

**PRESSBOOK**

PARK Seo-Bo

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# A Fine line

Acclaimed South Korean artist PARK SEO-BO explains to PAYAL UTTAM the evolution of his oeuvre from moody expressionism to the serene minimalism of today

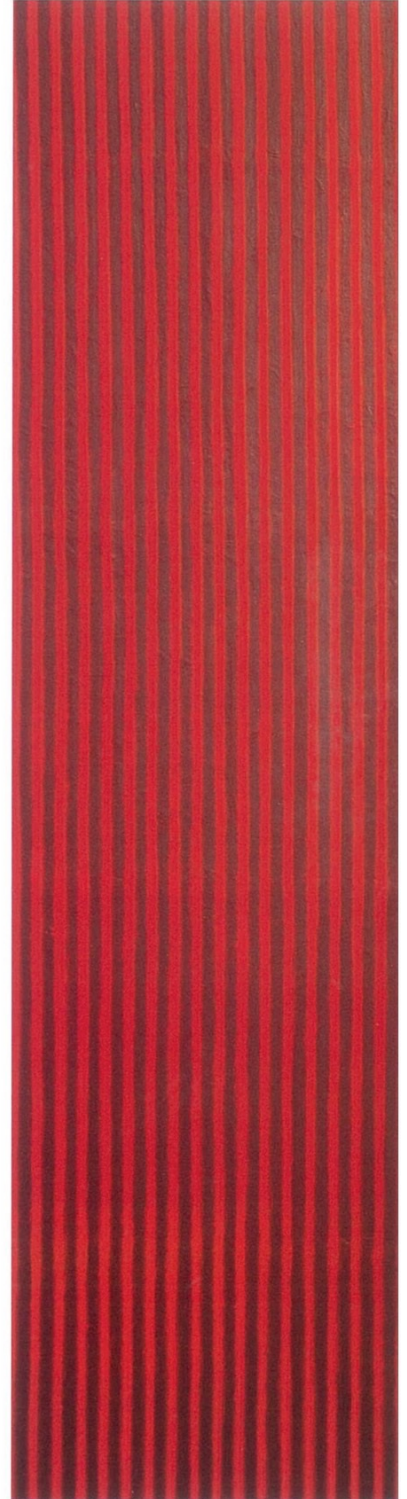
SOUTH KOREAN ARTIST Park Seo-Bo had barely begun college when civil war broke out in 1950. Thousands of North Korean soldiers invaded and swept south towards Seoul, leaving destruction in their wake. Park watched as his high-school friends were recruited to the army, only to see none of them return.

"The war really brought me to the edge," says the 75-year-old artist, sinking into a sofa in the back office of Galerie Perrotin. "It became the turning point for me. If there wasn't a war my art wouldn't be like it is today."

Park had just started learning Korean brush painting but he was forced to stop his studies and return to his hometown. In the absence of his teacher, he decided to explore Western painting instead.

"But I was so poor that I couldn't afford canvas or oil paints so I had to sell my watch to buy materials," he recalls. "I started painting on lunchboxes I got from the US army troops."

His early works were a response to his war-ravaged country. Violently gestural, the dark paintings were a means of coming to terms with his



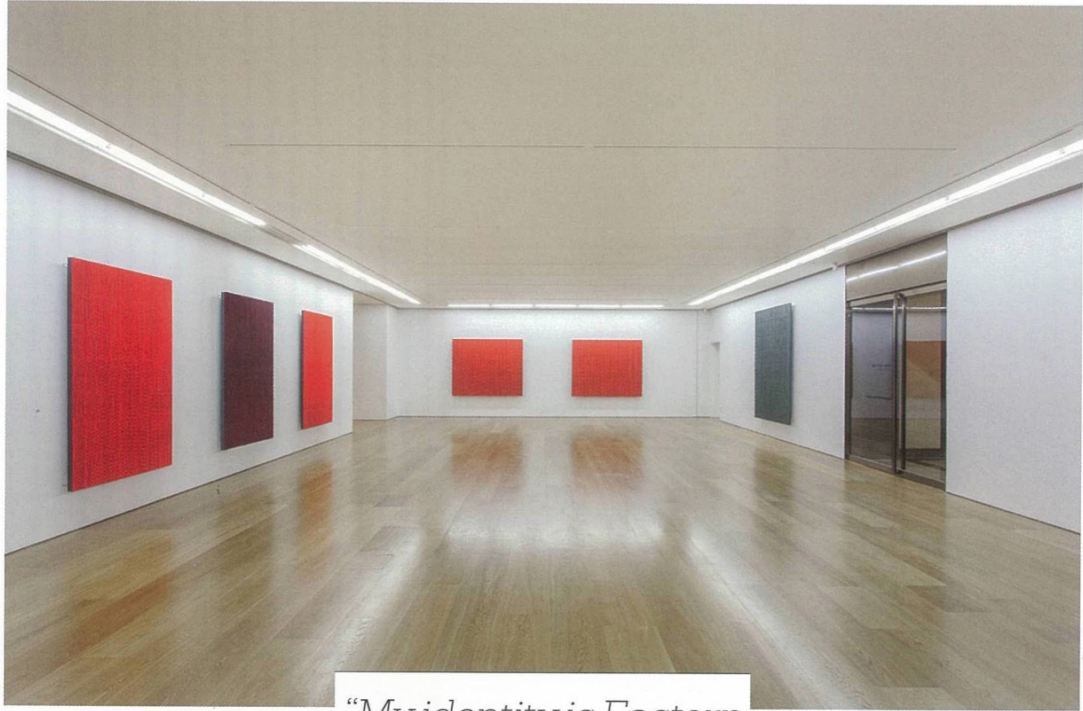


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CULTURE ART



*“My identity is Eastern not Western and I wanted to express this in my painting”*

bleak surroundings.

Looking at Park's paintings today, it's hard to believe they are by the same man. Instead of moody expressionist works, he is now known for serene minimalist paintings. Fondly called the father of the Dansaekhwa movement – which roughly translates as “monochrome painting” – he has cultivated a following for his richly saturated paper pieces. At the core of these works are spiritual ideas of emptiness and surrender. While he's no longer caught in the thick of a civil war, Park's work is still a response to human suffering.

“People are more stressed in society,” he says. “I think my paintings should heal people and provide a space for people to take rest and breathe.”

Bald with large Buddha-like ears, wearing a bulky ring with a giant purple gemstone and carrying a walking stick, the elderly painter

hardly fits the bill of your typical trendy young artist showing with Emanuel Perrotin. Yet he is easily among the gallery's most famous.

A leading figure of his generation, Park is credited as one of the first artists who ushered ideas of European modernism into Korea. While he was once forgotten by the market, collectors from across the globe are now clamouring for his work.

Park first travelled to Europe in 1961 when he was invited to participate in a painting competition in Paris to serve as a representative of his country. “I only had \$48 in my pocket,” he says, explaining that he was only prepared for a brief visit, but to his dismay the show and prize ceremony were postponed.

“The Korean government received a letter explaining this but they didn't know French, so someone just put it away in a drawer and didn't

tell me.” Stuck in Paris, unable to pay for a return ticket, Park managed to convince the French exhibition organisers to give him a loan.

While he ended up spending a year in the city barely making ends meet, he was awarded a major prize. During his time in Europe, he became fascinated with Art Informel, a gestural, improvisational style of abstract painting that influenced his work. However it wasn't long before Park grew disillusioned and decided to fly home.

“I looked at a lot of galleries and exhibitions, but I thought French art was hopeless,” he says. “Art in Paris was more about technique than spiritual aspects and it should be the other way around.”

The following year he became a professor of the College of Fine Arts at Hongik University, but re-entering the art community in Korea proved to be a struggle. “I wanted to make the university the best in Korea

A VIEW OF PARK'S EXHIBITION INSTALLED AT GALERIE PERROTIN



but other professors were more conservative." His open-minded and unconventional teaching approach led to clashes with faculty members that became so intense he was forced to resign, and he entered a period of deep introspection.

Park threw himself into his painting practice. He created dark, shadowy canvases filled with amorphous forms influenced by his time in Europe. "But soon I started to question myself and who I really am," he remembers. "I realised my identity is Eastern not Western and I wanted to express this in my painting."

Park began reading voraciously, delving into Chinese classical texts by Lao-tze and spiritual texts on Buddhism. "I wanted to learn how to empty myself [to reinvigorate] my art and creativity. In the end I actually learned this from my younger son," he says, launching into a story.

One day he noticed his two-year old son trying to write Korean characters in his older brother's notebook. "My son got very anxious. He couldn't write the characters properly within the square boxes," he says. "He wrote something and erased [all over the page] and did that so many times that the paper broke."

This triggered a breakthrough for Park, who saw how the little boy's

resignation and the way in which he gave up and let go, resulted in a beautifully empty page. Park began using pencils to incise thin lines and loops into wet surface of painted white and cream toned canvas. He created these pieces in a single sitting before the paint could dry. These became known as his famed *Écriture* series.

"My works were more about discipline than painting," he says of the subtle works. "The painting itself is a result of discipline. Just to do painting in itself is not a very big thing."

When he returned to the university in 1968, the difficulties continued. "The conservatives still wanted me out, but I felt the more the painful it was the more it allowed me to discover more of life." Fuelled with a sense of purpose, he ignored the traditionalists and continued to encourage his students to think unconventionally while persevering with his own paintings.

In 1982, he grew interested in *hanji* (paper pulp made from mulberry leaves), which soon became a critical part of his practice. "With oil paintings you may get cracks after a hundred years but *hanji* was created to have no change for thousands of years. It's a very strong material," he says. "I didn't want to see any cracks or breaks in my painting while I was still alive."

Park continues to work with traditional *hanji* paper today. Each of the works in his Hong Kong exhibition consists of thick slabs of *hanji* with deep striations cutting across the surface. The majestic paintings range in colour from vibrant red works to ethereal grey blues.

A deeply meditative process is at the heart of these pieces. Park begins by soaking the paper in a watercolour bath for at least two to three months, creating a pliable yet delicate

surface. He then piles it on to boards and begins inscribing and scoring geometric lines, using various tools and his fingers in a slow contemplative process. "While working I empty myself of [personal desires and emotions]," he explains.

Refusing to elaborate with conceptual art speak, Park starts gesturing at an explosive Takashi Murakami painting hanging on the wall in front of him to explain. The canvas is an expanse of dark purple with splattered paint and an ominous black eye in the centre.

"The artist wanted to put his ideas in this painting and tell the audience what he thinks, but these kinds of works are a kind of spiritual violence," he exclaims, openly criticising the popular Japanese artist. "That made sense for the 20th century but now it's the 21st century."

At that moment a gallery assistant steps in to bring the interview to a close, but Park refuses to leave. He insists he has more to say about his aspirations for painting. "I think society is sick. There are murders. People are killing people they don't know. In this context, paintings like [Murakami's] are too violent," he says, turning solemn. "I want people to stand in front of paintings and feel comfortable and relaxed. That should be the future of art." ■