

TINA KIM GALLERY

Kim Tschang-Yeul: Recurrence

November 5–December 19, 2026

Tina Kim Gallery is pleased to present *Kim Tschang-Yeul: Recurrence*, its third solo exhibition of the Korean émigré painter who devoted five decades of his career to the sustained exploration of luminous, hyperrealistic waterdrops. Focusing on works from the 1980s through the 2010s, the exhibition traces the evolution of Kim's mature practice as he embraced a more tactile materiality, experimented with varied surfaces and grounds, and began working on a larger scale. At its center is his *Recurrence* series, which emerged in the mid-1980s, shown alongside significant *Waterdrop* paintings from across these decades. Together, the works demonstrate the remarkable range Kim drew from a single motif, continually pushing its formal and conceptual possibilities.

Born in 1929 in Maengsan, in what is now North Korea, Kim Tschang-Yeul's life and artistic development were profoundly shaped by the upheavals of modern Korean history. At age seventeen, amid the political violence and division that followed Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, he fled south, ultimately settling in Seoul. In the 1950s, after studying painting at Seoul National University, Kim became a leading figure in Korea's emerging Art Informel movement alongside artists including Ha Chong-Hyun and Park Seo-Bo, adapting the gestural, materially expressive language of the European movement to the circumstances of postwar Korea. Kim's early Informel paintings, characterized by dark, earthy tones and dense surfaces seemingly riven by wounds and fissures, have often been understood in relation to the scars of war and displacement.

With the encouragement of the modernist pioneer Kim Whanki, his mentor and former teacher, Kim moved to New York in 1965 and secured a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation. While studying printmaking at the Art Students League of New York, he immersed himself in the city's rapidly evolving avant-garde scene, encountering Op Art, Pop Art, and Minimalism, and becoming acquainted with fellow Korean artist Nam June Paik, among others. During these years, Kim left behind the heavily worked surfaces of his Informel paintings in search of a radically different visual language. He began painting smooth, geometric compositions and rounded, biomorphic forms that seem to swell from the canvas. These New York experiments marked a broader shift in his practice toward a more graphic language and fluid shapes, which would become important precursors to his waterdrop paintings. Kim relocated to Paris in 1969, where he would remain for nearly five decades before returning to Korea in 2017.

The waterdrop motif emerged from a chance encounter with the material itself. While working in a makeshift studio outside Paris, Kim splashed water onto the back of his canvases. When the droplets caught the light, he was struck by their extraordinary appearance and began searching for a way to capture their fleeting presence through painting. Kim's first solo exhibition in Paris, at Knoll International in 1973, introduced the waterdrop as the defining motif of his mature practice. Yet the waterdrop was never simply an exercise in illusionism—for Kim, its repeated depiction became a means of working through the memories of violence and loss he carried from the Korean War. As he wrote in a letter to the critic Lee Yil, "The act of painting waterdrops is to dissolve everything into an act of transparency, returning to nothingness... One seeks the expressive method, while aiming for the

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extinction of ego.” This conception of painting as repetition, purification, and ego-erasure was also informed by Kim’s engagement with Taoist and Zen Buddhist thought. The waterdrop thus became both subject and method: a transparent, ephemeral form through which Kim could contemplate impermanence in the repeated act of painting.

In 1979, Kim expanded the material and visual possibilities of his waterdrop motif, incorporating brushwork and experimenting with oil paint, stains, and other marks within his compositions—developments that became increasingly pronounced during the 1980s. Works such as *Genesis* (1986) and *Gouttes d’eau* (1984) introduce a more tactile quality, with stains of oil seeping into the canvas evoking traces left by water, while touches of white paint further illuminate their surface. His palette also grew more varied, with impastoed brushstrokes in fiery hues recalling his Informel practice. Beyond paint, he worked with a range of materials and supports, including newspaper, wood, sand, jute, and traditional Korean paper, continually opening up new relationships between the waterdrop and the surface on which it appeared. As early as 1975, Kim had painted waterdrops over a page of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, one of his earliest works to bring the motif into dialogue with language. As he continued to explore this relationship, the incidental printed text of newspapers evolved into the *Recurrence* series in the mid-1980s, featuring characters drawn primarily from the *Thousand Character Classic*, a sixth-century text traditionally used as a primer for literacy and calligraphy. Kim first encountered the text as a child through his grandfather, who taught him calligraphy and encouraged his artistic aspirations. Its presence in his mature work lends the series a deeply personal dimension, connecting one of his earliest encounters with writing to his signature motif.

The *Recurrence* paintings vary considerably in the balance they strike between image and text, abstraction and figuration. In some, waterdrops appear with remarkable clarity against fields of characters so orderly that they resemble typeface rather than calligraphy, emphasizing Kim’s meticulous attention to illusion and surface. In others, the text is partially obscured by layers of paint or appears faded, fragmented, or weathered, becoming less a field of readable language than an abstract ground. In a 1989 work in watercolor, acrylic, and India ink on paper mounted on canvas, the characters are rendered in ink, but layered so densely that they become illegible. One work shows waterdrops on raw canvas juxtaposed against Chinese characters stenciled in gold; another sets its characters hovering against a weathered ground resembling time-worn marble or stone. Across these works on view in the gallery, language gradually shifts from something to be read to something to be seen. The waterdrop similarly oscillates between precise representation and abstraction, appearing at once as an identifiable object and as a vehicle for light, reflection, transparency, and the passage of time. Kim continually recalibrated the relationship between these elements, changing their scale, density, color, and placement to draw new possibilities from a vocabulary to which he returned throughout his career.

The exhibition at Tina Kim Gallery also features noteworthy *Waterdrop* paintings from the 2000s and 2010s, among them two large-scale, classical compositions in which waterdrops spill across the raw linen canvas. Two *Nuit* paintings, meanwhile, trace back to the earliest waterdrop Kim exhibited: *Événement de la Nuit* (1972), which depicts a lone droplet against a solid black ground. Kim returned to this motif throughout his mature career, and in the two works featured here, waterdrops appear against dark grounds that evoke the stillness of night and the atmospheric intensity of a heavy

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rainstorm. Here, the waterdrop's familiar luminosity takes on a different psychological register: rather than emerging against a luminous or neutral ground, the drops seem suspended within an expansive darkness, heightening the tension between presence and absence. Together with the *Recurrence* paintings, these variations demonstrate the extraordinary range Kim found within his singular subject, transforming the waterdrop into a sustained meditation on memory, materiality, repetition, and time.

Kim Tschang-Yeul's singular contribution to postwar painting was recently celebrated in a major retrospective at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA), in Seoul in 2025. His work is held in major international collections, including the M+, Hong Kong; Centre Pompidou, Paris; MMCA; Leeum Museum of Art, Korea; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art; and National Museum of Modern Art, Japan. The Kim Tschang-Yeul Museum, dedicated to collecting, researching, and exhibiting the artist's works, was founded in 2016 in Jeju, Korea. In May 2026, his former home and studio in Seoul's Pyeongchang-dong neighborhood reopened to the public as the Kim Tschang-Yeul Atelier.

About the Gallery

Tina Kim Gallery is internationally recognized for its critically rigorous program that foregrounds Asian and Asian diasporic artists across generations and mediums. Founded in 2001 and located in Chelsea, the gallery works closely with artists, estates, and institutional partners to produce exhibitions, publications, and public programs of scholarly depth and critical resonance.

Spanning leading postwar figures to contemporary visionaries, the gallery's program has been instrumental in advancing artists whose work engages transcultural perspectives. It has championed diasporic figures such as Pacita Abad, Kim Tschang-Yeul, and Kim Lim, alongside seminal Korean artists including Ha Chong-Hyun, Lee ShinJa, and Suki Seokyeong Kang. The gallery's growing roster of international contemporary artists includes Mire Lee, Maia Ruth Lee, and Tania Pérez Córdova, among others. Over the course of the last 25 years, the gallery has played a formative role in elevating Korean Dansaekhwa on the global stage, building institutional and public awareness of the post-war movement's significance and influence.

Across generations and geographies, the gallery's program engages questions of migration, diasporic identity, history, and material culture—reflecting a sustained commitment to expanding the canons of art history, pushing the conversation beyond national frameworks, and bringing underrecognized practices to international audiences.

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