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Dansaekhwa
Korean Monochrome Painting

Simon Morley

During the second half of the 1970s a monochromatic style of painting emerged in South Korea that is superficially very similar to the uncompromisingly reductive painting at the heart of the modernist revolution in the West. This tendency developed under the name Dansaekhwa, which means literally ‘monochrome painting’ in Korean. A large and impressive exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, South Korea, recently provided the opportunity both to encounter the works of that period en masse and to see several younger contemporary Korean artists who can be said to broadly work in the monochrome idiom, and thus to reflect on its historical and current significance.1

Dansaekhwa in its heyday during the 1970s and ’80s is exemplified by the work of such artists as the internationally better-known Korean-born but Japan and Paris-domiciled Lee U-fan (or Lee Ufan).2 Dansaekhwa became a significant part of South Korea’s quest for a modern cultural identity in a period marked by slow economic development and repressive politics. Today, in a country that is the tenth largest economy in the world and that has more or less smoothly transformed itself into a democratic system, monochrome painting still remains a vibrant ‘tradition’ as this exhibition attests, although it is far from being in the vanguard, which, as is the case globally, has been seized by video, performance and installation art.

The specific traits and temporalities of modernization within South Korea meant Korean monochrome painting marked a moment when the culture that gave birth to it appeared almost as a tabula rasa. This was a culture poised between the closure of a tragic period and the dawn of a new era. In this sense, Korean monochrome painting mirrors the crisis experienced by Korean society as a whole in the period after the Korean War (1950–1953); it was a society left in confrontation with a belligerent neighbour, where the need for strong social and political control, and the equally powerful drives to sanction and encourage rapid economic development and guarantee the nation’s protection by the United States, coexisted uncomfortably.
MODERNISM IN SOUTH KOREA

The first phase of modern art in Korea dates from the late 1950s to the early 1960s and involved encounters with Art Informel in Europe and, to a lesser extent, American Abstract Expressionism. Korean monochrome painting evolved in part as a reaction against the expressive rhetoric of such approaches, and in this exhibition Kim Whan-Ki (1913–1974) is presented as the transitional figure. Whan-Ki shifted from a School of Paris-inflected painterly abstraction to all-over monochromatic effects, mostly in blue hues, after moving to New York in 1963. Monochrome painting also developed because South Korean artists were able by the mid-1970s to assimilate a more expansive knowledge of Western art.

At first, therefore, Dansaekhwa painting may seem typical of the kind of work produced by artists stranded at the margins. In broad cultural terms grounded in the assumption of a dominant (Western) modernity, in relation to which other forms of modernity are incomplete or copies, Korean monochrome painting figures as a belated aspect of an artistic impulse deriving from the West and manifested as the will to abstraction. A situation of cultural belatedness and inferiority seems inevitable, as Korean artists struggled hopelessly to move forward shoulder-to-shoulder with Western culture in an effort productively to assimilate foreign traits.

In this context, Korean monochrome painting can even be read as a cultural 'place-holder' signalling the South’s alignment with the United States and the Western democracies. The uncompromising ‘abstractness’ of the works correlates with the dominant Western narrative wherein the repudiation of figuration signifies as a visual analogue for the freedom of expression made possible under American protection. Furthermore, in the specifically Korean political situation, such defiantly abstract paintings could be interpreted in starkly antithetical terms to the Socialist Realist art propagated north of the border under Communist control.3

However we choose to approach Dansaekhwa, it is clear that it very markedly displays qualities that set it apart both from the kind of painting styles that dominated East Asian art for millennia, and also from those that were being adopted under the ‘modernizing’ agendas of East Asian Communism. This rupture certainly has much to do with the impact of Western culture.

The development of modernism in the West before it became co-opted into Cold War politics had been inextricably bound up with a cultural situation in which artists sought to rebel against the dominance of an objective mimetic approach to representation grounded in the conventions of optical realism, conventions that were also closely aligned with a limited set of values based overwhelmingly on order and tradition – the ‘classical’ ideal. So there also grew up an ideological link between artistic norms and repressive authority and power, between innovation and reaction, which meant the avant-garde was obliged to reject the past and to embrace anti-structural and ‘anti-disciplinary’ strategies. As a result Western modernity heralded what Umberto Eco calls the era of the ‘open work’.4 In East Asian art and culture, in contrast, at least until the arrival of the forces of imperialism and the spirit of modernity symbolized by Western avant-garde styles, no such conflict existed. In East Asia an artist’s journey involved not the rejection of the past but a

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Chung Chang-Sup, *Tak No. 86077*, 1986, mixed media with Korean tak (mulberry) paper on canvas, 330 x 190 cm, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea
continual return to it, although not simply in order to imitate. Intensive study was encouraged in order to find what were deemed fundamental truths, and the goal was a connection both with an underlying sense of reality – nature – and with the past. To this extent, East Asian art was a ‘closed’ system, as classical art had once been in Europe. As John Clark puts it, ‘the semiotic [sign-generating] plasticity of its universe is only of a certain degree, beyond which it is a closed discourse’. On the other hand, as the Chinese art historian Wen C Fong notes in relation to a discussion of traditional Chinese art, the basis of the ‘archaic idea’, apart from cases of official revivalism, was fundamentally different from that in the Western situation, in so far as this continual reference to past models was also construed as ‘pre-eminently personal and psychological’.

In an obvious sense, then, Korean monochrome painting appears to be one of the many symptoms, manifested according to different time-frames in different countries globally, signalling the end of indigenous art and cultures characterized by harmonious evolution – by repetitions, emulations and incremental departures from the norm. Dansaekhwa seems to present itself visually as a site of rupture with its culture’s past, and the emergence of this new stylistic tendency in the 1970s in South Korea in particular suggests a context within which Korean artists encountered the liberating example of Western modernism and sought to break with their own heritage and to assimilate and emulate Western modernism’s styles.

In this reading, Dansaekhwa artists clearly seem to identify with the ‘destined’ movement towards abstraction and with the Western story of art staged as a rejection of illusionistic or mimetic realism. They reject figurative imagery – whether derived from the conventions of Oriental culture or from earlier phases of Western art – in favour of simple, flat and repeated motifs made with reductive gestures. Their works are in line with Clement Greenberg’s influential definition of modernist painting; they seem to posit painting as anti-illusionistic and grounded in two-dimensionality as an object for disinterested contemplation.

Thus Dansaekhwa can be said, for example, to share several formal characteristics with the ‘cool’, ‘all-over’ or ‘colour-field’ end of Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, and the later 1960s American Color Field paintings of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, who most closely exemplified Greenberg’s aesthetic credo (as, for example, with the later paintings of Park Seo-Bo). But it also seems close to later ‘Minimalists’ like Frank Stella, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin and Brice Marden (as, for example, the works of Quac In-Sik, Kim Gui-Line, Suh Seung-Won, Yun Hyoung-Keun, Chung Chang-Sup and Choi Myoung-Young), and with post-Abstract Expressionist gesturalism as practised by Cy Twombly (for example, earlier Park Seo-Bo, Lee Kang-So, Youn Myeung-Ro, Lee Ufan).

But in the West, by the time this Korean monochrome painting emerged, this seemingly inexorable progress towards abstraction had already fallen apart. Under the pressures exerted by Pop,Minimalism and Conceptual Art, and then by postmodernism, formalist modernism had been quickly consigned to history, and the new art produced in the West was involved in very different – even diametrically opposed – concerns. As a result, linking Korean monochrome to a ‘Euramerican’
Ha Chong-Hyun, *Conjunction 74-98*, 1974, oil on canvas, 225 x 97 cm, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea
chronology also suggests a case of belatedness, of the periphery lagging behind the centre.

With the exception of Quac In-Sik and Lee Ufan, who studied in Japan, Park Seo-Bo, who spent a year at the Sorbonne in 1961, and Kim Gui-Line, who studied in France, the Korean monochrome painters did not study or spend their formative years abroad. Opportunities for travel were not very plentiful in a country that was under military dictatorship and economically weak – during this period passports were not readily issued. Thereafter, the artists of the movement chose on the whole not to move to the West to pursue their careers, instead working within the embryonic Korean art scene, and so access to contemporary Western art came mainly through reproductions in newspapers and magazines.

The role of Japan in relation to Korean art also complicates the question of transmission and influence. For, while openings onto Western art in Korea often came via Japan, which had pursued an aggressively Westernizing policy since the late nineteenth century, such interactions were highly charged with ambivalence, as Korea had recently undergone a painful period of oppressive colonization. This is part of the context within which we should see Lee Ufan’s decision to study philosophy and then art in Tokyo in 1961 and to remain in Japan thereafter – in the land of a former oppressor. As a result, Lee is sometimes classified as a Japanese artist, both by Westerners and by Japanese and Koreans. Certainly, Lee assimilated many influences from traditional Japanese culture, in particular from Zen Buddhism, although Korean Buddhism is also strongly Zen-oriented (it is called Seon in Korea, and Chan in China, where it originated out of a fusion between Taoism and Buddhism). But in addition, Lee’s domicile there gave him access to a more sophisticated modern artistic scene, one that had been open to Western influences for much longer than Korea. Hence, under the banner of Mono-ha, Lee adopted anti-art traits from Art concret and Neo-Dada, fusing them with indigenous East Asian ideas. Indeed, Lee is also crucial for the development and dissemination of Dansaekhwa. On a practical and strategic level, initial exhibitions and critical appraisals occurred in Japan under his auspices, rather than in South Korea, and it was in Tokyo that the first group exhibition identifying the trend was held in 1975. But from the mid-1970s Lee also chose to spend much of his time in Paris, as if actively seeking to embody the postmodern nomadic and hybrid identity, and ultimately Lee’s significance lies in his ability successfully to detour traditional East Asian ideas via Western philosophical and artistic models, and vice versa, thereby bringing Korea into closer cultural alignment with Japan and vice versa, and at the same time with Western developments.

**EAST ASIAN AESTHETICS**

But a reading of Dansaekhwa in terms of influence and appropriation from Western models clearly involves superficial stylistic comparisons and the assumption of a single master chronology. It fails to take into account the differentials within the temporality of modernity as it
impacted on, and unfolded within, East Asia itself. Indeed, as John Clark argues, we should learn to see that in broad terms:

... modernity is a phenomenon in art for which other kinds of situation, construction or historical change should be sought which inhere to a practice and a cultural domain before the transference of Euramerican academy realism and then various modernisms.\textsuperscript{12}

As result, Clark suggests that perhaps the most fruitful way to approach world art is:

... to look at local sites as the domain in art discourses of interaction, of transfer, of counter-appropriation from the global, and of these sites’ subsequent transformation along with the global.\textsuperscript{13}

This level Clark terms the ‘exogenous embedded within the endogenous’ – the presence of an in-between cultural space.\textsuperscript{14} This broader de-territorialized mode of analysis demands an interpretive model based on cultural differences approached from within what Clark calls a series of ‘probabilistic mappings’, rather than in terms, for example, of more traditional notions of centre and periphery.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus we should recognize that the context for Korean monochrome is not only a growing awareness amongst Korean artists of modern Western art but also the inspiration of indigenous artistic techniques, of philosophical traditions that lend themselves to the monochrome effect, and of a cultural context that encouraged freedom of expression. The monochrome painters felt compelled to re-examine their own indigenous cultural traditions without abandoning the knowledge they had acquired of progressive Western art, and thereby the native cultural and historical context within which they self-consciously emerged establishes criteria that both intersect with and differ from those customarily employed in relation to Western abstract art. These traditions draw on shamanism, Taoism, Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, and they extend into East Asian art in general, while a movement of specifically monochrome-style painting emerged only in South Korea. In other words, monochrome painting in Korea has an Oriental pre-history, but also a specifically Korean one, and this embeds it within a specifically endogenous modernity.

Thus, for example, the prevalence of white or off-white tones in many of these works can be related to uniquely Korean responses to Taoist Buddhist and Neo-Confucian concepts that reveal themselves in traditional Korean Buddhist painting and the white porcelain of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). ‘The clarity of so (white)’, writes art historian and critic Kim Miyung, ‘though it may feel lucid and transparent like sunshine, includes in it all the colours present in the universe.’\textsuperscript{16} And as Yoon Jin-Sup, the curator of the exhibition writes in the catalogue:

The colour white was present in many corners of Korea’s life: It was the colour of our ancestor’s garments, the famous moon jar as well as other various white porcelains, baeksulki (traditional rice cakes)... the different hues of hanji (traditional paper) and so on. It existed as a cultural base to form part of a collective identity, which was revealed through dan-saekhwa.\textsuperscript{17}

Furthermore, the qualities of incompleteness and a seeming crudity of execution that are evident in Korean monochrome paintings are often

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\textsuperscript{12} John Clark, ‘Doing World History with Modern and Contemporary Asian Art’, \textit{World Art}, vol 1, no 1, 2011, p 95. I acknowledge that such cross-cultural analyses are fraught with problems. James Elkins has posed the dilemma at perhaps its most intractable when he concludes that the deep-rooted Western conventions inherent in any encounter between Western art history and, in his case, Chinese art, overwhelm any possible investigations on their own terms of the Chinese works themselves, or the ideas that inform them. For, so he argues, while ‘it is true that we all see brushstrokes, flat surfaces, spatial cues, compositions, and so forth... the naming of such elements, the structure of our analysis, and the conviction that we are doing something that is phenomenologically fundamental to a perception of art, are all Western’. John Elkins, \textit{Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History}, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2010, p 139. To which a quotation from John Onians can serve as riposte: ‘Increasing numbers of scholars are, like me, finding themselves in a trajectory which inevitably leads to the development of some sort of World Art approach.’ John Onians, ‘World Art: Ways Forward, and a Way to Escape the “Autonomy of Culture” Delusion’, \textit{World Art}, vol 1, no 1, 2011, p 129. This essay also provides a good overview of the current literature in the field.

\textsuperscript{13} Clark, ‘Doing World History’, op cit, p 94

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p 96


\textsuperscript{17} The colour white was present in many corners of Korea’s life: It was the colour of our ancestor’s garments, the famous moon jar as well as other various white porcelains, baeksulki (traditional rice cakes)... the different hues of hanji (traditional paper) and so on. It existed as a cultural base to form part of a collective identity, which was revealed through dan-saekhwa.
Lee U-Fan, From Point, 1976, glue and stone pigment on canvas, 117 x 117 cm, courtesy National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea
cited as particularly important attributes of a Korean aesthetic in general, which, unlike Chinese or Japanese aesthetics, was more concerned with conveying an air of nonchalance or unconcern for technical perfection. An ethos of spontaneity pervades Korean art and artefacts, as well as its music and dance, and this can also be linked in part to the trance state central to shamanism, which is fundamentally ecstatic and has led to a pervasive admiration for absence of order in Korean society. Fused with a desire for naturalness, the ethos of spontaneity thus resonates especially strongly, and rawness, spontaneity, nonchalance and individuality, as well as humour and expressiveness, are usually identified as components of a particularly Korean aesthetic.18

These qualities are especially evident in the indigenous folk art – called minhwa – which developed with greater independence from Chinese cultural influence and as a result manifests a higher degree of specifically ‘Korean’ individuality. But some of these traits also emerged in relation to Korean literati painting in which a specifically ‘Korean’ style called ‘True-View Landscape’ took shape in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century under the influence of Jeong Seon (1676–1759). This style put a special value on the direct and spontaneous responses to particular locations rather than on the depiction of generic

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18. The first attempt by a Westerner to produce an art historical overview of Korean art was made by André Eckhardt, who in Geschichte der Koreanischen Kunst, Hiersemann, Leipzig, 1929, claimed that ‘classicism’ is the dominant intrinsic characteristic of Korean traditional art, by which he meant symmetrical structure, balance, simplicity, serenity and impartiality.
and ideal scenes and, in contrast to Chinese and Japanese works, Korean landscape paintings thus display a more naturalistic and spontaneous treatment of the mountainous scenery of the peninsula.19

A complex – and to Westerners (and today perhaps also to Koreans) unfamiliar – weave of ideas therefore underpin Dansaekhwa’s value as a specific genre of advanced painting, ideas that are very different from those usually deployed in relation to abstract painting in the West. For example, here is Park Seo-Bo, talking in 2006:

People say my current work is similar to minimal art, but I don’t agree. My work is more related to the oriental tradition and its spiritual concept of space. I am more interested in space from the point of view of nature. Even though my paintings may represent an idea about culture, the main focus is always based on nature. In other words, I want to reduce the idea and emotion in my work, to express my interest in space from the point of view of nature. Then I want to reduce that – to create pure emptiness. This has been an old value that still exists in oriental philosophy where nature and men are one. This tendency is evident in my work from the ’70s and ’80s – not just in recent years.20

And here is Lee Ufan, explaining his practice in a way that seems especially difficult to assimilate to a Western paradigm:

Rather than my work defining me or the other way round, something different grows in the mutual interaction and response and suddenly comes into existence. This is the context of my work and my position within it. When Lee encounters a canvas with brushes and painting, a work of art comes into existence. Therefore, strictly speaking, it is wrong to say that Lee has painted a canvas with paint and brushes. This would be a Western-European mistranslation.21

As François Jullien cautions, when the word ‘nature’ is used in translations of East Asian texts we should be wary of attributing to it the kind of associations familiar in the West. ‘The Chinese did not conceive of “nature” as a distinct notion, one that confers an objective status on any occurrence lying outside our will, but which... is not “random”’,22 Instead, ‘nature’ was considered to signify many things that on the metaphysical level refer to processes of regulation within the cosmos and on the physical one to trees, mountains, rivers, clouds, etc.

This fundamental distinction is part of a wider cultural differentiation. Lee Ufan notes that East Asian art was traditionally characterized by a lateral orientation, rather than one grounded in movement in depth. Thus East Asian painting was often characterized by what to Western eyes seems a lack of focal point or specific visual interest. ‘Modern European thought’, writes Lee, ‘has placed its emphasis on the vertical axis, while East Asian concepts place their emphasis more on the horizontal axis’. This, Lee notes, has led to a divergence in how representation is understood. For ‘the horizontal axis presents an image of nothingness in an indefinite extension’, while ‘the vertical axis presents an image of the absolute in a conceptual extension’.23 In this way, the manner in which the viewing ‘I’ is related to an East Asian work’s space differs fundamentally from the Western model.

Such painting was not directed at mimesis, in the Western sense of imitating nature and achieving illusion through concealing the pictorial medium. Oriental painting was conceived as space within

References:


23. Lee Ufan, op cit, p 15
Yun Hyong-Keun, *Burnt Umber and Ultramarine*, 1975, oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea
which ch’i – ‘vital breath’ or ‘breath-energy’ – could be seen to circulate. All things are understood to realize both themselves and their relationship with other things within the unity of this ch’i, composed of the non-dualistic intertwining of yin–yang – the two defining principles of the East Asian world-view. While it is misleading to set them in opposition to each other, broadly speaking, it can be said that yin is negative, dark and feminine, while yang is positive, bright, and masculine. The sky is yang and the earth is yin. Yang is active and yin is restful, and their interaction influences all creatures and things. ‘Vital breath’ is an inherent animating energy that continuously circulates and concentrates itself. By circulating, it connects and brings consistency to reality.

In this context, the self is understood as simply a phase within a continual process of transformation driven by ch’i energy. Everything is open to the invisible ‘breath’ or flow of life, and as a consequence everything is radically impermanent. ‘Not only my own being, as I experience it intuitively’, writes Jullien, ‘but the entire landscape that surrounds me as well, is continuously flooded by this subterranean circulating energy’.24

It is for this reason that the concept of void has considerable importance within the language of East Asian painting. As the Korean art historian and curator Lee Joon writes:

> From the perspective of Western art, which explicates everything based on forms, the void of Asian painting may appear, to certain extents, to suggest a lack of forms or a space of incompleteness. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to find a term corresponding to the concept in the Western artistic lexicon. ‘Empty space’, a negative element, implies absence of physical representation or is synonymous with ‘blank space’. In the theory of East Asian painting, however, void exists as a complete, legitimate part of a work, and, in a more active sense, is an ‘unpainted painting’. In that sense, void does not mean the renunciation of the use of space but rather the encouragement of space and is absence-cum-presence.25

Void, in fact, constitutes a central aspect of an expanded system of representation, one in which emptiness is considered a privileged sign. Indeed, as François Cheng emphasizes, it is precisely through void that the other units within the system of painting are defined as signs.26 Thus, as Jullien puts it, ‘the emptiness of clouds and mists is not only the indistinct beyond into which forms vanish at the horizon’, as it would be within the conventions of Western landscape painting. On the contrary, in East Asian art this void ‘also permeates the interiority of forms, opens them, aerates them, liberates them, and makes them evasive’.27

The principal goal for East Asian painters was therefore neither to set in train the recognition of mimetic illusion nor to invite imaginative reverie. Rather, it was to enhance awareness of a flux-like and evanescent reality within which the viewer could actively participate. East Asian art was thus based on the belief that ‘vital breath’, as Jullien writes:

> ... designates in the most general way, as a first term – and even as the first term possible – both that from which beings and things arise and that which animates them.28

In painting, this ‘vital breath’ was signalled by the energy of the brush, ink and colours. It is in a ‘between’, as Jullien writes, ‘through all these
manifestations of vivacity and vitality, however diverse they might be, that spiritual resonance is found, even though we cannot fix it more precisely’.29 As a result, what to Western eyes registers as lack of finish or refinement, sketchiness, or a sense of incompleteness, was actually highly valued because ‘breath-energy’ was associated with spontaneity. Catching the flow of ch’i required that a painting should convey a stage ‘when plenitude has not yet broken up and dispersed’.30 As the T’ang dynasty painter and writer Chang Yen-Yu¨ an wrote in his Origin and Development of Painting (c 845AD): ‘If the spirit-resonance is sought for, the outward likeness will be obtained at the same time.’31 Sketchiness put potentiality at the centre of representation. ‘When you paint’, advised Tang Zhiqi (c 1620), ‘there is no need to paint all the way; if with each brushstroke you paint all the way, it becomes common’.32 As Jullien puts it, ‘the aim of figuration was not to fix essences but to record a play of energies in continuous interaction, whose coherence figuration unveils and indicates how to use’.33 Painting was ‘an operation of actualization and engenderment in which what takes precedence is its character as a differentiating process from an undifferentiated foundation-fount’.34 East Asian painting employs a ‘deictic’ mode in which the image cannot be ‘taken in all at once, tota simul, since it has itself unfolded within the dure´ e of process’, as Norman Bryson describes it, and this implies a ‘carnal, corporeal body, with its gestures and physical presence’.35 In looking at East Asian paintings viewers are also made more aware than their Western counterparts of the materiality of the picture, and its relationship to surrounding space. The work’s surface was often a repository for both images and texts, and in taking in the image awareness of the flat, two-dimensionality of the picture plane persists even as the viewer scans the representation. Furthermore, East Asian paintings are often painted on scrolls intended to be rolled and unrolled and to be viewed horizontally. But even when hung vertically, they were decorated with paper or textile mounts, so that the framing edge, and the boundary between image space and real space, was more permeable than in Western conventions.

DANSAEKHWA

Many of these characteristics of traditional East Asian art are on display in the Dansaekhwa exhibition. Viewing the works ‘in the flesh’, rather than in photographs, it soon becomes very evident how different the Korean painters’ use of materials is from that of their Western cousins. Many used hanji – traditional Korean paper made from the mulberry tree – rather than canvas. They devised ways of applying paint and manipulating the paper that have no precedents amongst Western artists. Furthermore, in the time-honoured East Asian fashion, they often worked their surface horizontally rather than vertically.

A very strong sense of process is also conveyed as an intrinsic part of what these paintings mean. While for Westerners this may seem to have certain affinities with the notion of painting as performance espoused especially during the 1950s, here it should more properly be located within a deep indigenous tradition that valued the artwork as in an intimately indexical relationship with the maker. This repetitive process-

29. Ibid, p 96
30. Ibid, p 68
32. Quoted in Jullien, The Great Image, op cit, p 72
33. Ibid, p 108
34. Ibid, p 194
based approach, as Yoon Jin-Sup writes in his catalogue essay, is grounded in physicality, by the use of the hand. As a result, this painting conveys something quite different from the cold and rigorous formal aspect of minimalism.36

But a sense of tactility is ‘the outstanding feature’ of Dansaekhwa, as Yoon emphasizes.37 This tactile sense is more inclined to deliver an ambiguous and empathetic grasping of data. As Gilles Deleuze notes, the ‘haptic’ or tactile response to a painting’s presence involves perception at close range, while the ‘optical’ necessitates viewing from a distance. In the ‘haptic’ mode a rigid link is made between the eye and the hand, and frontal or proximic viewing is essential. The effect is such that ‘the form and the ground lie on the same place of the surface, equally close to each other and to ourselves’.38

But the sense of touch, especially since the establishment of the ‘oculcentrism’ characteristic of Cartesian perspectivalism, in the West has been relegated along with the other senses to an inferior status as a potential source of knowledge about the world. Instead, the intellect is understood to inspect and process the visual field modelled on retinal images. Mathematical structures – point, line, plane and ratio – are therefore of the first importance in modern Western philosophy and art; their value lies in their epistemic repeatability and reliability. The sensible data of the world, on the other hand – colour, taste, sound, odour, and touch, have been downgraded due to their alleged delivery of a ‘merely’ subjective and private experience. These secondary, inferior properties are closely connected with the emotional and valuing tone of experience and, as a result, emotions and values have also been demoted to an inferior position. ‘Within the optics of truth produced by such an emphasis on the so-called primary properties of ratio and objectivity’, writes Mark C Taylor, ‘the goal of the viewer is utter clarity and complete transparency. Such lucidity is supposed to erase equivocality by securing univocal meaning.’39 This, Taylor continues, guarantees a ‘monologism of truth’ which is ‘pre-scribed to ease the distress induced by the uncertainty that arises from the polymorphous play of appearances’.40

But the experience of an embodied relationship to space delivered through tactile ‘seeing’ challenges an epistemology and ontology based on a purely optical reading of the world. ‘Tactile sight’ is more adept at considering the holistic ‘field’ than at analysing specifics. The consequence of this divergence is the coexistence of two different recursive orientations to the world. As Richard E Nisbett et al write:

Analytic cognition is characterized by taxonomic and rule-based categorization of objects, a narrow focus in visual attention, dispositional bias in causal attribution, and the use of formal logic in reasoning. In contrast, holistic cognition is characterized by thematic and family-resemblance-based categorization of objects, a focus on contextual information and relationships in visual attention, an emphasis on situational causes in attribution, and dialecticism. What unites the elements of the analytic style is a tendency to focus on a single dimension or aspect, whether in categorizing objects or evaluating arguments, and a tendency to disentangle phenomena from contexts in which they are embedded, for example, focusing on the individual as a causal agent or attending to focal objects in visual scenes. What
unites the elements of the holistic style is a broad attention to context and relationships in visual attention, categorizing objects, and explaining behaviour.41

Nisbett argues that the former ‘analytic cognition’ is dominant in the West, while ‘holistic cognition’ is prevalent in the East. In this context, Dansaekhwa paintings convey a more subjective, empathetic and elusive kind of cognition that is grounded in the holistic dialecticism embedded in traditional East Asian culture.

Lee Ufan, in a text in which he speaks of the Namsan mountain in Gyeongju province in south-west Korea, captures the specifically Korean context of such a world-view by drawing attention to the nature of the environment. Known as the ‘mountain of ten thousand Buddhas’ because for centuries it has been a site of pilgrimage, Namsan for Lee is analogous to ‘an intermediate site between the natural and the artificial’, a place where a visitor can especially experience the indeterminacy of the ‘in-between’ which is embodied in the Korean words eun eun ham. This means, Lee writes, ‘a kind of infinite resonance, suggesting a diffuse clarity, an absent presence, a vacillating stability’.42 It is a quality that is common in Korean weather, and so environment and climate have served to condition Koreans towards a special sensibility:

In Korea, the sky is in general a finely nuanced indistinct blue. It is the same with the vegetation, where no part really dominates, for their colours seem nuanced by the rocks.43

In reducing the perspicacity of vision, eun eum ham signifies instead the substitution of a kind of haptic or tactile negotiation of space. The Koreans especially love this in-between-ness, says Lee, which is also perceptible in the half-closed eyes of their Buddhas represented in postures of mediation. ‘Indeterminacy for the Koreans is a comfortable state because it is an opening onto the infinite.’44

**EAST AND WEST**

In a text published in 1971 Lee Ufan addressed the contrast between East and West as he saw it. Drawing on the writings of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and melding their phenomenological perspectives with those of Nishida Kitaro and Keiji Nishitani of the Japanese Kyoto School of philosophy, he added his voice to the growing critique of Cartesianism, arguing that the way forward lay in rejecting the subject–object dichotomy in favour of awareness of the body as the bridge between the two poles: ‘[T]hrough the body as medium, the world opens up as a site of direct experience, and, through the self-awareness of that perception, the man encounters a truly open world.’45

An essay by Norman Bryson that links Western ‘scopic regimes’ to an East Asian concept of vision and visuality grounded in awareness of radical impermanence serves to clarify Lee’s arguments. Bryson brings the theorizing of Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan – chosen as representative of modern Western ideas on how the self is constituted – into confrontation with those of the Kyoto School, who approached phenom-
enology though the lens of Buddhist ideas on void and radical impermanence and as a result could propose an entirely different interpretation of what is at stake. Bryson notes that the bias of contemporary Western thought leads to an attitude within which visuality is often considered alienated and alienating. This is because within the Western paradigm ‘[b]etween retina and world is inserted a screen of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena’. There is no access to anything ‘real’. Furthermore, this situation is inherently terroristic and potentially annihilating, as the self’s autonomy and centredness are continuously threatened by all that exceeds its control. In Lacan’s influential theory, for example, ‘[t]he screen mortifies sight’, writes Bryson.

In order to clarify the implications of this, Bryson makes an enlightening comparison between Chinese flung ink painting, read from within its own conceptual framework, and Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors (1533), with its celebrated anamorphic representation of a skull, as seen from a Lacanian perspective. In Lacan, writes Bryson, ‘the skull appears in and as the protest of the Imaginary against its own decentering, as the menace of death’. Flung ink paintings, on the other hand, ‘represent instead the subject’s acceptance of decentering’, As a result, for Lacan ‘the skull represents the subject’s fear of dissolution’, and in contrast the flung ink embodies:

... the subject’s renunciation of a central subject position, on a field of radical emptiness where the last remains of the cogito are rendered null and void, literally cast out on empty air.

By seeking to identify with a sense of the emptiness of the self, the East Asian artist is put in harmony with the world – with breath-resonance or ch’i – and becomes its mirror. The void roots an individual life in time and space, linking it to the origins in the numinous – the eternal, in nature and the infinite. This movement, furthermore, is understood to be fundamentally non-transgressive; it does not aim to overturn or repudiate structure and difference, but rather to integrate it into harmony with anti-structure and sameness. In this sense, the East Asian concept signifies the condition of dynamic suspension between opposites. As Bryson argues, the fundamental divergence between East and West is epitomized by two different readings of Western phenomenology:

Nishitani engages with Sartre as precursor, and both regard the centering of the universe around the sovereign subject as illusion. In the field of sunyata [void or blankness] the centralized subject falls apart; its boundary dissolves, together with the consoling boundary of the object. Nihility and blankness undo the subject’s centering of the world upon itself; and, radically decentered, the subject comes to know itself in noncentered terms, as inhabiting and inhabited by a constitutive emptiness. Such decentering is a central theme in Lacan and in Nishitani; and yet their approaches are quite different.

**EAST IN WEST**

We should of course not lose sight of the fact that East Asian philosophical and religious concepts have been filtering into Western culture since

52. Drawing excessively close analogies can be misleading, however. In a lecture at the Pratt Institute in 1958 Rothko said: ‘People ask me if I am a Zen Buddhist. I am not. I am not interested in any civilization except this one. The whole problem in art is how to establish human values in this specific civilization.’ Mark Rothko, *Writings on Art*, Miguel Lopes-Ramiro, ed, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 2006, p 126. Recently, Frank Vigneron has argued that a reading of Rothko’s work as ‘Zen art’ is seriously misplaced anyway, since it relied on a Platonist view of the artwork as representing an idea, whereas true Zen is idea-less: Frank Vigneron, *I Like Hong Kong: Art and Deterriorlization*, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2010. Nevertheless, the sociologist Colin Campbell makes a strong case for a widespread and profound cultural turn towards an Eastern world-view. See *The Easternization of the West: A Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, Paradigm, Boulder, Colorado, 2008. A neurological perspective on this debate is also interesting. As the psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist observes: ‘the evidence suggests… that the East Asian cultures use the nineteenth century, blurring hard-and-fast distinctions. For example, several pioneer abstractionists were inspired by Theosophy, which fused interpretations of traditional Indian religion concerning the nature of ultimate reality with Neoplatonism and an awareness of new developments in science, such as evolutionary theory, into a rationale that gave support to the desire to repudiate mimesis in painting. From the 1940s to 1960s the influence of Zen was widespread. Helen Westgeest lists some of the ways in which Zen impacted on Western practices: ‘art of the empty field’, ‘art of the calligraphic gesture’, ‘living art’, ‘emptiness and nothingness’, ‘dynamism’, ‘undefined and surrounding space’, ‘direct experience of here and now’, and ‘nondualism and the universal’.51 The desire to quarantine art from extremes of arbitrary symbolism and traditional metaphysics was in part motivated by East Asian thought, which was understood to call for the suspension of analysis and to prioritize non-conceptual knowing, but it was also deployed to challenge the mere objecthood postulated by Minimalism.52

Korean monochrome thus implies a hybrid situation in which Eastern ideas to some extent have been absorbed into the Western context before being exported again back to the East in a new form. But whereas for the Westerner the void substantiated by, say, Mark Rothko can be said to have embodied a desire for reabsorption into the undifferentiated – or the ‘oceanic’ in Freud’s word – for the South Korean monochrome painters it signified a de-centring and relocating of the self within the flow of life. Western monochrome has been largely grounded in a vision of purification, transcendence and abstraction (and then, in postmodernism, on its failure to achieve such ends). Eastern monochrome, on the other hand, sought the experience of oneness through the immanence of ‘breath-resonance’.

The liminal zone of eun eun ham into which such works are supposed to transport us is constituted as a phase, process or a transition – a negotiation or mediation within an ongoing ‘rite’. The Korean artists foreground the radical contingency of structure but do not abandon it. They sought a ‘middle way’ between yin–yang in which a passage is achieved via a sense of void, understood as the channel for carrying nature’s ‘breath-resonance’ back into culture.

**DANSAEKHWA NOW**

In the exhibition, curator Yoon Jin Sup was also concerned to bring the Dansaekhwa aesthetic into the twenty-first century. But as he himself admits in his essay in the catalogue, things have perhaps changed too utterly. In an era of the technologically induced ‘simulacrum’, younger Korean artists no longer find it possible, or even valuable, to bind themselves to the kinds of East Asian beliefs that for the older artists were still part of a living tradition. Certainly, the later works in the exhibition, with the exceptions of, say, Lee In-Hyeon, Kim Taek-Sang and Kim Tschoon-Su, suggest that engagement with the old materials of hanji paper and Korean colours, and with the notion of art as a meditative process and a tactile engagement with materials, have given way to more urbane and mediated relationships to practice. Kim Taek-Sang, however, seems
Kim Tack-Sang, *Breath’s hue-deep*, 2010, water, acrylic, matt varnish on canvas, 136 x 102 cm, courtesy the artist
to embody the Dansaekhwa aesthetic when he says that ‘process is very important for my work. It is how nature enters in’.53

Within a society where traditional sources of meaning and a sense of the sacred are being eroded by the incessant expansion of capitalist economic relations – where the anonymity, exchangeability and indifference bred by the commodity form are becoming endemic and generating an implicit dichotomy between the subjective experience of flux and the alienating structures of social repression – the South Korean monochromists have sought to reconnect with their traditions while remaining modern. The specifically Korean cultural heritage that sets Dansaekhwa apart from its neighbours is made yet more telling by the tragedy of recent Korean history and the continuing division between North and South, which perpetuates the ideological divisions of the twentieth century, thereby arresting the development of civic society not only in the North but also in the South, and forcing both sides to remain trapped within a cycle that elsewhere has been passed through.

Rather than viewing the South Korean monochromists as either merely derivative or hermetically independent, they can perhaps best be seen as strong cases of ‘misreading’, in the sense suggested by Harold Bloom.54 While Dansaekhwa is inconceivable without the Western precedents, these paintings boldly re-routed Western attributes in wholly different directions. As Homi Bhabha noted in the seminal *The Location of Culture* (1994), globalization has displaced culture to an indeterminate zone – to ‘the interstices – the overlap and displacement domains of difference – [where] the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated’.55 The culture of the centre is now contested from both within and without, and what is most likely to challenge the status quo is the obscure and fluid forms of hybridity found where cultures meet and merge.

Both completion and antithesis, Dansaekhwa is about such meetings and overlaps, but also about where they cease. And so, amongst other things, Dansaekhwa can serve to problematize what we thought we knew about Western abstraction, and about modern art as a whole.

‘Return to nature,’ writes Lee Ufan:

That is to say, re-examine the source.

Nature is the realm of infinity where one can continuously bring one’s self back to nothingness.

One can limit or define one’s self in the midst of this realm of the undefined or infinite.

Staring at the depths of self-negation is the true recognition of history; this is the starting point where one can be transformed.56

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53. Conversation with the author, April 2012
56. Lee Ufan, *Selected Writings*, op cit, p 23