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Six Kinds of White: Questioning the "Koreanness" of Korean Monochrome Painting

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Abstract: During the late 1960s and 70s, Korean artists regarded Japan as a platform of entry into an alleged international art scene. The introduction of *Tansaekhwa* or Korean monochrome painting in the 1970s saw Japanese as well as Korean voices advocating a sense of "Koreanness" centered on the rising prominence of the color white in these works. Considered within the context of Korea's internationalization, the understanding of *Tansaekhwa* inclined towards a reiteration of cultural autonomy and ethnic solidarity. This view was also encouraged in Japan; the exhibition *Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White* (Tokyo Gallery, May 1975) marked an exemplary point for the said movement. Compared to the mélange of artistic endeavors in the wake of the *Informel* whirlwind in Japan, the current of monochrome paintings in Korea prompted admiration in the eyes of Japanese critics, the flip side of which read exoticization.

Borrowing Barbara Rose's idea of the monochrome as originating from the mystical and concrete, this paper attempts to identify the ways in which *Tansaekhwa* has come to prioritize the mystical over the concrete, developing differences in its manifestation. It seeks to parry the much assumed "Koreanness" in the works of Kwon Young-woo, Park Seo-bo, Suh Seung-Won, Heu Hwang, and Lee Dong-Youb shown in the exhibition by including the Japan-based Korean artist Lee Ufan into the discourse as the sixth kind of white. Through a focus on both language of critique and details of works that developed around *Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White*, we begin to see the dynamics of *Tansaekhwa* within its palimpsest of both contrasting and harmonizing values.

Keywords: *Tansaekhwa*, monochrome, white, Kwon Young-woo, Park Seo-bo, Suh Seung-Won, Heu Hwang, Lee Dong-Youb, Lee Ufan.

"History and the eye have a profound wrangle at the centre of this 'constant' we call tradition."

Brian O'Doherty. *Inside the white cube: The ideology of the gallery space*, 1999.

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The monochrome in modern art has often stood as a tabula rasa emerging from the shadows of historical tragedy. From Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist composition: White on white* during the Russian Revolution to Lucio Fontana's *Spatial concept* series in the aftermaths of World War II, the dominance of color in monochrome painting has offered new immersive experience into a transcendental surface that retains its presence as material object. In line with these modern monochromatic works are those by the Korean *Tansaekhwa*[1] artists of the 1970's. They too have surfaced from the shadows of conflict (that is to say from the Korean War), but they can hardly be described as "clean slates" detached from history. Unlike many modern monochromes, *Tansaekhwa* works have not erased the past but have built upon it; they are palimpsests of values sought, not only by the artist, but also by the viewer and their critical voices.

Despite eliciting endless talk, the monochrome remains silent and standing. Barbara Rose describes its two origins as the "mystical" and the "concrete"; the monochrome involves "the spiritual search for a transcendental experience and the wish to emphasize the material presence of the object as a concrete reality and not an illusion" (Rose 2006, 21). The former has been markedly emphasized in the overall reception of *Tansaekhwa*, prompted by the movement's inspiration from Taoism, also a source in the history of Korean landscape painting. In particular, critics from Japan—serving as a platform for Korean artists to enter into an allegedly international art scene—characterized the mystical qualities of the movement emerging from their neighboring country. The ties to history and locality suggested by such interpretation were welcomed by their Korean counterparts seeking to rebuild their national identity in the postwar period. While some artists took to the visualization of surfaces that allowed the viewer to come across a transcendental

[1] *Tansaekhwa* literally means "monochrome painting" or "single-colour painting" in Korean. The term has been widely used to refer to the movement from the 1970s to the early 1980s that saw a prominence of canvases in neutral tones such as white, grey and brown. See *Modern and contemporary art in Korea* 2005, 45-52 for more detail.

experience, others approached their surface more candidly, already seeking transcendence in the creation process that left imprints on the material surface to be retraced by the viewer. This paper seeks to bring out such distinctions obscured by voices that have both described and nurtured these works in the past.

Upon initiating this dialogue between history and the eye of the viewer, I have focused on the works exhibited at *Five Korean Artists Five Kinds of White* (*Kankoku, gonin no sakka: itsutsu no hinseku <shiro>*) along with the early paintings of Lee Ufan (b. 1936), an influential figure of *Tansaekhwa*. The exhibit was held at Tokyo Gallery in 1975 under the joint curation of the Japanese critic Nakahara Yūsuke (1931-2011) and the Korean critic Lee Yil (1932-1997), showing the works of Kwon Young-woo (b. 1926), Park Seo-bo (b. 1931), Suh Seung-won (b. 1942), Hur Hwang (b. 1946) and Lee Dong-yeop (b. 1948).[2] Joan Kee has pointed out how the exhibition should be read "not as a point of origin [for *Tansaekhwa*] but as an exemplary point that illuminated an extended line of desire" (Kee 2008, 10-11). Indeed, despite acknowledgement of individual differences, the curation demonstrated a strong fascination for the dominance of white in these works and how this was a phenomenon particular to Korea. The first half of this paper reconsiders the ways in which this interest has surfaced in the vocabulary of past criticism, owing much to the research of Kim Youngna and Joan Kee. The second half provides an analysis of the works to speculate on the ways in which the mystical and concrete origins of the monochrome appear and entwine in the details of the works. By questioning the sense of "Koreanness" in accepted vocabulary of criticism, and through a fresh analysis of the works themselves, this paper calls for a parley between history and the eye to address the values accumulated in the palimpsest that is *Tansaekhwa*.

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Korean contemporary art entered Japan at the end of the 1960s following the signing of the Korea-Japan Basic Treaty in 1965.[3] The exhibition

[2] I have employed the translation of the exhibition name used by both Kim Youngna and Joan Kee for its conciseness compared to "Five Hinsek <White>: Korea—Five Artists" which was the official English title given to the show.

[3] In comparison, Chinese contemporary art was introduced to Japan during the 1980s following the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China signed in 1978, making the introduction of contemporary Korean art the first instance in which the Japanese art world began to contemplate on an Asian contemporary art scene.

Contemporary Korean Painting (*Kankoku gendai kaiga ten*) held at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo in 1968 was an attempt to contemplate the future of contemporary art in Asia. Although the overall exhibition had less impact on the following generations of artists than the 1975 exhibit in question, this was the first curatorial attempt to exhibit contemporary Korean art in Japan (Lee Yil 1975). These were also the years leading up to Expo 70, when artworks sought from Korea still consisted mainly of Silla artifacts of gold crowns and Buddhist statues, Goryeo celadon, and Joseon porcelain (Lee Seduk 1968, 2). In this respect, *Contemporary Korean Painting* introduced a new wave of Korean art to Japanese audiences exhibiting abstract works that branched from pop art, op art, kinetic art, and happenings.

In a short discussion published on the 1968 exhibition, works employing brighter colors were compared to previous Korean *Informel* works, which drew from a combination of Abstract Expressionism and *Art Informel*, the dark tones evocative of the tragedy experienced during the Korean War. As a panel participant, Lee Ufan noted that there were features of lyrical abstraction that resonated with the ink painting traditions and the age-old philosophies they were based on that allowed for its welcome reception in Korea (Lee 1968, 4). He wryly pointed out that simple bright colors employed in op art were received favorably due to an *ethnic fondness* for such colors, whereas white was held in high esteem as a symbol of elite aesthetics in a Confucian society. One can surmise that these new artistic endeavors were received in resonance with past traditions and general interest of the masses.

Compared to previous decades of the more anti-institutional *Art Informel*, the Monochrome movement coincided with a national interest in "Korean things" encouraged on a political level (Kim 2005, 45). Once Korea had begun to recover from the aftermaths of the Korean War, its citizens sought to foster a new sense of "Koreanness" within a modernizing society, also encouraged by the rising nationalism of the Park Chung-hee government.[4] The search for a modern cultural identity led to two artistic currents: one was the *Tansaekhwa* movement in the 1970s, and the other was the *Minjung* movement of the 1980s, which drew upon marginal traditions such as folk art and masked dances producing very colorful

[4] According to Kim Youngna, preference of the term "Korean things" over "tradition" was expressed to avoid a direct clash with modernism (Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea 2005, 45).

works. Although this paper only focuses on *Tansaekhwa*, it must be taken into account that *Minjung* art rose from a critique of its predecessor's academic or elitist selection of Korean tradition. Whereas such debate of tradition already took place in 1980s Korea, the understanding of "Korean things" remained relatively unstirred in Japan.

Critique of Korean art in Japan never did let go of Korea's past history in discussing its modern endeavors. In the case of the monochrome, critics sought for a transcendental experience to relate to indigenous traditions, the exoticization facilitating the assimilation of contemporary works by the Japanese viewer. Following *Yi-Dynasty Portraits and Folk Paintings* in 1972, *Five Korean Artists* was the first contemporary Korean art show held at Tokyo Gallery, which had previously exhibited works by artists who produced monochromes such as Yves Klein (1962) and Lucio Fontana (1962, 1970).[5] The thematic focus on "white" chosen for this exhibition in 1975 reflected the gallery owner Yamamoto Takashi's keen interest in white Joseon porcelain.[6] Adjectives such as "pure white" were used to describe both porcelain and monochrome canvases despite the growing disjunction between the real and ideal as porcelains turn bluish and canvases yellowed over time.

White is a color that elicits numerous ideas and associations, many of which are not directly linked to the color per se. *Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White* has been widely regarded as the first official use of the term "monochrome" in exhibiting the works by *Tansaekhwa* artists. The title foregrounds the dominance of white in the works, yet critic Nakahara's introduction for the show refers to secondary tones and middle tones, suggesting that the white in question was less an actual color than an overall impression of white as a cultural metaphor. Addressing color through language has its limits, as expressed by Wittgenstein in *Remarks on color*, but the expanse of language addressed by color is almost without end (Wittgenstein 1998, 29). In particular, white is a color with very little information available to the eyes hence prone to abstraction and used metaphorically. Derrida divides metaphors into those that lend and those that borrow; in other words, "those which seem intrinsically to have the

[5] The venue also hosted the op-art related *Tricks and Vision* show with Muramatsu Gallery, and exhibited many works by *Mono-ha* artists including Lee Ufan.

[6] According to Kim Mikyung, Lee Ufan's mentioned that prior to dealing in Korean antiquity, Yamamoto was stationed in Korea during the colonial period during his service in the military (Kim Mikyung 2002).

character of origins and those whose object is no longer original, or natural, or primitive" (Derrida 1974, 19). In this case, white as a metaphor of Korean culture inclines towards the latter category; it is an object that has been built up over the course of history.

The digression of white from color to cultural metaphor also seems related to differences in the idea of white according to cultural contexts. In Western philosophy, white is often understood as colorless. To quote Wittgenstein regarding white as a light color:

> White as a color of substances (in the sense in which we say snow is white) is lighter than any other substance-color; black darker. *Here* color is a darkening, and if all such is removed from the substance, white remains, and for this reason we can call it "colorless" (Wittgenstein 1998, 9).

In comparison, ink painting traditions in the East see black as a color that potentially expresses all colors and white as a color that anticipates the presence of all that is left unpainted. Of course, notions such as "pure white" are common amongst many cultures, and are often the reasons behind the adoption of white in various religions and their rituals. However, the understanding of white as a versatile color with anticipated meanings has also prompted the numerous appearance of white as a symbol of Korean culture. For example, Korean people are referred to, and often refer to themselves, as the "people of white garments" (*hakui minzoku*) whilst stipulation during the Joseon Dynasty stated white as a color reserved for the clothing and wares of the elites and aristocrats. Curator Yoon Jin-Sup of the recent exhibition *Dansaekhwa: Korean Monochrome Painting* (2012) held at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul also emphasized the dominance of white in Korean culture brought to attention by the movement of *Tansaekhwa*:

> The color white was present in many corners of Korea's life: It was the color of our ancestor's garments, the famous moon jar as well as other various white porcelains, *baeksulki* (traditional rice cakes)... the different hues of *hanji* (traditional paper) and so on. It existed as a cultural base to form part of a collective identity, which was revealed through *[t]ansaekhwa* (Yoon 2012 in Morley 2013, op. cit. 196).

What Yoon chose to discuss here was not white as a physiological color, but white as a cultural base that carried the spirit of the Korean people. The alternative understanding of white had already entered the peninsula by the 1970s—the idea of white as colorless, along with word of works that followed in its footsteps. However, just as Lee Yil cited Piet

Mondrian's concept of "non-color" in his catalogue introduction to compare against the fullness of white in Korea, it merely provided an opportunity to reconsider the way it symbolized a breadth of Korean culture and history.

White was not the only concept that attempted to anchor the monochrome to indigenous discourse. Kim Youngna has unraveled how the language used during the 1960s and 1970s in both Korea and in Japan to relate monochrome art to historical discourse had been largely taken from Japanese writings of the 1930s and 1940s. The most influential source was the work of philosopher Yanagi Sōetsu (also known as Yanagi Muneyoshi, 1889-1961) who wrote extensively on Korean folk art. Nakahara's "unbroken line of relationship with the past" (Nakahara 1975, unpaginated) was quoted directly from Yanagi. Other phrases such as "simple and natural", "compliance with nature", and "use of white" were inherited by the first Korean art historian Ko Yuseop (1905-1944) then passed on to later generations of scholars in both countries (Kim 2011, 269). Therefore, Yanagi's Folk Art (*mingei*) movement and his fondness for Joseon porcelain influenced the use of pottery-related vocabularies in interpreting contemporary Korean paintings. His writings on Korean art still adorn catalogue introductions to Korean contemporary art exhibitions today, their relevance and validity remaining unquestioned.[7] These vocabularies have facilitated the Japanese consumption of Korean contemporary art by implying its connection with Korean traditions familiar to Japan.

Certain terms have been repeatedly used by Japanese critics to identify a quality in Korean art lacking from the contemporary Japanese art scene that ran the gamut of its own *Informel* whirlwind. Korea was seen as a developing country confronting the same "tradition versus modernity" paradigm as Japan in previous years. At the same time however, Korean individuals possessed a particular sense of unity embedded in a deeper part of the human psyche according to their Japanese counterparts. The terms "heightened spirituality" (*takai seishinsei*) and "lyricism" (*jojōsei*) were often used to describe this quality in Korean artworks. While the words themselves have no negative

[7] As an example of this, in the exhibition pamphlet of Tokyo Opera Art Gallery in 2011 entitled *Lee Ufan and Korean artists: From the Terada Collection*, Sayama Yuki begins her essay with a quote from Yanagi's encounter with a Joseon bowl (Sayama 2011).

connotation, the way these terms favor impressions over the details of works is generalizing and problematic, often harboring preconceptions that affect the way the works are seen.

"Heightened spirituality" is an awareness of the present without renouncing the past, a receptive attitude contemplating the coexistence of both according to Chiba Shigeo (b. 1946). He writes how Korean artists were able to translate their sense of spirituality from its expression in the object and style of depiction to its extraction from the materialistic mediums employed (Chiba 1993, 110). The transition traced the progression of modern interests but with reference to a spirituality that encompassed an awareness of an intrinsic feature that had "less to do with politics, sociology and nationalism than with ethnicity, regionalism and sense of country" (Chiba 1993, 114-15). One must keep in mind however, that the Park regime also encouraged interest in "Korean things" and provided a background for Korean artists to digest modernity within its pre-existing framework. The coexistence of the present and past was sought, not only by artists, but by the nation as a whole.

On the contrary, the term "lyricism", commonly known as an imaginative expression of the artist's emotion, has been used beyond the description of individual works to give the impression of a cultural current closed to outside influences. Critic Lee Yil uses the word to describe Suh Seung-won's works in later years, which befit the categorization of lyrical abstraction:

> Fundamentally he is an artist of a puritan nature and is very austere to his works. And yet there is a relaxed atmosphere of lyricism adrift in his works. This particular lyricism seems to have been born from a harmony between his logical thinking and his refined, modest sensibility (Lee 1984, unpaginated).

Here, Lee Yil elaborates on the lyricism of Suh's works as balance between logic and sensibility, which corresponds to Suh's geometric yet flexible forms. Nonetheless, the same term is also used in a more vague and sensory way, its connotations almost in opposition to logic. Describing the Korean art scene in comparison to Japan, Oio Keitarō (b. 1929) uses lyricism to articulate a quality that fosters a sense of one nation's color instead of evoking confusion by a flurry of outside influences (Oio 1968, 4). This may have been said in praise of their supposed unity, yet isolates Korea's developments from the rest of the

world. The following analysis of the actual works attempts to call attention to some of the details that confronts such views.

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The initiators of the Monochrome movement were already prominent artists by the 1970s, having been involved in the Korean *Informel* movement earlier on in their artistic careers. These were Kwon Young-woo, Park Seo-bo, Ha Chong-hyun (b. 1935), Kim Gui-line (b. 1936) and Choi Myeong-young (b. 1941). As Monochrome artists, they employed new methods and styles, which had three elements in common: the use of a single often pale color; the reduction of painting to a flat surface; and the assertion of an East Asian mentality, in particular a harmonious relationship with nature.[8] It was the first of these features—the overall lightened color tone of the canvas—that marked the entry point for the show curated by Nakahara and Lee Yil at Tokyo Gallery in 1975.

Five Korean Artists Five Kinds of White—together with the first *École de Seoul* exhibition also held in 1975—drew attention to the growing dominance of white amongst works produced in Korea. This being a phenomenon rather than a consolidated movement, there was no sense of camaraderie borne amongst the artists: Kwon Young-woo, Park Seo-bo, Suh Seung-won, Hur Hwang, and Lee Dong-yeop (Kim Mikyung 2002). Beyond the first impressions of subdued color tones, each work had its own aims and methodologies—a point that Nakahara acknowledged in his scrupulous introduction, yet yielded to a greater fascination of the decisive presence of white in these works (Nakahara 1975, unpaginated). The intrigue was partially due to a sense of unity, which contrasted with the spate of anti-art groups emerging in Japan during the sixties, and the way it seemed to form a white monochrome movement comparable to that of other countries. However, close scrutiny of these works reveals that even within the scope of this particular exhibition, there are several distinct elements that create divides amongst the artists in question. The following section presents an analysis of the works to reconsider how the mystical and concrete origins of the monochrome are addressed in elements such as traces of hand, floating figures, grid structures, serialization, the notion of encounter, and color—most notably white.

[8] See *20th century Korean art* 2005 for more detail.

In his *Work* series, Kwon Young-woo did not employ pigment but pasted mulberry paper called *hanji* usually used for calligraphy on a panel pushing his fingers onto the still wet surface to create repeated perforations that gently cascaded down the surface (fig. 1). The unconventional use of quality paper was also a feature of earlier *Informel* artists such as Lee Ungno (1904-1989) who also employed *hanji* in his collage drawings. In comparison to Lee's rough tactile surfaces however, Kwon's interaction with the material was much more delicate and discreet, the singularity of each act marked by the penetration of the flat plane. Joseph Love points out how the elicited shadows seem to hint at a presence of space, at the same time artfully evading any indication of depth by their smooth integration into the mellow surface (Love 1975). Whereas Fontana's *Spatial Concept* series provokes one to imagine a deep void behind the canvas, Kwon's evasion of depth foregrounds the material expanse of the horizontal surface plain. His marks made in repeated interaction with the material can be traced by the viewer and re-experienced visually.

Park Seo-bo has also left traces of hand upon the surfaces of his *Écriture* series that allows the viewer to contemplate on his particular method. Park applies a layer of whitish pigment on canvas followed by a sweep of repeated pencil strokes digging into the still wet paint underneath, which is again covered by paint, the gesture repeated till both surface and act meld into one (fig. 2). The combination of marks repeated in graphite atop a wash of paint is reminiscent of the grid-like works of Agnes Martin (1912-2004). Both artists adhere to a strict system of repetition that has no place for intuition, the result of which vaporizes into a hazy surface when seen from a distance, though in slightly different ways; Martin's grid pattern repeats itself in the square of the canvas whereas Park's inscription disappears into the palimpsest of densely accumulated acts. The fluid marks made to the rhythm of his hand form a kind of cardiogram that could be "read" as suggested by the mention of "writing" in the title. Yet the marks do not simply flow across the spread of white; unlike the brush, the pencil dents the surface as it lays its marks. Both graphite and paint are layered to constitute one surface cancelling out any clear foreground-background relationship, an integration also seen in the previously discussed work by Kwon.

In contrast, the following three series involve forms that "float" upon the surfaces of their white planes. Suh Seung-won's *Simultaneity* is characterized by its suspension of sharp geometric patterns (fig.3), which Nakahara eloquently likened to minerals crystallized in a white matrix

(Nakahara 1975, unpaginated). Lee Yil approached Suh's painting more analytically by describing it as a reduction of pictorial elements into simple vocabularies of form, color and pictorial space with a harmonious relationship maintained between the three.[9] The translucent blue rhombus is superimposed onto the parallelogram, their diagonal vertical lines of the same measure whereas the shorter horizontal lines of the latter causes an unsettling spatial depth to emerge between the two entities and boundlessly spread upon the white plane. Here, there are no traces that give away the artist's making process, and the eye is set adrift in the microcosm of its result. Suh's works in later years involved the interweaving of more shapes across the white plane like crystals seen under a microscope. Needless to say, Suh's white plane is a space of origin, a field remaining empty until forms are laid out to awaken its depth.

Whereas Suh's shapes are sharp and geometric, Hur Hwang's forms in his *Variable Consciousness* series are soft and organic, appearing and disappearing upon the surface plane (fig. 4). The pool of white paint dabbed onto the white surface is just about visible by its contour line and slight bump indicated by the thicker application of pigment. This two-layer structure indicated by the protuberance smoothes out in Hur's later works; the form comes across as something between a stain and a relief, its relationship with the plane kept in constant flux (Nakahara 2010). According to Kim Mikyung, Hur's series was inspired from his transcendental experience of throwing a pillow against the wall of a motel room, and seeing it land on the crumpled white mattress below (Kim Mikyung 2002). Hur does not leave any traces of hand, but translates his experience of seeing separate objects merge into one another, marked out by just their contours and varied textures, into an abstraction on a white plane to be contemplated by the viewer. The form has been deliberately integrated into the plane without indication of depth to evoke a sensation derived from a lived situation.

Lee Dong-yeop's abstract forms in his *Situation* series also take after actual objects (fig. 5). He describes the lines that gradually curve and rise away from their horizontal origin as the remaining outlines of cups fading towards complete obliteration into the surround. Lee's

[9] In a later discussion on Suh's works, Lee Yil notes how his earlier works still retained traces of constructive illusion in that the form and plane of color defined by its shape only constituted an area of the pictorial space instead of addressing it in its entirety (Lee Yil 1984).

inspiration came from melting ice (symbolizing "being") in a cup (symbolizing "the universe"), the water gradually evaporating to leave the container empty (Lee Dong-youb 1992). Translating the impression of these motifs onto the canvas, the lines have been carefully drawn with rigid ends that contrast with the subtle gradation on the topside of each line (though in the case of the very bottom horizontal line, the gradation begins from its underside). Lee's gradation develops perpendicular to the length of each line, transitioning from dark to light with a soft touch that blurs any traces of its execution. This results in abstract forms that melt or float upon the white plane, the spatial positioning of the multiple forms hinting at a sense of depth akin to that of Suh Seung-won's works.

The intractability of Lee Dong-yeop's gradation becomes more apparent when compared to the undisguised brush strokes of Lee Ufan. Although his works were not included in the 1975 exhibition, I want to introduce him into the discourse as the sixth "white" in order to recapitulate my analysis of the previous five works. In 1973, Lee Ufan began his painting series, *From Point* and *From Line*, employing familiar elements of calligraphic practice to translate the critical mentality he had developed as an artist. His earliest *From Point* featured rows of dotted blue pigment that commenced on the left hand side and continued till the brush was spent, whilst his *From Line* featured long vertical brush strokes in a similar manner (figs. 6, 7). Compared to Lee Dong-yeop's traceless gradation, Lee Ufan's gradation marks the process of his controlled brush hand following a system of repetitious acts, emptying the mind onto the material surface, leaving imprints that can be visually traced by the viewer. The traceability of the artist's material interaction, through which transcendental experience is attained, is reminiscent to that of Kwon Young-woo and Park Seo-bo.

The way in which these three artists address both concrete materiality as well as mystical transcendence also lie in their employment of a grid-like composition. The grid is almost constantly employed in Western monochrome paintings, the power of which "makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)" according to Rosalind Krauss (1987, 12). The grid structure employed by the three artists is weak compared to the firm framework of say Agnes Martin, and yet it is clearly prevalent compared to the planes of Suh Seung-won, Hur Hwang, and Lee Dong-yeop. In the works of these younger artists, abstract forms float within an extensive white

matrix, free from the rigidity of structure. The sense of materialism and process is absent from their works, leaving the eyes to wander within a pictorial field where objects and experiences from reality are translated into abstract forms suspended in an infinitely white cosmos.

However, that is not to say that the works by these six artists had nothing in common other than the prominent presence of the color white. Their titles indicate that each work belonged to a larger series with accompanying numbers or letters specifying their order of production.[10] Serialization poses a continuation transcending the spatial-temporality of the single plane. The critic Minemura Toshiaki (b. 1936) describes how each individual work retains its autonomy, yet when they are regarded as parts of a larger whole, the practice extends beyond the individual framework (1977, 84-85). That being said, the titles reveal various interests that range from those that address the work as an object, to those that focus on the work as an image. Kwon's *Work* and Park's *Écriture* both suggest the materiality of the work as synonymous with the instigated act. Lee Ufan's *From Point* and *From Line* also self-reference the material and act, at the same time alluding to the dynamics of the pictorial field by incorporating prepositions to their titles. Suh's *Simultaneity* and Lee Dong-yeop's *Situation* both refer to the relationship between elements such as form and space developing upon the surface plane, whereas Hur's *Variable Consciousness* addresses an issue of perception in addition. These titles vividly illustrate the diversity inherent in the group whilst marking the absence of any explicit search for a unified "Koreanness" in the exhibited works.

The inclusion of Lee Ufan in this discourse is not only due to his historical relevance, but also because his ideas offer new insight to the analysis of other *Tansaekhwa* works, his particular position between cultures allowing us to challenge their accepted associations to "Koreanness". Lee Ufan is an internationally renowned Korean artist based in Japan since 1956, a key figure of both the *Tansaekhwa* movement in Korea and the *Mono-ha*[11] group in Japan, liaising between

[10] However, Lee Ufan was the anomaly since he worked in series but did not indicate the order in which the works were produced.

[11] The Mono-ha artists sought possibilities of transcending the quagmire of modernism in the limited human intervention of unprocessed materials that stood outside accepted artistic categorizations such as painting and sculpture, evoking a paradigm shift that left a defiant mark upon the history of contemporary art in Japan. See Munroe 1994, 257-83 for more detail.

the two art worlds by introducing them to each other through his writings. His solo show at Tokyo Gallery along with that of Park Seo-bo at Muramatsu Gallery, both held in 1973, partially instigated the monochrome trend in Korea, leading to the *Five Korean Artists* exhibit, the organization of which he assisted.[12] Contrary to a sense of "Koreanness" discussed in the critique of works by other Korean artists, the study of Lee's works have focused on a sense of transnationality, given his activities in Japan and the West (Kim 2011, 290). Although his ideas and concepts are not entirely applicable to the works of other *Tansaekhwa* artists, some of the views expressed from his particular standpoint between Japan and Korea—more widely between the East and West—give fresh insight to a discourse that has, more often than not, leant too steeply to one side.[13]

Lee Ufan stated the necessity for a theoretical or interpretive approach for artists to adopt certain styles instead of yielding to a sensory acceptance of what resonated with past traditions. As introduced earlier on in the paper, he questioned the function of lyricism in the Korean appropriation of *Informel* and Op Art. Furthermore, he provided philosophical writings published in both Japan and Korea encouraging artists to employ theory into their works (Lee 1968, 4). One of his most well known concepts is the idea of "encounter", a notion that links together both transcendental and corporeal experience to give more weight to what could simply be dismissed as lyricism.[14] Lee describes his works as gestures to prolong moments of encounter with the world, or in other words, moments of revelation experienced in the everyday. Similarly, the inspiration behind the works of Hur Hwang and Lee Dong-yeop—the anecdotes of the pillow and wall, the ice and cup—can also be read as encounters. Through minimal interaction, the works of both artists convey a sensation experienced in real life to be visually re-experienced by the viewer. These works may not address material reality by leaving

[12] Lee Ufan translated Lee Yil's introduction for the exhibition catalogue into Japanese, and his involvement in the show is also mentioned there.

[13] Referring to the vast writings of Lee Ufan available in both Japanese and English was also necessary in supplementing the lack of primary sources available of the other artists outside of the Korean language. In the future, this research will come to include Korean sources necessary to gain a better understanding of *Tansaekhwa*.

[14] Lee's first publication *In search of encounter* (1971) was widely circulated and reached both Japanese and Korean audience.

traces of their practice, but they do stem from their experience of encounter in the material world.

Another element of painting that relates closely to the real for Lee was color. Color has its place on Lee's canvases as an element closer to things in the real world than that of pure abstraction. Lee gives specific references to the colors he uses; for example, his reds allude to the ochre of Korean soil, his blues to the *Almost transparent blue* of Murakami Ryū (Lee 2008, unpaginated). He relates the bright colors favored in Korea to the transparent air and lack of humidity of the land, whist recognizing how color exemption in the history of Confucian practice has partially affected the interpretation of contemporary works in Korea (Lee 2008, unpaginated). Lee's perception of color addresses both the real and imagined, the present and the past, citing particular examples that are set side by side as though in correspondence to the placating surface of the monochrome. In the range of works exhibited at *Five Kinds of White*, the dominant color was white; the final stretch of analysis deals once more with this color to see how contrasting ideas have coalesced in its presence.

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Previously, I have discussed how white in the Korean context has been treated as more a cultural metaphor than a physical color per se. In line with this notion of white as metaphor, I turn to white as a color that symbolizes nothingness and emptiness. Lee Yil, in the introduction of the exhibition catalogue, refers to white as a certain mentality or an esprit of nature; he contrasts Mondrian's treatment of black and white as a non-color with the Korean understanding of these colors as evocative of the presence of all possible colors through referencing Buddhism and its multiple notions of "nothingness" (Lee 1975, unpaginated). Kim Mikyung addresses two of these concepts by alluding to *mu* (nothingness) and *kū* (emptiness) as characteristics of the color white in monochrome painting (Kim 2002, unpaginated). There are certain distinctions between the two terms: whereas *mu* is nothingness with density that cannot be penetrated, discouraging the notion of a permanent self to advocate the self formed through encounters with others, *kū* is a void where in which one cannot differentiate between subject and object in the flux of change. The introductory texts written by the two curators of the exhibit seem to refer to both ideas of "nothingness" in describing the dominance of white in the works of the five artists. Lee Yil emphasizes the breadth of white as aforementioned, resonating with the density of nothingness as *mu*. On the other hand, Nakahara's description of white as "a matrix for the

organization and annihilation of phenomena, as something pregnant with temporality" is similar to the fluctuating emptiness of *kū* (Nakahara 1975, unpaginated). These two kinds of "nothingness" are not entirely contradictory and their visualization in white can elicit mixed responses. Yet, what I suggest here is a shift from *mu* to *kū* that corresponds to a generational shift amongst the five artists, with Lee Ufan standing in between as testifier to the transition.

The white used in the works of Kwon Young-woo and Park Seo-bo addresses nothingness in the sense of *mu*. Kwon's *Work* is marked by perforations that accentuate the white surface rather than reveal the dark void underneath, likening the white to an impenetrable nothingness. Moreover, his act is marked out onto the surface, not only by punctures, but also by protuberances that have resulted from his interaction with the material. With *Écriture*, Park repeatedly layers paint and graphite to form a thick white surface upon the canvas. He uses the material to both mark and obscure the traces of his act, establishing and concealing the self in the accumulation of matter. Previously, I have discussed how remnants of the repeated act prompt the viewer to retrace the artist's transcendental experience—a characteristic of the mystical monochrome. Simultaneously, the same white surface can suggest an impenetrable nothingness that emphasizes the presence of the material, or the concrete monochrome.

Lee Ufan's points and lines also recall the meditative process of his painterly act, at the same time foregrounding the materiality of the work in his particular application of pigment. However, compared to the dominance of white in Kwon and Park's works, Lee's white exists less as a totality than in relation to his colored marks. He refers to the blank margins of his canvas as *yohaku* (excess white) differentiating it from the use of white in the tradition of monochrome landscape painting that suggests a continuation of the painted scenery. For Lee, white was a color that allowed the canvas and the wall to cross over one another, echoing the dynamics of the painted and unpainted:

> *Yohaku* is not empty space but an open site of power in which acts and things and space interact vividly. It is a contradictory world rich in changes and suggestions where a struggle occurs between things that are made and things that are not made. Therefore *yohaku* transcends objects and words, leading people to silence and causing them to breathe infinity (Lee 2000 in Yoshitake 2011).

Lee's *yohaku* is a site of change and interaction; sure enough, his marks seem to migrate across or cascade down the white planes with particular dynamism. Suh Seung-won, Hur Hwang, and Lee Dong-yeop also place forms upon a white plane. In comparison to Lee Ufan's marks however, these shapes are less dynamic and seem to merely float upon a surface plain that would otherwise remain empty. White here overlaps with the notion of *kū*, less open than empty, less vivid than still. In particular, Hur Hwang and Lee Dong-yeop's shapes seem to fluctuate upon the white surface; their appearance and disappearance resonate with the flux of change experienced in the emptiness of *kū*. Hur and Lee's canvases link to real experience as suggested in previous discussion of encounter, but the mystical origin of the monochrome remains dominant in these works. With the work of Suh Seung-won, the impression of abstraction is so strong that following Lee Yil's example, "a sense of lyricism" might be best in describing the feeling it renders in the viewer. Yet it should only be through close scrutiny of the work in comparison with others, and not on generalizations, that the dominance of the mystical be emphasized.

The monochrome is binary, and although its mystical and concrete origins do not appear evenly or consistently in the viewing experience of all monochromatic surfaces, elements of these works can often be seen from both viewpoints. For example, the grid-like repetition that emphasize the dense materiality of the canvas can be read as traceable acts by which the artists themselves sought for transcendence in the making. In turn, sensations of an encounter experienced by the artist in material reality can be translated into a meticulously executed form floating upon a void-like picture plane. All too often, the works of *Tansaekhwa* are described in a language that only addresses the mystical origin of the monochrome. Even so, distinctions must be made between those that seek transient experience in the process of making works and those that offer it in their finished works. The contrast reveals the concrete origins of the former and the growing prominence of criticism favoring the mystical in the development of the latter. Such differences can be taken into account by seeing beyond the sense of "Koreanness"—we must attempt to spot traces of effaced values from underneath superimposed layers and contemplate on the growing palimpsest of the movement as a whole.

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The modern monochrome appeared in various cultures as a reaction to wars and revolutions of the twentieth century. In Korea too, the white

monochrome came into being just as the country was recovering its cultural identity in the modern age. More a white palimpsest than a tabula rasa, it began to accumulate values applied by critics as well as artists, Japanese as well as Korean. The mystical origin of the monochrome was favored in comparison to the concrete. Its search for a transcendental experience was used to link the endeavor to elements of history, promoting a sense of "Koreanness" with the color white serving as its cultural basis. Such desire was most prominent in the exhibition *Five Korean Artists, Five Kinds of White* which, despite acknowledgment of differences amongst works, strongly emphasized the presence of the mystical symbolized by the prominence of white. This paper aimed to recover traces of change that took place within the increasing dominance of white in these works by looking at the language of criticism together with the details of works. The two have become closely interrelated in the growing prominence of the mystical monochrome. Yet only through acknowledging the concrete and questioning the accepted undercurrent of "Koreanness" does the palimpsestic structure of *Tansaekhwa* come fully into light. It is precisely this complex layering of values and ideas that gives *Tansaekhwa* its significance in the wider discourse of modern monochrome painting.

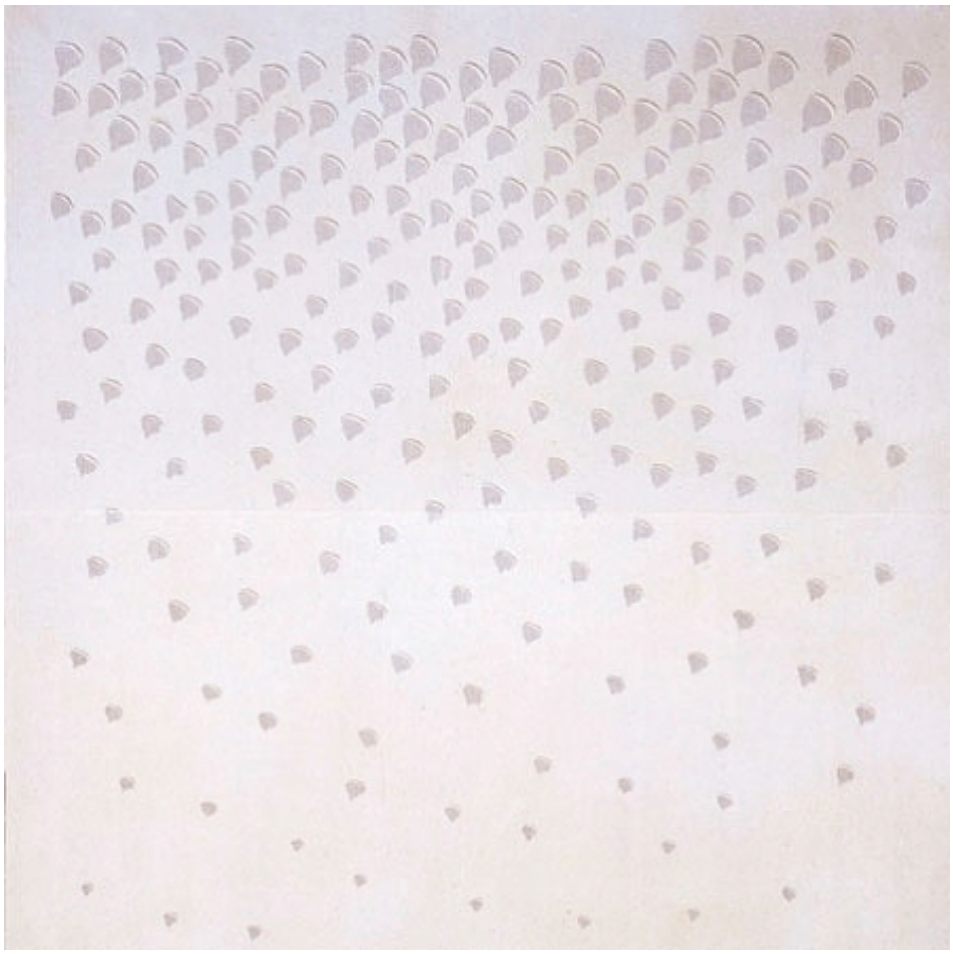

Fig. 1: Kwon Young-woo, Work 74-1. *Paper, 161.7 x 121.8 cm, 1974.*

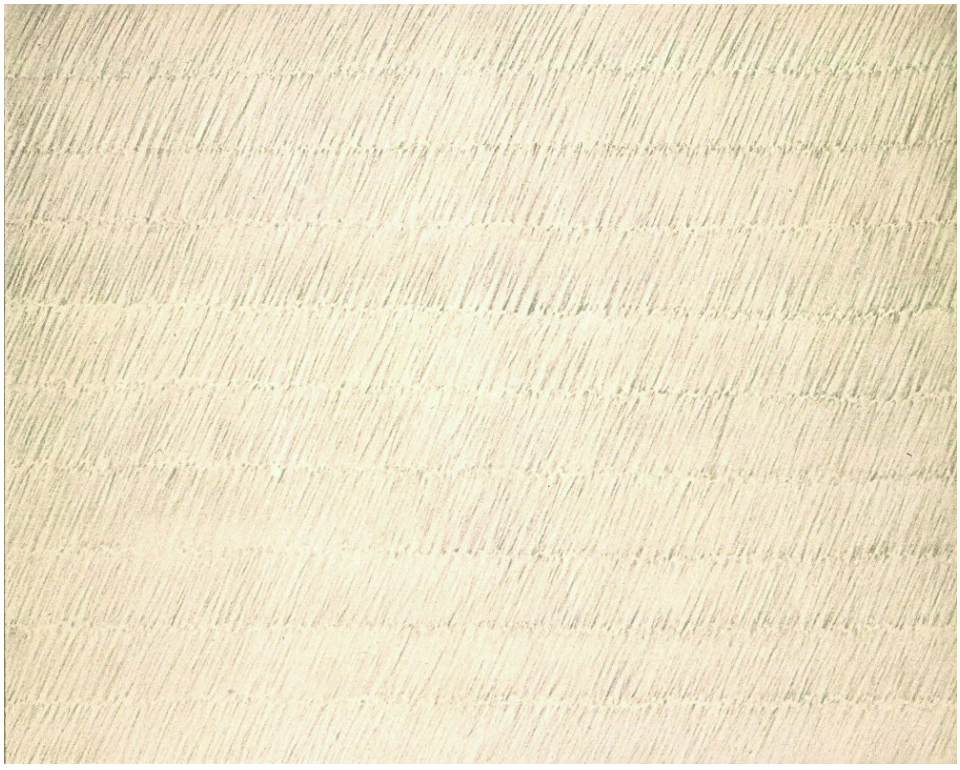

Fig. 2: Park Seobo, Écriture no. 9-74.
Oil on canvas (and graphite), 129.9 x 162.4 cm, 1974.

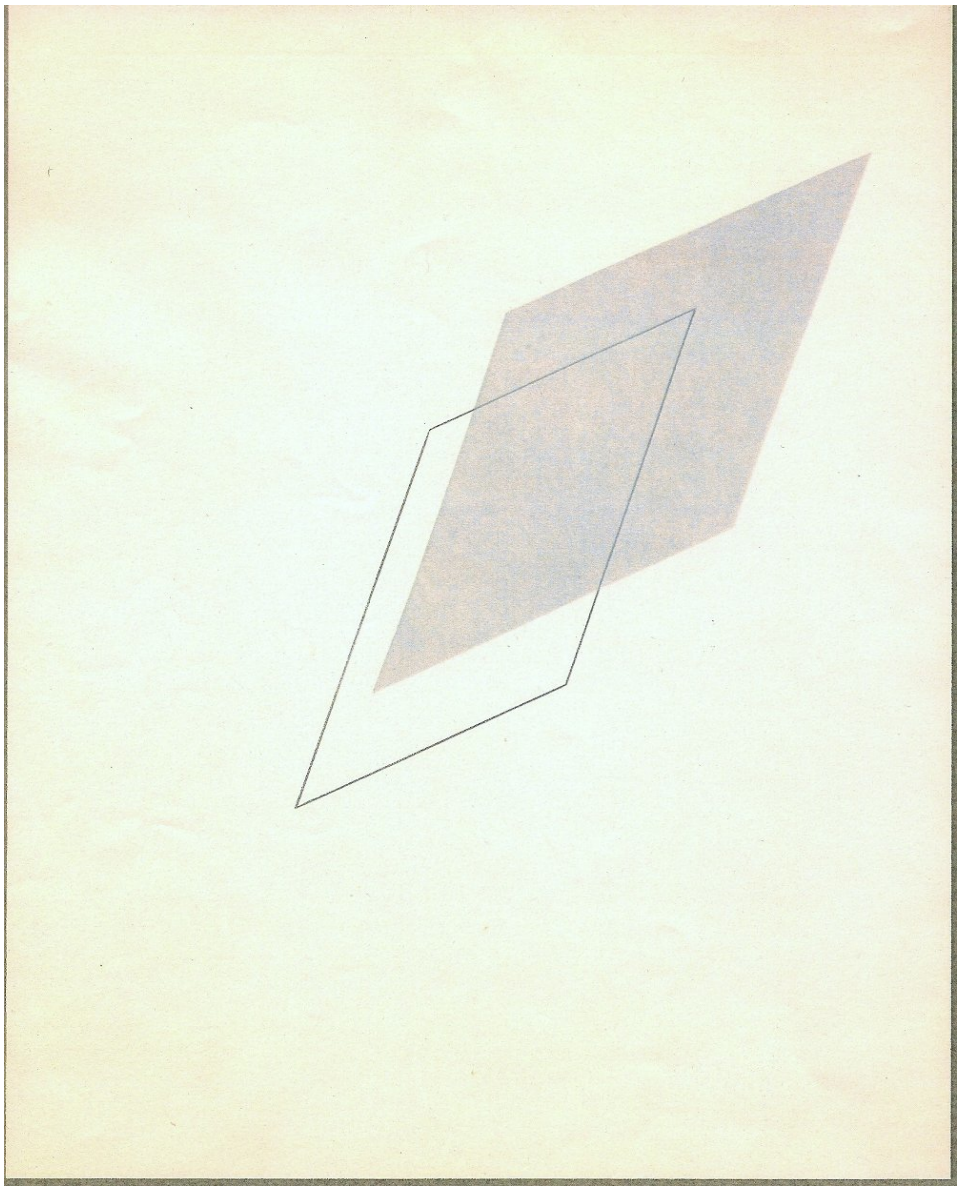

Fig. 3: Suh Seung-won, Simultaneity 73-14. *Oil on canvas, 161.2 x 130.5 cm, 1973.*

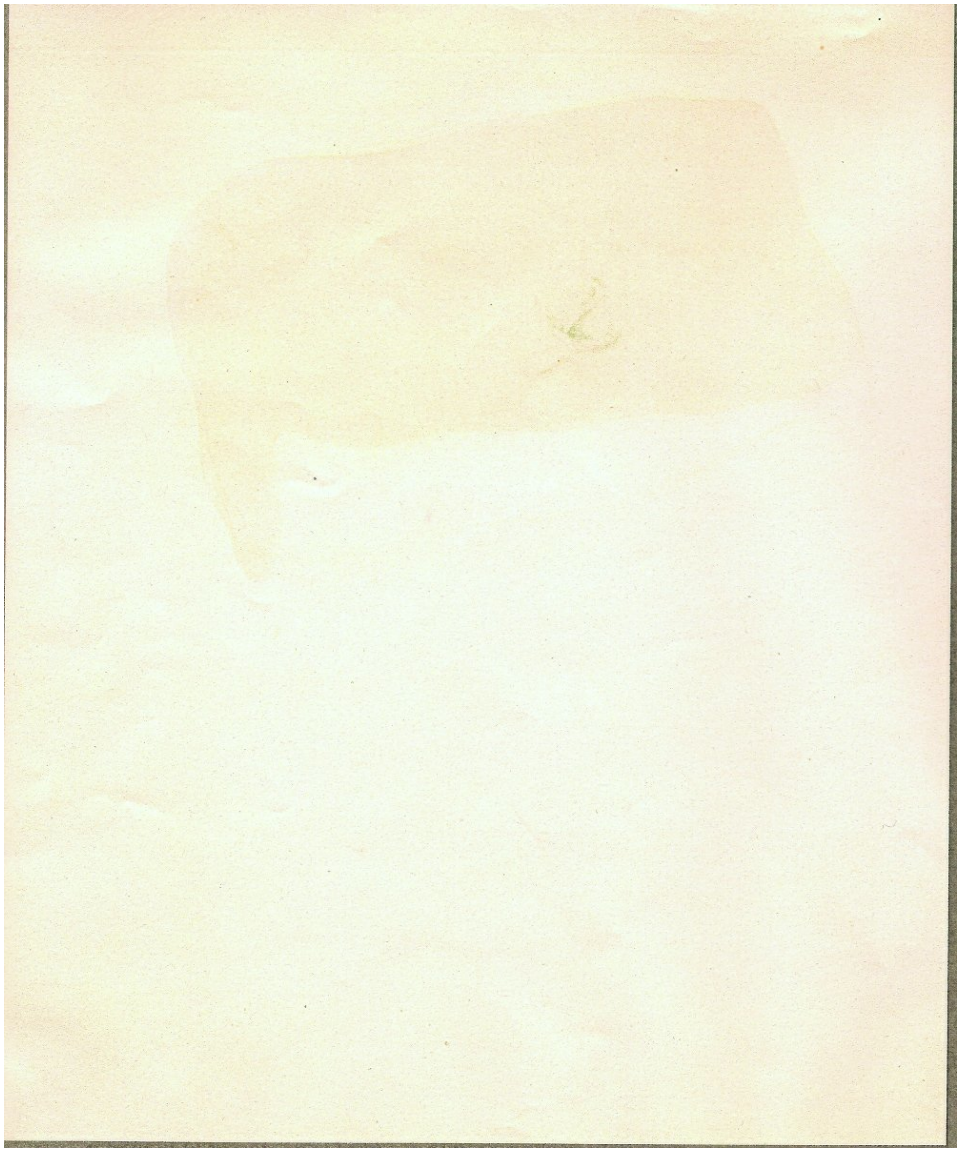

Fig. 4: Hur Hwang, Variable Consciousness 74-3. *Oil on canvas, 152 x 130.5 cm, 1974.*

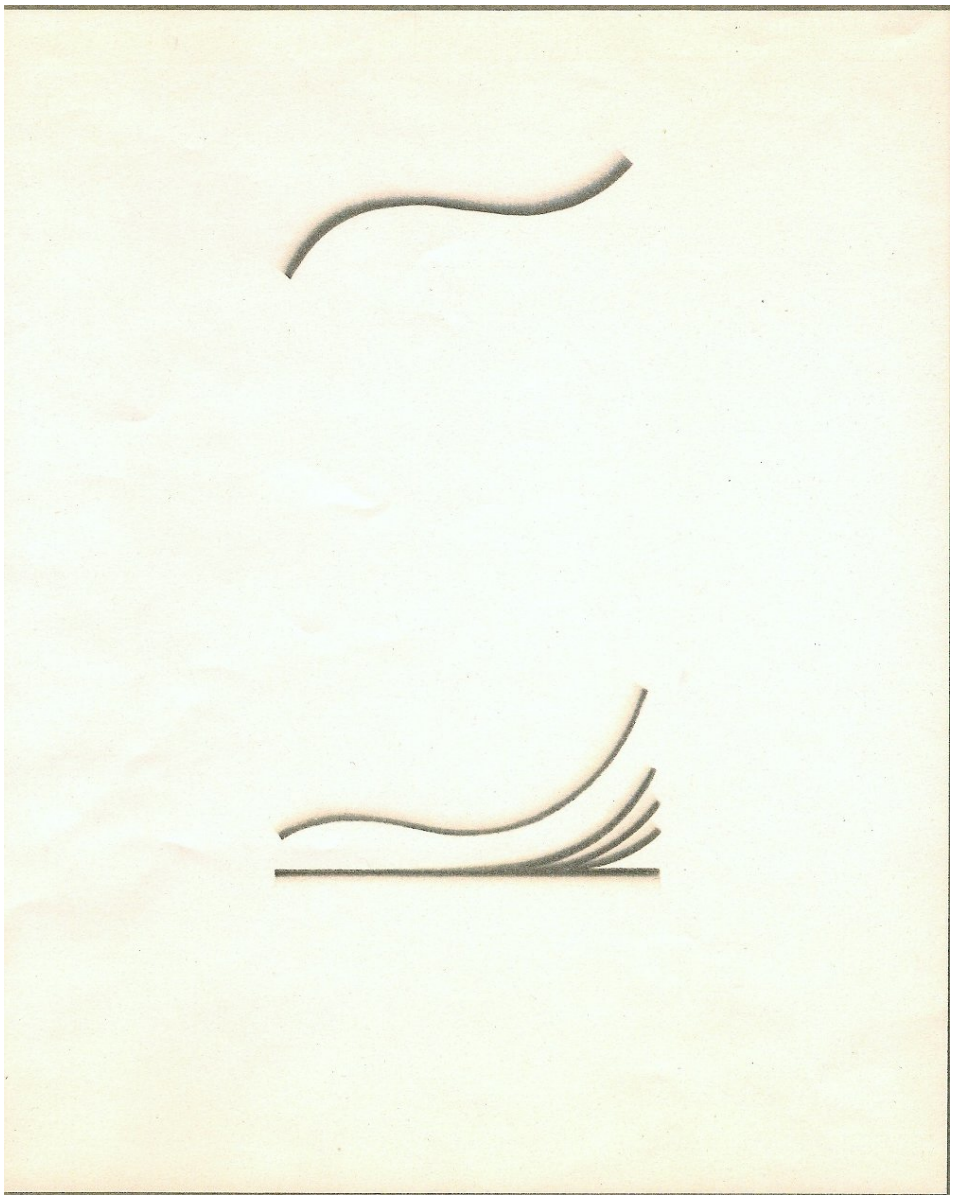

Fig. 5: Lee Dong-yeop, SITUATION C. *Oil on canvas, 161.3 x 130 cm, 1974.*

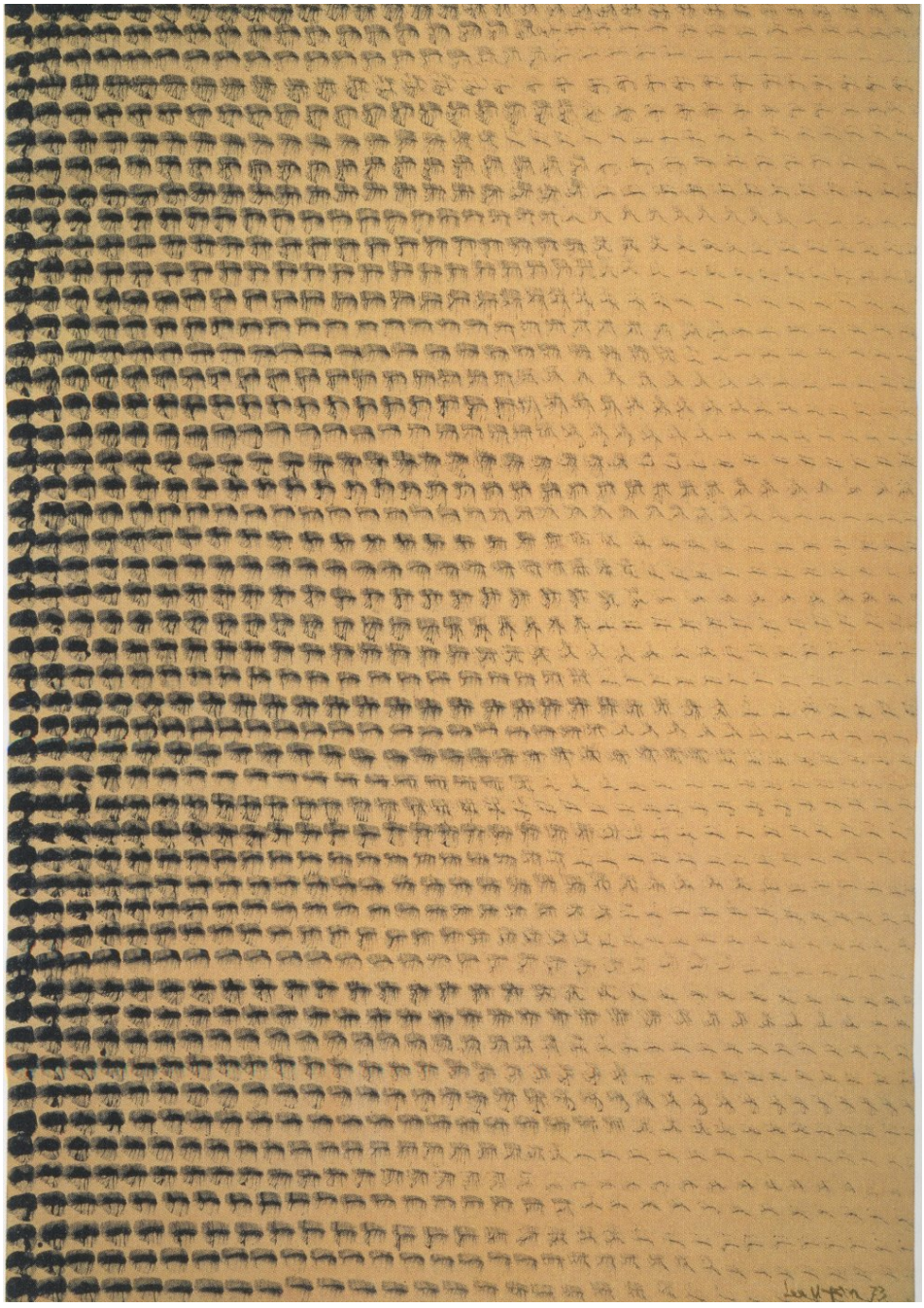

Fig. 6: Lee Ufan, From Point.
Glue and mineral pigment on canvas, 163 x 114 cm, 1973.

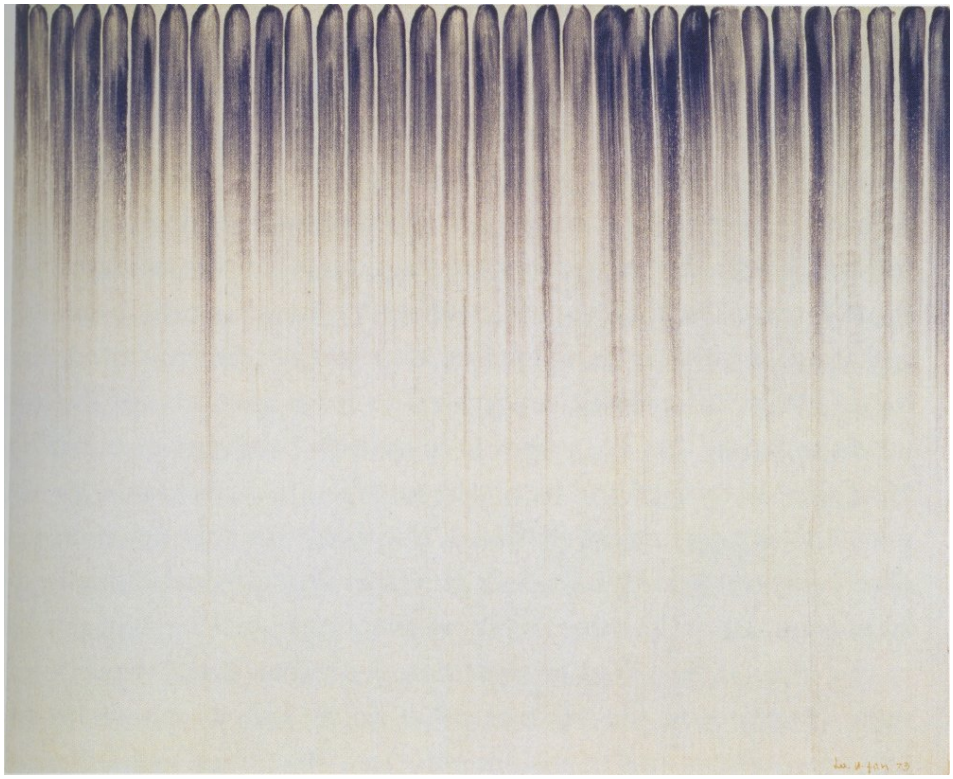

Fig. 7: Lee Ufan, From Line*. Glue and mineral pigment on canvas, 182 x 227 cm, 1973. Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum.*

Images courtesy of Tokyo Gallery + BTAP (1-5) and Lee Ufan (6-7).

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