



**National Museum of
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Korea**

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Umber-Blue, 1977, Oil on linen, 220.5x100cm

Yun Hyong-keun Retrospective

4 Aug 2018 – 16 Dec 2018

MMCA Seoul

The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea(MMCA) announced that the retrospective exhibition of Yun Hyong-keun(1928-2007) is to be held from 4 August to 16 December 2018 at MMCA Seoul.

Born in 1928 in Cheongju, North Chungcheong Province, Yun Hyong-keun lived through one of the most traumatic periods of Korean history, suffering great misfortune related to Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and the postwar dictatorship. Yun's hardships began in 1947, shortly after he entered Seoul National University (SNU), when he was arrested and expelled for joining the campus-wide protests against the US Army Military Government's role in establishing the school. Then in 1950, just after the outbreak of the Korean War, the South government began arresting and executing so-called "dissenters" and political opponents who had been blacklisted (often for trivial or fabricated reasons) as part of the "Bodo League" (or "National Rehabilitation and Guidance League"). Because of his prior arrest at SNU, Yun was detained and set to be executed by a firing squad, before

he miraculously escaped with his life at the last moment. After surviving this brush with death, he found himself trapped in occupied Seoul, where he was forced to work for the North Korean army. When this “collaboration” was discovered in 1956, Yun was incarcerated for six months in Seodaemun Prison. Then in 1973, Yun was teaching art at Sookmyung Girls’ High School, when the school granted admission to an unqualified student with connections to the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, the highest power of the time. Yun criticized this unethical practice, which resulted in another arrest and imprisonment for violating anti-communist laws. Thus, simply for standing up for his beliefs, Yun was incarcerated four times, and once faced with near-certain death. Only after surviving these harrowing incidents did Yun fully commit himself to making art, in 1973 when he was forty-five years old.

From the moment he dedicated himself to painting, Yun clearly established his own distinct artistic world, which he called the “gate of heaven and earth.” In the quintessential series of works that he began in the 1970s, Yun used a wide brush to apply thick blocks of black paint to canvasses of plain cotton or linen. To be precise, the paint was not actually black, but slightly variant mixtures of the same two colors: blue (representing “heaven”) and umber (representing “earth”). From their production method to their final appearance, these paintings are simple, genuine, and organic. Gazing into them, viewers are bombarded with different sensations, like looking at an ancient tree that has withstood the ravages of weather, or the rafters of a Korean traditional house, or a patch of soil that is fragrant with fertility. With these seemingly offhand works, Yun succeeded in translating the humble, comfortable, and solid values of Korean traditional aesthetics into the lexicon of international contemporary art.

The exhibition is filled with dark and poignant paintings that magnificently capture the shattered national psyche of their time, perhaps highlighted by the heart-breaking works that Yun furiously painted in the wake of the Gwangju Massacre (May 1980). Most notably, the displays feature a wealth of personal materials that have never been publicly shown, including early drawings, a large archive of photos, and strikingly honest excerpts from Yun’s private journals. In addition, one entire gallery (Gallery 8) contains a meticulous reproduction of Yun’s actual atelier, including outstanding works by other artists (Kim Whanki, Choi Jongtae, and Donald Judd) and Korean traditional artifacts (furniture, porcelains, and pottery).

Eleven years after his death, this exhibition explores Yun’s life and art with unprecedented range and depth, introducing many details and perspectives that have not yet received adequate attention.

Through such diverse materials and displays, this exhibition comprehensively explores the life and art of Yun Hyong-keun, who has thus far been known primarily within the context of the Dansaekhwa movement in Korea.

More information is available on the MMCA website (<http://www.mmca.go.kr>).

□ For general enquiries, please call +82-2-3701-9500 (MMCA Seoul)

Contents of Exhibition

I. Prologue: Early Works

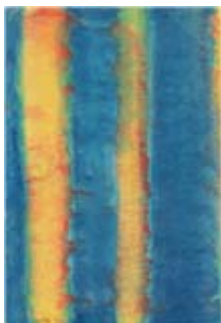
The first section of the exhibition introduces Yun's works from the 1960s and early 70s, before he fully dedicated himself to art in 1973. After enduring many hardships early in his life, Yun finally gained some respite in the 1960s, when he worked as an art teacher at Sookmyung Girls' High School (1961-1973). With this improved work environment, Yun produced many drawings and small works, most of which are light-colored abstract paintings that show the influence of Kim Whanki, his mentor and father-in-law. In 1973, however, after Yun was detained by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and incarcerated in Seodaemun Prison, the light colors disappeared from his palette, replaced by the somber black tones that characterized his works for the rest of his career. This section shows how the colors, forms, and processes of Yun's art became purer and simpler in relation to the traumatic events of his life.



Title Unknown, c.1966, oil on canvas, 62x51.5cm

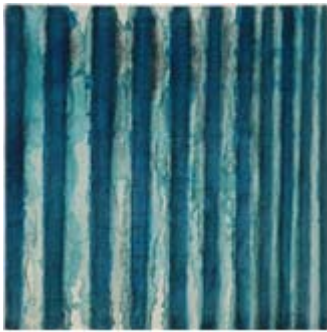
Yun Hyong-keun had his first solo exhibition at the Press Center in Seoul in 1966, while he was teaching art at Sookmyung Girls' High School. Many of the works from this exhibition have not survived, but photos show that the lost works basically resemble the few extant ones. The works from this period typically had poetic titles taken from the natural world (e.g., *Landscape of an Island*, *Lake*, and *Plum Blossoms and Moon*, but the title of this work is unknown.

The canvas is entirely coated with blue paint, interspersed with dots of various colors that sparkle like gemstones. Exuding a lyrical sensibility, the work clearly shows the influence of Kim Whanki (1913-1974), Yun's mentor and father-in-law.



Drawing, 1972, Oil on hanji, 49x33cm

In his early sketches and drawings, Yun Hyong-keun practiced various styles and aesthetics that interested him. In this work, for example, he experimented with the unique texture and permeability of Korean traditional paper. As demonstrated by many traditional Korean calligraphers and ink-wash painters who used the “wet-on-wet” technique, the spread of the ink or paint depends on how thinly it is diluted. This work presages Yun’s paintings from the 1970s, in which he applied black paint to linen fabric, adding oil to the paint mix to control the spread. However, whereas all of the colors disappeared from Yun’s works after his imprisonment in 1973, this early work is painted with bright primary colors.



Blue, 1972, Oil on canvas, 70x70cm

This work is believed to have been shown at Yun’s second solo exhibition, held at Myeongdong Gallery in 1972. The arrangement of cool blue vertical lines conveys a refreshing sensation, reminiscent of a watercolor painting. Yun painted each dark blue line in a single stroke, and then allowed the thin paint to naturally spread and diffuse over time, blurring the edges. Like Yun’s later works, this one seamlessly integrates the artificial action of the artist and the organic interaction between the paint and the paper or fabric, thus highlighting the tenuous border between people and the natural universe.

II. The Gate of Heaven and Earth

The second section features the works that Yun began producing in 1973, when he dedicated himself full-time to painting after having been detained in Seodaemun Prison. For about ten years after his release, Yun was blacklisted and could not find a steady job. During this time, he painted the series of works that he called the “gate of heaven and earth,” (天地門), all of which were made by mixing blue (representing “heaven”) and umber (representing “earth”) to make variant shades of black. After adding oil to the paint mixture, Yun used a wide brush to paint wide bars down canvasses made from cotton or linen, creating forms that resembled a gate. Looking into these works is like staring through a gate of solid black pillars, beyond which lies an entirely new dimension. These modest but solid paintings are deceptively simple in terms of both form and production method, to the point of sometimes seeming crude or artless. One of the highlights of this section are the paintings that Yun made after learning about the Gwangju Massacre (May 1980), in which black monoliths seem to stumble over one another, like people falling in the street.



Umber-Blue, 1976-1977, Oil on cotton, 162.3x130.6cm

In a diary entry from January 1977, Yun Hyong-keun wrote: “The thesis of my painting is the gate of heaven and earth. Blue is the color of heaven, while umber is the color of the earth. Thus, I call them ‘heaven and earth,’ with the gate serving as the composition.” After being released from his incarceration and quitting his teaching job in 1973, Yun spent the next ten years painting in his atelier. All of his works from this period were made with the same basic procedure. First, he mixed blue and umber paint to make a shade that was nearly black, using turpentine and linseed oil to control the thickness. Then he soaked a wide brush in this mixture and used the brush to paint straight down on cotton or linen cloth, allowing the paint to seep naturally through the canvas.

Most of the early works from the series were painted on white cotton, yielding a more dramatic contrast than the works painted on ivory linen cloth. While the dark mixtures of blue and umber generate a memorable sense of depth, the essence of each painting is the blank space in between the bars, which evinces the “gate” that leads the viewer to another dimension.



Umber-Blue, 1977, Oil on linen, 220.5x100cm

In the 1970s, Yun’s works were better received in Japan than they were in Korea. This work, for example, was shown at Tokyo Gallery in 1978. Describing his style, Yun Hyong-keun once wrote, “I paint a single wail, with no small talk.” With a rustic beauty that appears to be both adept and artless, his works are characterized by their simple, plain, solid, and comfortable aesthetics. By harmonizing the artificial intervention of the artist with the natural effects of the materials, Yun’s paintings represent a contemporary manifestation of Korean traditional aesthetics. Thus, despite the apparent simplicity and concision of the colors, forms, and work process, his works emit powerful sensations that never fail to captivate the viewers.



Burnt Umber, 1980, Oil on linen, 181.6x228.3cm, MMCA Collection

Born in 1928, Yun was deeply impacted by the seminal events that reshaped Korea in the twentieth century: the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War, the April Revolution of 1960, and the Yushin regime. In May 1980, tragedy struck again, when many civilians were slain by the military in the Gwangju Massacre. After learning of this horrific incident, Yun could not contain his fury, so he went out to his yard and transformed his pain into a series of masterpieces. In these paintings, which are some of the most emotional works in his entire oeuvre, thick black pillars topple over one another like people who can no longer stand, capturing the fatigue of those who have persisted through endless blood, sweat, and tears. In particular, this painting has been specially restored for this exhibition and is now being shown to the public for the first time.

III. The Utmost Depth and Simplicity

The third section showcases Yun's later works, produced beginning in the late 1980s, which represent the culmination of his lifelong pursuit of simplification. The subtle variations in the colors disappeared, so that all of the late works appear to have been painted with pure black. Also, he used less oil in the paint mixture, so that the surfaces became drier. Although the forms, colors, process, and results represent the utmost simplicity, these works have an uncanny depth; gazing into one of the huge black voids is like plunging into a deep and inexplicable abyss. Thus, Yun's late works convey a measure of certainty, even as they address complex issues of solitude, death, and the relations between living beings.



Umber, 1988, Oil on linen, 205.5x333.5cm

In the late 1980s, Yun Hyong-keun produced his most consummate works. While he still mixed the two colors of ultramarine and burnt umber, the “gate” composition was replaced by an “all-over” painting style. In this period, Yun's technique consisted of coating the entire canvas with a layer of paint, allowing the layer of paint to completely dry (which took a very long time), and then repeating the process many times. Based on his adept knowledge of the fabric and the color mixtures, he meticulously varied the layers to achieve a palpable sense of depth and mystery. Looking at these works is like descending deep into an

underground tomb; as such, they embody the principles of “memento mori.”



Burnt Umber & Ultramarine Blue, 1999, Oil on linen, 182 x 291.5 cm

Entering the 1990s, Yun Hyong-keun's work process became even simpler, and so did the works themselves. Most of these late works were made via the same procedure. He would stretch a huge cloth (more than three meters long) across a wooden frame, which he then placed on the floor. Next, he used a ruler and pencil to draw lines on the canvas, and covered the lines with masking tape. Finally, using a large brush soaked with “black” paint (mixed from blue and umber), he filled in the rectangular areas inside the tape, and then removed the tape. Because of the tape, the edges of the rectangles are almost perfectly straight, although the paint still seeps through the fabric in certain areas, for a natural look. As his career progressed, Yun's work process became simpler, his forms became more precise, and his colors (which once showed subtle variations) were reduced to pure black. Standing before these seemingly simple works, viewers are overwhelmed by their sheer size, the sense of time, and the meaning of the sublime.



Burnt Umber & Ultramarine Blue, 2007, Oil on cotton, 162x130.5cm

In 2007, the year of his death, Yun painted about twenty works comprising his Burnt Umber & Ultramarine Blue series. For this series, he returned to the white cotton fabric that he had frequently used in his early works of the 1970s. Two large black rectangles are arranged in various ways: some are side-by-side, some are oblique, and some are leaning against one another, as if they are about to collapse from fatigue. These works consummate Yun's lifelong theme of “relations,” while simultaneously delivering a solemn message of solitude, serenity, and death from the true realm of old age.

IV. The World of Yun Hyong-keun

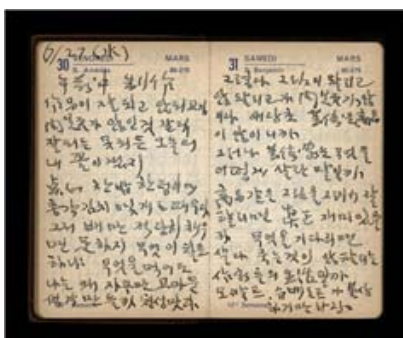
The fourth section was designed to provide a window into the overall worldview of Yun Hyong-keun. From 1983 until his death in 2007, Yun lived in a house in Seogyo-dong that he had built from his own designs. In the final gallery, we have faithfully reproduced his atelier from this house, where he lived and worked for the final twenty-four years of his life. The atelier is filled with Yun's cherished furniture and crafts from the Joseon period, including woodcrafts, porcelains, and pottery, along with calligraphy by Kim Jeonghui, painting and archives by Kim Whanki, sculptures by Choi Jongtae, and work by Donald Judd. Filled with the objects that Yun used everyday and mementos from the people that he cared about, as well as his personal diary, notes, and photos, the atelier provides a compelling glimpse into Yun's spirit and his artistic mission.



Yun Hyong-keun's Atelier

This gallery contains a nearly complete reproduction of Yun Hyong-keun's living room, in which antique furniture, porcelains, potteries, and books are harmoniously arranged with artworks by Yun and his friends. This room represents the culmination of Yun's lifelong quest to translate the aesthetics and style of Korean traditional crafts into a contemporary vocabulary. Crafts of the Joseon Dynasty begin from natural ingredients, such as clay and wood, which are subtly accentuated through minimal human intervention, thus preserving their inherent simplicity and beauty. Emulating the aesthetics of nature, these deceptively nondescript works generate endless fascination and visual pleasure, such that we never tire of looking at them.

A work by Donald Judd is hanging in the middle of the wall. Judd and Yun met in 1991, when Judd visited Seoul for his solo exhibition at Inkong Gallery. The two became fast friends, and Judd would later invite Yun to hold solo exhibitions at the galleries in New York and Marfa, Texas. During his first visit to Seoul, Judd purchased three of Yun's works, and Yun later purchased this work by Judd, which he cherished for the rest of his life.



Yun Hyong-keun's Diary

For this exhibition, a huge quantity of Yun's belongings and archives were carefully researched. Chief among these materials was Yun's personal diary, which he began keeping in 1975. Squeezed into several small notebooks, the writings are an invaluable resource for understanding Yun's life, personality, character, and attitude to art. He once wrote that his paintings are "like a diary that I use to record each day," thus rejecting the supposed prestige and specialty of an artwork. Hence, Yun reminds us that monotonous, ordinary days have true value and meaning, so long as they are spent in earnest.



Postcards sent from Kim Whanki to Yun Hyong-keun, July 10, 1974

Taking the entrance exam for the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University, Yun met Kim Whanki, who was the proctor for the exam. This was the beginning of a very special relationship for both men. After being expelled from Seoul National University, Yun transferred to Hongik University under Kim's guidance and support. Then in 1960, Yun married Kim Youngsuk, Kim Whanki's oldest daughter, and the two became in-laws. Throughout his life, Yun called Kim "abeoji" (아버지, "father"), and Kim returned the same level of respect and trust.

This display includes a postcard that Kim wrote to Yun from his hospital bed in New York on July 10, 1974, just fifteen days before Kim's sudden death in New York. Having endured illness for about three years, Kim had finally been hospitalized, conceding his need for rest and recovery. In this intimate message, despite his frail state, Kim tries to reassure Yun, telling him not to worry. In the other letters on display, Kim Whanki tells Kim Youngsuk (his daughter) and Yun Hyong-keun how much he misses them.