

Kang Seok Ho: Hold Still

November 20, 2025 – January 24, 2026

The winter sea the eyes have seen is wider than itself.

—Kang Seok Ho, *Seeing*, 2017

Tina Kim Gallery is pleased to present *Kang Seok Ho: Hold Still*, the gallery's second solo exhibition of the late Korean artist, on view from November 20, 2025 through January 24, 2026. Bringing together Kang's *Couple* and *Nude* paintings—created between the mid-2010s and 2021—the exhibition traces the artist's sustained engagement with the human figure as a site for exploring painterly surface, materiality, and form. Depicting bodies and intertwined faces yet stripped of narrative and erotic intent, these works reflect Kang's deep fixation on painting itself—and his fascination with how the effort to see and depict another contains the paradox of closeness and distance inherent in human relationships.

Kang Seok Ho (1971–2021) studied sculpture at Seoul National University and trained under Jan Dibbets at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, receiving his MFA in 2001 before returning to Seoul. His contemporaries included Park Chan-kyong, Haegue Yang, Chung Seoyeong, and Kim Beom, among others. At a time when the critical discourse in Korea revolved around multimedia and conceptual practices, Kang turned instead to the language of painting itself. He studied the Old Masters—both Western and Eastern—and was particularly drawn to the techniques of Piero della Francesca, Giorgione, and Tintoretto, whose treatment of color and light he admired in their depictions of skin. Yet Kang deliberately resisted virtuosity, developing a distinctive method of tapping a brush dipped in thinned paint to build up delicate, uniform layers, creating textured surfaces where pigment both reveals and mimics the weave of the linen beneath. Informed by the philosophy of East Asian landscape painting—which privileges the subjective interpretation of nature over direct representation—Kang approached every subject, including the human figure, as a kind of landscape: a terrain for exploring gesture, surface, and dimensionality in paint.

Kang's methods, however, were distinctly contemporary, exemplified by his use of photographic sources—first explored in his *Get Up* series, which zoomed in on clothed torsos and buttocks, omitting faces and other identifiers. Working from photographs—some his own, others drawn from media—he isolated and enlarged fragments of images, taping off sections to re-angle and translate them onto canvas. Focusing on details such as the wrinkles in denim where thighs meet or the beads of a necklace resting against a collarbone, the *Get Up* paintings became Kang's first anonymous portraits, turning the body into a rhythm of folds, seams, and reflections: quiet abstractions that reveal his fascination with the everyday as a site of intimacy.

This process of cropping and re-framing became central to his later *Couple* and *Nude* series. For the *Couple* paintings, begun after 2016, Kang focused on compositions of two figures sharing a single frame, zooming into moments of touch and proximity in photographs drawn from social media or film stills. What might appear to mark a turn toward narrative was, for him, a continuation of his formal and material concerns—now directed toward the tension and harmony between forms sharing a pictorial

surface: clasped hands, entwined arms, and faces pressed together. His interest lay not in depicting two individuals, but in capturing the fleeting moments of convergence or intimacy between them.

These investigations of the body as landscape evolved into the *Nude* series, where the artist magnified his gaze still further, turning his attention to the texture, creases, and folds of skin. Cropped tightly on the décolletage, navel, or buttocks, these paintings subvert the conventions of the nude, lingering between disclosure and restraint. In one painting, a few strands of ebony hair splay across a softly dappled expanse of skin; in others, peaches and grapes—perhaps a nod to nudes in Western art—partially obscure the body, leaving the viewer uncertain of what is being revealed or withheld. Viewers often interpreted these works as erotic, a reading Kang resisted.

In the late 2010s, Kang pushed the compositions of the *Couple* paintings further inward, enlarging his canvases to focus on the eyes of two individuals. In some, two faces adjoin edge to edge, their shared boundary forming a seam; in others, one face passes another, half-visible, half-withheld. Eventually, the faces nearly overlap, merging into a single eye-like form—a meeting point of color and light akin to a solar eclipse. In his final group of *Nude* paintings, created for a 2021 exhibition shortly before his death, Kang concentrated his gaze on the belly button—the body’s physical and metaphorical center. Perhaps his most intimate works, these paintings anchor folds and crevices of skin within expanses of color that verge on abstraction.

The exhibition’s title, *Hold Still*, refers to Kang’s working process of selecting an image and re-framing it to fit the proportions of his canvas. This became a way of reconstructing chance, visually compelling moments encountered amid the sensory excess of contemporary life and translating these images from the immediacy of photography to the slower temporality of paint. The images, held still by the artist’s intention, become his paintings—and in turn, invite viewers to look with the same attentiveness.

Although Kang’s work has only recently begun to receive wider international recognition, his influence within Korea’s painting community was deeply felt during his lifetime. As an artist, curator, and writer, he helped shape the discourse on contemporary art, organizing group exhibitions such as *Good Form* (Insa Art Space, 2005), *Manner in Korean Paintings* (Hite Collection, 2012), and *When Words Fail* (Hite Collection, 2016). His writings on everyday experiences—plainspoken yet lyrical—echoed the tone of his paintings, reflecting an ongoing search for clarity that always left space for uncertainty.

Kang’s passing in 2021 left his inquiries open-ended. Yet in his *Couple* and *Nude* paintings—where forms meet, merge, or drift apart—he captured something of the fragility of connection itself. His paintings do not seek to resolve the tension between self and other, painter and viewer, figure and ground; rather, they hold that tension quietly, discovering comfort in the unsettled.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kang Seok Ho received his Bachelor of Fine Art in sculpture at Seoul National University, then left for Germany to study with Jan Dibbets (b. 1941) at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he

received his Masters of Fine Art in painting. After winning the UBS Art Award in Basel, Switzerland in 2000, he returned to Korea and won the Seoknam Art Prize (Seoul, Korea) in 2004, and he was the selected artist for *Young Korean Artists 2008: I AM AN ARTIST* by the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. From 2003 to 2020, he held 16 solo exhibitions at Insa Art Space, Kumho Museum of Art, and Mimesis Art Museum. Beyond his artistic practice, Kang was also active as a curator, organizing group exhibitions featuring his peers and younger artists, as well as design shows inspired by his personal passion for modern European and American design. Exhibitions curated by Kang include *Good Form* (Insa Art Space, 2005), *Manner in Korean Paintings* (Hite Collection, 2012), *When Words Fail* (Hite Collection, 2016), and *Bauhaus and Modern Life* (Kumho Museum of Art, 2019). Not separating his daily life and art, he led meetings to interact with fellow artists on the subjects of painting, books, music, hiking, and fishing. He taught as a professor at Seoul National University of Science and Technology from 2018 to 2021, and his first retrospective, *seok ho kang: Three Minute Delight* (2022-2023) was held at the Seoul Museum of Art in the first year after his untimely death in 2021. His debut solo exhibition with Tina Kim Gallery was held in 2023.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Tina Kim Gallery is widely recognized for its unique programming that emphasizes international contemporary artists, historical overviews, and independent curatorial projects. The gallery has built a platform for emerging and established artists by working closely with over twenty artists and estates, including Pacita Abad, Ghada Amer, Tania Pérez Córdova, and Mire Lee, amongst others. Our expanding program of Asian-American and Asian diasporic artists, including Maia Ruth Lee, Minoru Niizuma, and Wook-Kyung Choi, evince the gallery's commitment to pushing the conversation beyond national frameworks.

Founded in 2001, the gallery opened the doors to its ground-floor Chelsea exhibition space in 2014. The gallery was instrumental in introducing Korean Dansaekhwa artists such as Park Seo-Bo, Ha Chong-Hyun, and Kim Tschang-Yeul to an international audience, establishing public and institutional awareness of this critically influential group of Asian Post-War artists. The gallery partners regularly with prominent curators, scholars, and writers to produce exhibitions and publications of rigor and critical resonance.

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