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Reading Tansaekhwaboda

BEYOND

WHITE

BY ROBERT LILES

The outline of a transparent cup against a white background painted by Lee Dong Youb in *Situation A* (1972) is a near-literal representation of what the artist says about the color white: "For me the white surface is a void for consciousness, a vessel for thought." Here, the smoothly painted white surface presents the viewer with an apparently neutral blank space, occupied only by a few feathered lines suggesting a simple form. Once this form is identified as a cup, though, the question of what it contains, or what it represents, contends with our perception of the pure surface. The empty vessel reminds the viewer of a tension that exists in reading abstract art: are we to "fill" the work with thought and interpretation—identifying its symbolic, cultural or personal meaning—or allow it to stand as a unique aesthetic phenomenon in its own right?

This tension between interpreted meaning and aesthetic purity is present in many forms of art, but in Tansaekhwa—Korean monochrome painting, of which Lee's works are an example—it manifested itself as a critical debate over the cultural signification of monochrome. Tansaekhwa, which simply means "monochrome painting," describes the work of a sometimes loosely connected group of South Korean painters that includes Lee Ufan, Park Seobo and several other artists active in the latter half of the 20th century. Over the years since its inception in the late 1960s, the heavy use of white in these distinctly restrained paintings has been taken as, alternatively, an emblem of Korean cultural identity or a neutral ground for opening up new aesthetic experiences of painting. With two shows in the United States this year that take Tansaekhwa as their subject—"Overcoming the Modern, Dansaekhwa: The Korean Monochrome Movement" at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, and "From All Sides: Tansaekhwa on Abstraction" at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles—it seems a good occasion to reconsider the advantages and disadvantages of these two modes of reading abstraction, and what their competing claims say about how we have come to think about global modern art.

Many of the artists associated with Tansaekhwa had previously worked in a more colorful, gestural style, but in the 1960s and '70s they pushed their approach to abstraction in another direction.

Their use of color became more restrained, often limited to white, beige or black. Compositions became more systematic: many of the works had overall, nonhierarchical structures, with their forms determined by controlled gestures carried out across the entire space of the canvas. With both color and composition understated in this way, other elements of the paintings came to the forefront, in particular the artists' methods of repetitive mark-making and the physical properties of the works' components. At the same time that these works tended toward extreme abstraction, they also became an aesthetic representation of a nation: promoted widely in Seoul, Tokyo and Paris in the 1970s and '80s by both Korean and international curators, Tansaekhwa was one of the first representations of contemporary Korean art on an international scale.

One of the challenges in discussing Tansaekhwa today is the way in which, as these works were presented to both Korean and international audiences, they came to be seen as the face of modern Korean art and, by some accounts, a representation of Korea and "Koreanness." The cultural identity of monochrome, and in particular whiteness, has been a theme in the criticism of Tansaekhwa since the movement's inception, and there is certainly a lot to be seen by viewing Tansaekhwa in light of its national context. South Korea in the 1970s was still in the process of rebuilding itself following the division of the peninsula, and its citizens were living under an authoritarian government during a rapid process of industrialization. Considering this, and the lingering aftermath of the Japanese occupation (1910–45) and the Korean War (1950–53), it is understandable that the desire to assert cultural independence appeared in contemporary art and its criticism. And the case of Tansaekhwa is, of course, not the only instance in which abstract art has been implicated in issues of national identity; government promotion of American modern art during the Cold War years can be read as embodying related anxieties and concerns.

In recent responses to Tansaekhwa, though, there is a movement away from looking at the style in terms of its national context. Writing

for the recent show "Overcoming the Modern, Dansaekhwa," its joint curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath acknowledge Tansaekhwa's entanglements with questions of identity but seek to "evade discussions about art, nationalism, or search for true 'Koreanness,'" and instead "bring to the fore the conceptual and formal innovations that a group of seminal artists have achieved through their negotiation of modernity and their desire for constant contemporaneity." Yet, when we look back to the movement's origins, we can see that the tension between national identity and artistic innovation has in fact been a part of Tansaekhwa since its beginning. In "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White"—a group show held in May 1975 at the prestigious Tokyo Gallery that is often credited with giving Tansaekhwa its first concrete expression—whiteness was read simultaneously as an emblem of national identity and as a means to aesthetic innovation. Looking back to the writings and works of art that made up this early presentation of Tansaekhwa, we can get a clearer sense of the kinds of interpretations that a purely formal reading of the works might seek to embrace.

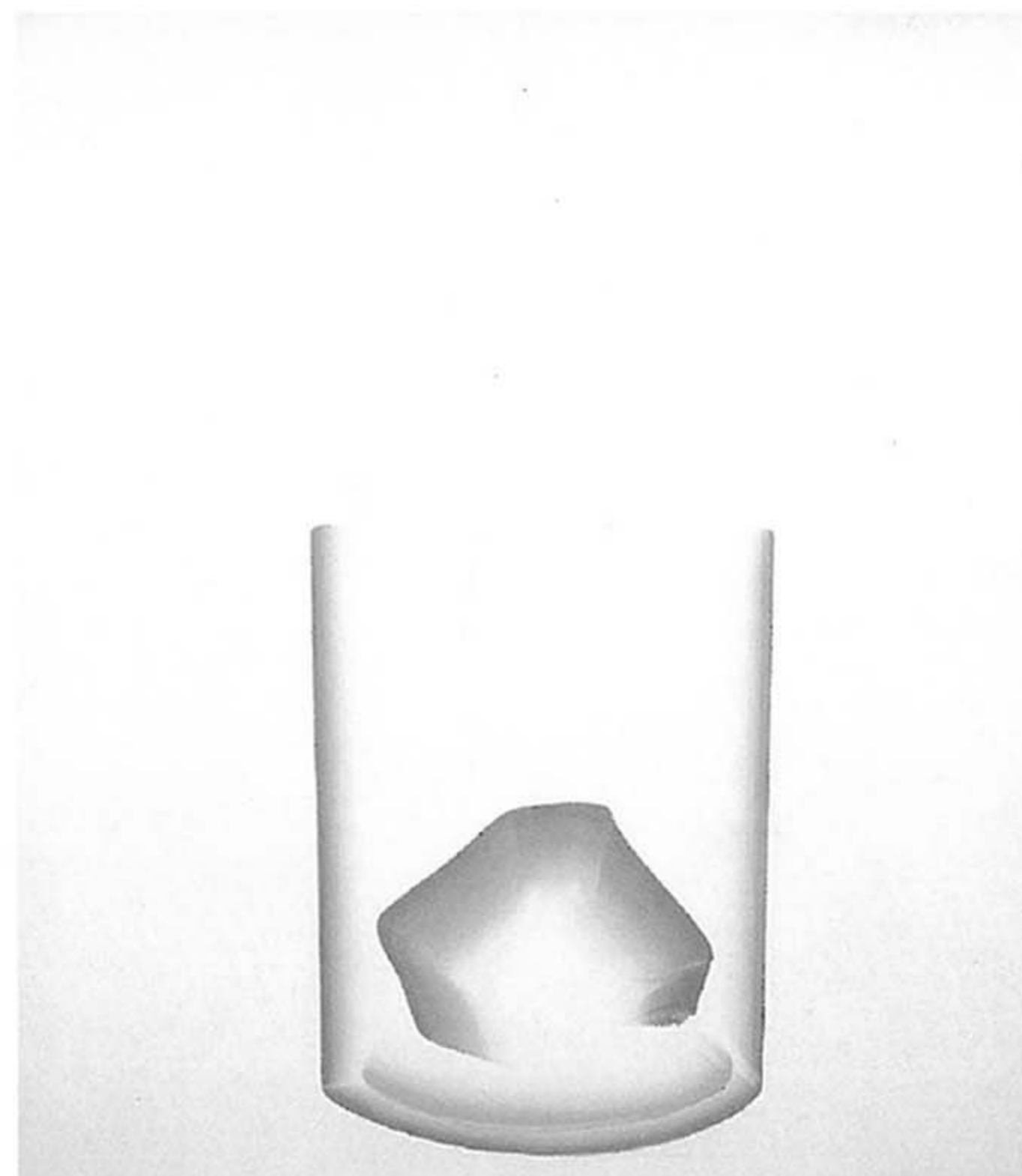
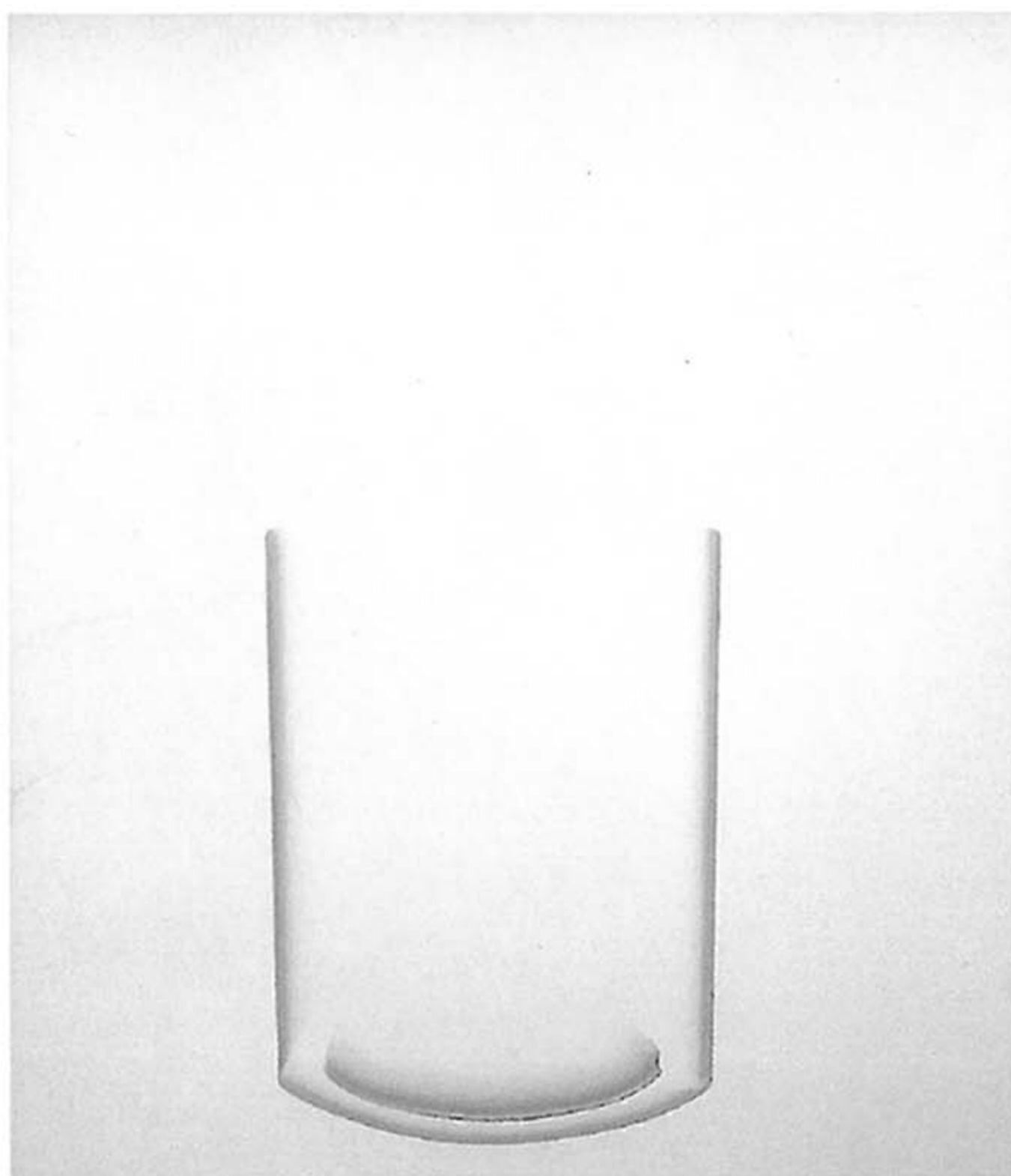
The artists in "Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White"—Kwon Young-woo, Lee Dong Youb, Heu Hwang, Suh Seung-won and Park Seobo—were selected by Takashi Yamamoto, Tokyo Gallery's director, and the exhibition was one of the first major shows of contemporary Korean art abroad to present works unified by a concrete aesthetic theme. While the term "Tansaekhwa" was not then used to describe this style—it was one of several terms, including *tansaekp'a* ("the monochrome group") and loan words such as *monot'on* ("monotone"), that were used interchangeably throughout the 1980s and '90s—these artists would come to represent the bulk of the first generation of the movement, with other artists brought in as several more exhibitions on similar themes proliferated in Korea and abroad.

The artists shown in "Five Korean Artists" were of different generations, with different backgrounds and training. The eldest, Kwon Young-woo, was then in his fifties and had been in one of the first classes of artists to study at Seoul National University after Korea gained independence from Japanese colonial rule. He had

an established reputation in Korea as an ink painter, having been recognized by the Kukchon, or International Art Exhibition, for his work in the late 1950s. The youngest, Lee Dong Youb, was still in his twenties and had only graduated from Hongik University in Seoul three years before the show. The fact that Kwon's works—such as *Work 74-1* (1974)—were composed of *hanji*, a paper used for ink painting and calligraphy, while the other works were mostly oil or acrylic paintings on canvas, was significant, as the two media were at the time seen as distinct, opposing categories. Even today, oil painting in Korea is often referred to as *soyanghwa* ("Western painting") and ink painting as *tongyanghwa* ("Eastern painting").

The two critics who wrote for the exhibition's catalog—Korean critic Lee Yil and Japanese critic Yusuke Nakahara, both prominent contributors to their countries' literature on modern art—thus had to find a unified characterization of a show that was already bold in suggesting comparisons between different generations and often segregated media. Their disparate approaches to this task would come to set the stage for the dynamics of national and formal interpretations of Korean monochrome.

In his essay for "Five Korean Artists," Lee Yil makes a strong claim about the significance of the color white. Arguing that white is not just a formal tool for artistic investigation, he asserts that the color is an emblem of Koreanness itself. "[White] is not only the representative color of our inherent aesthetic sensibility," he writes, "but also a symbol of our spiritual constitution." Lee Yil cites the prestige accorded to the white ceramics of the late Choson dynasty (1392–1910) as an earlier manifestation of this sensibility, and while he does not dwell on this comparison it has lingered throughout the history of Tansaekhwa. Lee Dong Youb and Chung Sang-hwa, whose grid-like monochromes became associated with the movement in the 1980s, are among the many Tansaekhwa artists whose paintings have since been subject to the same comparison, often as a way of arguing for their work's distinction from instances of Western monochrome. The implications of this comparison, however, reveal some of the difficulties in producing concrete examples of national aesthetic identity.



(Previous spread)
PARK SEOBO, *Ecriture No. 64-74-77*, 1974–77,
 pencil and oil on canvas, 195 x 300 cm.
 Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

(Opposite page, left)
LEE DONG YOUB, *Situation A*, 1972,
 acrylic on canvas, 162 x 131 cm.
 Courtesy the artist.

(Opposite page, right)
LEE DONG YOUB, *Situation B*, 1972,
 acrylic on canvas, 162 x 131 cm.
 Courtesy the artist.

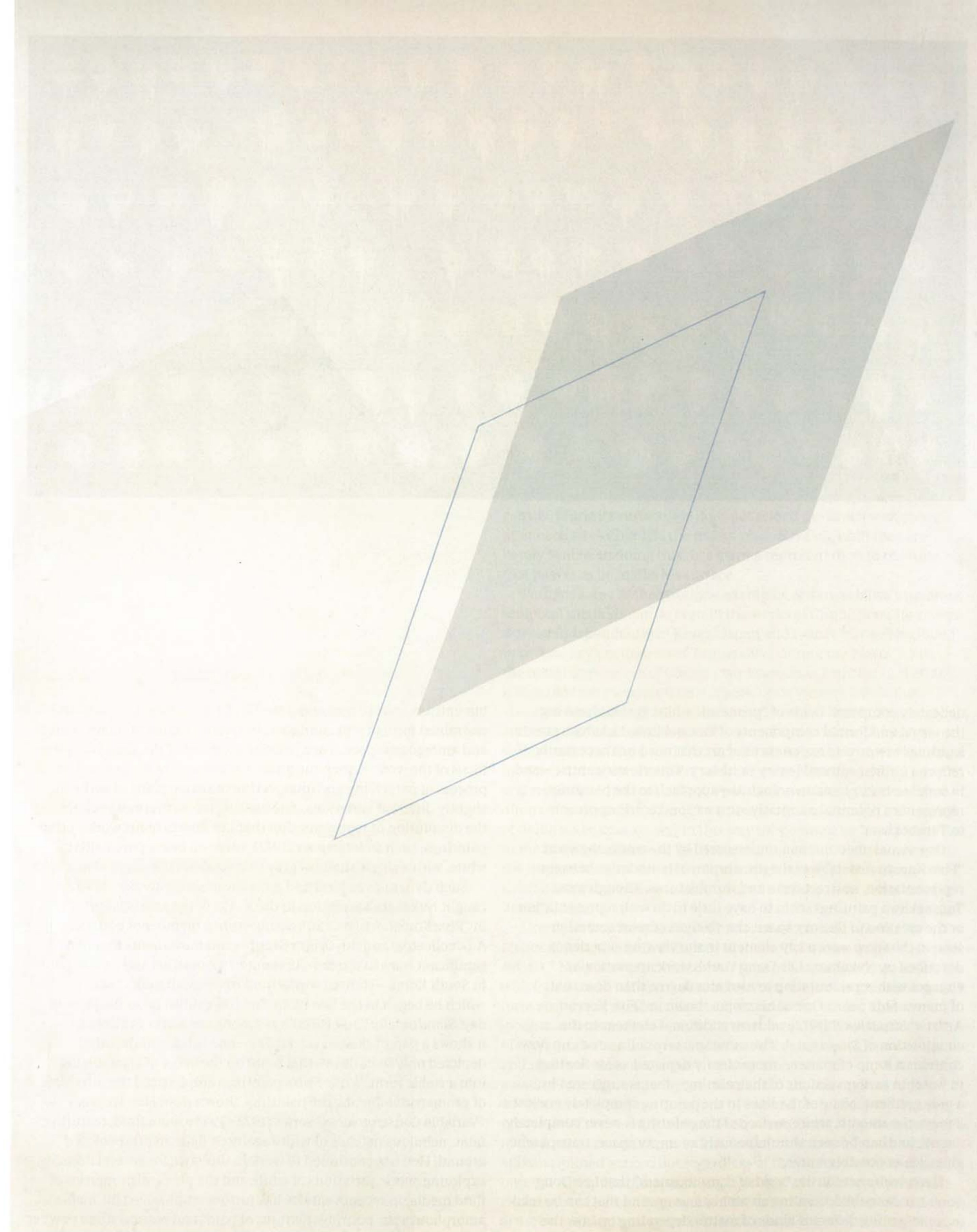
The empty vessel
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On one level, Lee Yil's suggestion that Choson white ceramics were a precursor for monochrome painting speaks to the known interests of established Korean artists. Mid-20th-century painter Kim Whanki—whose blue-dot field paintings such as *Where, and in What Form, Shall We Meet Again? 16-IV-70 #166* (1970) have been presented as precursors to Tansaekhwa—was particularly fond of Choson white porcelain, citing it as an important artistic reference point and using it frequently as a motif in his paintings. In *Jar and Plum Branch* (1958), for example, Kim depicts a single white jar (known as a moon jar, or *tal hanari*) against an abstract ground, the only other concrete element being a thin branch of plum blossoms bisecting the vessel. Kim often used the jar as the only figurative element in compositions that verged on abstraction, emphasizing its simple form and color. To a degree, the pared-down composition of *Jar and Plum Branch* resembles that of Lee Dong Youb's *Situation A*: both depict an uncolored, upright container as one of the only representational elements in an otherwise abstract composition. But while the cup in *Situation A* resembles a simple drinking glass—something mass-produced and with little apparent cultural value—the moon jar and plum branch of Kim's painting are clear references to earlier visual traditions of ceramics and painting, specific to the Korean and East Asian canons, and suggest a desire to preserve the history of these traditions while also embracing modern forms of abstraction.

Although white ceramics were treated as symbolic of Korean identity by artists such as Kim, they come with a divided history. White porcelain had long been highly valued by Japanese collectors of Korean art and, with Japan's former occupation of the Korean peninsula, the continued value placed on objects such as the moon jar can also be seen as having been validated by the tastes of the outsider or colonizer. Many writings by Japanese collectors of Korean art from the early 20th century—most famously those of Soetsu Yanagi, founder of the *mingei* ("folk craft") movement in Japan—describe the whiteness of these ceramics as representative of a Korean disposition, but in a way that downplays individual agency. By reading these restrained white ceramics as evidence of a simple, melancholic disposition, these collectors implied an identification between Korean objects and Korean people. This history has prompted some contemporary Korean critics to dismiss the idea of "Korean white" as an example of colonialist aesthetics, a backlash that has shaped many recent critical texts on Tansaekhwa. Writing for the 2012 retrospective "Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting" at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, curator Yoon Jin Sup explores in detail how many other examples of Korean white—such as the prominence of white clothing in preindustrial Korea, cited by Lee Yil in his 1975 essay—came from early accounts by journalists visiting the country and thus might not represent a positive self-identification by Koreans themselves as much as they reveal "the eye of the Other."

Through this example, we begin to see the problems surrounding a nation-centric reading of Tansaekhwa. Though there was a clear desire at the time to establish a Korean version of modernism that acknowledged its non-Western origins, nonetheless the signifiers of Koreanness identified by critics were unstable, ultimately reflecting the country's history of relationships with the rest of the world. And perhaps most frustrating for contemporary viewers of Tansaekhwa, this question of cultural specificity diverts attention from the works of art themselves.

"Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White," however, was not presented purely on these terms; the works were also noted for formal qualities that produced intense, individualized viewing experiences. Yusuke Nakahara's essay for the exhibition also addresses the artists' use of white, but instead of looking for its cultural origins he describes this monochrome tendency as a "framework for a vision of the universe," with each painting presenting a unique visual world in the process of formation before the viewer. According to Nakahara, in the five artists' paintings one witnesses momentary experiences of color and form emerging from



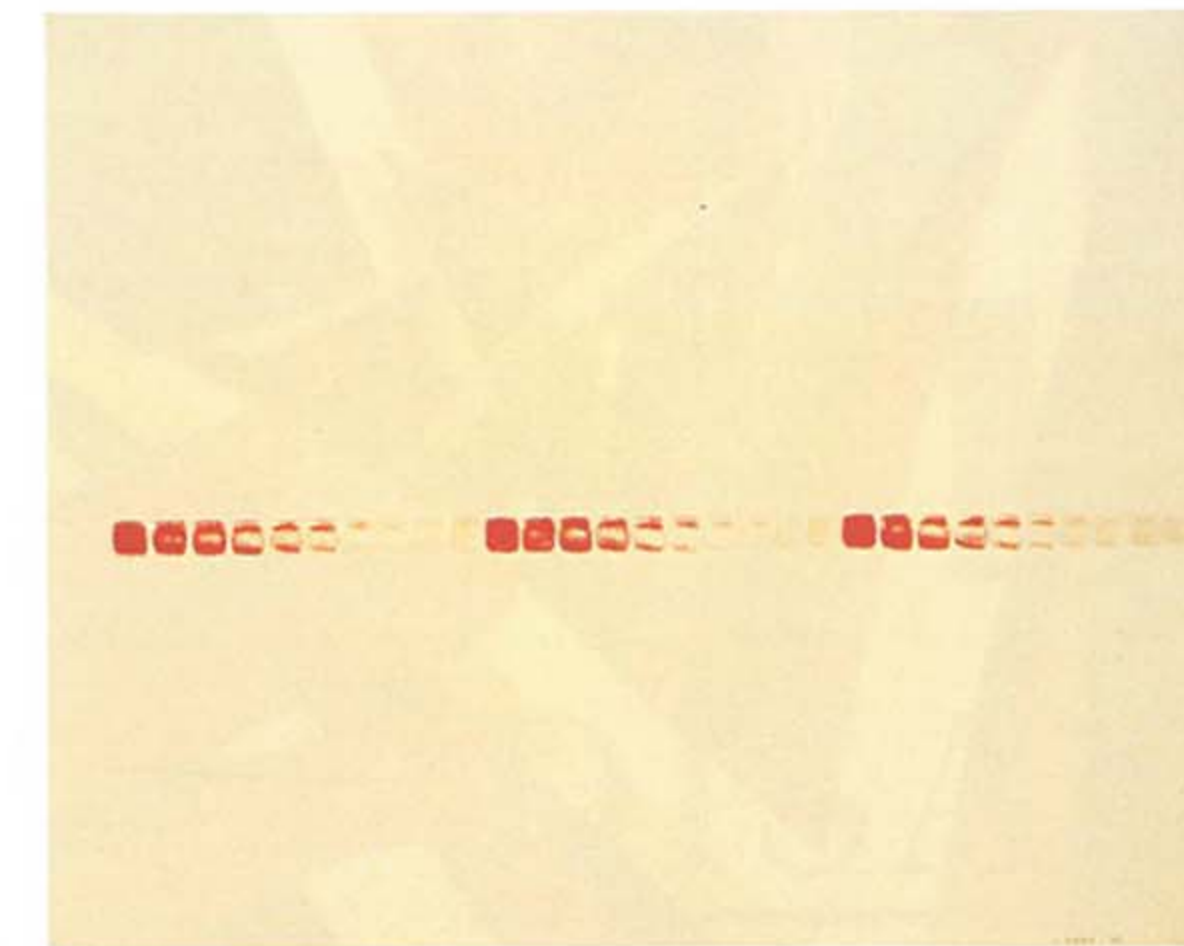
(Opposite page)
SUH SEUNG-WON, *Simultaneity 73-14*,
 1973, oil on canvas, 162 x 130 cm.
 Courtesy the artist and Art Beatus, Vancouver.



(Opposite page)
HA CHONG HYUN, *Conjunction 74-26*, 1974,
 oil on canvas, 109 x 222.9 cm. Courtesy the
 artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

(This page, top)
LEE UFAN, *From Point*, 1978, glue and stone
 pigment on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Courtesy
 the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

(This page, bottom)
CHUNG SANG-HWA, *Untitled 123*, 1973,
 acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Courtesy
 the artist and Kukje Gallery, Seoul.



paint in works such as *Conjunction 74-98* (1974), in which he pushes white paint through hempen surfaces from behind, creating highly textured effects. Taken together, all these works demonstrate the various phase changes between representation, abstract form and raw materiality; the visual experience of Tansaekhwa requires the viewer to navigate between these disparate modes of perceiving the work of art.

Nakahara also noted the temporal aspects of the works shown in “Five Korean Artists.” Park Seobo, who would become a figurehead for the promotion of Tansaekhwa both in Korea and abroad, was represented by three paintings from his “Ecriture” series (1967–) that appeared to be the result of sustained, deliberate action—in this case, repeated marks of graphite into wet paint, carried out horizontally across the canvas like writing. This observation by Nakahara would prove particularly prescient, with many Tansaekhwa works over the next decades emphasizing iterative gestures that can be read as forms of marking time. The “From Point” and “From Line” series (both 1972–84) by Lee Ufan, who was not featured in “Five Korean Artists,” but translated the text for the exhibition’s catalog from Korean to Japanese, and was also instrumental in the introduction of many Korean artists to Japan in the 1970s, are good examples of this. In *From Point* (1973), for instance, the artist restricts himself to creating a single kind of mark—a point created as a result of pressing a brush against the canvas once—and moves laterally across the canvas, filling its surface. He does not reload the brush with paint after each stroke but lets the marks gradually fade until they are barely visible; in doing this, Lee gives a representation to the time that passes as he marks his surface.

Perhaps some of the strongest examples of Tansaekhwa’s iterative, temporal methods can be seen in the works of Chung Sang-hwa, who worked independently in Korea, Japan and France but was included in several key exhibitions of Tansaekhwa during the 1980s. While the initial impression of Chung’s works, such as *Untitled 123* (1973), is that they are monochrome surfaces, once viewers adjust their vision to the paintings they see a range of colors—gradations of gray and blue, hints of brown—and the irregularities of the paintings’ surface texture. These variations come about as the result of the way in which Chung creates these surfaces: he repeatedly scrapes away and repaints individual cells of a painting over long periods of time, often several months. Chung’s works are created through this cycle of doing and undoing, and in this way they cannot be “completed” in the traditional sense of finishing a composition. Rather, one gets the impression that the cycle of painting and unpainting can go on indefinitely, with the work becoming a function of the duration of its creation.

Downplaying the question of national and ethnic origin and responding to the formal themes of the works shown at “Five Korean Artists,” Nakahara explored the works as self-contained worlds in which one could witness a drama between contrasting elements: form and chaos, dynamic time and static composition. This way of looking at Tansaekhwa—paying attention to the destabilization of representation and form, and acknowledging the element of time and process—does not require that we categorize the movement as a nation- or culture-specific phenomenon. Yet this approach does not necessarily exclude questions of cultural influence; the iterative processes of artists such as Park Seobo and Chung Sang-hwa have invited many comparisons to East Asian traditions of meditation and disciplined action. But regardless of the direction in which we take our interpretations, granting legitimacy to the viewer’s initial experience of perceiving a work of art empowers both viewer and artist by opening up a space for an exchange between the two. Read this way, the works of Tansaekhwa are not simply historical instances of a single culture’s visual expression, but living spaces for aesthetic encounters. And perhaps it is this particular combination in Tansaekhwa—the desire for a pure viewing experience in a world of shifting boundaries and identities—that ensures that the paintings remain compelling today. ㊦

delicately composed fields of “primeval” white. By emphasizing the visual and formal components of Tansaekhwa, Nakahara grants legitimacy to private experiences of art that need not necessarily reflect a unified cultural legacy or history. This viewer-centric—and, in some senses, phenomenological—approach to the paintings represents a potential alternative to a nation-centric approach to Tansaekhwa.

One visual phenomenon underscored by the works shown at “Five Korean Artists” was the dissolution of boundaries between representation, abstract form and formlessness. Though most Tansaekhwa paintings seem to have little to do with representation or the creation of illusory space, the vestiges of representation seen in the show were a key element in the viewing experience described by Nakahara. Lee Dong Youb’s work, in particular, engages with representation to a greater degree than does that of many of his peers. One of his works shown in “Five Korean Artists,” *Situation B* (1972), adds an additional element to the composition of *Situation A*. The same sparsely delineated cup now contains a lump of matter—more clearly depicted as ice floating in water in earlier versions of the painting—that is suggested by a gray gradient. None of the lines in the painting completely encloses a form; the smooth, white surface of the painting is never completely cut off, and can be seen simultaneously as empty space, transparent glass, ice or possibly water.

Here, white acts as the “void of consciousness” that Lee Dong Youb has described, creating an ambiguous ground that can be read as representing different kinds of matter depending on how the viewer understands the painting. Furthermore, the situation Lee represents is one in flux: the solid ice is on the verge of melting into liquid. The third piece of the series, *Situation C* (1972), restates the first painting: the same apparently empty cup is depicted in a slightly fainter outline. However, if the three paintings are read as a temporal sequence, the third cup would contain the resulting water, present

but entirely transparent and invisible. In this series, Lee thus uses a restrained form of representation to create a drama of phase change and ambiguous space. The symbolic meaning of the glass is not the focus of the work; rather, the artist is interested in the psychological process of perceiving and interpreting the same plane of white in slightly different variations. The melting ice furthermore echoes the dissolution of representation that Lee enacts in his works: other paintings, such as *Interspace* (1977), verge on being pure fields of white, with a single shade of gray that suggests the edges of an object.

Such dynamics of form and ambiguous space are part of what caught Nakahara’s attention in the works of the artists featured in “Five Korean Artists.” Suh Seung-won, a member of both the A.G. collective and the Origin Group—two movements that played significant roles in the development of modern art and its criticism in South Korea—showed works from his “Simultaneity” series, which he began in the late 1960s and has continued to the present day. *Simultaneity 73-14* (1973) was among the works exhibited; it shows a pair of skewed rectangles—one solid, and the other depicted only in outline—that seem on the verge of crystallizing into a stable form. While Suh’s paintings emphasized the interplay of geometric elements, the paintings shown from Heu Hwang’s “Variable Consciousness” series (1972–) were more fluid, featuring faint, nebulous patches of white against a light, neutral-colored ground. Heu has continued to work in this style for several decades, exploring subtle variations of white and the physical properties of fluid media; in recent years he has further emphasized his media’s amorphousness, pouring mixtures of paint and natural stone powder onto his canvases in an attempt to “release” his materials.

This turn to the material properties of painting became an important feature of Tansaekhwa. Artist Ha Chong Hyun—who was not part of the original “Five Korean Artists” exhibition, but exhibited alongside many of its artists throughout the 1970s and was the first chairman of A.G.—emphasizes the fluid properties of