

## KUKJE GALLERY | PRESS RELEASE

### Lee Seung Jio Solo Exhibition *LEE SEUNG JIO* at Kukje Gallery

Press Conference: September 1 (Thurs.), 2022, 11AM

Exhibition Dates: September 1 – October 30, 2022

Venue: Kukje Gallery K1, K2, K3

*I was traveling on a train. I was lost in thought, with my eyes closed, and there was something that flashed across my retina. I suddenly opened my eyes. But there was nothing. It was like the inability to forget a person who made a strong first impression. As soon as I arrived home, I worked straight through two nights with what was left of the image in my mind, completing today's pipe-like painting.*

– Lee Seung Jio

Kukje Gallery is pleased to present a solo exhibition of work by Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990) from September 1 to October 30, 2022. The artist's first exhibition with the gallery, the presentation of thirty works will examine anew the unique visual language of a painter who devoted his practice to developing a vocabulary of geometric abstraction in Korea.

Born in 1941 in Yongcheon, Pyeonganbuk Province, Lee Seung Jio moved to the south with his family in the post-liberation period. After joining art clubs in middle and high schools, he devoted himself to painting while a student at Hongik University, joining the Department of Western Painting in 1960. In 1962, he founded the Origin Group with his fellow artists including Kwon Young-Woo and Suh Seung-Won. As the name indicates, the avant-garde group sought a reduction to the foundational elements of art, as it fought against the conventional aesthetic systems of the time. Cultivating a visual language of his own, in 1967 Lee presented the first work in his *Nucleus* series, a title chosen by the artist for its association with an irreducible core element.

Only months later, in 1968 Lee painted his first "pipe" form in the tenth painting of the *Nucleus* series. A subject that would become his most familiar archetypal motif, the artist used masking tape to define the borders on the canvas, then applying oil paint with a flat brush. By putting light-colored paint at the center of the brush and darker hues on both ends, he was able to paint each color band with one stroke. By repeating this technique, he erased the distinction between disparate colors in the brushstrokes, forming a natural gradient that also captured an uncanny three-dimensionality. After laying in the colors of the bands, the artist would also sand the surface of the painting, burnishing the medium to further allude to a metallic surface.

Garnering an optical illusion through simple shapes and color variations within a rigid order, Lee's forms soon became the core of his vocabulary. In the year that followed his breakthrough, Lee won the Grand Prize at the first Dong-A International Fine Art Exhibition and the Minister of Culture and Information Prize at the National Art Exhibition (Gukjeon), making history as the first abstract artist to be awarded the highest honor in the western painting category. His work received awards at the National Art Exhibition for four consecutive years through 1971, provoking his famous observation, "it is hard to win a prize, but harder to not win one."

While acknowledging the importance of his signature method, Lee observed that, "There are people who call me 'the pipe painter.' It is not a label I welcome nor dislike. The name is simply a reference to the illusory objecthood deriving from a repetitive act of seeing, where the premise of figurative object as a motif

is denied. Of course, its appearance was never meant to indicate any symbolic body for contemporary civilization."

As the artist himself notes, the pipe-like forms are neither an association to nor an extension of any specific object. Asserting that these forms should only be read as a combination of line and color, the primary elements of painting, the art critic Lee Yil had suggested that, "through the order of regular repetition as a basic principle of plasticity, Lee Seung Jio introduced Clement Greenberg's 'self-reductive abstraction' or 'post-painterly abstraction' for the first time in Korea."

In contrast, the machine critic Youngjun Lee later argued that if we are to recognize abstract art as "a reaction to the new sensibility of a rapidly industrializing and modernizing world," then it is natural to read art as in association with how the changes of perception, driven by our new machine civilization, are expressed on the canvas. The landscape perceived walking on two legs cannot be the same as that perceived looking out the window from a seat of a train traveling over 100km per hour. As can be seen from the artist's notes recollecting his own train journey, technology leads the one experiencing it to mull over the unfamiliar sensation. Machine aesthetics cannot but be seen in relation to the development of modern and contemporary art.

Lee Seung Jio had remarked that it was after the launch of NASA's Apollo space craft that he opened his eyes to a new consciousness of space in relation to the cosmos and embraced his work as the most appropriate form of expressing the times he lived in. Lee's estate has described the artist, "a man who did not know math and yet so clearly saw through speed and expansiveness." Interpreting the advancement of a generation as the result of the velocity secured through new science and technology, philosopher Paul Virilio has argued that speed is the medium of our collective experience and the core impetus behind the historic dynamics of that experience. He defines speed as "the world's destiny and its destination." This is an appropriate framing of Lee Seung Jio's work, where the artist clearly embraced this destiny, adapting the motifs and terms of technology to his canvas. As his practice evolved, the artist would produce large-scale works longer than 4 meters wide, in a bid to capture the infinitely expanding universe onto the canvas.

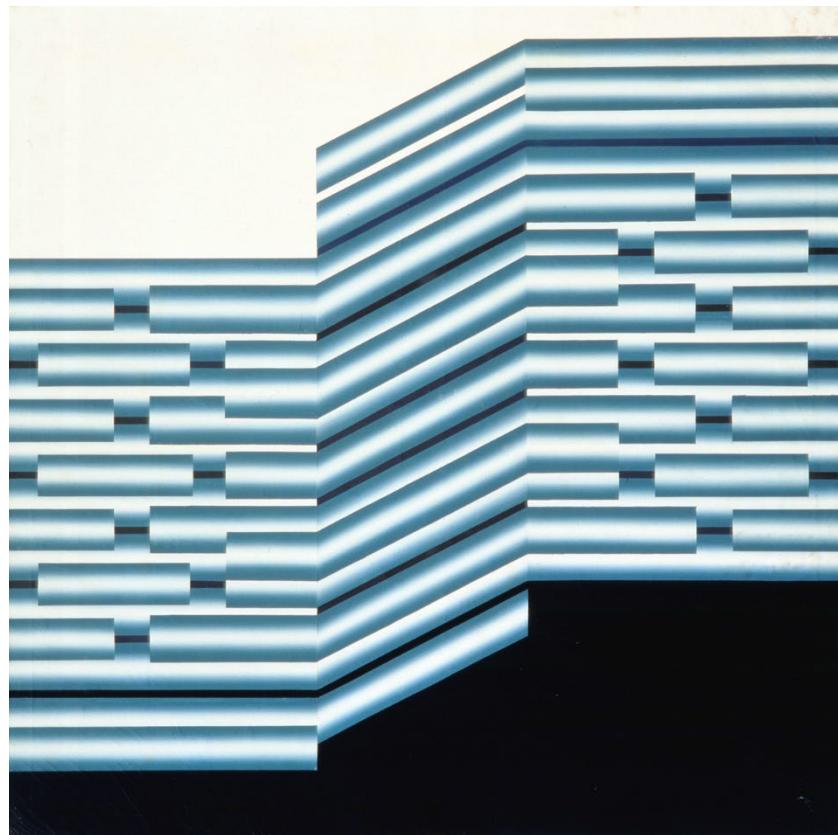
### About the Artist

A pioneer of Korean geometric abstract painting, Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990) occupies an unparalleled position in the history of Korean modern art. With the debut of his trademark series *Nucleus* in 1967, he paved the way for Korean geometric abstraction and thereafter rigorously formulated a unique and original formal language in an unceasing manner for over 20 years before his early death. Since the latter half of the 1970s, Lee expanded his artistic œuvre in relation to the Dansaekhwa movement, pursuing monochrome paintings of neutral colors and adopting the Korean traditional paper *hanji* as an artistic medium. Characterized by cylindrical forms reminiscent of "pipes," his paintings not only are in dialogue with modern civilization but also challenge the notion of opticality, evoking a sensory illusion that oscillates between the two-dimensional flatness and three-dimensional structure as well as the abstract and the figurative. Sharing the title of "Nucleus," Lee's works are a crystallization of his lifelong contemplation of what constitutes a distilled pictorial quality, demonstrating his commitment to finding the essence of modernist abstract painting.

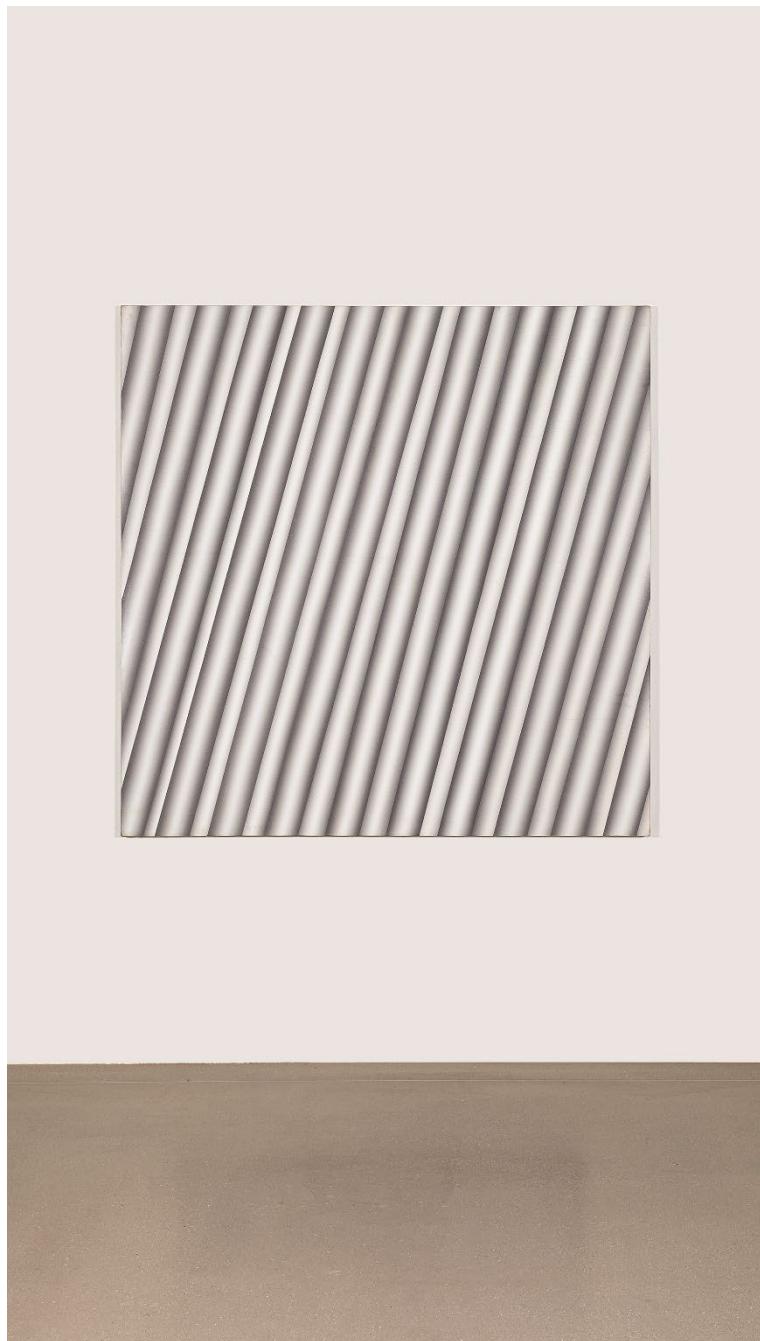
Lee Seung Jio studied painting at Hongik University and was a professor at Chung-Ang University. While acting as a founding member of the avant-garde art organization Origin Group and AG (Korean Avant-Garde Association), he received multiple awards at the National Art Exhibition, playing a vital role as an intermediary between the avant-garde and mainstream art. He further participated in major group exhibitions led by Dansaekhwa artists, which established him as one of the most representative Korean abstract painters. His works have been widely exhibited around the world, including the recent large-scale retrospective at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA) in 2020, and are in the collections of prominent institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the MMCA, Seoul Museum of Art, Ho-Am Art Museum, Total Museum, and Deutsche Bank, Seoul.



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**  
*Nucleus*  
1968  
Oil on canvas  
173.7 x 130.9 cm  
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery  
Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**  
*Nucleus PM-76*  
1969  
Oil on canvas  
161.4 x 161.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery  
Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**

*Nucleus 75-10*

1975

Oil on canvas

146 x 146 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**  
*Nucleus*  
1976  
Oil on canvas  
116.5 x 91 cm  
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery  
Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**

*Nucleus 85-21*

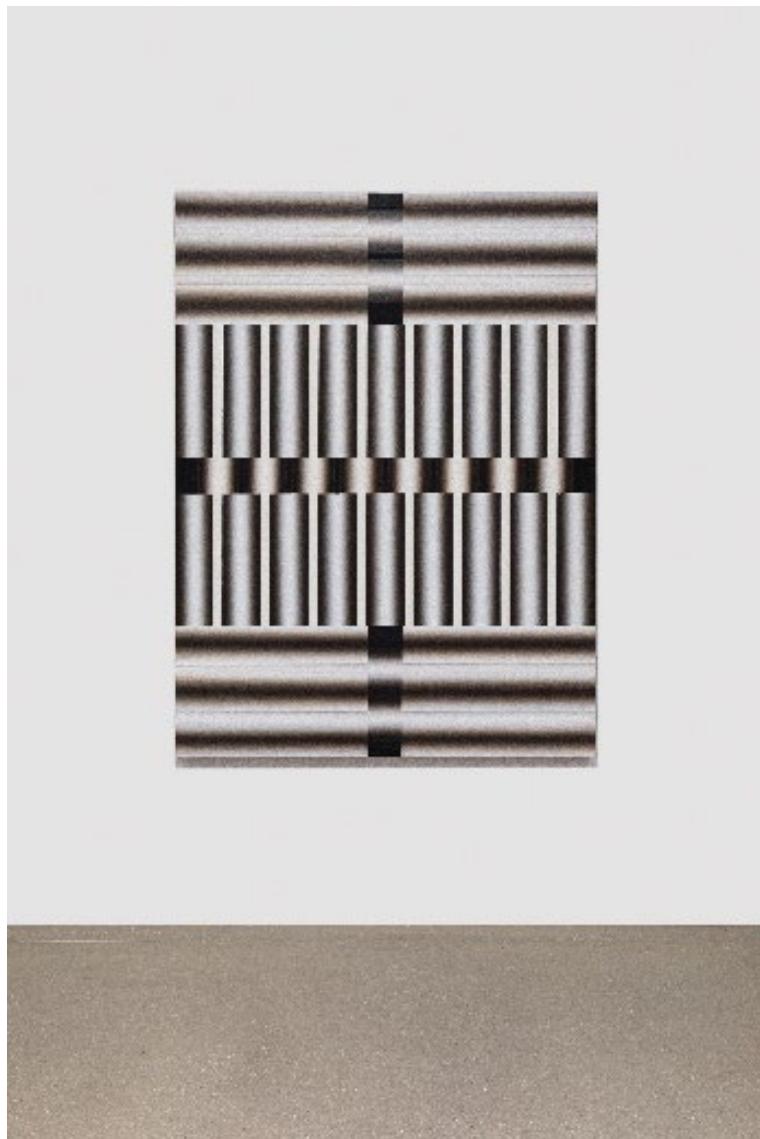
1985

Oil on canvas

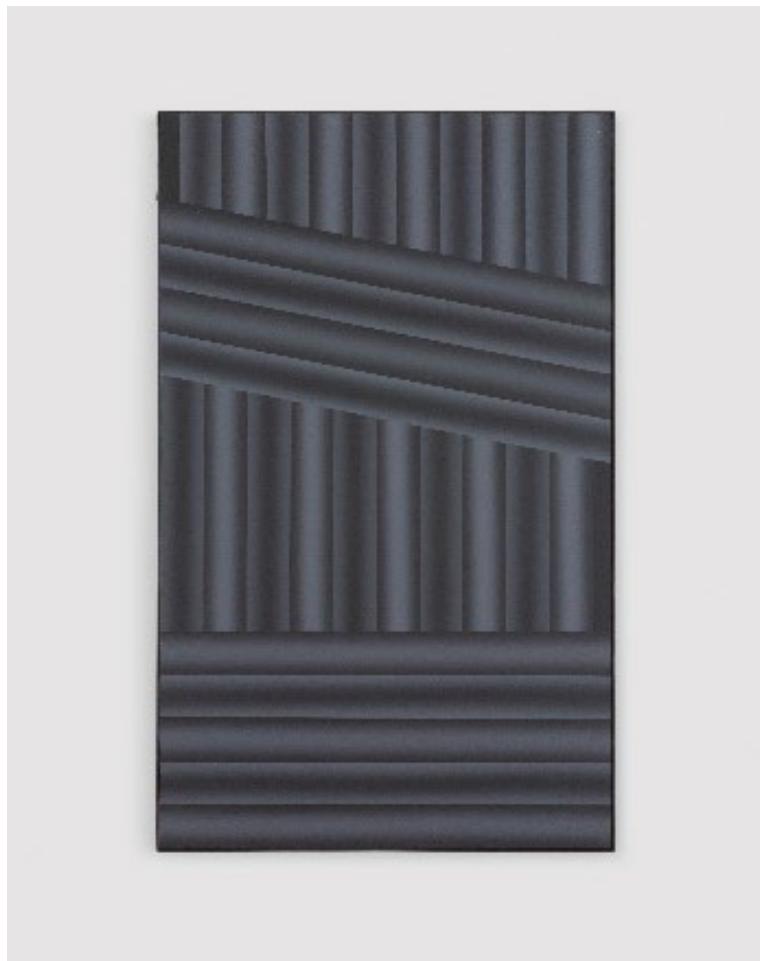
199 x 299.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery

Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**  
*Nucleus*  
1987  
Oil on canvas  
130 x 97 cm  
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery  
Image provided by Kukje Gallery



**Lee Seung Jio (1941-1990)**  
*Nucleus 89-20*  
1989  
Oil on canvas  
145 x 89.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Kukje Gallery  
Image provided by Kukje Gallery



Artist portrait of Lee Seung Jio, approximately 1969  
Image provided by Kukje Gallery

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**KUKJE GALLERY** | COMMUNICATIONS  
T +82 2 3210 9821 | [press@kukjegallery.com](mailto:press@kukjegallery.com)

## KUKJE GALLERY

54 SAMCHEONG-RO, JONGNO-GU SEOUL, 03053 KOREA  
T + 82 2 735 8449 | F + 82 2 733 4879 | [WWW.KUKJEGALLERY.COM](http://WWW.KUKJEGALLERY.COM)

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