

PERROTIN

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**KIM Chong-Hak**

*Modern Painters,*

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*April 2019*

"Untitled," 2018,  
acrylic on canvas,  
91 x 72 cm./  
35 13/16 x 28 3/8 in.

# KIM CHONG HAK, THE KOREAN VAN GOGH

The painter, who is turning 82 this year, is one of the most sought-after artists from the land of the morning-calm. Emmanuel Perrotin is currently showing a selection of his recent works in Paris

**BY AYMERIC MANTOUX**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN









Kim Chong Hak at work.  
"I paint nature but I do  
not paint just what  
I see but what I  
experience of nature."



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

**B**orn in 1937 in North Korea, Kim Chong Hak has been nicknamed “the painter of four seasons,” because of his tropism for nature and flowers. But that would be too simplistic, given the lyricism of his paintings and his incredible energy. Very popular in his country, he remained relatively unknown elsewhere, before recently joining the Perrotin stable of artists. Showing great respect for the Korean tradition, Kim Chong Hak is also a renowned collector of Korean art, of which he gave 300 pieces to the Seoul National Museum of Korea 20 years ago. The artist’s taste for figuration diverts from the Dansaekhwa movement of the 1970s, which was drawn towards minimalism and monochromes. Colors, flowers, vegetation, invade his canvases like in some Outsider Art works. But they also remind you of van Gogh or Douanier Rousseau. “Color is at least half of painting,” says the artist, who continues to wander in the countryside and marvel at the birds and insects who populate his works.

**How did you prepare for this specific show at Perrotin ? Or do you just do your work, draw, paint, and then show it to the world?**

Some of the works that will be presented during the exhibition are from many years before, but the majority are from the paintings that I worked on during last few years. I did not especially prepare for the exhibition at Perrotin but I did suggest

specific paintings which I wished to be presented.

I go to my studio every day unless I am sick. I paint what comes to my mind that day or that week. My main motives have not changed but these days I really try my best to capture the vitality of the subject that I paint.

**Why define yourself as a painter exclusively, even though you are also an installation artist?**

I mainly paint. But long time ago, I also worked on the installation art in Japan. Recently I like making what I paint with flexible material like clay or papier mâché.

**When did you know you would be an artist? When your grandfather took you out for a walk? Later?**

I have liked drawing or painting ever since I was very young, but it was when I was a high school student that I wanted to be an artist.

**You say you are a painter of nature, but it's your vision of nature. How does all this natural world make it into one of your paintings or sculptures ? Your painting is far from naturalism.**

I paint nature but I do not paint just what I see but what I experience of nature.

**Apart from nature, where have you drawn your inspiration from?**

I am a renowned collector of Korean antiquities. I have collected since I was in

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"Weeds," 1987,  
acrylic on cotton,  
198.5 x 223 cm./  
78 1/8 x 87 13/16 in.

THIS & FACING PAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN





"Untitled," 2018,  
acrylic on canvas,  
162.2 x 130.3 cm./  
63 7/8 x 51 5/16 in.



my 30s. I spent most of my earnings to acquire antiques.

**Some of your sketches and drawings remind me of van Gogh, would it be correct to assume there is a connection ?**

My nickname during high school years was van Gogh due to my personality, which was similar to his. My paintings back then did not have a resemblance to van Gogh's paintings. But I can agree that now my paintings do have the similarities but ironically my personality is not like him.

**I also read you were inspired by Odilon Redon when you were very young. How come? It's quite odd. Even in France, not many people worship Redon. Except maybe painters from the younger generation, such as Claire Tabouret, who happens to be also represented by Perrotin.**

When I was a high school student, I saw his works in Vincent van Gogh's book. I liked the fantastical and mystical images. His usage of colors were also surreal. I particularly liked his vase paintings.

**There also seem to be references to Douanier Rousseau in your painting. Not only the motives, flowers, birds, but also the sense of composition, the flow, the colors. Would you agree with that impression ?**

Although he painted nature, he did not paint from observation but from his imagination. I liked his unique and distinctive style; and his imaginative motives.

**There is a very strong flow of Korean Contemporary art, which was very traditional before the 1960s, but it seems to speak to the whole world. How do you explain the fact that people who do not have your culture, your religion, your sense of aesthetics, share your art ?**

I believe that art is a universal language. We are much more similar than different. My paintings reflect the subject matter that has been dealt with during so many years of human history and everywhere in the world. However, we perceive nature differently because I believe we were taught to think differently about nature. I welcome young children to my exhibition because they have not been taught how to think. Their reaction is very genuine and intuitive. You may find comfort in the similarities but you enrich yourself from trying to understand the differences.

**You were drawn toward figurative painting when it was fashionable to paint abstraction. How do you feel about the comeback of painting nowadays?**

It is the circle of life! Nothing lasts forever but nothing perishes forever either.

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"River," 1987,  
195 x 313 cm./  
76 9/16 x 123 1/4 in.

**What do you mean when you say you are not painting flowers or birds? Do you mean you are painting the idea of a bird or a flower? And that in that sense, figurative painting is also an idea, a kind of abstraction, because it's just a way of representing the word?**

We think we see with our eyes, but we do not. Contemporary science is proving that. I see birds and recognize them as birds. But in my mind, they are part of the elements of the whole image that I construct. If I do not find them necessary, they are just any birds that I see but will

not remain in my mind and be painted.

**Once you also said you would be happy to paint 100 good paintings of nature. But you did. And then you continued? What do you believe is the reason behind all this? Is there a reason? Is a reason for art necessary?**

When I told myself that I was at the brink of giving up my life. But even during that situation, I felt destined to paint and to leave paintings behind. Now I do not count how many I paint. I just paint. I do not know what else I can do. I live to paint or I paint to live.**MP**