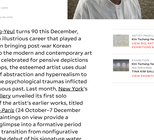
Kim Tschang-Yeul: Art Without Ego



In Conversation with
Kim Tschang-Yeul
New York, 21 December 2015

Eric Fredericksen Columbia University

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Kim Tschang-Yeul turns 90 this December, following an illustrious career that played a crucial role in bringing post-war Korean painting into the modern and contemporary art canon. Long celebrated for pensive depictions of water drops, the esteemed artist uses dual languages of abstraction and hyperrealism to articulate the psychological instinct by a tumultuous past. Last month, New York's Tina Kim Gallery unveiled its first solo exhibition of the artist's earlier works, titled *New York to Paris* (14 October–7 December 2015). The paintings on view provide a remarkable glimpse into a formative period marked by a transition from nonfigurative forms, and the debut of his signature water drops.

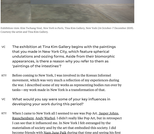
Kim Tschang-Yeul, Untitled, 1960. Oil on canvas. 90 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artist and Fine Art Gallery.

Understanding Kim's background is essential to grasping the meaning behind his contemplative paintings. Born in Pyongyang, Korea, in 1929, Kim fled to Seoul in his late teens at age 16 a historical time marked apparently by Japanese occupation, communism, and civil war—the latter of which he witnessed firsthand as a young man. Kim's experiences in Korea helped found the mid-1950s and early 1960s Korean informel movement, which embraced abstraction as a turn away from traditional artistic norms. In 1963, a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled him to move to New York, where he lived and worked for nearly a decade, and became a mid-century American art. Kim, however, found New York inhospitable, and relocated to Paris in 1969.

Exhibition view: Kim Tschang-Yeul, *New York to Paris*, Tina Kim Gallery, New York (14 October–7 December 2015). Courtesy the artist and Tina Kim Gallery.

The exhibition opens with a group of works created soon after this juncture in Kim's life. It comprises paintings wherein oozing black lines, which the artist compared to calligraphy, are undulating free-wrap around round of gradient circles. These compositions allude to the visual vocabularies of Minimalism and Op Art, movements that Kim was then exploring. Paintings give way to seemingly ambiguous shapes Kim fittingly referred to the canvases as 'paintings of the Intestines'. In light of their apparent biomorphism. The rippling of black and white lines also call to mind Op Art's play on ocular perception, acting as a kind of optical illusion. Kim's work, however, is not as visual define Kim's practice for over four decades to come.

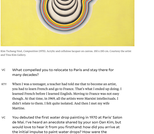
An empty stretch of the gallery demarcates these earlier works from a pair of Kim's inaugural water drop paintings, first shown at Paris' Galerie de Mire in 1970. Each featuring a magnified water drop, the paintings, with their photorealistic appearance belie a minimalist approach, in which gestalt of artifice, blues, and greys are used to simulate translucence. The artist's technique, which involved manipulating paint through the early 1960s—some sparse, with others bearing tight clusters of droplets, in 2 phase (1970), tiny water drops appear to hang in the air, floating in a void. Kim's work, which references a concrete poem published by the avant-garde artist Guillaume Apollinaire in 1916, following his service in Korean War, was also influenced by the Zen Buddhism and Taoist philosophy traditional who similarly lived through times of violent upheaval.



Kim Tschang-Yeul, *Untitled*, 1970. Acrylic and cellulose lacquer on canvas. 195 x 195 cm. Courtesy the artist and Fine Art Gallery.

Although he has resided in Europe for the majority of his life, Kim's work remains rooted in Korea. His paintings are a subtraction, characterizing water as an amorphous entity imbued with the power to dissolve and to purify; to worship and to commemorate; to nourish and to destroy; to be wasteful, and solace in meditative repetition. Kim's pioneering approach to artmaking pushed aberrant painting beyond its traditional limits, and, in the process, he transformed water, rendering it as an increasingly cosmopolitan world. In 2016, the Korean government erected a museum in his honour on the southern island of Jeju, to which he donated over 200 works from his archive. It stands as a testament to the impact Kim's work has had on the 20th-century art, both within Korea and around the globe.

In this conversation, Kim discusses his beginnings in New York and Paris, early influences, and the formulation of his famed water drop paintings.



Exhibition view: Kim Tschang-Yeul, *New York to Paris*, Tina Kim Gallery, New York (14 October–7 December 2015). Courtesy the artist and Tina Kim Gallery.

Q1 The exhibition at Tina Kim Gallery begins with the paintings that you made in New York City, which feature spherical undulations and oozing forms. Aside from their biomorphic appearance, what did these works early you refer to them as 'paintings of the intestines'?

A1 Before coming to New York, I was involved in the Korean informel movement, which was seen made a reflection of my experiences during the war. I described some of my works as representing bodies—not my bodies, but my bodies as a collective. I was in consideration of that.

Q2 What around you say were some of your key influences in developing your work during this period?

A2 When I came to New York all I wanted to see was the art. Jasper Johns' paintings were very important to me. I was also influenced by Mondrian. I can see that in Informel art. In fact, I felt compelled by the materialism of Jackson and by the art that embodied this society. I did not understand Pop Art at the time, but I liked it. Rauschenberg and seeing his first performances stirred me from the ground up.

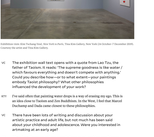
Kim Tschang-Yeul, *Descriptive* (1960). Oil on canvas. 90 90 cm. Courtesy the artist and Fine Art Gallery.

Q3 What compelled you to relocate to Paris and stay there for many decades?

A3 When I was a teenager, a teacher had told me he hoped one artist, you had to leave French and go to France. That's what I ended up doing. I felt compelled to leave Korea because I felt I had to see what I had thought. At that time, in 1969, all the artists were Marcel Duchamp's. I didn't want to see. I felt quite isolated. And then I met my wife Marlene.

Q4 You debuted the first water drop paintings in 1970 at Paris' Galerie de Mire. I've heard an anecdote shared by your son Kim Ichi, but would love to hear it from you. Apparently Pablo Picasso did pay artists at the Galerie de Mire. Did he come to your exhibition? Did your paintings resonate? Did it critically as well as by personal viewers?

A4 I discovered the water drop one morning after working at night. Quite dissatisfied with myself, I had splashed some water with my hands on the canvas. I was surprised to see the water drop, and I was surprised that it was shining on the canvas. It was extraordinary. I thought that's what I have to do. I wondered if I could make art out of this.

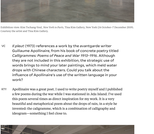


Kim Tschang-Yeul, *Untitled*, 1970. Oil on canvas. 195195 cm. Courtesy the artist and Fine Art Gallery.

At that time, I wanted to break away from the experience of the war. When I discovered the water drop, I thought I had found a playing ground for my work. I was very interested in Taoism and Zen Buddhism philosophies like Taoism and Zen Buddhism. We first show at Bonk International was very well received. Pierr Alain Bouquet known a very well known critic he newspaper Combat wrote a lot of people come, including Apollinaire. Ils vinrent à la gouttelette, cela qui en magnétisa en le transformant en Zen. Ils vinrent à magnétiseur les trois coins et Pompéiens!

Q5 One of the things that I find most stunning about your work is the remarkable contrast between how they appear from a distance, versus up close. The water drops are hyperrealistic, but the paintings are minimalist and abstract. How do you approach the canvases, first this technique come intuitively to you, or did it take some refining?

A5 At first my approach was more hyperrealistic. Even though I was never interested in hyperrealism, I used an airbrush. Bar artists now big. I wanted to make a painting that looked like photography. I was very childishness, and the reason I became a painter. A Leonardo da Vinci.



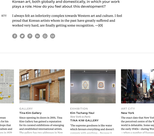
Exhibition view: Kim Tschang-Yeul, *New York to Paris*, Tina Kim Gallery, New York (14 October–7 December 2015). Courtesy the artist and Tina Kim Gallery.

Q6 The exhibition wall text opens with a quote from Lao Tzu, the 6th-century BCE Taoist sage, "Nothing is more soft and yielding / which forces everything and doesn't compete with anything / Could you describe how—or to what extent—your paintings reflect Taoist ideas? Do you think Taoist philosophies influenced the development of your work?

A6 I've said often that painting never drops is a way of erasing my ego. This is an idea close to Taoism and Zen Buddhism. In the West, I feel that Marcel Duchamp and Dada were closer to these philosophies.

Q7 There have been lots of writing and discussion about your artistic practice and adult life, but not much has been said about your early childhood experiences. Were you interested in artmaking at an early age?

A7 When I was five years old, my grandfather started teaching me Chinese calligraphy. He kept pressing me to keep practicing. I hated that but I did it started. My uncle, who was a sort of mentor for me, also had a tremendous influence on me. I remember when I was very young, I ran to the library. I read a book called The Lives of Great Men. Among them was Leonardo da Vinci. Reading about him made me realize that being an artist could be a great and noble thing.



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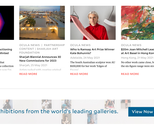
Q8 *A place* (1970) references a work by the avant-garde artist Guillaume Apollinaire, from his book of concrete poetry titled *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War 1913–1916*. Although they are not included in this exhibition, the strategy use of text in your work, and the relationship between the written and the spoken with Chinese characters. Could you talk about the influence of Apollinaire's use of the written language in your world?

A8 Apollinaire was a great poet. I used to write poetry myself and I published a few poems in the Korean literary magazine Munhak Sasang. I felt that this poem would show a deep inspiration for my work. It is a very beautiful and sensitive poem about the drops of rain. In a style he invented, Apollinaire combined the visualization of calligraphy and language—something I feel close to.



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Q9 To and with the present: the past years have witnessed a significant surge of interest in modern and contemporary Korean art. Do you think the contemporary art world today plays a role. How do you feel about this development?

Q9 I always felt as inferiority complex towards Western art and culture. I feel proud that now Korean artists have to the past years finally settled and worked very hard, are finally getting some recognition.—ED

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