National Museum of
Modern and Contemporary Art
Korea

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Chung Sang Hwa

22 May – 26 September 2021

MMCA Seoul

The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (**MMCA**, Director Youn Bummo) presents a large-scale solo exhibition of one of Korea's representative monochrome-abstract artists, Chung Sang Hwa, from 22 May through 26 September 2021, at MMCA Seoul.

The exhibition ***Chung Sang Hwa*** intends to provide a retrospective of as well as a renewed look at the artist's authentic body of work and contextualize it within the history of Korean abstract art. With painting as his main method of production, Chung has experimented with diverse techniques including printing, drawing, décollage, and frottage to explore the potential of the flat surface. Since the 1990s, he has developed his own meditative methodology and presented an idiosyncratic series of monochrome works. This exhibition, while broadening the foundation of Korean contemporary art, highlights both the historical significance and contemporary context of Chung's works.

Born in Yeongdeok, Gyeongsangbuk-do, in 1932, Chung Sang Hwa enrolled in the Department of Painting at Seoul National University in 1953. After graduating in 1957, he participated in numerous regular and group exhibitions, including the *Contemporary Artist* (1958), the *Actual* (1962), and the *Invitation Exhibition of the Congress for Cultural Freedom* (1963), and also represented Korea as an artist at the *Biennale de Paris* (1965) and the *Bienal de São Paulo* (1967). He traveled to Paris in 1967 and returned to Korea a year later; later, he would live and work in Kobe, Japan, between 1969 and 1977 before traveling back to Paris in 1977 to immerse himself in work there until his 1992 return to Korea.

In 1996, Chung built a studio in Yeoju, Gyeonggi-do, and has continued to produce works in Korea. As a university student, he primarily painted figurative, representational images, but in the mid- to late 1950s he began experimenting with atypical informel-style painting. Around the same time that he traveled to Kobe, he began pursuing a shift away from informel toward monochrome work. It was during the artist's time in Kobe and Paris during the 1970s and 1980s that he established the grid-like canvas structure that is now so strongly associated with his work. Experimenting with various techniques and media, he discovered his own formative methodology rooted in the act of "peeling off and filling in."

The grid composition, the fruit of Chung's authentic experimentation with abstraction, is the result of meticulous planning and patience as well as intense physical commitment. First, using a brush, the artist primes the canvas with kaolin until it forms a three- to five-millimeter-thick layer. This process alone takes about a week, after which he folds the canvas along vertical, horizontal, or diagonal lines that he marks out on the back of the canvas, creating natural cracks and crevices on the surface. Using tools, materials, and methods that are often used to produce sculptures or craftworks, Chung "weaves out" his frames. The cracks created on the canvas through the act of breaking, folding, and cutting achieve more profound depth through the artist's method of "**peeling off and filling in**." He repeatedly peels off the gridded kaolin pieces and fills in each empty cell with layers of acrylic paint until the canvas becomes the sum of many small squares that each embody an individual rhythm. It is through this monotonous, labor-intensive, and repetitive process that Chung has built his one-of-a-kind formative world.

From Seoul and Kobe to Paris and Yeoju, this exhibition bridges the various locations and periods of the artist's career and chronologically traces the journey through which he established his unique productive system. Simultaneously highlighting Chung's formative study and material experiments through never-before-seen works, the exhibition notably features his paper and frottage works that have often been excluded from exhibitions in Korea.

Chung Sang Hwa is composed of four sections: "**Experimentation on the Abstract**," "**Transition to Abstract Monochrome Painting**," "**Perfection of the Grid**," and "**Beyond Monochrome**." These are accompanied by a special themed section titled "**Paper and Frottage**" and an archive section that displays videos, records, and early paper works that overview Chung's career from multiple angles.

The first section, "Experimentation on the Abstract," deals with the period between 1953 and 1968, covering Chung's college years and activities in Seoul. This section captures his transition from figurative, representational paintings to abstract works that reflect his sense of loss and anxiety as an artist of the first post-Korean war generation such as *Work 64-7* (1964) and *Work 65-B* (1964).

The second section, "Transition to Abstract Monochrome Painting," features works produced in Kobe, Japan, between 1969 to 1977. During this period, Chung began to deviate from expressionist abstraction and move toward producing monochrome-abstract works such as *Work G-3* (1972) and *Untitled 74-F6-B* (1974).

The third, special themed section, "Paper and Frottage," surveys the 1970s and 1980s, when the artist began experimenting with paper, a material that is easier to manipulate than canvas, in an effort to develop a signature medium and technique. This section presents the paper and frottage works produced during this period, which have remained relatively under-explored in Korea.

The fourth section, "Perfection of the Grid," follows Chung's course of work in Paris, where he resided from 1977 to 1992 after his departure from Kobe. During this period, he perfected his monochrome-abstraction methodology based on the process of "peeling off and filling in" that he had discovered in Kobe and produced many variations of this grid-format work.

The fifth section, Beyond Monochrome," introduces works produced from the time of Chung's permanent return to Korea in 1992 to the present. Works such as Untitled *95-9-10* (1995) and Untitled *07-09-15* (2007), which demonstrate the epitome of Chung's monochrome abstraction as well as his characteristic sense of depth created by the layers of paint, attest to the level of artistry he has achieved, presenting the viewers with a synesthetic experience in which not only their visual but also tactile senses are awakened.

Youn Bummo, director of the MMCA, notes, "This exhibition, which provides a retrospective of Chung Sang Hwa's over 60 years of artistic endeavors, is an opportunity to grasp the essence of an artist who has significantly contributed to the status of Korean abstract art. It is a chance to reassess the artist's preeminent body of work within the context of Korean art history."

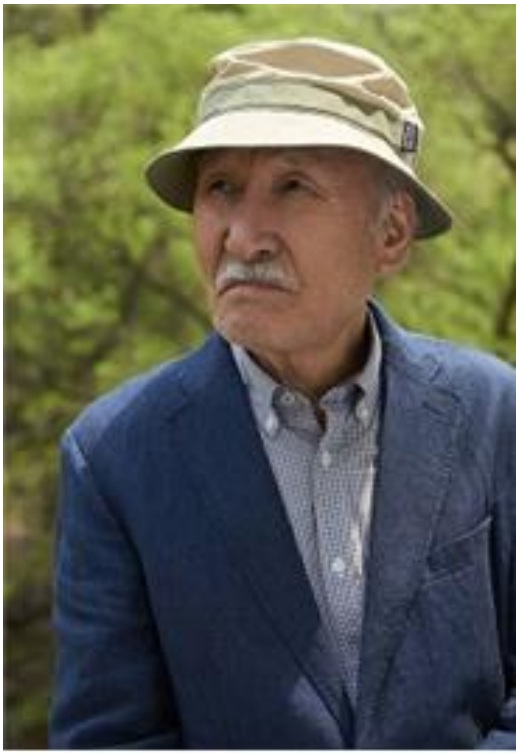
For the images and related press materials, please download from the link below.

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Biography



Chung Sang Hwa. Photo: Lee Manhong. Image provided by MMCA

1932 Born in Yeongdeok, South Korea
1957 BFA in Painting, College of Fine Arts, Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea

Selected Solo Exhibitions
2020 Lévy Gorvy Gallery, London, UK
2018 Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, USA
2016 Dominique Lévy Gallery, New York, USA
2014 Gallery Hyundai, Gallery Dugahun, Seoul
2013 Wooson Gallery, Daegu
2011 Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Saint-Étienne, France
2009 Gallery Hyundai, Seoul
2008 Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris, France
2007 Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul
2004 Gyeongnam Art Museum, Changwon
1998 Won Gallery, Seoul
1994 Gallery Kasahara, Osaka, Japan
1992 Gallery Hyundai, Seoul
1991 Gallery Ueda, Tokyo, Japan
1989 Galerie Dorothea van der Koelen, Mainz, Germany
1988 Motomachi Gallery, Kobe, Japan
1982 Centre Culturel Coréen, Paris, France

1980 Objekt, Wuppertal, Germany
Kunstfreunde im Erftkreis, Bergheim, Germany
1979 Fukuoka Gallery, Fukuoka, Japan
1977 Gallery Coco, Kyoto, Japan
Motomachi Gallery, Kobe, Japan
1970 Shinanobashi Gallery, Osaka, Japan
1968 Galerie Jean Camion, Paris, France
1967 Press Center Institute, Seoul
1962 National Central Information Center, Seoul
1956 Biwon Tea Room, Masan

Artworks

1
1953–1968
Experimentation on the Abstract

The period from 1953 to 1968 before Chung Sang Hwa's relocation to Kobe, Japan, covers his college years and his activities in Seoul. In college, he received a basic education in depicting objects, figures, and landscapes; hence, he mostly produced figurative paintings including still-lives and croquis. It was after his graduation in 1957 that he began producing abstract paintings with *informel* tendencies. As a member of the Contemporary Artists Association (1956–1961), then Actuel (1962–1964), he immersed himself in atypical impressionistic abstraction alongside other emerging artists at the time, contemplating how to capture the current grim postwar society onto the canvas.

Chung yielded dynamic compositions through his powerful gestures; throwing and smearing paint was a way for him to exude his passion and angst as an emerging artist of the first postwar generation. Chung introduced works with post-*informel* leanings around the mid-1960s. Between his initial move to France in 1967 and his move to Japan in 1969, the agitated energy gradually faded from his canvases and dark shades of brown and gray began to emerge. *Work 65-B* (1965), which adorned the cover of the pamphlet for the exhibition *Chung Sang Hwa: Departure to France* (Press Center, 1967), retained the pasty *matière* effect unique to *informel* art but showed heightened control over the energy of the plane.





(left) Chung Sang Hwa, *Work 64-7*, 1964, Oil on canvas, 162×130cm. MMCA collection.
(center) Chung Sang Hwa, *Work 65-B*, 1965, Oil on canvas, 162×130.3cm.
Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art collection. Photograph by Lee ManHong.
(right) Chung Sang Hwa, *Work 68-1-9*, 1968, Acrylic on canvas, 115.5×72.3cm.
Private collection. Photograph by Gallery Hyundai.

2

1969–1977

Transition to Abstract Monochrome Painting

The period from 1969 to 1977 coincides with Chung's years in Kobe, Japan. Chung moved to Kobe after spending a year or so in Paris, and it was during the eight years he spent in Kobe that his works underwent the most dramatic innovation. He experimented with such various techniques that he himself admits that his style underwent incredible change during this period. It was at this time that his works began to deviate from the *informel* style and show aspects of monochrome painting.

Starting in 1972, he reduced the use of geometric shapes and began using white as his dominant color. White gradually took over whole canvases, resulting in "all-over paintings". In 1973, Chung began producing a large number of predominantly white monochrome paintings, and with that, his signature grid structure began to take form. The sight of a laborer paving a vast boulevard with tiny square stones that he came across upon his visit to Brazil in 1967 for participation in the 9th São Paolo Biennial(São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo, Brazil) had an impact on Chung, who was going through a phase of formative transition. The grid technique, conceived around 1973, was initially tested on paper, which was relatively easier to handle than canvas. Most of these experimental works involved the frottage technique—creating a rubbing of a textured surface using paper and pencil—as can be seen in works like *Drawing* (1974) in the MMCA collection. In extension, he also intensively produced woodcut prints, collages, and décollages around this time.

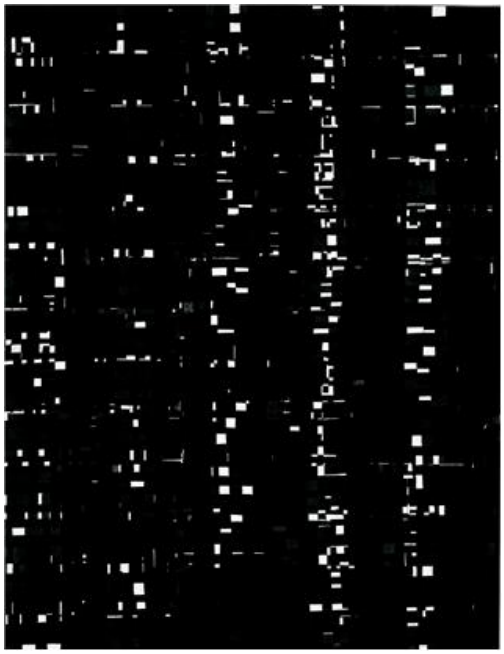


(left) Chung Sang Hwa, *Work G-3*, 1972, Oil on canvas, 190×131cm. MMCA collection.
(center) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled 72-10*, 1972, Acrylic on canvas, 115.5×73cm. Private collection. Photograph by Gallery Hyundai.
(right) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled 74-F6-B*, 1974, Oil on canvas, 226×181.5cm. MMCA collection.

3.

Paper and Frottage

During his years in Kobe, Japan (1969–1977), Chung Sang Hwa developed his unique style while working with paper because it was more malleable than canvas. The grid characteristic of his work first began to appear in these paper works, marked by lines whose vividness can be attributed to the smooth, delicate nature of the material. While experimenting with various grid structures by cutting and peeling the paper in horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines, he adopted the frottage technique—rubbing pencil or pen over a paper placed on a textured surface to achieve a print of the texture—to add depth to his works. This exhibition features the artist's paper and frottage works, which have been underexplored in Korea, to provide a more profound understanding of the course of his work.



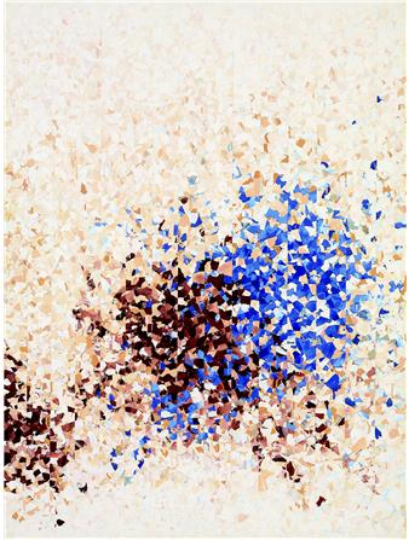


(left) Chung Sang Hwa*, Untitled, 1978*, Décollage and acrylic on paper, 64.5x49.5cm.
Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Sustain Works.
(right) Chung Sang Hwa*, Untitled 79-B*, 1979, Graphite on paper, 155x122cm. Courtesy of the artist.
Photograph by Lee ManHong..

4
1977–1992
Perfection of the Grid

In 1977, Chung left Kobe to return to Paris, France, where he resided and worked until 1991. According to the artist, the tension of everyday life and his sense of responsibility were heightened in Paris, which made him focus on broadening his view and perfecting his grid. Having antecedently moved on to grid-structure paintings in Kobe, Chung's grid-oriented works produced in Paris were attempts at diversifying his style in terms of constitution, density, and color.

Foremostly during this time, Chung's original method of "peeling off and filling in" was on its way toward being perfected. Deviating from the traditional method of applying paint directly onto the canvas, he primed the canvas with kaolin only to rip it off in pieces and fill the bare spots with paint. Chung had adhered to this labor-intensive method ever since the 1960s, but it was in the 1980s that he fully explored and experimented with all of its possibilities. The act of tearing up square sections of the three-to-five-millimeter-thick layer of kaolin and filling in the empty spaces with oil or acrylic paint rendered completely different results depending on the size and orientation of the grid and the thickness of the coating medium.


(left) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled 85-7-1*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 163×97.5cm. MMCA collection.
(center) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled*, 1987, Acrylic on canvas, 130×97cm. Private collection.
Photograph by Lee ManHong.
(right) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled 87-2-10*, 1987, Acrylic on canvas, 162×130.3cm.
Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art collection. Photograph by Lee ManHong.

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1993–Present

Beyond Monochrome

Chung wrapped up over two decades of overseas residence and returned permanently to Korea in November 1992. The period from when his studio was set up in Yeoju, Gyeonggi-do, in 1996 to the present can be called his “Yeoju period.” With the surge of interest in monochrome paintings in both Korean and overseas art markets in the 2010s, he has held numerous solo and group exhibitions including a particularly large-scale solo exhibition at Musee d’Art Moderne Saint-Etienne in 2011.

After settling in Yeoju, Chung continued to produce white monochrome paintings, honing his mastery. Chung’s works, which he defines as “processes,” are concentrated with arduous exertion. The labor-intensive process of each work—the duration of which takes months at minimum and a year at maximum—requires a high degree of mental patience and physical commitment. The artist, who says he has never had an assistant, tends to every step of the production process himself. And it is due to his idiosyncratic method of creation, incorporation of the practice of art into everyday life, and endlessly repetitive process that his works are deemed “records of recurring daily life.”



(left) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled 95-9-10*, 1995, Acrylic on canvas, 228×182cm. MMCA collection.
(center) Chung Sang Hwa, *Untitled 07-09-15*, 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 259×194cm. MMCA collection.
(right) Chung Sang Hwa, *2019-10-15*, 2019, Acrylic on canvas, 259.1×193.9cm. Courtesy of the artist.
Photograph by Lee ManHong.