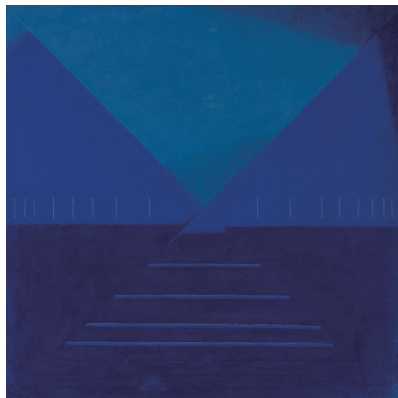


## 1965 – 1970 AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTATIONS

After his first solo exhibition in 1964, Yoo Youngkuk quit his active participation in art groups and took up a life of solitude. Each day, he religiously followed the same routine: waking up at 7, painting from 8 until 11:30 am, eating lunch, and then painting again from 2 until 6. He completely devoted himself to the creation of art, with the duty and diligence of a manual laborer. He once said that he thought that he would eventually return to the softer, more relaxed style of his natural forms, but only “after studying the basics until the age of 60.” As we can see from his works, he did indeed persist in his diverse aesthetic experimentations until he turned 60 in the mid-1970s.



Yoo Youngkuk, *Mountain*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 136x136cm, Private Collection



Yoo Youngkuk, *Circle-A*, 1968, Oil on canvas, 136x136cm, Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation Collection

## 1970s – 1990s WORKING WITH NATURE

Yoo Youngkuk felt that he should study the “basics” of painting until he turned 60, after which he could resume a softer approach through a “return to nature.” Unfortunately, around the time of this transition, his health began to deteriorate. In 1977 he had a pacemaker installed. Then, from 1977 until his death in 2002 (at the age of 86), Yoo suffered eight cerebral hemorrhages which caused him to be hospitalized 37 times. Nonetheless, despite his poor health, he continually produced serene and beautiful paintings, representing his desire for a softer approach and a “return to nature.”

In these works, irregular forms gradually advance into geometric shapes. The primary colors (yellow, red, and blue) are prevalent, but Yoo also plays with different variations of purple and green. Even within a group of works dominated by the color red, there are subtle differences in the shades: slightly brighter red, thick red, murky red, deep red. The interaction of these shades simultaneously yields a tangible tension and a superb balance. As such, these sumptuous works approach the supreme level of beauty that a painting may achieve.

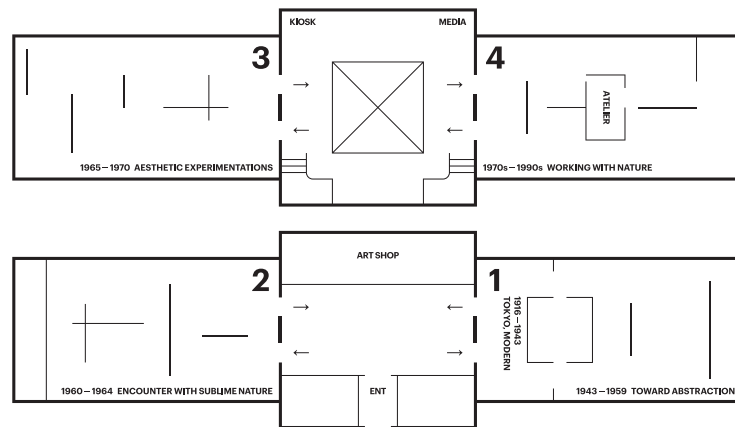
His final works convey the simple lyricism of the natural world that surrounds us: mountains and trees, lakes and seas, horizons of land and water, and above all, reflections of the sun and moon. All of these images reflect Yoo’s aspirations for a perfect equilibrium with the supreme peace and harmony of nature. In his later years, Yoo repeatedly returned from death’s door to his studio, and the resulting paintings radiate with the warm consolation of life.



Yoo Youngkuk, *Mountain and Lake*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 53x65cm, Private Collection



Yoo Youngkuk, *Work*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 135x135cm, Seoul Museum Collection



## INFORMATION

**Date**  
4 Nov. 2016 – 1 Mar. 2017  
(Closed on Mondays)

**Venue**  
National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art(MMCA), Deoksugung  
(Located in the Deoksugung Palace)

**Contact**  
+82 – 2 – 2022 – 0600  
www.mmca.go.kr

**Opening Hour**  
Tue, Thur, Fri, Sunday 10:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m.  
Wed, Saturday 10:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.  
(Admission: Until 1 hour prior to the closing time)

**Ticket (Include Deoksugung admission)**  
3,000 KRW for adult  
2,500 KRW for student under age 19  
2,000 KRW for under age 6 and over 65

**Discount for**  
Groups for 10 or more people: 20%

MMCA, Deoksugung  
2016. 11. 04. – 2017. 03. 01.

Yoo Youngkuk  
1916 – 2002

유영국

100th Anniversary of Korean  
Modern Master

절대와  
자유

YOUNGKUK

Yoo Youngkuk, *Work*, 1973, Oil on canvas,  
53x65cm, Private Collection





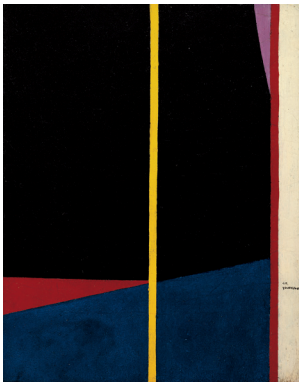
In the 1930s, Yoo Youngkuk (1916–2002) left the remote hinterlands of Uljin, North Gyeongsang Province, where he had been born and raised, and went to study art in Tokyo, one of the world’s most modern cities. He returned to Korea in 1943, amidst the tumult of the Pacific War. Through the ensuing years of Korea’s independence (1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953), he sustained himself by working as a fisherman or by brewing and selling his own liquor. After 1955, he fully resumed his art activities, becoming a leader of many early avant-garde art groups in Korea (e.g., New Realism, Modern Art Association, Contemporary Artists, and New Figures) and establishing himself as one of the true pioneers of Korean contemporary art. In 1964, however, he announced the end of his association with art groups and held his first solo exhibition. From then until his death in 2002, he was devoted solely to working alone in his studio, day in and day out, such that he left about 400 magnificent oil paintings.

In Yoo’s abstract works, basic visual elements—dots, lines, planes, forms, and colors—emerge as the protagonists. Often in tension or competition with one another, these elements maintain a certain sense of balance, which ultimately amplifies their potent innate energy. Although his works are reminiscent of the deep water, rugged mountains, clear valleys, and red sun of his hometown Uljin, he makes no attempt to depict these aspects of nature realistically. Nonetheless, the power of the abstract aesthetics themselves induces the viewer to approach the essence of nature in a more direct way.

This exhibition was organized to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Yoo Youngkuk. Looking at his modern works, it is almost impossible to believe that he was born a full century ago. As an artist, Yoo had the rare gift of combining an extraordinary aesthetic insight with a firm sense of practicality. He is not a legendary artist who enjoys great popularity among the Korean public. Somehow, during even the most turbulent times of the twentieth century, he alone demonstrated an uncanny—almost surreal—ability to avoid the worst of the trauma and adhere to his solitary and high-minded life as an artist. We hope that this exhibition will help to renew people’s appreciation of Yoo Youngkuk, the consummate Korean modern artist who deserves our remembrance and love.



Yoo Youngkuk, *Work 40-4-D, 1940*[Reproduced by Yoo Lizzy 2003], Mixed media, 48x40cm, Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation Collection



Yoo Youngkuk, *Work, 1940*, Oil on canvas, 46x37.5cm, Yoo Youngkuk Art Foundation Collection

## 1916 – 1943 TOKYO, MODERN

### GALLERY 1 – 1

In April 1916, Yoo Youngkuk was born the third son to a family of wealthy landowners in Uljin, Gangwon Province (present-day North Gyeongsang Province). He attended the prestigious Seoul Second High School, but dropped out one year prior to graduation. Then in 1935, he went to Tokyo to study and practice art at Bunka Gakuin University, a school famous for its liberal atmosphere. From the beginning, he indulged his lifelong passion for abstract art, the most avant-garde art movement of the time, even in Tokyo, one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities. In 1938, he received the 2nd Association of Free Artists Award, as well as membership in the association.

## 1943 – 1959 TOWARD ABSTRACTION

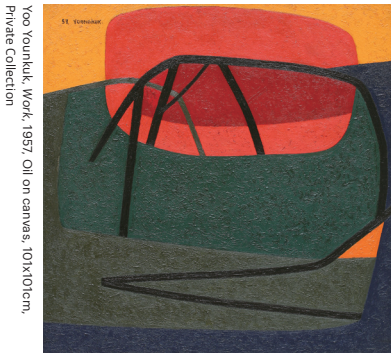
### GALLERY 1 – 2

In 1943, at the peak of the Pacific War (1941–1945), Yoo Youngkuk returned to his hometown in Uljin. He began working as a fisherman, driving his boat far out into the ocean in order to avoid the surveillance of Tokko, the “Special Higher Police” (a Japanese police force that existed until Korea regained independence in 1945). After several years of earning his living through fishing, Yoo supported his family through the bleak years of the Korean War (1950–1953) by operating his own distillery. Despite the desperate situation in Korea, Yoo seized every opportunity to continue his work as an artist, creating new works and leading many different avant-garde art groups, such as New Realism (1948), Modern Art Association (1957), and Contemporary Art Exhibition (1958).

His works from this period represent the gradual abstraction of ordinary natural elements (e.g., mountains, valleys, sunsets), thus marking a return to the fundamental principles of “painting.” He simplified the natural forms and sought an exquisite balance of colors, ultimately seeking to maximize the surface texture.

He studied and worked directly with the most influential leaders of Japanese abstract art, such as Murai Masanari and Hasegawa Saburo.

Most of the works that Yoo Youngkuk created in Japan are “relief” works, consisting of simplified geometric forms made by cutting, connecting, and pasting veneer plates. The objects are purposely uncolored, to highlight the natural grain of the wood or the sleek gloss of the processed surface. He was also very interested in photography, such that he studied at the Oriental Photography School. When the Japanese government began suppressing works of abstract art, he submitted photography works to exhibitions.



Yoo Youngkuk, *Work, 1957*, Oil on canvas, 101x101cm, Private Collection



Yoo Youngkuk, *Mountain, 1957*, Oil on canvas, 100x81cm, Private Collection

## 1960 – 1964 ENCOUNTER WITH SUBLIME NATURE

### GALLERY 2

By the 1960s, Yoo Youngkuk had emerged as the most admired role model among young artists of the succeeding generation, who were bringing abstract and avant-garde art into the mainstream of the Korean art field. Inspired by the April Revolution of 1960, there was a strong push for innovation and experimentation in all cultural fields. Yoo remained active in the contemporary art movement, serving as president of the Contemporary Artists Association, a prominent group of the 1960s. Then, in 1962, he organized a group called New Figures, which was devoted in part to providing more opportunities for young artists through art contests. In 1964, however, he suddenly announced that he would no longer associate himself with any art group, as he held his first solo exhibition of fifteen new works at the



Yoo Youngkuk, *Mountain, 1960*, Oil on canvas, 136x211cm, Private Collection



Yoo Youngkuk, *Mountain, 1961*, Oil on canvas, 136x134cm, Private Collection

Korea Press Center. This surprising declaration sent an invigorating jolt through the entire field of Korean art.

Yoo’s works from this period resonate with power and confidence. Unfolding massive landscapes, the large canvasses reveal vivid natural scenes of all seasons, seen from a bird’s-eye view. In particular, the new works that he produced for his 1964 solo exhibition embody his intense spirit and focus, conveying the illusion that the viewer is engulfed in a deep forest. Amazingly, these overwhelming works were produced in his relatively small studio in Yaksu-dong, which was just 23m<sup>2</sup>. Within this confined space, Yoo confronted the awesome power of nature and transferred the essence of that sublime energy onto the canvas.