



The Herstory of Abstraction in East Asia



CHANG SANG-EUI, *Soul*, 1989, color ink on ramie fabric, 131.5 × 113.5 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

“Gender is a key issue in this era,” says Ping Lin, director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), in an interview screened at the entrance of “The Herstory of Abstraction in East Asia,” an exhibition of postwar abstract paintings by 13 multigenerational women artists from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. In the video, Lin recounts

how, as an art student in New York in the late 1980s, she often heard visiting academics express surprise at the number of Asian female artists who favored the “masculine perspective” of Abstract Expressionism.

Decades later, TFAM’s exhibition, curated by art historians Moon Jung-Hee and Wang Pin-Hua, attempted to shed light on how, far from merely copying pre-existing Western, “masculine” approaches, East Asian women artists established distinct abstract visual languages. “The Herstory of Abstraction” brought together more than 80 large-scale paintings, supported by lengthy video interviews and footage of the artists at work. A detailed timeline in a central gallery traced the artists’ lives as well as pertinent historical events, though the artwork display itself was not chronological but instead was divided according to the artists’ regions in order to facilitate cross-cultural comparison.

As with their Euro-American counterparts, some East Asian

modern artists employed abstraction to express the horrors of the Second World War. Opening the exhibition was a selection of paintings by Yayoi Kusama, including the 1950 mixed-media canvas *Accumulation of the Corpses (Prisoner Surrounded by the Curtain of Depersonalisation)*. Featuring bloated lines of tilled land swirling like a camera shutter to the center of the painting, *Accumulation* suggests the sterility of a war-ravaged landscape. The dense composition of this work prefigures the repetitive patterns found throughout Kusama’s oeuvre, as seen in *Infinity Nets (E.T.A.)* (2000), a long painting adjacent to *Accumulation of* tiny, gold, crescent-shaped brushstrokes flowing out in multiple directions over a red background. The artist has characterized the repetitive action of creating her patterned abstractions as a form of therapy for tackling her past traumas and obsessive neuroses.

While Asian abstraction developed in dialogue with Western Abstract Expressionism, the Asian movement was not simply an export from the “West to the rest,” in the words of cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Many of the exhibited artists adapted Western techniques and styles to commingle with local traditions and plural national modernities. For example, Chang Sang-Eui’s colored-ink-on-fabric *Soul* (1989) depicts vertical curvilinear shapes, rendered in shades mixed from the traditional Korean *obangsaek* colors of white, black, blue, yellow, and red. In the adjacent video interview,

Chang explains how her paintings are often reflections on different stages of Korea’s political transformation—a personal topic for the artist, who took part in demonstrations against the autocratic rule of South Korean president Syngman Rhee in the early 1960s. One of the more recent works on display, Hsueh Pao-Shia’s *Moving Light* (2018), depicts overlapping splatters and trails of white paint recalling Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings. Yet the white streaks and fine, black and brown strokes suggest an element of control, hinting more at the brushwork of traditional Chinese ink painting, perhaps, than Abstract Expressionism. Looking carefully at the canvas, one can make out a scene of a lightning storm looming over ruined terrain.

The exhibition thoroughly illustrated how East Asian women artists used abstraction to translate and transcend personal concerns and local histories in their work. “The Herstory of Abstraction in East Asia” marked the first time that its participating artists were brought together in such a thematic and geographical configuration, and the diverse aesthetics and techniques on view disrupted the narrow reading of abstraction as inherently Western or masculine. The show marked a productive effort to redress the lack of visibility afforded to female Asian artists, whose contributions deserve to be remembered as a chapter of art history rather than as a footnote to it.

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