

Park Seo-Bo

The New York Times,
A Revolutionary Scribbles His Way To Artistic Posterity

June 2021

At age 89, the painter Park Seo-Bo is nearing new milestones in his remarkable career. BY ANDREW RUSSETH

A Revolutionary Scribbles His Way To Artistic Posterity

And for the South Korean painter Park Seo-Bo, 89, the shows keep coming.

By ANDREW RUSSETH

SEOUL — In 1951, as the Korean War dragged on, a young artist named Park Jae-Hong headed toward Seoul. The conflict had cut short his first year at art school, and he had been forced into service, first by the North, then by the South, stationed in coastal Masan. He had survived aircraft attacks, meager rations, bitter cold — and had managed to get discharged. Back in the capital, trying to raise tuition money, Park asked soldiers from the United States if he could do their portraits. He traded their dollars for won — Korea's currency — and bought art supplies and congee made with leftovers from military bases. “One cup of that and a glass of soju, and I would be very happy,” he recalled, through a translator, during a recent afternoon visit.

A pink scarf wrapped around his neck, Park was sitting in the Gizi, a sprawling residence, work space and gallery in Seoul where he has lived with family since 2018. Some of his works — radiantly colored abstractions vibrating with thin lines — hung nearby. Today he is a “figure of towering influence, as a teacher and as an artist,” said Alexandra Munroe, the Guggenheim Museum's senior curator for Asian art. In November, he will turn 90.

Though Park walks with an elegant wooden cane, he was full of energy as he sipped tea and uncorked stories about his remarkable career as it nears new milestones. After a spring show at White Cube in London, he has more on deck, at Kukje

Gallery in Seoul, Tokyo Gallery+BTAP in Japan and Château La Coste in Provence. An English translation of a moving biography by his daughter is out, and he is seeing through not one but two museums of his art in South Korea.

That two-pronged strategy is classic Park, who has never been one to make a difficult trek any easier. He was born in rural Yecheon in 1931 during Japanese colonial rule, and his father had wanted him to pursue law. When he was accepted into Hongik University's art program (he had applied secretly), the elder Park “wouldn't eat for two weeks because of his disappointment,” he said. “A painter was considered poor and very low in the hierarchy of social status.”

On the verge of his 1955 graduation, Park fled Seoul to avoid a military call-up and adopted the alias Seo-Bo. He kept it. And after finding success in the official national exhibition, he protested its conservatism with fellow artists. They called for “an insurgency against the obstinacy of the old art scene” in a manifesto, and organized an independent show.

Like many of his vanguard-minded peers, Park Seo-Bo channeled the horrors of the war into searing, aggressive abstractions. When he was young, he said, “I was always crying. I was even afraid of small insects. But the war made me really strong. It changed me completely.”

These early years are the stuff of feature films. When Park married a younger art student, Yoon Myoung-Sook, in 1958, Kim Tschang-Yeul, a fellow artist working as a policeman, accompanied them on their honeymoon south, flashing his credentials at checkpoints to ensure that the fugitive-groom was not detained. The couple lived

rugary in Seoul, which was impoverished and rebuilding. A dictatorship held power. Yoon managed their living arrangements, as Park relentlessly painted and scrapped together teaching jobs, eventually settling at Hongik.

While artistically adrift in the late 1960s, he landed on his defining style. He was reading Buddhist and Confucian texts, trying to find a way forward. One day he watched his second son, 3-year-old Seung-Ho (now Seung), struggle to write a word inside a grid. "He was erasing it over and over again, and in the end he got so fed up that he ended up doing these scribbles," Park said, violently moving his hand to imitate the action. "There were so many eraser marks. I realized it was all about giving up, letting go."

Park brought that revelation to his art. Perched atop a low platform, a canvas beneath him, he ran a pencil in waves through wet white paint, again and again. Abandoning expressionist marks, he was pursuing what he called "endless action and infinite repetition." These alluring paintings, which he titled "Écriture" ("writing" in French), are case studies in how simple actions, sustained over time, can bewitch. Shimmering fields of whites, blacks, and grays, they conjure an artist's hand in motion. He has said making them was a way of "emptying" his mind.

The Guggenheim has a captivating "Écriture" from 1973 (the year Park debuted the series in Tokyo), with tight graphite rows flowing across an expanse more than 6 feet tall and 9 feet wide. "It becomes immersive and atmospheric," Munroe said, describing the piece as "very much about imperfections. It's also about breath. It's also about the mark of the body."

The series made Park a leader of a loose Korean movement that came to be known as Dansaekhwa ("monochrome painting"), whose artists directed traditional materials toward inventive new ends, influenced both by indigenous practices and foreign avant-garde groups. Park eventually incorporated Korea's sturdy hanji paper, made from the inner bark of mulberry trees, into his works, soaking it until it became a pulp and manipulating it atop canvases before it dried.

A Dansaekhwa show at the 2015 Venice Biennale raised the reputation of its artists. By then, some had found success living internationally, in more robust art scenes, like Park's friends Lee Ufan in Japan and France, and Kim in France. But Park worked at home, taught and helped develop art festivals, becoming a kingpin of the na-

ture art world. Despite the fact that Korea has a lot of faults, a lot of weaknesses, my roots are in Korea," he said.

That meant that Park's "artistic reputation in global art was not really up to what he deserved," said Kate Lim, a Korean writer and curator in Singapore who credits him with revolutionizing painting and "mastering traditional paper as a color, as texture, even as a shape." Being "slightly indignant" about his low profile abroad, she wrote an English-language biography in 2014.

A related impulse motivated Park's daughter, Seungsook, to write. She was struck by the accomplishments of the generation that endured the Korean War and guided the South into prosperity, she said in an email. "I wanted to tell my parents that what they had done for their whole life was enough, and great, and that it will be intact in the future."

Her book, free online, is an unflinching account of her father's manic drive to succeed. In one revealing episode from the 1980s, he asks a curator to reveal the size of the largest work any artist is bringing to a group exhibition so that he can create an even larger display. He was a hard-driving professor, too, pushing students in their work, and — in an era of liberal alcohol consumption — their drinking. "You either got blind-drunk, blacked out, and woke up on the sidewalk or you dropped Seo-Bo's classes," she writes.

She describes marathon studio sessions (he now works eight hours a day) and a "long, adverse, unhealthy marriage," with his early controlling behavior leading Yoon to mull divorce. Seungsook, a former art therapist now working in film, said she actually "hated him for all my life." They didn't get along and she considered him "a kind of person who wants to control everything because he thinks he is the best and trusts nobody." But in 2018, he was ill, and when she visited, she was shocked by how weak he seemed. They started talking.

Over the years, the firebrand has cooled. "I maintain this peace inside," Park said, when asked the secret of his present vigor. "Before, even a little thing would annoy me. I would be outraged. You might say I finally matured." Park has bounced back from two heart attacks and a stroke. He told his daughter, "A man's life depends on the mercy of his wife." (Yoon, as it happens, has just published a book of personal essays; her husband penned its preface.) A trip the couple made to Fukushima, Japan, in 2000, to see its fall leaves dramatically changed his art.

"Ever since then, it's been about nature,

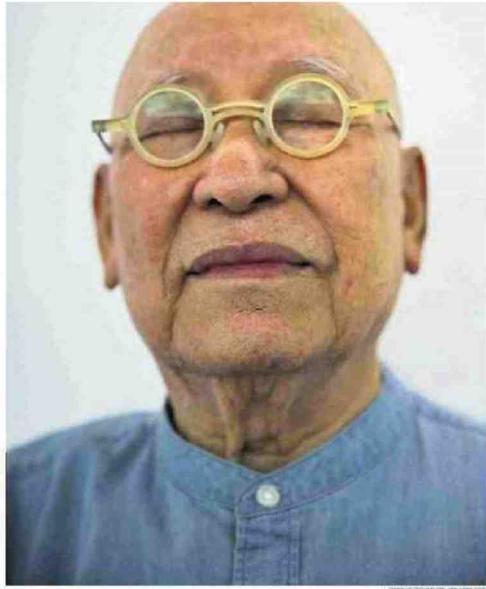
it's been about healing," Park said. Sumptuous color entered, to comfort viewers. Grabbing his cane, he strolled through his gallery, pointing to a potent red piece inspired by that foliage and a yellow one drawing on a limpid day on Jeju island. Narrow columns of hanji, with rough tops, line the canvases — ornamentation made with a humble, age-old material, gingerly set into place by rulers and other flat-edged tools.

In January, Park's longtime compatriot Kim, who painted glimmering water droplets, died at 91. Kim had established a museum devoted to his work and now Park is following suit. The first of his two museums, focused on his Dansaekhwa work, is scheduled to open in the Jongno area of Seoul in August 2022. Land has been donated by the local government, and the roughly 22,000-square-foot building, designed by Yang Kiran, is being funded by the [Park Seo-Bo Art and Cultural Foundation](#). (His first son, Park Seung-Jo, is its chairman.)

The more ambitious endeavor is in Yecheon, Park's birthplace. For a museum surveying his life's efforts (he will donate some 120 pieces), Park has been courting

the Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. His work is "almost like going into a cathedral in the morning hours," he said. (His favorite Zumthor building is the Kolumba, a tranquil art museum in Cologne, Germany, of gray brick and wood.) The architect has not yet signed on, and details of the project, backed by local officials, are still being determined, but Park has a history of getting what he wants.

When bidding at auction on porcelain moon jars from the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), Park said he often competes fiercely. At least half a dozen of the lustrous white urns were scattered about the room. "I love them almost like a crazy person," he said. Most were nearly spherical, with subtle, intriguing variations. But one had a thick, oblong ripple around its entire body. It was "the odd one in the belly" of the kiln, he said, explaining that it dated back perhaps 300 years. Normally, the artisans would have discarded such a piece. "But this one, in spite of it being wonky, had a balance," he said. "Because it can stand on its own, they didn't break it."



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