhwa—the invisibility of action (there can be



Installation view of Park Seo-Bo's solo show at Kukje Gallery, 2010
Both works are from *Écriture* series, 1970. Courtesy Kukje Gallery



Ecriture No. 920219, 1992,
hanji paper on canvas, 102.5 x 70.5 cm
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery

no single identifiable figure behind the work); the repetition of action; and materiality.

—So when you say that the invisibility of the subject behind the painting is important, that there is no single purpose, it suggests the importance of questioning the role of the author in terms of determining the work. But at the same time the repetitious act can also become a signature style that constitutes the self?

PS: Even if I empty myself, freeing myself from everything that may hold me back, I remain a human being and I absorb the complexity of my surroundings and its cultural background. So, the only reason I stay and work in Korea is to have my feet grounded in Korean soil and observe Korean surroundings. Years ago, the founder of Tokyo Gallery, Takashi Yamamoto encouraged me to go to New York. He said, within two years, you will be worldly renowned. But I refused this move in order to remain present in this country, Korea.

Spectrums of Purity

—Is there a connection between the paintings being therapeutic for the viewer and meditative for the producer?

PS: It applies to both categories. When you look at a red maple leaf, it looks different depending on the angle. So my production process can similarly be seen as both

therapeutic and meditative.

—The earlier and later *Ecriture* series both seem to pose questions about the relation between seeing and understanding. In the later paintings, one thing appears differently depending on one's angle and distance, whereas in the earlier *Ecriture* paintings of the late 1970s, you used marks that suggest writing, but nevertheless remain illegible.

PS: That's the viewer's perspective. From my perspective, as a maker, all I feel is that I discharge myself through the work to the point of a void and I feel entranced and rejoice when the work is complete. I feel very lighthearted. I feel a true sense of satisfaction.

—But the reference to writing, made quite explicitly in the earlier *Ecriture* paintings, is a different kind of emptiness. There's the Buddhist idea of recognizing the emptiness of things, which I understand, but that's very different from an image that evokes language, but is nevertheless indecipherable. The emptiness of communication is quite different from the Buddhist concept of an ultimate emptiness.

PS: The use of language is restricted only to my works in oil and pencil on canvas; while it remains separate from my other works using Korean paper. It depends on the material used. You really have to have insight into what element to take in and what not to take in. My purpose was to reveal the essential characteristic of Korean paper. Of course I could write or draw on the Korean paper, but that's not what I did. I took a step back to let the material create its own expression. The painting is a mere tool for me to take in and let out this material quality.

—So you're a kind of medium?

PS: Painting is a way of cleansing myself from sin and conviction. I want to live like a Korean scholar. They tried to live up to their honorable ideologies. To do so, they had to belong to a political group. In the process of political life, sometimes they had to commit dirty deeds, maybe even kill

someone, and when they returned home, they'd feel very heavyhearted. They'd relieve that burden by painting and writing. When I started this work, I approached it as if I was washing myself of worldly negative influences.

—If painting is a process of eliminating the worldly and the political, how do you feel about critics interpreting your works politically, especially in regards to the earlier *Ecriture* works as a response to the Park Chung-Hee's dictatorship?

PS: I despise critics who assert that there was a political

“Repetition is one of the three defining elements of Dansaekhwa—the invisibility of action, the repetition of action, and materiality.”

WHY ASIAN ART NOW?

Installation view of a solo exhibition "Ecriture" at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, 2014
Ecriture No. 140106, 2014 (left) and *Ecriture No. 120209, 2012* (right)
 Courtesy Galerie Perrotin. Photo by Claire Dorn

agenda or context behind the Dansaekhwa movement, because it's not true. I guess that people who want to use Dansaekhwa politically come up with these ideas. But there was absolutely no political agenda in Dansaekhwa. Another thing I want to make clear in that I even reject the term "Dansaekhwa" in its literal sense. It translates to "monochrome," which is just the opposite of multicolored; this doesn't correctly reflect the spirit of what I was trying to do.

—So how does your disapproval of the term Dansaekhwa square with its institutionalization, which you were instrumental in, and its more recent circulation in the global art world?

PS: I can't stop the term from circulating, but I will take every chance I get to explain why it's inadequate. For the past five thousand years, if there was one core belief shared by Koreans, it was to be a part of nature. This worldview of protecting and harmonizing with nature was destroyed by the era of political turbulence. Suddenly, because nature was destroyed, our spirit of wanting to be one with nature was also destroyed, and this resulted in a chaotic environment of anomie. In 1967, I wanted to revive the natural worldview. Because of the historical context, I thought

“The black and white I used are not the black or white we know in conventional terms. That's why Dansaekhwa is not necessarily about black or white painting.”

color would be too symbolic. That's why I decided not to use color. But the black and white I used was based on my childhood experience of growing up in the country. When I looked at old, rugged homes, the walls were charred from charcoal, so it was whitish and blackish, but not the black or white we know in conventional terms. That's why Dansaekhwa is not necessarily about black or white painting.

—So you believe in the concepts that Dansaekhwa represents, but they should not be summarized as "monochrome."

PS: Yes. At the 1992 exhibition at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool, they used the title "Working with Nature: Traditional Thought in

Contemporary Art from Korea" for example, and I think that's much more appropriate. It's not that the word "Dansaekhwa" should be abandoned, but my opinion is that it's inadequate. Back in the time of the exhibition "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White" in 1975 (Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo), the artists were all categorized as Dansaekhwa because there weren't such rigorous rules about what that meant yet. Tokyo Gallery detected the origin of Dansaekhwa at a very early stage. There were other shows such as "Korea: Facet of Contemporary Art"

(Tokyo Central Museum of Art, Tokyo) and "Exhibition of six Korean Contemporary Artists" (Muramatsu Gallery, Tokyo) exhibitions in 1977. So Dansaekhwa was defined through curation at an early point.

Currents of Korean Sentiment

—When you were first starting to produce this type of work, you wanted to avoid the symbolism of colors to emphasize the natural, but your color choices were biographically and culturally significant.

PS: It comes from a uniquely Korean sentiment, and from the everyday life of my upbringing. One reason I use this off-white is the history of Korean porcelain, a discipline in which its students would follow the footsteps of their masters. Beginning with the cutting of wood and starting of fire, the end product is an opaque, mysterious white color. Although I was never one of those apprentices, when I thought about Korean sentiment, I deconstructed myself and thought which would be the most Korean color. I knew then that particular white had a very important place in Korean history. Also if we think of black, basically, in Western terms, black

is just seen as a color, a visual, but when I say "black," I'm talking about a deeper darkness, something spiritual that you might see when you close your eyes. It's defined by emotion and Korean history rather than a singular concept.

—Can you elaborate on the importance of Korean-ness? In Western terms, the critical essence of monochrome painting isn't the absence of color, but reference to the world outside the canvas. This seems very different from situating a national aesthetic, history, and sentiment at the heart of one's painting practice. How did Korean-ness come to take such an important place in your art?

PS: I believe the more I empty myself, the more rooms are created within me for things to go into and come out of. I would say the significance of Korean sentiment is a byproduct of me emptying myself and allowing things around me to be observed. @

PARK SEO-BO

Works



Ecriture No. 23585, 1985
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery



Ecriture No. 981130, 1998
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery



Ecriture No. 080206, 2008
Courtesy the artist and Kukje Gallery



Ecriture No. 110415, 2011
Courtesy Galerie Perrotin

Biography

- 1931 | Born in Ye-cheon, Gyeong-Buk, Korea
- 1954 | Graduated from Painting Dept. of Hongik University, Seoul
- 1962 | Professor at Hongik University (-1997)
- 1975 | Group show "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White" at Tokyo Gallery
- 1988 | The 43rd Venice Biennale
- 1991 | Solo show at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul
- 1992 | Group show "Working with Nature: Traditional Thought in Contemporary Art from Korea" at Tate Liverpool
- 1994 | Founded Seo-Bo Art and Cultural Foundation
- 2000 | Received Honorary Doctorate from Hongik University
- 2010 | Solo show at Busan Museum of Art
- 2012 | Solo show at Daegu Museum of Art
- 2014 | Group show "From All Sides: 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, he has held solo exhibitions at Kukje Gallery (Seoul, 2010), Jhyun Gallery (Busan, 2010), Galerie Perrotin (Paris, 2014), White Cube (London, 2016). A solo show featuring new works are being held at Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong (through May 5), and he is preparing for another solo show at Tokyo Gallery+BTAP (March 30-May 14).