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May-June 2015 Special Edition

Dansaekhwa, Korean Abstract Painting

The Dansaekhwa fever that had swept over the Korean art market last year carried on its force onto Hong Kong this past March. To coincide with this “golden time” of the year when collectors and art people from all over the world come together, Sotheby’s Gallery presented the *Avant Garde Asia* (March 13 - 27) centered around Dansaekhwa. Price of the art is no longer the sole issue. Major museums around the world are purchasing Dansaekhwa works to make one anticipate future exhibitions. Now, this fever is about to heat up Venice through the Collateral Event *Dansaekhwa* (May 7 - August 15, Palazzo Contarini-Polignac) during the 56th Venice Biennale. Along with the boom in the art market, this paper examines the origin of this Dansaekhwa fever and the significance of an academic approach.

/Yeon Shim Chung

Everywhere in the world these days, “Dansaekhwa” is the key topic of art talks. Dansaekhwa fever is similar to the international rise of interest towards Chinese contemporary art after *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* in 1998 organized by Asia Society in New York and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. From the 1990s, paintings centered around those of Zhang Xiaogang spurred popularity in the market, while the conceptual arts and installations of Xu Bing and Cai Guo-Qiang interested many in the academia. After the masters that had continued on the trend of Political Pop and such in Chinese contemporary art, it seems that Dansaekhwa is also stepping forward not just as a temporary target of interest in the market but also academically.

Along with the works of Park Seo-Bo, the leader of Dansaekhwa, those of Ha Chong-Hyun and Chung Sang-Hwa were the most popular at this year's Art Basel Hong Kong (ABHK henceforth). To coincide with this year's ABHK, Sotheby's Hong Kong Gallery S|2 hosted *Avant Garde Asia*. As a two-part exhibition, one centered around Korea's Dansaekhwa and the other around Japan's Gutai. Although the Gutai had been greatly experimental and had shown many works using the body, the exhibition itself was plainly curated, displaying mostly two dimensional artworks and not effectively conveying the nature of Gutai. The Dansaekhwa exhibition, on the other hand, presented not only Dansaekhwa but abstract works as well. Park Seo-Bo's *Ecriture* and an early abstract painting of Chung Sang-Hwa created in 1969 were displayed, along with the works of Kim Tschangyeul, Kim Whanki, Lee Ufan, Chung Chang-Sup, and Ha Chong-Hyun. Seen as monochrome from afar but grizzled with multiple tones close up, the formal and aesthetic traits unique to Dansaekhwa seemed to present novel perspectives to people outside of Korea.

At the Sotheby's exhibition, the audience observed in earnest the quiet, yet multi-chromatic colors, the unique materiality of paint, and the strong yet slowly repeated pencil lines of Park's *Ecriture*. Ha's *Conjunction* series of pushing paint



from the back of the gunny establishes the unique style of Korean painting that accumulates materiality on the canvas through repeated gestures of labor. Through the “artist talk” at the gallery, Park and Ha generated a momentum for pronouncing the manifestation of Dansaekhwa to the world. During the Venice Biennale this coming May, another Dansaekhwa exhibition curated by Yongwoo Lee will be presented at the Palazzo Contarini Polignac to host around seventy works of the representative artists of Dansaekhwa.

Dansaekhwa Fever Over Academia

The Dansaekhwa fever that started at the official opening of ABHK continued on to the Dansaekhwa exhibition and artist talk at Sotheby's the next day. It was the same at the new fair, Art Central's Gallery Hyundai booth hosting a Dansaekhwa exhibition, and also at the K-Auction in the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Hong Kong. Dansaekhwa centered around Kim Guiline, Park Seo-Bo, Yun Hyong-Keun, Chung Sang-Hwa, Ha Chong-Hyun was very popular. Also, Sotheby's again presented Dansaekhwa at the Asian Contemporary Art Auction on April 4th and 5th. Those sensitive to the market ask themselves whether this Dansaekhwa fever will last long, hoping that the rest of the Korean contemporary art landscape can be exposed to the international art arena.

From top to bottom: Exhibition view, *Avant Garde Asia*, 2015. This exhibition took on a dual structure to better convey the concurrent artistic developments in Japan's Gutai and Korea's Dansaekhwa. / Still from a talk program, 2015. Alexandra Munroe, the Samsung senior curator of Asian Art at the Guggenheim, and Yongwoo Lee, the president of the International Biennale Association were invited as speakers to a seminar that accompanied the *Avant Garde Asia* exhibition. / Park Seo-Bo and Ha Chonghyun posing for the press after each giving a talk on March 14th. All Photos Courtesy Sotheby's Gallery Hong Kong.

Opposite page
Chung Sanghwa, *Untitled 96-5-2*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 162x130cm. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.





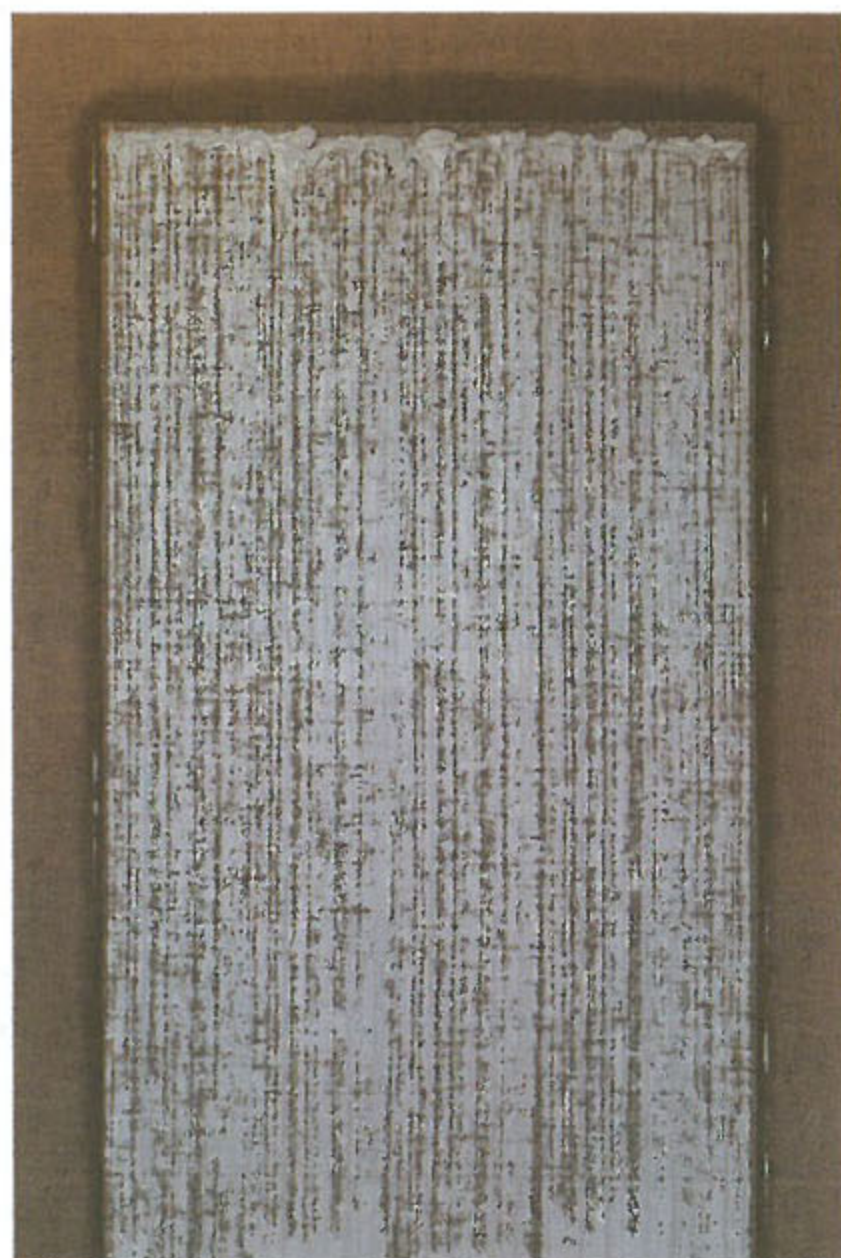
Above: Still from the *Salon* program at ABHK, 2015. During the first session of the *Salon* lineup, while the panels discussed *Abstract Space: Parallel Histories in Abstraction*, the topic of Dansaekhwa was brought up (From left to right: Sam Bardaouil, Co-Founder, Art Reoriented; Mika Tajima, Artist, New York; Umer Butt, Gallerist, Grey Noise, Dubai; Till Fellrath, Co-Founder, Art Reoriented). Courtesy Art Basel.

Below: Ha Chong-Hyun, *Conjunction 09-009*, 2009, oil on canvas, 180×120cm. Courtesy Blum & Poe.

Opposite page

Above: Installation view, Gallery Hyundai's booth at Art Central, 2015. Every artwork exhibited at the Gallery was sold out with the exception of the two of Lee Ufan's works that were relatively high up in the price range. ©Art Central.

Below: Installation view, Galerie Perrotin's booth at ABHK, 2015. Three of Park Seo-Bo's *Ecriture* series were given a separate space. In the center is a feathered polar bear sculpture by an Italian artist Paola Pivi. Courtesy Galerie Perrotin.



The Dansaekhwa fever does not seem to be confined to the art market. There is also movement into the discourse of the aesthetics of Dansaekhwa. In the West, the art market tends to flow in tune with the academia and the critique. At times, the art market and the art critique exclude one another, but not only Sotheby's and Christies but museums deemed highly of academic research value. An exhibition is not just a display or installation of artworks, but a presentation of the curator's statement on what has been academically researched. Under such trends, recent Dansaekhwa exhibitions have prepared not only artist talks, but also colloquiums and workshops.

Many galleries in Korea have presented Dansaekhwa exhibitions from various aspects between the 1970s and 2010s, but the popularity has never been so great. Gallery Hyundai's *Korean Abstract Painting* (March 25 - April 22) retraces its past exhibitions of abstract paintings and Dansaekhwa that the gallery has hosted since its president Park Myung-ja opened a small space in 1970 in Insa-dong. This exhibition conveys an individual's passion and faith cultivated through the friendship and trust of Korean abstract painters. Not only galleries in Seoul such as Kukje, Hakgojae, Hyundai, and PKM, but those outside of Korea have hosted Dansaekhwa shows as well. Galerie Perrotin, Paris, presented a solo exhibition of Park Seobo (curated by Kim Yongdae) last year while Blum & Poe, LA (curated by Joan Kee) and Korean Cultural Center and SPSI Art Museum in Shanghai (curated by Jung Joon-mo) also hosted Dansaekhwa exhibitions. With such shows, the price of Dansaekhwa works have steeply escalated. Taking into account that the biggest collector is in fact the "museum", the Guggenheim, Dia Beacon, and M+ have all purchased Dansaekhwa works, demonstrates the swift in academic recognition of Korean abstract art. The fever spreads quickly as if contagious, and Dansaekhwa was numerously mentioned in ABHK's *Salon* program as well.

The most memorable Dansaekhwa

exhibition in Korea was the *Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting* curated by Yoon Jin-sub at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in 2012. Yoon shone a spotlight on Dansaekhwa, passed on by several generations since the 1970s and focused on Korean abstract art. A total of 31 artists participated in the show including Quac In-Sik, Kim Whanki, Park Seo-Bo, Lee Ufan, Chung Chang-Sup, Yun Hyong-Keun, and Ha Chong-Hyun, with about 150 pieces displayed. The collection from the museum was outstanding and the Dansaekhwa Archive presented as a sort of "constellation" at the very end of the exhibition space mapped out the contemporary art of Korea against that of the West and Asia, to propose an interesting perspective. After the exhibition, a consequent solo show of Ha Chong-Hyun presented his experimental works from the early "AG" days and his *Conjunction* series to portray its changes with age. Through these two exhibitions, Dansaekhwa researchers in Korea either gave special lectures or were interviewed by the National Museum to define the identity or aesthetic nature of Dansaekhwa. The interview videos and archive publications presented at the exhibition served as an academic momentum through which to read the flow of Korean contemporary art. Whereas Yoon had focused on the first generation of Dansaekhwa, he is to curate another show centered around the second generation.

Two Steps for Dansaekhwa's Next Leap

Anyone at ABHK last March would have felt the Dansaekhwa fever. On the other side of that fever would be doubt and fear as to whether it will last. Fear on whether the market value would last, and for a researcher, this is accompanied by the question of whether the rise of market value will lead to academic expansion. I am no market researcher, but I believe Dansaekhwa will continue to prosper in the market. While it is true that the price of Dansaekhwa has escalated quite a bit, in comparison with Lee Ufan and other artists that have earlier



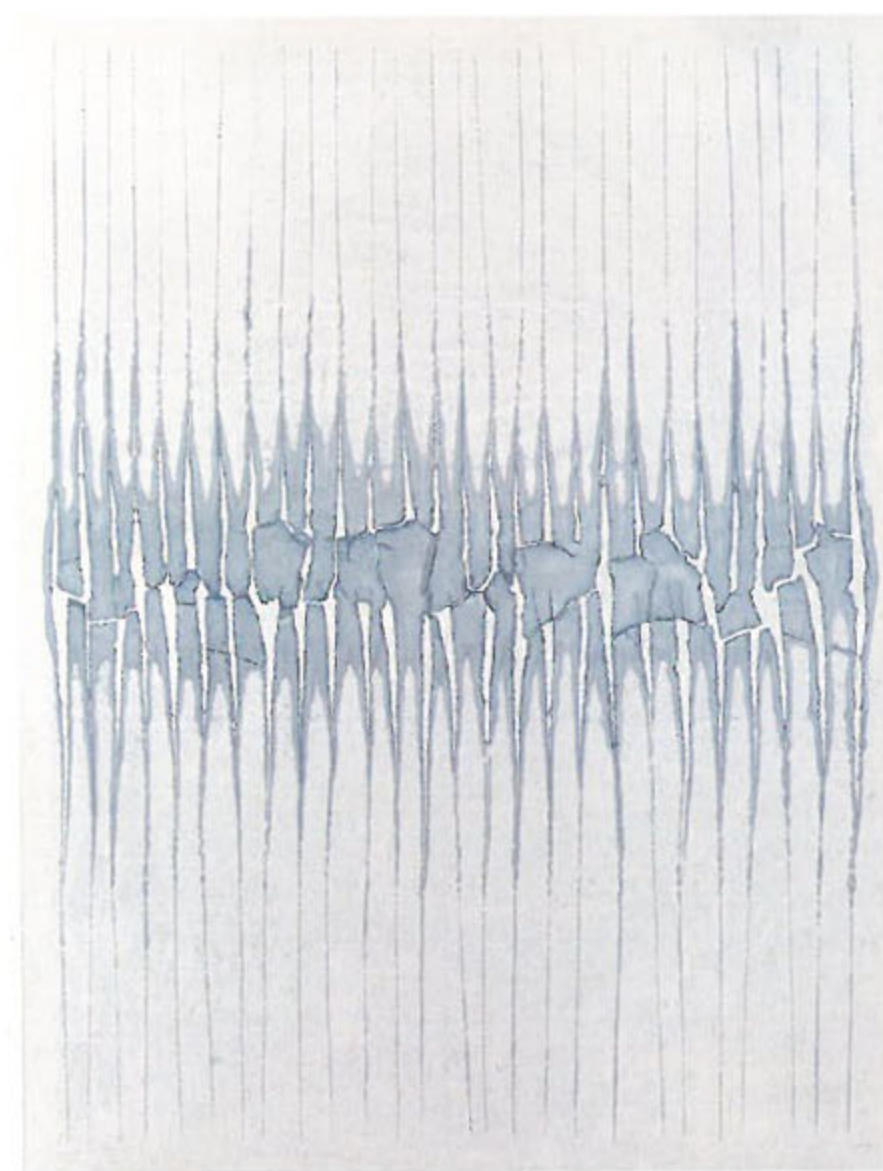
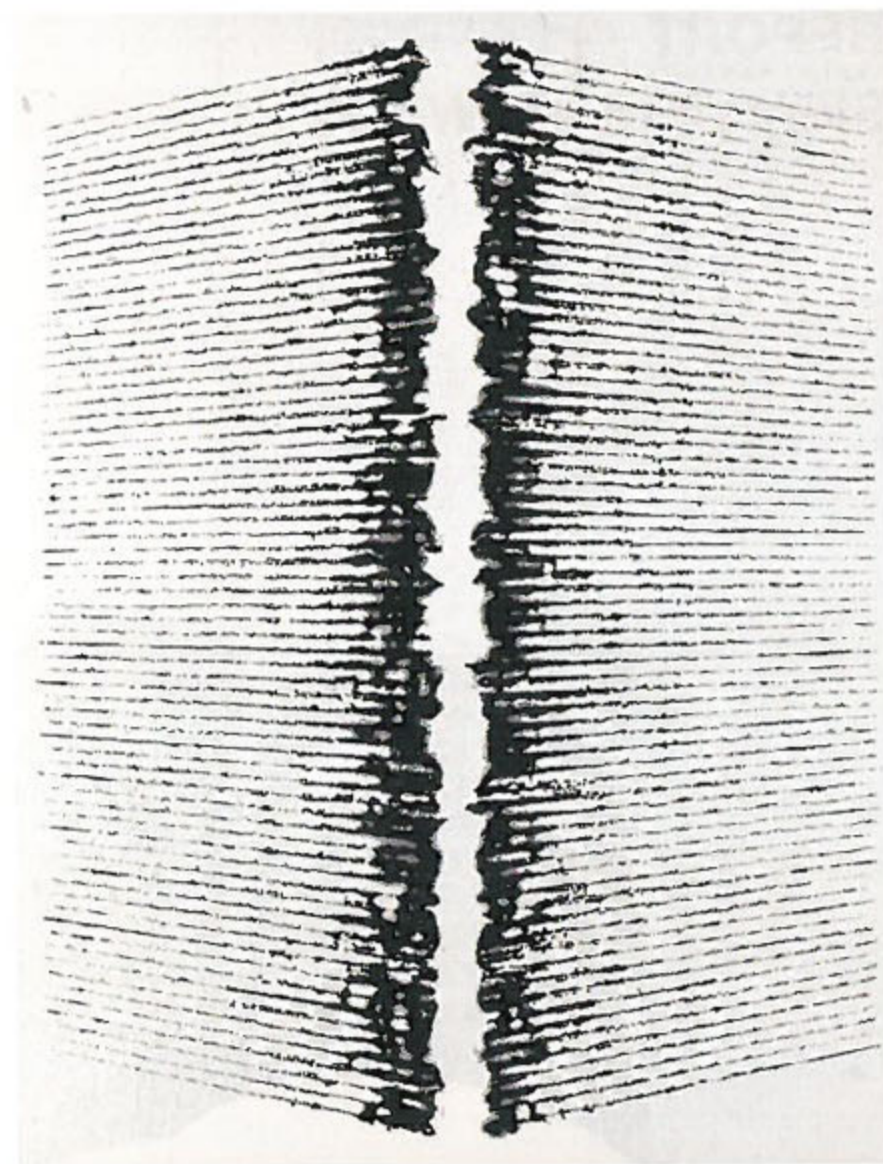
are Seo Seong-rok and Yoon Jin-sub, and Kim Mikyung and Yun Nanjie have also published academic research papers. Seo Jin-soo, an art market expert, is to publish a Dansaekhwa research material composed of several writers mentioned above under the title *Dansaekhwa and the Art Market*. The publication is to be translated into English. In the US, Joan Kee studied Dansaekhwa for her PhD dissertation at NYU, and many researchers in the North America and Europe are writing their thesis papers on Dansaekhwa and Korean contemporary art. In 2014 in Hong Kong, M+ hosted a workshop *Postwar Abstraction in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan* for which researchers from Japan, Taiwan, and North America discussed the abstract arts of Asia. The related texts were later published in English and Chinese. At the workshop, I talked of Lee Yil and the “reduction” of Dansaekhwa, and the “narrative space” witnessed through Dansaekhwa exhibitions. Although many research has been done on

Dansaekhwa in Korea, there is not enough monographs available in English. There is an urgent need for the publication of Korean research materials to be published as an English anthology.

Globalizing and Discoursing Dansaekhwa

Discourse study on Dansaekhwa is crucial because even a drop of capital value in the market does not mean a drop of aesthetic value and there needs to be continuous research to support it. Also, as Dansaekhwa can serve as a momentum for intensifying international and academic interest in Korean contemporary art, there is no reason to confine the Dansaekhwa fever only to the flow of art market. As there is a great shortage of English publication on Korean contemporary art compared to that of China and Japan, there is a need for a profound foundation of Dansaekhwa research through which to academically appeal the aesthetic value of Korean contemporary art to major museums around the world.

Despite the formal abstraction seemingly similar to that of Western Minimalism or monochrome paintings, Dansaekhwa has a distinct color generated from the political situations and aesthetic foundations unique to Korea. Unlike Western artists that stressed the minimal and reductive style, Dansaekhwa artists stressed the materiality of layering specific colors to achieve the spiritual state of *Far Niente* through concentrated labor, thus positioning themselves upon Korean spirituality rather than Western aesthetics. Western critics tend to note that Korean art conveys a sensation of “piling up” something. While there may be criticism of “Orientalizing Orientalism,” there is no denying that Dansaekhwa exists as itself. This is proved by not the Western “style” of abstract art but the “monochrome” abstract art that has been continued through numerous generations. Now with a proper name, the monochrome painting of Korea has been proved more than just a heat; a fever. Discourse on Dansaekhwa is called for now more than ever.





Above: Installation view of the exhibition *Avant Garde Asia* at Sotheby's Hong Kong Gallery SI2, 2015. Courtesy Sotheby's Gallery Hong Kong.

Opposite page
 Above: Kwon Young-Woo, *Untitled*, 1986, gouache on paper, 224×170cm. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.
 Below: Kwon Young-Woo, *Untitled*, 1984, gouache on paper, 162×130cm. Courtesy Kukje Gallery.

entered the international market, there is still a lot of room in value for Korean abstract painting to grow in.

Dansaekhwa is not a mere popular commodity, but a research object of academic value, and numerous studies have been and are still being conducted in and outside of Korea. I would like to point out two things in regards to Dansaekhwa, no, in fact, Korean contemporary art. First is the reexamination of Dansaekhwa and history of Korean critique. The first generation artists of Dansaekhwa are now more popular than ever but there is no interest on the critics that had talked of Dansaekhwa, and there is a widely shared attitude in Korea of not taking serious the texts of critics and deeming them as light writings of opinionated appreciation. In 2013, *Lee Yil Anthology* was published. It was only then that the texts of the representative Dansaekhwa critic were categorized and printed by date and subject.

After its publication, the International

Association of Art Critics (AICA) broke its convention of not awarding deceased critics, and the 2014 Prize for distinguished contribution to art criticism was posthumously awarded to Lee. His *"Dynamics of Expansion and Reduction"* (1970) and other significant texts will be published in English. His controversial texts such as *"The White Thinks,"* which received both praise and criticism in Korea, raise complicated points of discourse in contemplating Dansaekhwa.

Next, the absence of English publications on Dansaekhwa stands forth. There are many projects under way to generate discourse and introduce Dansaekhwa worldwide. Oh Kwang-su is another critic that has written much of Dansaekhwa. It would be no exaggeration to say that his life has been with the Korean contemporary painting, seeing that he has written more than 50% of the texts for abstract painting exhibitions at Gallery Hyundai. Among other Dansaekhwa critics