

Korean art steps into the spotlight



South Korea may have first taken part in the [Venice Biennale](#) in 1986, and had a permanent pavilion there since 1995 – where it has been represented by such internationally respected [artists](#) as Lee Bul (1999), Haegue Yang (2009) and Lee Yong-Baek (2011) – but 2015 has been the year Korean art took centre stage, grabbing the attention of the fickle art world and making it sit up and take notice. All the indications are that this appreciation can only grow, as Korean artists are becoming an ever-stronger presence at art fairs, in western [gallery](#) shows and in [auction](#) sales rooms.

Western institutions have been showing interest in these artists for a while. At MoMA, in 1997, Lee Bul became famous virtually overnight for her glittering but decaying installation of bejewelled dead fish, *Majestic Splendor* (a later work, *Untitled (“Infinity” wall)*, is pictured); and in 2008 the museum acquired *Documentary Nostalgia* by Jung Yeon Doo, an 85-minute, one-take film of a performance inspired by the artist’s vain search to find a breathtaking view of the Taebaek Mountains. By 2012, the magazine *Art + Auction* had named Jung one of the 50 next most collectable artists worldwide. Tate Liverpool, meanwhile, held a major retrospective in 2010 of Nam June Paik (*Bakelite Robot*), the acknowledged founding father of Korean video art, and in 2012 inaugurated its experimental space, The Tanks, at Tate Modern, with a

commission from Korean-born, [New York](#)-based video-performance artist Sung Hwan Kim.

But it was in Venice earlier this year that this interest crystallised into something undeniably potent. As well as the dreamy, futuristic multimedia installation of artist-duo Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho in the official Korean pavilion, there was also the film *Factory Complex* (about female textile workers in South Korea – an exploration of the underbelly of the country’s economic success) that won IM Heung-Soon the Silver Lion for Promising Young Artist. At 46, he is not all that young, but this year has seen his work (from about \$15,000) achieve global recognition – a recent film, *Reincarnation*, exploring women survivors of war in Vietnam and Iran, was shown at the Sharjah Biennial and New York’s MoMA PS1.

Outside the Venice Biennale’s official pavilions, at Palazzo Grimani, *Frontiers Reimagined* (curated by New York-based Tagore Foundation International) included two Korean artists of very different disciplines. Kim Joon showed two elaborate digital prints featuring bodies and body parts superimposed with tattoos and drawings (see *Ebony-Tiger*, \$18,000) – his work is now available through the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in the US and last May his *Chromogenic Diptych* sold for £21,875 at Phillips London. Chun Kwang Young, meanwhile, who emigrated to America in the 1960s, was showing some of his beautiful *Aggregations* – often massive sculptural compositions made from small, hand-cut pieces of styrofoam wrapped in antique mulberry paper sourced from Korean books and academic texts and tinted with teas, fruits and flowers. He has been making them since the 1990s and they marry traditional Korean craft techniques with his interest in American abstract expressionism. As Chun has said, “I think the first thing I saw [as a child] was my mother’s face, and then there was mulberry paper. This paper is not just for writing and drawing but is like the spirit and soul of Koreans.” Chun has won major prizes in Korea (Artist of the Year in 2001, a Presidential Prize in 2009) and been exhibited at galleries in the US and [London](#), but this year he was honoured with a show at the Dovecot Studio, as part of the [Edinburgh](#) Art Festival. Recent auction prices – £43,750 for *Aggregation 04 No 054* at Sotheby’s London in March, against a high estimate of £12,000, and HK\$500,000 (about £43,000) for *Aggregation 07 No 77* at Sotheby’s [Hong Kong](#) in April – reflect his strong international following. Next year sees a solo show at Bernard Jacobson in London. Another revelation in Venice was the collateral event organised by the Brussels-based Boghossian Foundation with Seoul’s Kukje Gallery and New York’s Tina Kim Gallery, entitled *Dansaekhwa* – a celebration of the subtle poetry of Korean monochrome painting. The Dansaekhwa art movement turned its back on western realism and colour, focusing instead on the picture plane itself, animated by the innovative use of raw materials. Developed in Korea in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, partly as a response to its devastating 20th-century history of occupation, colonisation and political suppression, these abstract works are nonetheless profoundly imbued with an understanding of nature, grounded in Korean thought and traditional ink painting. Dansaekhwa’s most famous representative is Lee Ufan (*From Line*), whose work has fetched up to \$2.2m at auction. Ufan, also a sculptor and founding member of the Japanese Mono-Ha group of artists, who is now approaching 80, was last year invited to create a solo show at Versailles, where his intense, minimalist sculptural stone and steel installations offered an impressive foil to André Le Nôtre’s landscapes. The other artists at the Venice [exhibition](#), Chung Chang-Sup, Chung Sang-Hwa, Ha Chong-Hyun, Kwon Young-Woo and Park Seo-Bo – together with Kim Whan-Ki (1913-1974), who represents an

earlier generation of modern abstract painters – are also riding high at auction. In April, at Sotheby's Hong Kong, Park Seo-Bo's *Ecriture No 9-75*, a coming together of calligraphy and painting (black ink and white oil paint), sold for around £403,000 – three times higher than the upper estimate. Chung Sang-Hwa's two *Untitled* paintings were sold together for around £424,000, double the high estimate. "In the past 12 to 18 months Dansaekwha artists have started to make a mark on a broader international level," says Alex Branczik, head of contemporary art at Sotheby's London. Indeed, in October, Christie's brought the first monographic exhibition of Dansaekwha, entitled *Forming Nature*, to New York, having seen its Hong Kong sales of Korean contemporary art soar from about £95,000 to £5.3m in 11 years. The May Hong Kong sale saw *Montagne Bleue (Blue Mountain)* by founding modernist Kim Whan-Ki make \$1.79m, a world record for the artist. Inevitably, both western and Korean galleries have leapt on this quickening interest from international collectors. Korean galleries Kukje and PKM have shown important figures from the Dansaekhwa movement at international art fairs, including Basel and Basel Hong Kong, since 2013; both Lisson and Pace have showcased Lee Ufan in London; White Cube will be exhibiting Park Seo-Bo (works from \$400,000-\$650,000) from January; while Galerie Perrotin will be showing Chung Chang-Sup (works from \$80,000, *Return 77-O*) in New York until December 23.

"The revaluation of the Dansaekhwa movement is part of a revaluation of historical movements across Asia, such as Gutai in Japan," says Magnus Renfrew, deputy chairman of Bonhams Asia. Art consultant Arianne Levene Piper extends the comparison to the current enthusiasm among collectors for artists of the Italian Arte Povera movement and Zero group, who also choose modest materials and a monochrome palette: "A revisitation of Dansaekhwa makes sense given the context of today's market – and how reasonably priced Dansaekhwa artists are in comparison to works by these other groups."

Such interest in the Dansaekwha tradition has helped expand the appreciation of Korean artists more broadly. Lehmann Maupin, based in New York and Hong Kong, represents established installation artist Do Ho Suh (works from about \$100,000). Luxembourg & Dayan, in London and New York, shows the exquisite, intensely worked art of Minjung Kim (*The Street*, €27,000). Other pieces cost from €3,000-€40,000. And just this year [Gagosian](#) took on the estate of aforementioned multimedia artist Nam June Paik (works from \$25,000) who died in 2006; the news was shortly followed by the show *Nam June Paik: The Late Style* in its Hong Kong gallery. Next autumn, the London outpost of Korea's Hanmi Gallery will host an exhibition of his work. "I feel this recognition has been long due and I see it as an encouraging step for Korean art globally," says the gallery's founder Kwak Heashin. "In particular, I hope it will widen collectors' views on video art, which traditionally has been a difficult medium commercially."

Levene Piper pinpoints 2012 as a turning point for Korean art: "The *Korean Eye* show at the Saatchi Gallery [that year] was a seminal moment that gave modern Korean art great exposure in the west." It was, in fact, the third exhibition of Korean art in London organised by David Ciclitira, founder and chairman of Parallel Media Group, but it was undoubtedly the largest and attracted the greatest media and collector interest. Ciclitira has been collecting contemporary Korean art since 2007 and is passionate about the flourishing art scene he has encountered on business trips to the country and the diversity and creativity of its artists. "Korea is the creative powerhouse of Asia – and its art is the way it can express itself

internationally,” he says. He picks out Yong Ho Ji, whose menacing life-size shark, constructed from old tyres, was a sensation at his 2010 show, *Fantastic Ordinary*, and whose extraordinary *Lion 2* paced the grounds of Chatsworth in 2011 as part of a Sotheby’s exhibition, and Kang Hyung Koo, whose hyper-realistic depiction of Mother Teresa featured in 2012. His portrait of Churchill fetched around \$270,000 at Christie’s Hong Kong last year. He is represented by the Arario Gallery, which has branches in Korea and Shanghai.

Many of the artists Ciclitira has showcased have become established names among international collectors. Foremost are U-Ram Choe, represented by Korea’s Gallery Hyundai, who creates intricate kinetic mechanical sculptures (from \$50,000), combining the skills of the engineer and the artist; London-based Meekyoung Shin (represented by the Hakgojae Gallery, with works from £5,000), known for her *Translation Series* in which she replicates antique Chinese vases and Greek statuary in scented soap; Yee Sookyung, who shows at London’s Almine Rech Gallery and makes towering sculptures (€3,000-€50,000, *Translated Vase*) out of broken porcelain; and Lee Jaehyo, whose work can be seen at London’s Albemarle Gallery and who creates exquisite sculptures (*Untitled*, £15,000) from wood and nails, drawing deeply on Buddhist philosophy.

These artists belong to the generation who reached maturity in the 1990s. As associate vice president and regional specialist at Christie’s Yunah Jung explains: “The 1990s were a very interesting time for contemporary Korean art.” The country’s economy was beginning to grow and society to heal after the first free parliamentary elections in 1988. Moreover, in 1993, the Whitney Biennial took place in Seoul, introducing Korean artists to international trends. This was followed by the opening of the first Gwangju Biennial in 1995. Yunah says of this generation: “They are very sophisticated, very smart. They exchange ideas with western culture but speak with their own language and about Korean life.”

Jonathan Watkins, director of the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, which gave Lee Bul her first UK solo show last year, shares Yunah’s high estimation. Indeed, he is anxious lest the current enthusiasm in the west for Korean art distract from admiration for these artists’ unique strengths: “It’s almost as if, after Japan and China, it is now Korea’s turn. That view would be a shame.” He adds, “We must guard against exoticising Korea as we exoticised Japan.” After all, he reminds me, there are sizeable numbers of Korean artists living in London – let alone in Paris, Berlin and New York. On the other hand, part of the strength he recognises in Korean art derives from its unique history: “Lee Bul is rightly recognised as a pioneer, coming out of difficult historical times.” And, he stresses, “it is not just all new technology. Korean artists are very strong on things that are handcrafted too.”

Ciclitira agrees. His latest initiative, the Start art fair at the Saatchi Gallery, the second edition of which ran in September, offered, among other covetable things, some of Chun Kwang Young’s styrofoam and mulberry-paper *Aggregations* (from \$75,000) at the Skipwiths stand and the extraordinarily beautiful ink paintings (£1,500-£6,000) of Kim In Kyum (*Space-Less*, £5,000) from Gallery SoSo in Seoul. Looking ahead, Ciclitira says, “Serious interest is already out there – we are just joining the dots.”