

Kwon Young-Woo Solo Exhibition *Kwon Young-Woo*

Press Conference: December 9 (Thurs.), 2021, 11AM at Kukje Gallery K2

Exhibition Dates: December 9, 2021 – January 30, 2022

Venue: Kukje Gallery K2

*The creator made everything but did not give a name. Nature itself is an abstraction.
I only discover, choose, reform, and add from various phenomena in nature.*

– Kwon Young-Woo¹

Kukje Gallery is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of Kwon Young-Woo, a leading artist of the Dansaekhwa movement, on view from December 9, 2021, through January 30, 2022, at the gallery's K2 space. Marking the artist's third presentation at the gallery, following solo shows in 2015 and 2017, the exhibition will not only showcase works from the Paris period (1978-1989) defined by Kwon's iconic work with white *hanji* (Korean paper), but will also feature for the first time, colored *hanji* works made upon his return to Korea in 1989. Newer works from the 2000s that incorporate geometric shapes by overlapping *hanji* on wooden panels will also be shown. The comprehensive span of these distinctive bodies of work allows the exhibition to provide an authoritative overview of Kwon Young-Woo's practice and the development of his formative language that uses traditional Asian materials in a modern way. It provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the artist's seminal practice, commitment to traditional aesthetic philosophies, as well as lifelong experimentation and innovation.

As a member of the first generation of artists who came to the fore after Korea's independence, Kwon Young-Woo was involved in the vital artistic debates that characterized the newly liberated country, where artists argued for and against breaking away from what had been the official Japanese style, and the development of a new 'national' art. At the time, Korean art was perceived as having been dominated by Japanese painting, which led towards a concentrated effort to reject this connection and pioneer new methods—a desire that, following the Western model, was founded on the individuality of each artist. Confronted with the shift to post-war abstraction, Kwon—a student of oriental painting—reacted to the search for a new idiom through a unique approach based on modernizing traditional methods. From the outset, he believed it was misguided to distinguish between Western and Eastern painting, saying, "I think it is more meaningful to continue anew than to preserve and inherit tradition."² In response, he distanced himself from traditional Eastern mediums of the 1960s, such as Chinese ink and the brush, focusing on techniques associated with the selected medium of *hanji*. Kwon's works were rooted in Asian tradition, but in line with Western forms—namely post-war abstraction, recalling the 'papier collé (paper collage)' by Georges Braque and 'concetto spaziale (spatial concept)' of Lucio Fontana. For Kwon, the question of how to compose superseded what to draw, prompting a deep investigation into both the method and meditation on the perception of the picture plane. This formal and conceptual rigor, coupled with the use of Eastern mediums, was the basis of his groundbreaking work which was way ahead of its time.

¹ Kwon Young-Woo, *Kwon Young-Woo* (Seoul: Image Art Research Institute, 2007), 98.

² Kim Bokyoung, "Light of action and existence," *Ibid*, 272.

Kwon began his lifelong practice of experimentation in his earliest works, by exploring the possibility of figurative abstraction with an emphasis on the use of Chinese ink. Around 1962, he started utilizing *hanji* as a primary sculptural medium. Kwon explained, "My fingers are the most important tool and other various objects are used as tools when necessary."³ Using his fingertips and handmade tools in lieu of more traditional approaches of drawing on paper, the artist adopted repetitive actions of cutting, tearing, piercing, and pasting, embracing the variability, materiality, and tactility of paper, which lies at the core of his early oeuvre.

Based on his tenacious craftsmanship and relentless experimentation, these methods resulted in a breakthrough series during his sojourn in Paris (1978-1989); approximately 18 works from this period are presented on the second floor of K2. These works highlight the delicate texture of *hanji* arranged in multiple layers, and convey a unique formal language based on the sculptural and rhythmic qualities of the surface. Kwon's study into the materiality of traditional mediums reveals new narratives that transcend existing boundaries that defined oriental painting.

The first floor of the exhibition presents approximately 11 colored works that Kwon completed shortly after returning to Korea from Paris in 1989, as well as 7 works of layered *hanji* from the 2000s. This exhibition marks the first time these works in color are shown to the public. While *hanji* was the artist's primary medium, Kwon mixed Western gouache and *meok* (Chinese ink) to add color. Unlike his previous works in which he tried to add spontaneity by tearing and piercing the surface, these paintings are characterized by flat, uniform planes that evoke roller (brush) marks, displaying black, dark brown, and yellow tones created with gouache and *meok* combined in different ratios.

This balance of different mediums reflects the artist's philosophy on how he does not distinguish between materials from different cultures. Explaining his use of gouache and Chinese ink, Kwon said, "I do not make any distinction between them as others do, and just regard them all as black."⁴ While Chinese ink smudges and spreads like watercolor, gouache, an opaque water-based pigment, coagulates on its own. Thus, they counteract each other, leaving a lasting impression on the paper. Color, as used by Kwon, is not an additive to the paper, but more of a second surface, existing as a kind of veil. Furthermore, the artist uses the subtle nuances of color, integrating it with the texture of the paper to generate moments of amplified energy, composing space that cannot be bounded.

Kwon, who had repeatedly experimented with three-dimensional paintings by composing around appropriated and found objects in the 1990s, returned to two-dimensional works in the 2000s, continuing his unique exploration of the painting plane. In these more recent works, the artist arranges and reveals geometric shapes through thin layers of *hanji* on wooden panels. He explores the density of white by applying one or two layers of *hwaseonji*, a thin and tough type of paper, which is one of the raw materials that create *hanji*. The more these layers overlap, the more the subtle depth of the paper fiber is revealed—a focus that became the basis of these newer works. Initially inspired by the process of gluing *hwaseonji* on a drawing board, the resulting layers created elegant yet unexpected dynamics with the paper, that depended on two simple factors: the amount of *hwaseonji* and glue.

While traditional *hanji* was his main medium, Kwon consistently used his own hands and handmade tools to study its materiality, employing Chinese ink and color as secondary methods as needed. This focus on the surface was a tenacious and continuous process of realizing the potential of the painting plane, linking his practice to those of modern Western artists. Through the world of abstraction that completely transcended boundaries of the East and the West, Kwon successfully implemented his search for the "connection of the human mind and matter" and reached a "modern return to the origins of the East."

3 Kim Inwhan, "Carte blanche of paper, refraction of white," Ibid, 265.

4 Kwon Young-Woo and Gye-Ri Park, *2007 Oral Study of Contemporary Art in Korea Series 101: Kwon Young-Woo* (Arts Council Korea, 2007), 138.

About the Artist

Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013) matriculated at Seoul National University in 1946 in the first class of the College of Fine Arts and studied oriental painting. He received his MFA, also from Seoul National University, in 1957. He taught at Chung-Ang University from 1964 to 1978 before moving to Paris, where he spent about ten years fully devoted to his studio practice. He has had solo exhibitions in major venues including Blum & Poe, New York (2016); Kukje Gallery, Seoul (2015); Seoul Museum of Art (2007); National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (1998); Ho-Am Art Museum, Seoul (1990) and Jacques Massol Gallery, Paris (1976). His work has also been featured in international biennials and group exhibitions, such as *Korean Abstract Art: Kim Whanki and Dansaekhwa*, Powerlong Museum, Shanghai (2018-19); *When Process Becomes Form: Dansaekhwa and Korean Abstraction*, Boghossian Foundation, Brussels (2016); the official collateral exhibition of the 56th Venice Biennale *Dansaekhwa*, Venice Biennale, Venice (2015); *Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White* at Tokyo Gallery (1975); the 12th Biennale de São Paulo (1973); and the 8th Tokyo Biennale (1965). His works are included in the collections of major art institutions, such as the MMCA, Korea; Seoul Museum of Art, Korea; Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea; the British Museum, London, UK; and Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

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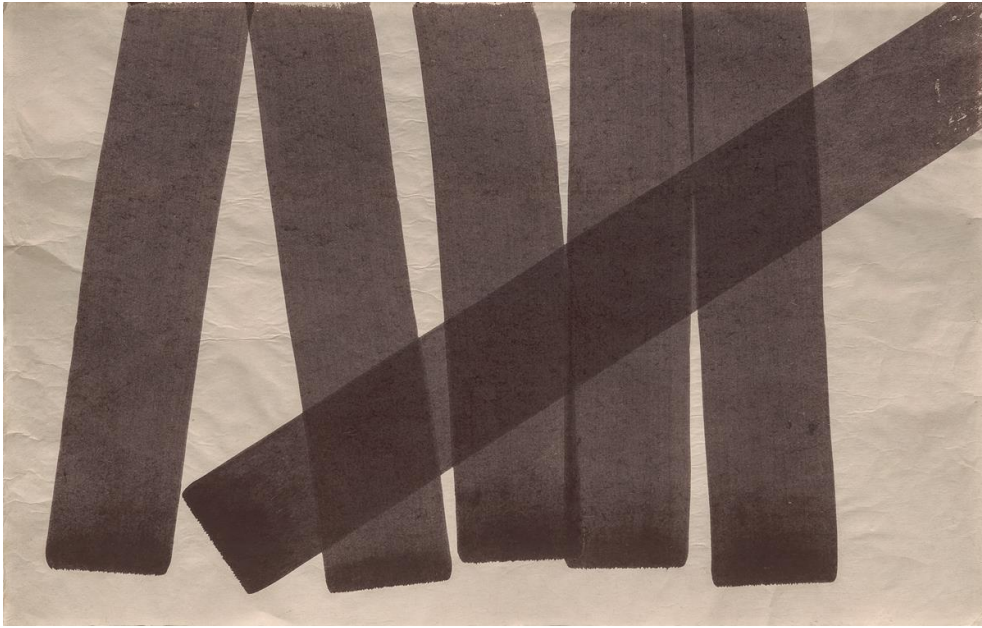
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Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013)

Untitled

c. 1980s

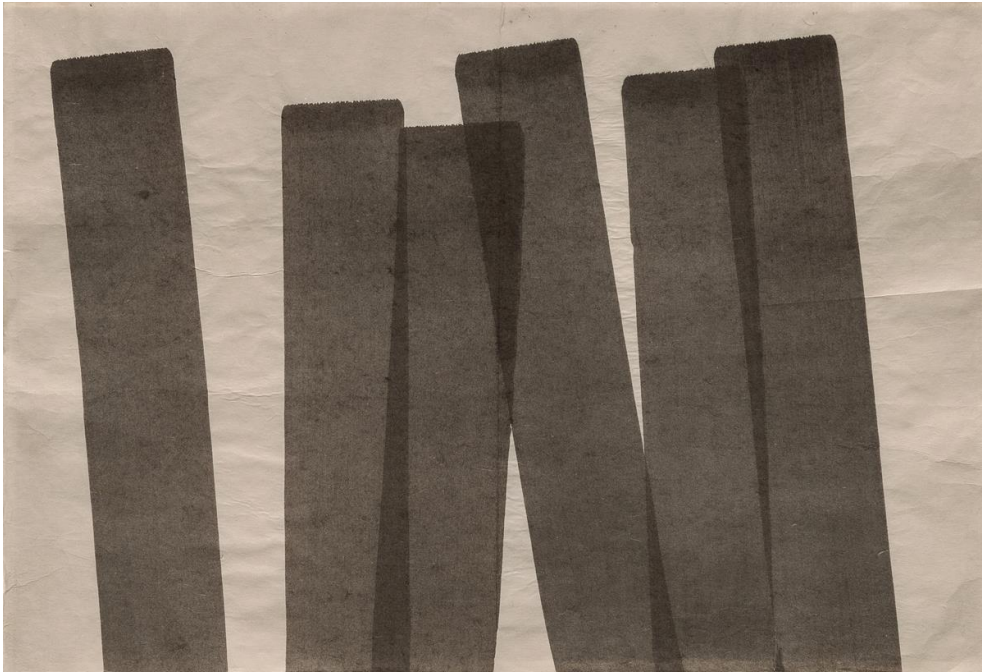
Color on Korean paper

47 x 74 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013)

Untitled

c. 1980s

Color on Korean paper

51 x 74 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013)

Untitled

c. 2000s

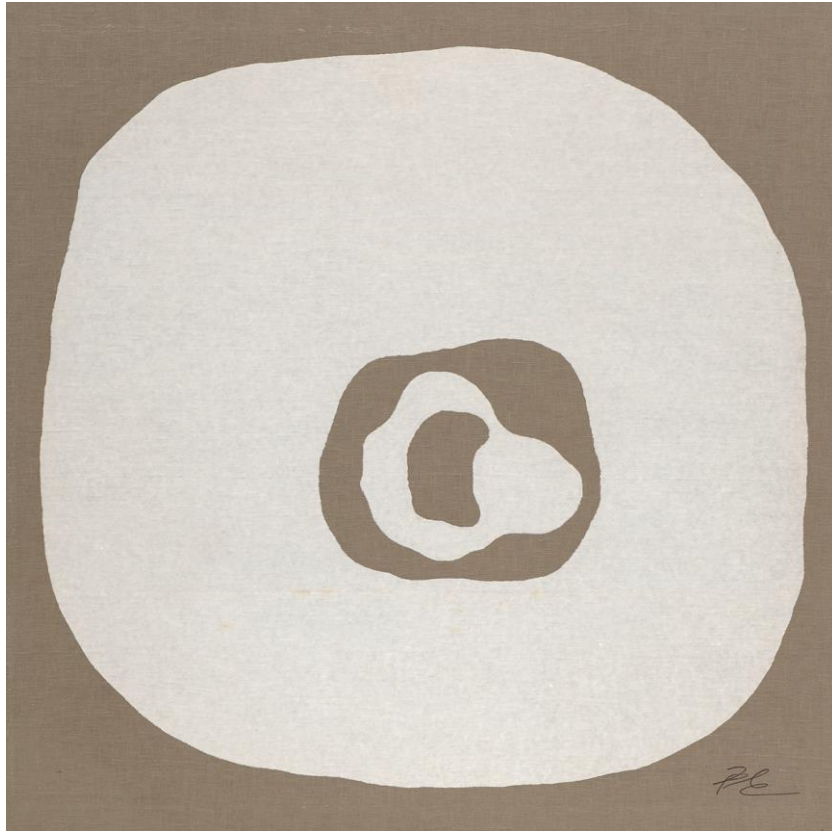
Korean paper on canvas

117 x 91 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013)

Untitled

2002

Korean paper on canvas

130 x 130 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013)

Untitled

1982

Korean paper

121 x 94 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Kwon Young-Woo (1926-2013)

Untitled

c. 1980s

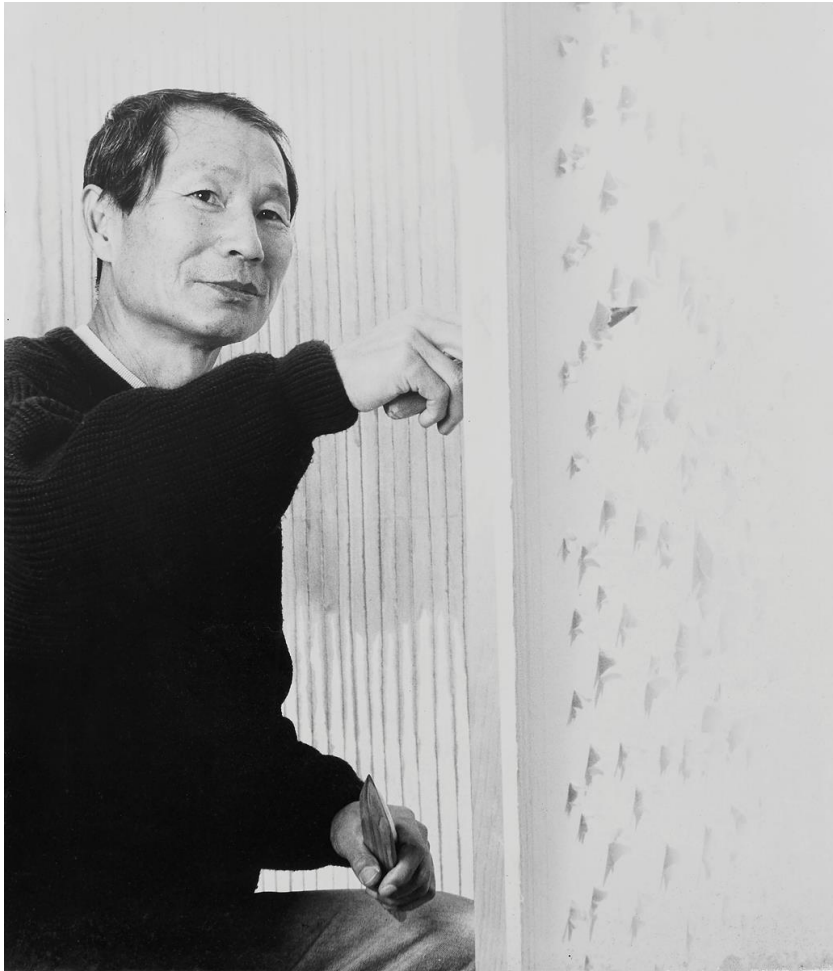
Korean paper

80 x 67 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Photo: Chunho An

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Artist portrait of Kwon Young-Woo
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery
Image provided by Kukje Gallery