

**PRESSBOOK**

CHUNG Chang-Sup

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Natasha Degen and Kibum Kim

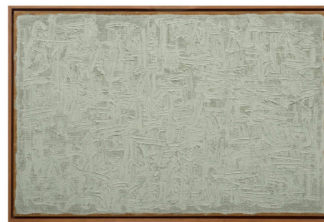
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## THE KOREANS AT THE TOP OF THE ART WORLD

BY NATASHA DEGEN AND KIBUM KIM

*Ha Chong-Hyun's "Conjunction 86-11" (1986), which will be featured in Christie's selling exhibition in New York.*

COURTESY CHRISTIE'S



**N**ext week, when V.I.P.s and special guests shuffle through Christie's new West Galleries, in Rockefeller Center, they will alight on a series of abstract paintings by a group of relatively unknown artists. These pieces reflect a recent market craze for attractive, anodyne work with an emphasis on process and materials. But the artists at the West Galleries are not young painters from Brooklyn, Berlin, or Los Angeles. They are a group of Korean octogenarians who comprise a movement known as Tansaekhwa (or "Dansaekhwa") and have been producing in this style since the nineteen-seventies.

Tansaekhwa will receive the red-carpet treatment from Christie's, with a sumptuous, hundred-and-thirty-six-page catalogue, a lavish exhibition split between New York and Hong Kong, and prices to match: a million dollars for a work by Park Seo-Bo, \$1.5 million for a Chung Sang-Hwa. By the standards of today's frothy art market, the prices are far from eye-watering, but for the artists, who until now were mostly forgotten even within Korea, they are almost unfathomable. "I am unbelievably happy," the artist Ha Chong-Hyun said on the phone from Korea. "I'm eighty-one years old. Back in the day, Koreans didn't live this long. I shouldn't be here. But to have this happen in my lifetime, I can't be more thankful."

After four decades of languishing, with occasional exhibitions in regional galleries around Korea and Japan, Ha has, within the last year, landed his first solo show in New York, seen his work enter the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection, attended the opening of a highly lauded Tansaekhwa show in Venice, and watched forty-five of his paintings go on the auction block, with nine selling for more than a hundred thousand dollars. Prior to 2014, his auction record was a mere \$13,303, and, in the six years from 2007 through 2013, when eight works of his went to auction, half went unsold. "To be honest, it was not possible to make a living making this kind of work in Korea," Ha said. "I was so tired and it's such welcome news."

Although he was the dean at Korea's most prestigious art school, Hongik University, for many years, Park Seo-Bo, who is eighty-four, had a negligible



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market as well. Park's 1982 piece "Ecriture 3-82" was sold in November, 2013, for \$56,750 and then resold in May of this year for \$631,972. In the nineteen-eighties, Park said, he couldn't sell this kind of work for even three million Korean won, which, at the time, was equivalent to less than four thousand dollars.

This sudden attention has blindsided the Tansaekhwa artists, but it coincides with a new global focus in the art world. Galleries are opening outposts; collectors from emerging economies are increasing their influence; and museums are revising the art-historical narrative to include under-recognized artists and movements. Tansaekhwa has found itself at the nexus of a number of changes. Alexandra Munroe, the curator of the 2011 Guggenheim Museum retrospective of Lee Ufan, an artist associated with Tansaekhwa and its most prominent exponent, describes it as a "perfect storm."

The powerful art adviser Allan Schwartzman, who has taken a keen interest in Tansaekhwa, said, "I've never seen this amount of widening interest in a particular circle of non-contemporary artists, in historical material before." The number of upcoming exhibitions associated with the group this fall supports Schwartzman's observation. In New York alone, the blue-chip galleries Blum & Poe, Galerie Perrotin, and Tina Kim will open shows of Yun Hyong-Keun, Chung Chang-Sup, and Ha Chong-Hyun respectively, within a week of each other, starting on October 30th. In London during Frieze week, in mid-October, no fewer than three exhibitors—Axel Vervoordt, Kukje Gallery / Tina Kim, and Hakgojae—will be showing Tansaekhwa works at Frieze Masters. South of the fair, in a tony gallery space next to the Royal Academy of Art, the global mega gallery Pace will host a retrospective of Lee Ufan's paintings from the Tansaekhwa period.

What started the market phenomenon? It can be traced to two shows of major historical works: one, at Kukje Gallery in Seoul, in August, 2014, and, less than a month later, a show at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, which was curated by Joan Kee, an art historian who authored "Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method," the first book on the movement in English. (The artists credit her for spurring international interest in their work.) Following the two exhibitions, a number of institutions acquired Tansaekhwa works, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Centre Pompidou, in Paris; the Guggenheim Museum in New York and Abu Dhabi; the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C.; the Museum of Modern Art, in New York; and M+, a new museum currently under construction in Hong Kong. Important American collectors, such as Howard Rachofsky, who, with his wife, Cindy, has promised their entire collection to the Dallas Museum of Art, also bought from these shows, under Schwartzman's guidance.

As collectors took their cue from these influential tastemakers, auction prices went up. Since the Blum & Poe and Kukje shows last year, seventy-two works by Chung Sang-Hwa, Park Seo-Bo, Ha Chong-Hyun, and Yun Hyong-Keun have sold for more than a hundred thousand dollars each at auction. Prior to that, only four works had surpassed a hundred thousand dollars, ever. Although



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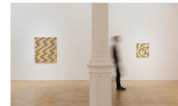
the sales took place in Asia, more than half of the bidders were Western collectors and new clients, Jihyun Lee, a specialist at K Auction, which holds auctions in Korea and Hong Kong, said. Seoul-based Yunah Jung, who is organizing the Christie's selling exhibition, concurs that Western interest is driving the market.

Joan Kee, the art historian, says that Tansaekhwa has that “extra oomph factor” from its association to Lee Ufan, who was acclaimed in the late nineteen-sixties as the main theorist behind the Japanese postwar movement Mono-Ha. But she cautions that Tansaekhwa was not an official movement; there was no manifesto, nor a clearly defined group of members. The term, meaning, literally, “monochrome painting,” appeared in the mid-nineteen-seventies to describe work that shared a spare palette and an innovative approach to process, which differed from artist to artist. Lee Ufan created works consisting of lines, made by dragging his brush down the length of the canvas until the pigment disappeared, and points, made by repeatedly pressing the tip of the brush against the canvas until the paint was used up. Park Seo-Bo used pencil to draw dense scribbles, wispy lines, and sinuous loops into the still-wet surface of the painted canvas. Chung Sang-Hwa covered the canvas in a layer of zinc-based paint, laboriously stripped away sections and then repainted those areas with a slightly glossier acrylic paint. Ha Chong-Hyun used a burlap woven fabric as a support and pushed paint from the reverse side, allowing it to seep through to the front.

The resultant works had a strong, if superficial, affinity to paintings by Cy Twombly, the ZERO artists,

Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, Niele Toroni and other exponents of postwar abstraction, but came

*Works from Lee Ufan's "From Point" series, currently on view at Pace London.*  
LEE UFAN, COURTESY PACE GALLERY



out of a period of economic deprivation and political upheaval. In 1972, South Korean President Park Chung Hee declared martial law and instituted a new constitution that greatly expanded executive power, effectively rendering the state a dictatorship. Although political repression was met with some disaffection and resistance, the Tansaekhwa artists remained silent. “Young artists unknown to the public or with no prestigious position had nothing else to do than to repeat non-expressive expressions with no distinctive image using minimal materials,” Lee Ufan said. Park Seo-Bo described his intentions in a similar way: “I didn’t want to express anything, it was about emptying myself. The monk empties himself by ritual, by repetition. So I did the same thing.”

The artists’ choice of materials also reflected these conditions. Ha Chong-Hyun began using burlap, a material sent by the U.S. to aid South Korea and which was readily and cheaply available at Seoul’s Namdaemun Market. Specific to the Korean context yet resonant with Western abstraction, Tansaekhwa came to dominate international shows of Korean contemporary art by the late nineteen-seventies. Over time, the movement gradually fell out of favor; only its most celebrated artist, Lee Ufan, who mainly split his time between Tokyo and Paris, maintained a successful career both at home and abroad.



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The response to the Kukje and Blum & Poe shows was immediate, but not entirely surprising given that it came soon after a market boom for Gutai, another rediscovered movement that was both non-Western and abstract. Founded in Japan in 1954, Gutai challenged the conventions of art in an astounding array of mediums, including painting, performance, installation, and participatory art. In recent years, the market has taken particular interest in one member, Kazuo Shiraga, who created violently expressive works by painting with his feet. Since 2009, the average price of Shiraga's work has risen more than sixfold. This spring, the market reached a fever pitch when two of New York's most important galleries—Dominique Lévy and Mnuchin Gallery—mounted Shiraga shows concurrently and a third gallery, Fergus McCaffrey, which has represented the Shiraga family since 2009, held a show shortly thereafter.

Tansaekhwa has several advantages over Gutai, including abundance. According to Schwartzman, who has acquired, with his clients, works by Gutai and Tansaekhwa artists, "there was never meaningful supply of Gutai." The supply that did exist was widely dispersed. Shiraga, for instance, was represented for decades by galleries in Paris, Berlin, and London, so many of his works ended up in European collections. Because most of the Tansaekhwa artists had few market outlets prior to 2014, most of them are sitting on vast resources of material. Ha Chong-Hyun estimates that he still possesses roughly a thousand works, though he has promised a portion to a municipal museum in Korea.

As the big galleries become bigger, through larger spaces and multiple locations in cities around the world, and as the proliferation of art fairs continues unabated, more programming is needed than ever before. Tansaekhwa is particularly appealing, because, in addition to their considerable inventories of historical material, most of the artists continue to make new work. Plus, their oeuvre is almost exclusively painting, which remains the market's most saleable medium. "Painting is painting," the dealer Tim Blum said. "It's a kind of a no-brainer in terms of how that gets marketed, collected and contextualized."

Another advantage is its relative affordability, especially in comparison to its Western cognates. "For eleven million dollars I could have a Ryman, or I could build a whole history of Tansaekhwa," one curator explained. By 2014, the market for abstract, neutral-colored, process-based painting reached its peak; works by young artists like David Ostrowski and Lucien Smith were selling at auction for hundreds of thousands of dollars, despite the fact that many of these works were created only a year or two prior. "When you look at the work of young artists, by their third show they get two to three hundred thousand dollars," a collector said. "It fulfills the consumer's desire for something that looks nice, but it's a little premature. None of it's significant art-historically."

Tansaekhwa's built-in historical import distinguishes it from this recent boom. The young artists, without institutional support or art-historical validation, were ultimately undone by over-supplying a market that provided thin support once the faddish exuberance dissipated. Although the market for emerging art has cooled, abstraction continues to resonate. "Clearly we're at a moment when an



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an audience can see this historical work through a contemporary lens,” Schwartzman said. “There’s so much interest from younger artists in abstraction. We’re well-framed to be able to look at it.” Jihyun Lee says that Western collectors bidding on Tansaekhwa feel “more comfortable” and “familiar” with the works, “because [Tansaekhwa works] are abstract, so they don’t need to understand the culture or need to study it. It comes more easily.”

The facile appeal of abstraction, coupled with the spectacular market rise—the Christie’s prices reflect a fourfold increase since the Kukje and Blum & Poe shows last fall—prompts the question of whether the frenzy over Tansaekhwa indicates a speculative-market bubble. Despite numerous institutional acquisitions, Tansaekhwa has yet to receive a major museum show, and the work may soon get too expensive for continued museum interest. “When you jump from two hundred thousand dollars to a million dollars, that’s going to kick the museums out of the market,” Schwartzman said, adding that, with the new price levels, “Markets always have a certain plateau level. It needs a next group of collectors.”

Dealers are prepared. “We’re committed to push it to another level,” Tina Kim, one of the New York gallerists, said. 2016 promises a fresh crop of Tansaekhwa exhibitions. The global juggernaut White Cube, known for its longtime representation of Damien Hirst and his Y.B.A. cohorts, will open the year with a solo show of Park Seo-Bo in London in January. Blum & Poe has three shows in the works, notably a group show in L.A. juxtaposing Tansaekhwa artists with western counterparts such as Brice Marden and Robert Ryman which will make an emphatic case for Tansaekhwa in the postwar art-historical canon. Dominique Lévy, whose show of Shiraga was integral in catapulting him to mainstream prominence, is organizing a joint show of Chung Sang-Hwa with the Chelsea gallery Greene Naftali.

There may indeed be room yet for more growth. Tina Kim recalled a recent meeting with a Chinese collector who was suspicious of these relatively low price levels. “Why is it so cheap? Why is it not half a million?” the collector asked, wondering if there was something wrong with the work.

Park, who has described himself as the best artist in Asia, is confident. “I think it should go up tenfold to reflect the right price,” he said, before predicting a price of ten million dollars for his works. “It will happen. You’ll see.”

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