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Installation view of "Overcoming the Modern; Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Movement" at Alexander Gray Associates, 2014. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

OVERCOMING THE MODERN; DANSAEKHWA: KOREAN MONOCHROME MOVEMENT

WEB EXCLUSIVE BY DIANA SEO HYUNG LEE
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KOREA, SOUTH

In "Overcoming the Modern; Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Movement," at Alexander Gray Associates, guest curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath embark on the significant task of disentangling works from the 20th-century movement from the messy bounds of nationalism. Instead, they ask viewers to see the works for their conceptual and formal innovations.

The paintings included in the show span three decades, the earliest being Chung Sang-hwa's *Untitled 005* (1973), while Lee Dong Youb's *Interspace Musing (Cycle)* (2000) is the most recent. Though this arrangement may appear retrospective, the curators intend exactly the opposite. Rather, this grouping helps to bring the artists and the movement out of a contentious political background, showing that their unique styles and innovations are not solely tied to post-war upbringings.

Chung's *Untitled 005*, a large painting of acrylic and frottage on hanji paper (traditionally used in Korean calligraphy) collaged onto canvas, stands over 1.5 meters tall and 1.2 meters wide. It consists of small grids, resembling old marble tiles of gray and ivory, with hints of beige and light brown. Closer up, the colors divide into countless hues—though from further away, this variety might not be so easily discerned. Chung's use of the collage medium is not obvious—the dried acrylic paint and the paper are hard to separate—and the grid-like effect is created by ripping portions of paint off the canvas, then refilling the gaps.

Despite layers of pigment and interventions by the artist, the paintings still maintain a feeling of constraint and organization. Across the gallery is *Untitled* (1976), which is similar to *Untitled 005* in its size and schema. But in this painting, the grid has been broken down, creating pixels. Cooler in hue than *Untitled 005*, it does not have the ivory or brown, but rather cool grays, whites and blues. Leaning closer reveals traces of pale orange and yellow, and the grays also contain traces of cyan, turquoise and lavender. Such inconsistencies allude to the subjective and the delicate relationship it shares with the objective.

In Hur Hwang's *Untitled* (1978), the artist pours paint created from a thick mix of natural stone powder onto the canvas at random. The end result is a pale beige rectangle with specks of short, brighter, vertical drips that look like light spots in a photograph. Similar to Lee's *Interspace Musing (Cycle)*, *Untitled* plays with the viewer's perception. Its minimal use of color might easily be mistaken as one's own shadow or misdirected light on the surface of the canvas.

Lee Ufan and Park Seo-bo's contributions to the show are the most systematic. In the former's *From Line No. 12-12* (1982), the artist begins at the top of the canvas with a brush full of pigment, drawing straight downward until it has run out. He then repeats the same act in the proceeding column. In the three drawings from Park's famous "Ecriture" series (1997–98), which has continued for more than 40 years, Park draws vertical straight lines ticked off at intervals like a ruler. In some areas he marks the width in centimeters, while others he fills in with white and gray.

Pared-down aesthetics and the desire to move away from figuration in a manner reminiscent of minimalism, as well as spontaneous acts

of expression and working with the physical limitations of materials as in abstract expressionism, coexist in Korean Monochrome. There is an incompleteness to the works; they require the viewer's presence to complete them. Once the gaze is fixed, the work begins to move and shift—materials, colors and light meld and grow hazy—and the act of looking activates the paintings.

Bardaouil and Fellrath bring forth a particular moment in the history of Korean art. While the works inspire the inevitable questions of identity and nationhood, viewers are given the opportunity to look beyond official narratives and discover something in themselves.

Overcoming the Modern; Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Movement is on view at Alexander Gray Associates through March 29, 2014.

Diana Seo Hyung Lee is a writer based in New York City.

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