

TINA KIM GALLERY

The Making of Modern Korean Art:

The Letters of Kim Tschang-Yeul, Kim Whanki, Lee Ufan, and Park Seo-Bo, 1961–1982

May 5–June 21, 2025

Tina Kim Gallery is pleased to announce *The Making of Modern Korean Art: The Letters of Kim Tschang-Yeul, Kim Whanki, Lee Ufan, and Park Seo-Bo, 1961–1982*, on view from May 5 through June 21, 2025. Organized in conjunction with the launch of a landmark new publication of the same title, the exhibition brings to life the personal and intellectual exchanges between four pioneering artists who shaped the trajectory of modern Korean art during the transformative decades following the Korean War. Through the presentation of significant paintings made by all four artists during this period, as well as archival materials, photography, and ephemera, the exhibition will make manifest the artistic dialogues and debates that guided the global emergence of Korean modern art.

In the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–53), amid political upheaval and limited institutional support, Korean artists faced the urgent challenge of redefining their cultural landscape and articulating their collective trauma and existential dislocation. Many turned to abstraction as a means of forging a distinctly Korean modernity, one that resisted both Western ideologies and inherited aesthetic traditions. Among Korea's earliest abstractionists, Kim Whanki evolved from semi-abstracted depictions of moon jars and plum blossoms to the sublime all-over dot paintings of his New York period, blending a Korean sensibility with global avant-garde influences. Park Seo-Bo and Kim Tschang-Yeul, deeply influenced by European Informel, produced early works characterized by thick impasto, raw surfaces, and material experimentation. This shared language laid the foundation for their later iconic series: Kim Tschang-Yeul turned to the meditative precision of his *Waterdrop* series, reflecting Taoist principles of ego dissolution; while Park Seo-Bo developed his *Ecriture* series, defined by its monochromatic palette and a rigorous focus on repetition, process, and discipline. Lee Ufan, initially a key figure in the Mono-ha movement in Japan, transitioned in the early 1970s to his *From Point* and *From Line* series, merging material restraint with philosophical inquiry in simple, deliberate brush strokes that evoke Eastern calligraphy. By the mid-1970s, each artist had developed a singular visual idiom: distinct yet unified by a shared ambition to advance Korean art on the global stage. Key works from these formative series will be featured in the forthcoming exhibition.

Though geographically dispersed, the four artists remained closely connected through a decades-long correspondence. In the absence of a robust cultural infrastructure in Korea, their letters became essential conduits for critical exchange, exhibition planning, and mutual support. Park Seo-Bo and Kim Tschang-Yeul, lifelong friends and collaborators, played a pivotal role in organizing the second Hyundai Fine Art Exhibition in 1957 and corresponded tirelessly to coordinate Korea's participation in the 1961 Paris Biennale. Lee Ufan and Park Seo-Bo, who began exchanging letters after their joint inclusion in a 1968 group exhibition in Tokyo, became key mediators between the Korean and Japanese art scenes; and Kim Whanki, a generation older, served as a mentor figure, encouraging Kim Tschang-Yeul to apply for Rockefeller Fellowship funding that ultimately brought him to New York in 1965. From Seoul, Tokyo, Paris, and New York, the four artists exchanged ideas, critiques, and reflections on both the practical and philosophical challenges of working from the periphery of the

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global art world. Their letters not only offer an unprecedented window into their artistic development but also reveal a collective commitment to building a Korean modernism that could engage—on its own terms—with the broader narratives of postwar art.

The Making of Modern Korean Art foregrounds these correspondences—newly translated, previously unpublished, and reproduced at actual size—as critical primary documents in the story of Korean modernism. Published by Gregory R. Miller & Co., the book is co-edited by Yeon Shim Chung, Professor of Art History and Theory at Hongik University, and Doryun Chong, Artistic Director and Chief Curator of M+, Hong Kong, and features a contribution by Kyung An, Curator of Asian Art at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Beyond the letters, the volume marks a major contribution to the field as a comprehensive English-language survey of Korean abstraction, spanning the period from the birth of Korean Informel to the formation of Dansaekhwa.

To celebrate the book's launch, Tina Kim Gallery will host a panel discussion at Asia Society's Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium on May 9 at 6 PM, featuring co-editors Yeon Shim Chung and Doryun Chong, contributor Kyung An, and honored guest Lee Ufan in conversation, moderated by art critic Andrew Russeth. The event is free and open to the public, but please note RSVP does not guarantee entry and seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. A limited number of advanced copies will be available for sale at the panel event, ahead of the publication's official release in June 2025.

The Making of Modern Korean Art was made possible through the generous support of the Park Seo-Bo Foundation, the Estate of Kim Tschang-Yeul, and Lee Ufan, who provided the letters for translation and publication. The project is generously funded by the Korea Arts Management Service (KAMS) and the Peter Magnone Foundation, with additional support from the YS Kim Foundation, Kukje Art and Culture Foundation, Gina H. Sohn and Gregory P. Lee, Gay-Young Cho and Christopher Chiu, and Miyoung Lee and Neil Simpkins.

Years in the making, this major project coincides with the tenth anniversary of Tina Kim Gallery's brick-and-mortar space in Chelsea as well as the gallery's landmark co-organization of the Dansaekhwa collateral event at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015—widely recognized as a defining moment in the recognition of Korean modern art within the global canon.

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.

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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.

Press inquiries:

Hanna Gisel | hanna@hannagisel.com

Sales inquiries:

inquiries@tinakingallery.com | +1 212-716-1100