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Yun Hyong-keun in Venice: The Artist Behind the Paintings

Yun Hyong-keun in his studio. Courtesy Estate of Yun Hyong-keun. Image Copyright: Yun Seong-ryeol.

'He was not a "political" kind of person. He just wanted to be honest and straight. But it was not easy in Korea to live like that,' writes curator Kim Inhye on artist Yun Hyong-keun. For much of his life, Yun lived in proximity to some of the most tumultuous moments in modern Korean history, from which he emerged as a pioneer of abstract painting in Korea. More than 60 of the artist's works, as well as a recreation of his atelier, will be presented in Venice at Palazzo Fortuny (11 May–24 November 2019), marking the first major international retrospective of Yun's career since his death in 2007.

Curated by Kim Inhye, who also organised the artist's retrospective in 2018 at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul (MMCA) (4 August 2018–6 February 2019), the exhibition is a collaboration between MMCA, the Civic Museums of Venice (MUVE), and five partner galleries: Axel Vervoordt Gallery, David Zwirner, Simon Lee Gallery, Blum & Poe, and PKM Gallery, the latter gallery representing the artist's estate.

Born in 1928 in Cheongju, much of Yun's childhood was spent under Japanese occupation in Korea; he was 17 upon its termination in 1945. In 1947, he was set to study Western painting at Seoul National University (SNU), but was arrested and expelled that same year for taking part in the student protests against the school's establishment by the U.S. Military Government in Korea. Protestors responded by suspending class, and Yun was among the 4,956 students to have their admission annulled (3,158 of them were, however, later allowed to return to the university).

As the demonstration at SNU was a left-wing movement, Yun was suspected of being a communist in the following years. He was enlisted into the so-called Bodo League, an anti-communist organisation founded by the Korean government in 1949 to re-educate and convert those suspected of harbouring leftist tendencies. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, the South Korean government arrested people on the Bodo League list—among them civilians who did not even know that they had been registered, or what the League was for—and many were executed. Yun was one of those who was rounded up and, as Kim Inhye explains, he narrowly escaped execution by hiding in a forest. Yun was then forced to work for the North Korean Army after becoming stranded in occupied Seoul, which led to six months of imprisonment in 1956 on charges of collaborating with communists, after the war ended.

In the midst of state oppression, however, Yun was able to pursue his path as an artist. When he took the entrance exam for SNU, he met Kim Whanki, an influential modern Korean artist who was a professor at the university, and would become Yun's lifelong mentor, friend, and father-in-law. By 1952,

Kim had moved to teach at Hongik University in Seoul, and he allowed special admission for Yun so that he could continue studies there in 1954. Kim's influences can be seen in Yun's early paintings, many of which experiment with abstraction and feature bright colours. Circular shots of red, light blue, and purple congregate in *Title Unknown* (c. 1966), for example, while the vivid blue columns over yellow in *Drawing* (1972) bleed into the surface of the *hanji* paper, fostering an illusion of three-dimensionality.

Both Yun and Kim are associated with the development of Dansaekhwa, a style of abstract painting that emerged in the 1970s in Korea, though Kim Inhye points out that Yun did not wish to be categorised as a Dansaekhwa artist. 'Along with Chung Chang-Sup (1927–2011), Yun was a senior member among the group of Dansaekhwa painters,' Kim Inhye explains. 'He was also a lifelong best friend of Lee Il (1993–1997), who was an art critic and a most important protagonist of Dansaekhwa theory.'

In a postwar environment struck by political instability and poverty, Yun and his contemporaries—among them Lee Ufan, Park Seo-Bo, and Chung Sang-Hwa—turned to inexpensive and readily available materials as diverse as *hanji* or Korean paper, pencil, ink, coal, iron, and burlap sacks. Adopting equally diverse methods, Dansaekhwa artists focused on ways of manipulating material, including soaking, pulling, pushing, dragging, or ripping paper.

Yun's paintings were informed, in part, by traditional Korean aesthetics. This was a result of his background. As Kim Inhye notes, Yun's grandfather was a Confucian scholar and his father a literati painter, and he had great admiration for Joseon dynasty furniture and ceramics that he collected as an adult—an interest he shared with Kim Whanki. Yun also held great respect for the 19th-century calligrapher Kim Jeong-hui, and with it the aesthetic of 'imperfection' that a master Joseon-era calligrapher was considered able to achieve, seeking to cultivate the simplicity and purity of mind that traditional Korean calligraphy emphasised. (Explains Kim, 'the naturally "imperfect" boundary lines in Yun's paintings' reveal a pursuit of this ideal.)

Hoping to align past aesthetics with a contemporary visual language, Yun experimented with the absorbing ability of *hanji*, a Korean paper made from the bark of the mulberry tree, and adapted the results to cotton and linen as the unprimed surfaces on which he would paint using a method of mixing turpentine oil and pigment based on the traditional combination of water and ink.

A common composition in Yun's oeuvre consists of two black columns flanking either side of the canvas, such as in *Umber-Blue* (1978), with the lighter shadow of the pigment pooling around the pillars. The blank space in between the black forms evokes a pathway into a new world or 'the gate of heaven and earth', as the artist described his painting practice, with blue representing the heaven and umber the earth. Yun's early black-pillar paintings were time-consuming—during their making he would wait for the first layer of pigment to dry before applying multiple others.
Over time, however, his works became increasingly simple—from the late 1980s, they feature black columns with more defined edges such as *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine* (1996), which depicts two elongated rectangles standing closely next to each other.

Following his first solo exhibition at Press Centre Gallery, Seoul, in 1966, and participation in the 10th São Paulo Biennale in 1969, Yun began to gain recognition, yet it would not be until 1973 that he became a full-time artist. That year, Yun had started to teach art at Sookmyung Girls' High School, but this stability in his life was short-lived; in 1973, he was arrested—for a fourth time—for speaking out against the corruption in the school's admission system. Falsely charged with being a communist, Yun was released after he promised to resign from his teaching post. From then on—and under state

surveillance (he was blacklisted for almost ten years)—he committed himself to art. From this point, the bright colours begin to seep away from his works, replaced by his signature black: a mixture of blue and umber.

Despite increasing alienation at home, Yun became one of the first Dansaekhwa artists to gain a reputation in Japan. He held his first solo exhibition in Japan at Tokyo's Muramatsu Gallery in 1976, arranged by Joseph Love, a professor at Tokyo's Sophia University and *Art in America* editor, who first saw the artist's work in 1975 in Seoul. This was followed by another show at Tokyo Gallery two years later. As Kim notes, Yun's success in Japan enabled him to support himself during a period when not many were willing to purchase his paintings in Korea and, as a result, a considerable number of his works from the 1970s and 80s are in Japanese museums and private collections today.

Among the works that command undeniable presence in Yun's oeuvre is *Burnt Umber* (1980), a solemn pair of paintings that are perhaps the most openly emotional pieces the artist ever made. Painted in response to the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, a pro-democracy protest during which the military massacred hundreds of students and civilians, it depicts pillars toppling against one another. Pigments hardened while dripping, their forms evoking tears, sweat, or blood.

Kim Inhye points out that Yun was a generation of the April 19 Revolution, a mass uprising initiated by student and labour groups in 1960 that led to the end of Syngman Rhee's despotic rule, which is why he was so affected when he witnessed the government subdue its people with similar violence in Gwangju. '*Burnt Umber* (1980) was painted in the yard, and not in his atelier, because he was so furious', notes Kim. The paintings were never shown in public while he was alive.

In the early 1990s, Donald Judd travelled to Korea for a solo exhibition at Inkong Gallery in Seoul, where he encountered Yun's paintings during a visit to his studio. Impressed by his work, Judd invited Yun to exhibit at the Donald Judd Foundation in New York 1993, and at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, in 1994. By this time, now in his sixties, he was no longer seen as a communist threat, and in 1995, he represented Korea in the 46th Venice Biennale, thus cementing his significant contribution to Korean art.

This Venice connection makes Yun's Palazzo Fortuny show, which coincides with the 58th Venice Biennale, a meaningful return for the artist—a full circle that also expands on the 2018 MMCA Seoul retrospective that Kim Inhye curated. The MMCA survey included 40 paintings and 40 drawings presented alongside archival material; it attracted some 100,000 visitors in four months, and was extended for two months more.

One meaningful work that was presented in the MMCA show and will also be included in the Palazzo Fortuny presentation is *Burnt Umber & Ultramarine Blue* (2007), one of the last paintings that Yun made. This oil on cotton canvas depicts two columns of black paint with a thin slit of unprimed canvas between each. On the work, which was included in an exhibition of 12 of the artist's paintings at Blum & Poe in New York in 2015, critic David Rhodes wondered why Yun's work was not better known in the Western world, given the way his practice 'expands the field of abstract painting'. Perhaps this Venice show will affirm Yun's position internationally as a painter whose work resonates beyond Korea, not to mention Asia.

As MUVE Contemporaneo note, their decision to stage this important showcase reflects a resonance that transcends geography: it was 'based on the conviction that [Yun's] art is in particular harmony with this city of land and water.'—[O]