

Park Seo-Bo

Park Seo-Bo

March 2020

CONTACT US
The Asian Art Newspaper
Vol 22 Issue 3
Published by
Asian Art Newspaper Ltd,
London

EDITOR/PUBLISHER
Sarah Callaghan
The Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521,
London W8 4GT, UK
sarah.callaghan@
asianartnewspaper.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

ADVERTISING
Jane Grylls
tel +44 (0)20 7300 5661
jane.grylls@royalacademy.org.uk
Renata Molina Lopes
Renata.Molina-Lospes@
royalacademy.org.uk
tel +44 (0)20 7300 5751

SEND ADVERTISING TO
Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521
London W8 4GT
United Kingdom
info@asianartnewspaper.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

ART DIRECTION
Gary Ottewill, Editorial Design
garyottewill.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS MANAGER
Heather Milligan
info.asianart@btinternet.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040

SUBSCRIPTIONS
AND ADMINISTRATION
Asian Art Newspaper
PO Box 22521
London W8 4GT
United Kingdom
info.asianart@btinternet.com
tel +44 (0)20 7229 6040
Paypal available on
asianartnewspaper.com
for back issues, subscriptions,
and digital editions

ANNUAL PRINT SUBSCRIPTION
(8 issues a year)
UK £45
Rest of Europe £50
Rest of World £55
US residents US\$90
(including airmail postage)
Monthly except for Winter Quarter
(Dec-Feb) and
Summer Quarter (June-Aug)

£30/US\$48 digital subscription
Add £10/\$16 to print subscription
for a print and digital subscription
Copyright 2020

© The Asian Art Newspaper
The Asian Art Ltd
All rights reserved. No part of this
newspaper may be reproduced
without written consent. The Asian
Art Newspaper is not responsible
for the statements expressed in
contributed articles and
commentaries.
Advertisements are accepted in
good faith, but are the
responsibility of the advertiser and
The Asian Art Newspaper is not
liable for any claims made in
advertisements.
Price guides and values are solely
for readers' reference and The
Asian Art Newspaper accepts no
legal responsibility for any such
information published.

ISSN 1460-8537

Looking for
something to read?



Explore our extensive archives
at asianartnewspaper.com

PARK SEO-BO

By Olivia Sand

Over the past few years, Western collectors and art institutions have begun to investigate art historical movements in Asia that had previously been overlooked. Such is the case for the Gutai group, Mono-ha, and the Korean Dansaekhwa movement that have not truly been acknowledged until recently. Following exhibitions in prominent venues such as the Tate Gallery in London and the Venice Biennale, Dansaekhwa and its members have become much sought after artists. The founder of Dansaekhwa, Park Seo-Bo (b 1931, Korea), is the best-qualified person to relate the movement's story. In addition, his own artistic journey has been fascinating, starting with a grant to Paris in the 1960s, before returning to Korea. Back in Seoul, Park Seo-Bo developed a new approach towards painting, an approach he follows to this day with his *Écriture* series, mainly based on repetition and on the absence of purpose. Further to his retrospective at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, he looks back on Dansaekhwa and discusses his career with Asian Art Newspaper.



Portrait of Park Seo-Bo
© Photo: Claire Dorn

Asian Art Newspaper: The title of the catalogue of your retrospective in Seoul is *The Untiring Endeavour*. Looking back on your career, it has, indeed, been an incredible endeavour.

Park Seo-Bo: I spent a lot of time creating my works and put great effort into the making of this catalogue. I would be quite

disappointed if the result had only been average.

AAN: We are meeting in Paris, a city which back in the 1960s, in a way, marked the beginning of your artistic endeavour. Looking back, how important was your stay in Paris and what impact did it have on your life?
PSB: I spent approximately a year in

Paris creating works. I arrived in the city for the very first time in 1961, back then there were many galleries along the rue de Seine, near the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. One of them was the gallery belonging to Michel Tapié, who had coined the term '*art informel*'. Walking through these galleries, I was quite disappointed. Indeed, I could see there were many new techniques, but I felt that what was missing from these pieces was a spiritual journey. In my opinion, everything was too technique-oriented, with the technical aspect overtaking the spiritual aspect. To me, what I saw represented nothing more than fireworks, and I could not go along with it. However, I found some very interesting artists such as Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, and Pierre Soulages, who have all been an inspiration to me. Besides these French artists, there were some European artists I followed closely, too, like Millares, Saura, and Tapiés, who were very dynamic. In the 1960s, whilst still in Paris, I got more inspiration from artists from other parts of Europe than from the ones in France.

AAN: When you went back to Korea in the Sixties, the economic situation was quite difficult and it was not easy getting access to artist's materials.

As an alternative, were you tempted to use something closer to Arte Povera, for example, or did you have a very set idea as to what you wanted to accomplish with oil and canvas – without compromising?

PSB: It is true that the economic

Continued on page 4

NEWS IN BRIEF

museums' Korean art and Buddhist art collections. Additionally, she will collaborate with colleagues in the Division of Modern and Contemporary Art on the acquisition and presentation of contemporary works of Chinese art.

BAMIYAN BUDDHAS, AFGHANISTAN

After bearing the brunt of jihadist dynamite and looting by thieves, the archaeological treasures of Afghanistan's Bamiyan province are facing a new and possibly more daunting threat: climate change. The giant Buddhas, located in the Bamiyan Valley, still contain a network of caves housing temples, monasteries, and Buddhist paintings. The valley is also home to the silk-road era BamiShahr-e Gholghola fortress and the Shar-e Zohak citadel to the east. From the empty caves, visitors can see the Cultural Center, which began construction in 2015 but has yet to be completed.

Philippe Marquis, the director of the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan, told AFP that 'The erosion processes are much faster, the rains more devastating and the wind erosion stronger, which has an extremely harsh impact on the sites'.

BRITISH MUSEUM HELPS TO RETURN AFGHAN SCULPTURE

The British Museum and the Art Loss Register have worked together

to identify and preserve an Afghan limestone sculpture depicting humped bulls which was stolen from the National Museum of Afghanistan. The sculpture was illegally removed from the country and offered for sale through an online auction house in the UK. The National Museum of Afghanistan have agreed to allow this important sculpture to be put on public display for the first-time outside Afghanistan and prior to its return and display in Kabul.

The sculpture will be officially returned via the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. site of Surkh Kotal in northern Afghanistan. It shows a reclining humped bull with its face turned to the viewer and the front of a second bull on the left. It was part of a composite frieze with other blocks showing human figures and bulls in some form of ceremony. The site and temple date to about the 2nd century, when this region of Afghanistan was part of the Kushan empire which stretched as far as northern India.

DSC PRIZE FOR SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

Amitabha Bagchi's novel *Half The Night Is Gone* has won the prestigious US\$25,000 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2019. The prize has always encouraged diverse voices that bring alive the layered nuances of South Asian life, and Bagchi's novel, a post-colonial saga that unfolds over three

generations, adroitly explores human relationships, and the intertwining of fates and cultures in a thoroughly Indian context.

THE ART MUSEUM FOSHAN, CHINA

The private institution, which is supported by He Jianfeng, the founder of the Midea electronics company, said it was closely following measures from the Chinese government and World Health Organisation and had decided to postpone the opening of the new museum dedicated to celebrating southern China's regional culture. It had previously been planned for March and is now scheduled to open late May.

STUDIO GHIBLI JAPAN

Netflix has started streaming 21 films from Studio Ghibli, the Academy Award-winning Japanese art house now available in most countries. They will also be available in May on HBO Max in Japan, Canada, and USA. For the first time this expansive catalogue of Studio Ghibli films will be subtitled in 28 languages, and dubbed in up to 20 languages.

BANGKOK ART BIENNALE

The Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB) foundation have announced that the biennale will return in October under the theme *Escape Routes*. The festival's chief executive and artistic director Apinan Poshyanada, who

also led the inaugural edition, explained in the press release that BAB 2020 will focus on the ways that 'artists create 'escape routes' to make us aware of the paths of sufficiency, sustainability and inclusivity' amid contemporary crises such as environmental destruction and sociopolitical unrest. Poshyanada said that the festival will offer art practice as mind escapism where meditation, contemplation, ritualism, healing and performance become the essence of hope and optimism.

WMF ANNOUNCE FUND TO HELP AREAS IN CONFLICT ZONES

World Monuments Fund (WMF) and the International Alliance for the protection of heritage in conflict areas (ALIPH) have announced a US\$1.1 million partnership, establishing a new joint effort between the two organisations to restore crisis-affected heritage sites around the world.

Beginning next year, ALIPH will provide financial support to WMF for two conflict-focused conservation projects: the reconstruction of Mam Rasha Shrine in Mount Sinjar, Iraq, a 2020 World Monuments Watch site destroyed by ISIS in late 2014; and the rehabilitation of Al-Badr Palace in the Old City of Ta'izz, Yemen, a 2018 World Monuments Watch site, which is part of the Ta'izz National Museum complex that was destroyed in Yemen's Civil War.

situation was terrible then. I could not afford to buy any oils or canvases, so I ended up creating mixed media and relying on cheaper materials. Even in Paris, when I was living in the Bastille area, I went through rubbish bins in order to take what I could use, such as stockings or any type of mechanical device that helped me have new ideas. In a way, one could say that during that time I reverted to alternative materials. Basically, a lack of material should not prevent an artist from developing his work. One needs to paint with whatever is available: that, to me, is art. As an artist – and looking back – I would say that in my case, poverty marked a new beginning.

AAN: There was a time in Korea when you decided to step back from your practice. Instead, you focused on reading for almost a year before getting back to making art. What was the trigger event that led to your decision to step back from the art world all together?

PSB: In 1966, in Seoul, I went through a very difficult time at the university where I was teaching. I wanted to reform things, but I was driven away by the hardliners. As a result, I submitted my resignation in 1967 and started to reflect on many aspects of my life: I questioned who I was, who I was as an artist, and as a human being. Over time, it turned out to be a thinking process that was more philosophically oriented, influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, to define myself not only as an artist, but also as a human being. Starting 1967, I no longer left my home. Somehow, I felt that I was under the influence of the Western art market and that I was no longer an independent artist. I tried to come back to basics and figure out what painting actually was and what it meant. In order to move forward and keep painting, I had the urge to 'empty' and purify my mind. I realised that painting was a means of self-control. The sole objective of painting was not to create a beautiful piece, but to attain self-control. Painting goes hand-in-hand with asceticism. It is difficult to single out one event or one element, but I guess there were many factors that came together which combined led me to that philosophical journey. Consequently, my *myobeop*, which from the Korean could best be translated as 'technique of expression', began to change.

AAN: That time in Korea was not a very friendly environment for art.

PSB: I had to find a philosophical way to survive in order to manage all the difficulties I was facing. I never considered only being an artist at the national level. I wanted to be an artist at the international level and, therefore, I also had to digest and respect what was happening locally in Korea.

AAN: In addition, you also turned your back on Western art theory.

PSB: I never had the intention of becoming a nationalist. In my opinion, however, by striving too much to be international, one ends up being cosmopolitan. It seems to me that the word 'international' is a word made out of 'inter' and 'national'. This means that international is based on national. This conviction has always remained with me. Korea, where I live, is a peninsular country. I breathe its air, I enjoy the sunshine, I inherit its history, I witness its changes. I have tried to include and capture all of what I have experienced in my work.



Ecriture No 55-73 (1973) pencil and oil on canvas, 195.4 x 290.5cm, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York

Ecriture No 41-78 (1978) Pencil and oil on hemp cloth, 194.5 x 300.5 cm, Collection LEEUM, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul

AAN: At some point, your fellow painter Lee Ufan (b 1936, Korea) played a significant role in your career. How did you get to meet and become friends with him?

PSB: I met Lee Ufan back in 1968 during a group show inviting young Korean artists to the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. At the time, Lee Ufan was unknown, be this in Japan or in Korea. Lee Ufan is five years younger than me and while he was at college, I had already finished university and was working hard on my art. He was always very courteous and greeted me respectfully. Upon that exhibition in 1968 and during my three week stay in Tokyo, we got together on a daily basis. We started talking about art, about philosophy, and I found him to be a fascinating person. I very much appreciated the language he was using compared to other Korean artists I had met before. After that exhibition, I used to stay more than two weeks a month in Japan, and I spent all my time together with Lee Ufan talking. That friendship has continued ever since and has developed over the years.

AAN: As you spent time with Lee Ufan in Japan, were you tempted to join the Mono-ha movement (the School of Things), which Lee Ufan was part of?

PSB: Never. That was very clear to me although at the time, Mono-ha's way of thinking felt very fresh and new. I respected their approach towards art, with their own views and logic.

AAN: You are known as the founder of Dansaekhwa, a movement insisting among other things on the lack of purpose of action and on repetition.

PSB: How did you convince your fellow artists to join you and continue experimenting the Dansaekhwa way, instead of being tempted to follow other movements that were active at the time, like Gutai group or Mono-ha?

PSB: I started Dansaekhwa because as an artist, I felt there was a need for artists to empty and purify their minds, getting back to a state where the individual does not exist. Our ancestors, for example, were preparing ink in their rooms in order to paint the four noble plants. However, they were never eager to become artists. The sole objective of that process was self-control. Therefore, painting is not a tool for expression, but a tool for self-control. In order to achieve that goal, one needs to get as close as possible to nature, avoiding the use of colours. That is why I came up with a movement that goes back to the colours found in nature that are neither white nor black, but rather imbued. Over time, many artists



'I started Dansaekhwa because as an artist I felt there was a need for artists to empty and purify their minds'

started working in this way and it became a school. In the beginning, the movement was not called Dansaekhwa, actually, it did not have a name at all. In 1992 or 1993, during the exhibition at the Tate Liverpool, it was given the name *Working with Nature*. Upon his trip to Seoul, one of the people in charge of the gallery called it 'Korean Monochrome'. I asked him to stop calling it that, because monochrome is a Western concept that is at the other end of the spectrum of multicoloured. Our movement was never created to stand as opposition to multicoloured, but to get back to nature. That is why, in my opinion, the use of the word monochrome is not appropriate and the title of the exhibition became *Working with Nature*. That is how it all came together.

AAN: Did people overall understand your approach and undertaking?

PSB: I remember an international colloquium on paper back in 1983, where together with David Hockney and Robert Rauschenberg, I was one of the speakers. The theme of the panel was 'Paper and Modern Art', with the idea that paper transmitted an image. In that scenario, paper becomes a container, a kind of plate that receives and supports the image, although it should be telling its own story. In my opinion, that was the wrong approach as the artist should step back and let the paper speak for itself. That was the way a new art form could be created. My talk received excellent feedback and after the panel we had a question and

answer session. My talk raised many questions and one of them came from a Western gentleman who appeared to have a broad knowledge of Korean contemporary art. In his opinion, Korean contemporary art was very ascetic. He wanted to know whether that ascetic feature was considered a sign of a resistance against the political hardline regime of the time or not, and if it was, or was not, symbolising a voiceless revolt against the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee. I told him there was not necessarily an immediate relation with politics, although I could not dismiss the possibility of political influence, even if that was not my intention. Through art, my goal was to empty and purify my mind.

AAN: You have frequently stated that painting should be a means to heal people leading a stressful life. Perhaps now that people know and recognise Dansaekhwa at an international level, they may also feel the need to heal as we are now constantly overloaded with images. Do you share my approach?

PSB: Absolutely. Early on, nobody had presented Dansaekhwa internationally and in the West people discovered it by accident. In order to understand Dansaekhwa, there are key principles to follow, the most important one being the absence of objective in our undertaking. The action should not be driven by an objective of any kind. Dansaekhwa is different from minimalism, because in the latter there is a philosophical approach behind it to express the artists' thoughts. To me, this distinction is very important as I do not want to be associated with minimalism in any way.

AAN: Coming back to your series *Ecritures*, did artists like Rothko (1903-1970), or Twombly (1928-2011), have an impact on your work?

PSB: Not at all. At the time, I knew about Rothko, but I did not even know who Cy Twombly was. Even

back in 1973, the director of Tokyo Gallery asked me whether I knew Cy Twombly, as he noticed a certain resemblance between my *Ecritures* series and his work. It was a sheer coincidence. Cy Twombly was a very talented artist, he could improvise on the canvas, but in his practice, I cannot identify a repetitive movement which is what my work is all about. That is the main difference between both of our approaches.

AAN: In the later part of your *Ecriture* series, there has been a drastic change in your colour palette. What prompted you to further explore colour, all the more as in the beginning you wanted to stay away from it. What got you back into colour?

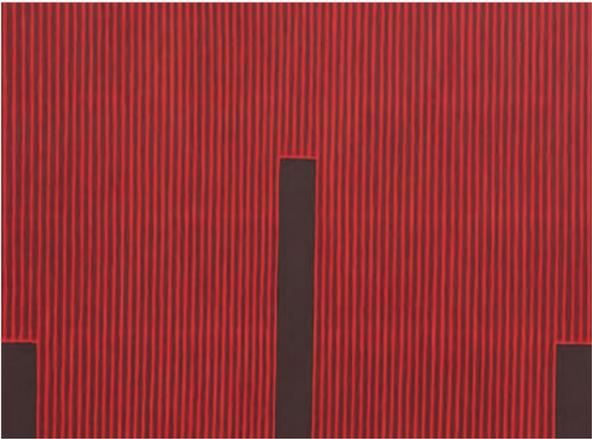
PSB: Considering the traditional Korean paper I am using, the colours black and white come out as imbued, or tinted. Black is closely linked to my childhood as my mother kept a stove in the kitchen in order to keep us warm, to feed us, to make sure we would not catch a cold. Over a period of 20 to 30 years, the smoke darkened the wall and the ceiling. Everything was black. However, following that childhood experience, I came to the conclusion that black is different from the black one paints. One can feel endless depth within black as if one could pinch with a finger into the surface. I have put a great amount of effort to come close to that type of colour.

At the end of the 20th century and moving into the 21st century, I was caught in self-reflection, as I got extremely scared with the arrival of the digital era. I was almost tempted to destroy and burn everything I had ever completed. I was even thinking about suicide, considering this as the ultimate solution to preserve my work. Nevertheless, I came through these dark thoughts and decided to carry on until the very last day of my life.

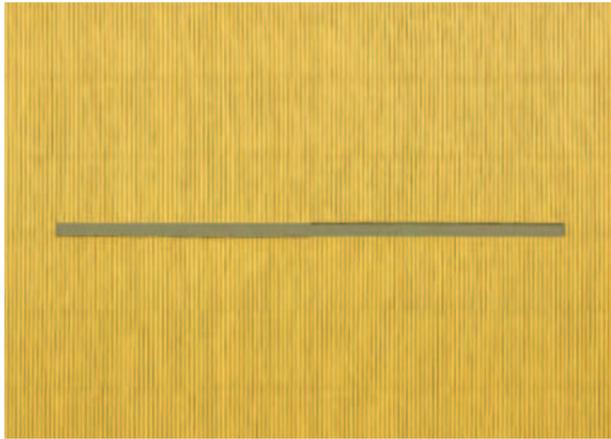
In this century, the digital era, everything changes very quickly. Not everyone is able to follow that pace and consequently, among some people, there are many 'failures', who get more and more left behind. I feel that this constant stress affects the earth which is getting sick and is increasingly getting filled with 'patients'. For people leading this fast-paced life and constantly under stress, a painting, an image, will represent an even stronger shock, making them feel even more depressed. Using this context, the violence of the flow of images must come to an end – and within this century, painting should transform itself into an art form that absorbs the grief, pain, and sorrow of these people, the same way paper absorbs the ink that has not yet entirely dried. This is why, in my choice of colour, I rely on the colours that can be found in nature, using them as a therapeutic tool and not as an ideological tool. The idea is to heal and calm people's minds.

AAN: Would you say that you associate colour with certain emotions?

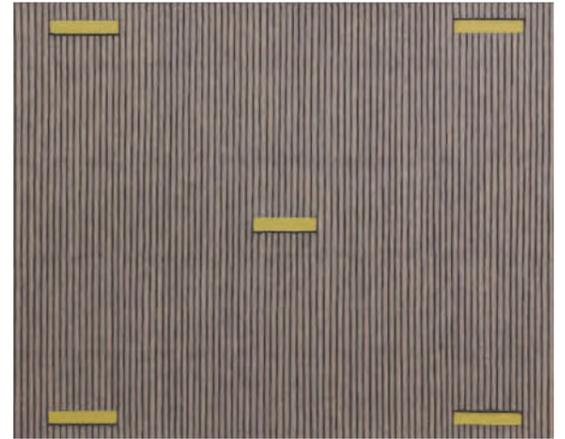
PSB: Yes. For example, here is how I got to further observe and include the colour red in my later series. As we reached the year 2000, I turned seventy. My gallery in Tokyo suggested an exhibition to mark and commemorate both of these events. Personally, my wish was to experience and see the autumn leaves turning yellow and red. I therefore travelled to Japan and went to Mount Bandai, near Fukushima. As I looked downhill, the red leaves were absolutely striking. I was so impressed by the scenery that I could hardly breathe. I had never seen such strong colours and it was an enormous shock. Nature was



Park Seo-Bo, *Ecriture No.050212*, 2005
Acrylic with Korean hanji paper on canvas 112 x 145 cm
Photo: Claire Dorn © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin



Park Seo-Bo, *Ecriture No.130815*, 2013
Acrylic with Korean hanji paper on canvas 170 x 230 cm
Photo: Claire Dorn © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin



Ecriture No.090530, 2009
Acrylic with Korean hanji paper on canvas 130 x 162 cm
Photo: Claire Dorn © Courtesy of the artist & Perrotin

grand and overwhelming. I told my dealer, who had accompanied me, that I wanted to somehow convey on the canvas the emotions I felt seeing the colour red in the autumn leaves. He made fun of me, insisting that it was not going to be an easy task to convey that colour palette on a simple canvas. I promised I would stick to it no matter what. The next day, we were on top of Mount Bandai where the explosion of the volcano had created a lake. It took us three hours by car to get there. Among the red leaves I saw that some of them under the sun were vividly red, almost fluorescent red. However, if the sun was shining from another angle, one side was a fluorescent red whereas the other was dark, blackish. During that trip, I felt the changing colours and their harmony. This is precisely what gave me the idea to use colour as a tool within my painting, and a tool for therapy. Since then, I have been using colours, not as an ideological

tool, but as a tool to trigger emotions.

AAN: The medium you rely on plays an important role in your work.

PSB: Yes, indeed. There came a moment where cracks appeared on one oil and crayon painting I had completed 10 years earlier. Witnessing this incident, I realised my work would not stand the test of time. I started wondering about an alternative that would keep my paintings alive. Traditional Korean *hanji* paper lasts for 1,000 years, as can be seen in some ancient scrolls found in a pagoda that were still intact. I find Korean paper made out of mulberry pulp to be the best and the most sustainable medium to keep my work in good condition. Western paper tends to reflect colour, whereas traditional Korean paper absorbs it. Therefore, it has become the perfect material to unify my philosophical approach and colour scheme.

AAN: How did the three-dimensional element get into your work?

PSB: It happened by accident. After the *Ecriture* series, where I used pencil, I decided to use hanji paper. I followed the same process as I did with oil on canvas. When the paper is still wet, it is very flexible. Tracing a line with crayon creates creases and crevices on the paper. All day long, I trace lines, often more than one hundred of them with sculptural lines emerging. The Buddhist monks strike the bell by reciting invocations in order to empty and purify themselves. Like them, I keep repeating the same thing. By repeating these insignificant lines, both sides of the paper arise, forming these sculptural lines. Basically, creating three-dimensional lines is not the objective of my work – I did not plan on achieving this effect intentionally. It simply appeared with me repeating the same stroke over and over again on wet hanji paper.

AAN: How did the title *Ecritures* come about for your series and why decide on a French term instead of an English word?

PSB: I wanted to find a word that came as close as possible to the Korean expression 'myobeop'. As I neither spoke French or English, I asked a friend, who was studying philosophy, what the closest word would be. He said that the French word *écriture* was the closest to what I had in mind as opposed to an English word. According to him, structuralism would also share some points with my work. He recommended I use *écriture* as a title. However, I still regret that choice: I should simply have used the Korean word *myobeop*, which would have been more accurate and unique.

AAN: You usually tend to say that for a new series you are working on it for five or six years, hiding it from the public before exhibiting it. At this

stage, are you working on a new series that you may only be disclosing in five or six year's time?

PSB: Painting on traditional paper has become too difficult and I had to stop. Hanji paper requires you to work while it is placed horizontally otherwise the colour immediately drips. When working with that paper, I am standing on the table and as it is mobile and I no longer have much strength in my legs to keep my balance, I end up falling. I have tried several times, but every time I fell, with my nose right on the painting. In order to continue using hanji paper, I am now getting back to working with crayons. This does in no way mean that I am going backwards, revisiting the past, but I want to work with colour crayon in order to touch the audience emotionally. I think my recent work *Color Pencil Ecriture*, which will be my next exhibition, follows that avenue.



Shashi Zain ul Din, Black-headed Oriole and Inces on Jackfruit Swamp (detail), Calcutta, 1778. www.wallacecollection.org

★★★★★ The Guardian ★★★★★ Daily Telegraph ★★★★★ Time Out

Forgotten Masters

Indian Painting for the East India Company

Curated by William Dalrymple

On until 19 April 2020

Members & Under 18s go free
wallacecollection.org

Book Now
Late Friday
Openings in
March &
April

In partnership with

