

PNC GALLERY proposes

a solo show of

Hoon KWAK

At th Frieze Seoul

2022

Hoon KWAK 郭薰(1941 ~)

Born in 1941 in Daegu, Korea

Lives and works in USA and Korea

About the artist

Hoon KWAK (b.1941), as one of the pivotal figures in **Korean abstract painting**, constitutes unparalleled aesthetic mainstay of contemporary Korean art along with Nam June Paik, Lee Ufan. In 1969, Kwak cofounded a group called '**A.G. (Avant-garde)**' with Kim Ku Lim and Kim Tchah Sup, and spearheaded Korea's avant-garde movement. His relocation to the U.S. in 1975 however, served as an opportunity to reflect on his cultural genesis. This is the period when he began working on abstract and primal paintings on subject matters such as Korean temples, ancient tombs, earthenware, and shamans.

Reaching beyond his personal identity and extending out toward the origin of humanity, Kwak's artworks established him as a unique presence in the American art scene, landing him exclusive contracts with Charles Cowles Gallery in New York. In 1995, as a member of the Korean delegation for the **Venice Biennale**, Kwak presented his work at the Korean pavilion's inaugural exhibition. In 2000, Kwak became the first Korean artist to hold a solo exhibition at the National Museum of Art in Beijing.

The world Kwak sees, with an inspired poet's sensibility, is one that arrives anew by returning to the primal source. The enduring subjects of his artistic oeuvre, such as Kalpa(eternity in Sanskrit), Chi(force), Incantations, and Halaayt(Ultimate spirit), urge humanity to liberate itself from the fatigues of humanocentrism and return to its roots, resonating with Gaston Bachelard's notion of the essential material imagination. His persistent interest in reviving mythologies, shamanism, and folklores that have been long-suppressed by modernity finds embodiment in his artistic perseverance. It is the viewers' role to identify and bestow meaning to these imageries.

Solo Exhibition(Selected)

- 2022 *"Halaayt"*, UM Gallery, Seoul
"Hoon Kwak", Sun Gallery, Seoul
- 2021 *"Hoon KWAK: Halaayt"*, PNC Gallery Seoul
- 2019 *"Halaayt: Passage of Transcendence"*, Pearl Lam Gallery, Hong Kong
- 2019 *"Hoon KWAK: Halaayt"*, PNC Gallery, Daegu
- 2016 *"From Earth: Hoon KWAK"*, PNC Gallery, Daegu Gallery Shilla, Daegu
- 2012 *"KWAK Hoon: Poem, Tea Ceremony, Contemplation"*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu
- 2011 College of Public Health Art Center, Daegu
- 2007 Korea Art Center, Busan
- 2006 Pyo Gallery, Seoul, Korea
Art Center of College of Public Health, Daegu
- 2005 National Art Museum of China, Beijing
- 2003 Andrew Shire Gallery, Los Angeles
- 2000 Johyun Gallery, Busan
Kuhmo Museum, Seoul
Rong Bao Zhai Gallery, Beijing
- 1999 Carinthia Gallery, Carinthia, Austria
- 1998 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York
Kuhmo Museum, Seoul
- 1997 Carinthia Gallery, Carinthia, Austria
Ci-Gong Gallery, Daegu
- 1996 Pyo Gallery, Seoul
Johyun Gallery, Busan
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham
- 1995 Venice Biennale, Venice
Sigma Gallery, New York
Palos Verdes Art Center, Los Angeles
Inkong Gallery, Seoul
Sun Gallery, Seoul
- 1994 Art Sonje Museum, Seoul
National Museum of Contemporary Art of Korea, Gwacheon
Andrew Shire Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1993 Art Sonje Museum, Seoul
- 1993 Macquarie Gallery, Sydney
National Museum of Contemporary Art of Korea
- 1992 Sala Pares Gallery, Barcelona
Macquarie Gallery, Sydney
The Works Gallery, Long Beach
- 1991 Sun Gallery, Seoul

- Pacific Asian Museum, Pasadena
- 1990 Macquarie Gallery, Sydney
- 1989 The Works Gallery, Costa Mesa, California
Levinson Kane Gallery, Boston
Karl Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica
- 1988 Iannetti Lanzzone Gallery, San Francisco
- 1987 Inkong Gallery, Seoul
- 1986 Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles
Harcourts Contemporary, San Francisco
- 1985 Karl Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica, California
Gallery Inkong, Daegu
- 1984 Traction Gallery, Los Angeles
Q Gallery, Tokyo
- 1983 Artcore Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1982 Traction Gallery, Los Angeles
Art Core Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1981 Artcore Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1980 Artcore Gallery, Los Angeles

Group Exhibition(Selected)

- 2020 *"Made in Daegu II"*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu
- 2017 *"5 years of Phosphorus & Carbon"*, PNC Gallery, Daegu
- 2016 *"Contact Point"*, Icheon Art Center, Icheon, Korea
"Korea Now", Korean Cultural Center, Brussels, Belgium
- 2014 *"Inhabiting the World"*, Busan Biennale, Busan
"Re-Discovering of Drawings", San Museum, Korea
- 2011 *"Qi is full"*, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu
- 2009 *"Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists from Korea"*, LACMA, Los Angeles
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
- 2008 *"Korean Abstract Art: 1958-2008"*, Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul
- 2000 National Museum of Contemporary Art of Korea
- 1998 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York
- 1997 Charles Cowles Gallery, New York
- 1996 Seoul Art Center, Seoul
- 1996 Newport Harbor Art Museum, Los Angeles
- 1993 Pauline Hirsh Art Museum, Los Angeles

1992 Levinson Kane Gallery, Boston
 Sandra Walter Gallery, Hong Kong
 Macquarie Gallery, Sydney, Australia

1991 Levinson Kane Gallery, Boston
 The Annex Gallery, La Jolla, California

1989 The Thumb Gallery, London, England
 Cerritos College Fine Art Gallery, Cerritos,
 California

1988 Kukje Gallery, Seoul
 Karl Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica, California

1987 Osaka Contemporary Art Center, Osaka, Japan
 Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

1986 Simard Halm Gallery, Los Angeles
 Karl Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica,
 California

1985 Harcourts Contemporary Gallery,
 San Francisco
 L.A. Country Museum of Art, Los Angeles

1984 California State University, Dominguez Hills,
 Carson, California
 Wing Luck Memorial Museum of Art, Seattle
 Karl Bornstein Gallery, Santa Monica,
 California
 Harcourts Contemporary Gallery, San
 Francisco
 Korean Cultural Service, Los Angeles

1983 Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles
 L.A. Artcore Gallery, Los Angeles
 L.A. County Museum of Art, Los Angeles

1982 Scope Gallery, Los Angeles, California
 Gallery C, Long Beach
 Traction Gallery, Los Angeles
 Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma

1981 "New Comers 1981", L.A. Municipal Art
 Gallery, Los Angeles
 Desert Palm Spring Art Museum, Palm
 Springs, California
 Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona
 Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
 Ahnot Museum of Art New York

1980 Brea Gallery Civic Cultural Center, Los Angeles
 Japan Cultural Center United States, Los
 Angeles
 The Press Center, Seoul

Collection

Korea

National Museum of Contemporary Art of Korea
 Art Sonje Museum, Korea
 Busan Museum, Busan
 Daegu Museum, Daegu
 Ilshin Spinning Group, Korea
 Kuhmo Museum, Korea
 Leeum Museum, Seoul
 Seoul Municipal Museum of Art, Seoul
 Sungkok Museum, Korea
 CS Wind, Korea
 Debec Culture Foundation, Korea
 Hilton Hotel, Seoul, Korea
 MBC Broadcasting Corp., Korea
 SK Group, Korea
 Walker Hill Hotel, Seoul, Korea

Worldwide

Security Pacific National Bank, Los Angeles
 First LA Bank, Los Angeles
 Columbia Pictures Co., Los Angeles
 Santen Seyak Co., Tokyo
 Wilshire House, Los Angeles
 Bel Air Hotel, Los Angeles
 Manatt, Phelps, Rothenberg & Tunney, Los Angeles
 Executive Life Insurance Co., Los Angeles
 Conrad Hilton Hotel, Tokyo
 Held Properties, Beverly Hills
 Trident Ltd., Los Angeles
 Larsen, Colby & Koralek Inc., Los Angeles
 Ana Hotel, Tokyo
 Jewish Federation Council, Los Angeles
 Hyatt Melbourne, Australia
 Grand Hyatt Regency, Washington D.C.
 Los Angeles International Airport Hilton, Los Angeles
 Jing An Hilton, Shanghai, China
 International Kunstverlag, Hamburg
 Directors Guild of America, Los Angeles
 Taipei Hilton Hotel, Taipei, Taiwan
 Nikko Hotel, Sydney, Australia
 Kinsella, Boesch, Fujikawa & Towle, Los Angeles
 Taipei Hyatt, Taipei, Taiwan
 Singapore Hyatt, Singapore
 Maeght Foundation, France

Hoon KWAK

Halaayt

Olivier Delavallade

Director, Domaine de Kerguéhennec

2021

Kwak Hoon's studio sits an hour away from Seoul, facing a valley of rice paddies. Despite its spaciousness, the artist finds it rather small. He hopes to build another building, even larger, to produce extra-large paintings. While eighty years in age, he bears a youthful look. His eyes have a sparkle.

In 1975, Kwak Hoon left for the United States. For the past ten years, he has shuttled between Korea and California. Having moved away from the Korean art scene early on, he did not take part in the adventures of the Korean avant-garde movement in the 1970s, particularly the textured monochrome of the Dansaekhwa movement. His art however, including works produced during his American years, remains rooted in his origins. Paradoxically, this distance appears to bring him closer to his home culture. The bowls in his work from the 1980s and thereafter - the *Tea Bowls* and *Incantation* series - remind us of the importance of pottery in art and civilization. One need only look at Neolithic pottery to be convinced – the accuracy of the forms, the refinement of the decoration. These motifs are not anecdotal. As with the *Halaayt* series, these emblematic figures allow him to evoke universal subjects and tell the history and memory of humanity by mobilizing all his pictorial maneuvers. Like the Dansaekhwa artists, Hoon KWAK also revives, in his own singular way, a forgotten or neglected tradition.

While modern societies aspire to renewing the distended, if not broken, links with nature and the animal world with the backdrop of a pre-apocalyptic discourse announcing the immanence end of times, art is neither meant to predict the future nor harbinger a better one. Rather, it is made to remember. It does not comment, it does not document; it summons, it exhumes; it makes the real happen in the depths of history and memory.

To this end, he uses a formidable tool that allows for the singular experience of an augmented reality. This tool is neither the latest 3D modeling software nor the technological debauchery of

so-called immersive installations. Instead, this tool is painting; one of the most archaic tools. Employed over millennia, it affords sustained freshness and actuality on the wall of the caves. This is the tool that Hoon KWAK uses. His painting has never meander into the elegance of formalism. In an animistic society, he would probably act as an intermediary between the different strata of the world. His enterprise could have an epic or heroic dimension. It is nothing of it. The reality that he faces is that of the confrontation between man and animal. This reality feeds imagination, builds narratives, and manufactures myths. The painter produces images, mobilizing the sheer force of imagination in a kind of mesmerized state; he surprises us; captivates us and captures us. He extracts us from our reality and invites us to experience, in body and spirit, an ancient world buried in each of us.

There is a remarkable prehistoric site in southeast Korea, now designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The petroglyphs of Bangudae (6000 - 1000 BC) are located in the village of Daegok. The engravings are in a mountainous area, isolated in the forest at the edge of the Daegok river. Engraved in sedimentary rock, they are grouped into three main panels that are five meters high and eight meters long. The engravings have been shielded from rain by the protruding parts of the cliff. The three hundred engravings show vivid and dynamic figures with a rich array of lines and dots.

The discovery of this site inspired the artist to explore the culture of his distant ancestors. He also became fascinated by the history of these people who had a strong relationship with the animal world. The *Halaayt* series, which began in 2019, refers to the first populations on the West Coast of Canada. The term refers to a ritual that allows one to enter a relationship with the ancestors, and by extension, the spirit world .

The main subject of this series is neither the whale nor whaling. Ethologists or prehistorians are much more knowledgeable on the subject. Rather, the artist is fundamentally interested in the power - expressive and dramatic - of the animal figure, in its propensity to fabricate both images and narratives, and even more so in the relationship that humans have with this world. A fundamental relation which expresses itself since the first artistic manifestations on the cave walls in the Paleolithic then in the Neolithic (I think of the representations of sperm whales on the walls of the tumulus of Gavrinis in Brittany, at the other end of the big Eurasian continent). Prehistoric research highlights the importance of this relationship with the animal. If it is a question of survival for the hunter-gatherers (to protect and feed themselves), the relation continues at the time of the first domestication of the lands and the animals, in the Neolithic, in particular for these men often coming from the deepest of the lands to find themselves confronted with the ocean, and in a certain way with the finitude of the world. There, their long march stops. The men settle down because they cannot go further. They are confronted with this

vast aquatic world which is as new to them as it is foreign and disturbing. Animal figures occasionally emerge. Through these animal representations, the prehistorians convey knowledge, learning, and transmission, and celebration. It is also, perhaps, a way of representing themselves as a species, not necessarily in opposition but in symbolic distancing, which allows for a differentiation between humans and other animal creatures. And that passes for creation; if not artistic, it is certainly symbolic, and thus called so by us today. Humanity's consciousness was built through symbolic productions, which qualifies as art in our time. In his art, and especially in the *Halaayt* series, Hoon KWAK simply reminds us of this reality. Whether painting on canvas or paper, in large or small format, in bright or acidic colors - blue, purple - or in the more restrained but no less expressive tones of differing shades in gray, Hoon KWAK expresses in the same space and movement the dread of being in the world and our desire to celebrate this presence, not to boast but rather to ward off fate. Thus, although it has no religious dimension in the restricted sense of the term, this very physical painting - the artist's body at work, the animal and human figures represented or more precisely embodied - is colored with a profoundly metaphysical dimension.

Seoul, 2021

Hoon KWAK

Josine Ianco-Starrels

Former Directrice, LA Municipal Art Gallery

1991

When Hoon Kwak invited me to his studio to see his recent paintings I could hardly believe that more than ten years had passed since his arrival in Los Angeles and our initial meeting. His latest series of large – scale paintings and smaller works on paper were spread around the walls of the studio and the house: having followed the development of his work through a number of stages during the past decade. I confronted the new work with interest and curiosity. I turned out to be simultaneously familiar and surprising.

I thought about the earliest pieces I had seen those somber and poetic images of rice bowls in nodular arrangements, with evocative powers derived from Oriental refinement and restraint channeled into the established contemporary style of serial imagery. The paintings I was facing now were more assertive, more knowing – less nostalgic, less romantic. Still, subtle modulations of greys and ochre covered and revealed metallic gold patches the overall surface was intentionally marred by linear scrapes and gashes. Barely visible repetitive forms in symmetrical arrangements appeared and disappeared across the canvas: some loomed as ghostly presences, while other, smaller ones suggested patterns weaving in and out of the mottled nuances of color. I thought about the earliest pieces I had seen those somber and poetic images of rice bowls in modular arrangements, with evocative powers derived from Oriental refinement and restraint channeled into the established contemporary style of serial imagery. I asked the artist whether these shapes had any particular derivation or significance; he said he just felt the need for some kind of shape to work against – whether reality referential or geometric, made no difference – however, he stressed, that the shapes were not as important in and of themselves than they were as elements in the process of building the painting.

He used them, he said, as a pretext or a foil to avoid treating the canvas as one flat plane, he played with them, built and erased them in turn, sometimes obliterating them altogether in the end. He spoke of objects prized and safeguarded in museums : of surfaces ravaged by time and wear, he said he loved the patina of years with its faded colors and distressed skin. Let us assume, he said, that six identical objects from the

same period would be gathered in one place – each would bear different marks inflicted by time and events. The scars of one would differ markedly from those of the others. Similarly, time and fate affect each and every one of us in different ways. Hoon explained that in Buddhist lore there is a term. ‘Kapla’, which refers to a given time – cycle in the process of reincarnation, lasting perhaps for 2 or 3 million years. He inscribed ‘Kapla’ on several of the paintings in this series.

There are also several memorable transition pieces which act as a prelude to this recent series – one was done about a year ago and is titled ‘4 Demon Clubs’. It is an overtly aggressive painting of four phallic forms moving in parallel directions upward and downward at one and the same time. Their shapes and the thrust of their movement convey aggressive energy rather than eroticism or sensuality of any kind. Similar shapes reappear in later paintings – reduced to outlines tracing the contour of phallic forms now less aggressive but thoroughly integrated into the overall pattern of the paintings.

Works of art contain the spirit, the ideas and feelings specific to a particular culture, a given time – frame, articulated by an artist who lived within the boundaries of that time and culture. They also reveal the emotional state of the artist, often divulging more than they were intended to disclose.

These are the works of a mature artist – a man who no longer needs to prove anything to himself or to others he is in a position to assess the process and the price we must pay for the acquisition of knowledge and experience.

Hoon Kwak has confronted the fact that life is both finite and infinite. He sees mystery and beauty in the traces of time and the marks left by living. He loves the muted tones of color bleached by the sun and worn by the changing seasons. The marks he makes on the surface of his work impart new interest to what was once smooth and polished like young skin or newly lacquered wood. Hoon Kwak’s elegantly modulated paintings reveal the artist’s preoccupation with the softening of jagged corners, the mellowing of strident colors, the blunting of aggressive energies transformed into wisdom and forbearance.

Los Angeles, 1991

Back to the Root**Hoon KWAK****Yoon Jin Sup** Art Critic**2016**

Even as his life nears the eighty years mark, Hoon KWAK perseveres with his experiments, dedicated and determined. His artistic passion extends across forms and media, ranging from painting to ceramics, installation, and performance. Once an aspiring poet, he also wrote hundreds of sophisticated poems that could readily put lesser writers in the trade to shame.

Instead of relying solely on inspiration and intuition, Kwak firmly grounds his works on scientific training and methodological approaches to color, informed by the chemistry courses he took at the pharmaceutical college. Employing empirical knowledge in his treatment of color has become his second nature; for instance, his frequent use of Venetian Red tends toward a copper rather than golden hue. As the dominant shade in many of Kwak's works, the color gestures back to the Daewoongjeon (main sanctuary building) images seen at Korean Buddhist temples. His extensive knowledge of color adds credence to his paintings. A solid grasp on the paint's chemical components and the origin of the colors, on the artist's part, determines the appeal of the painting. Moreover, with the emergence of mixed media as a leading trend over recent years, material research has become a critical prerequisite for the artist's choice of materials. Kwak is certainly a pioneering figure in this regard, which is why his works deserve further scrutiny. Conversations with Kwak often reveal his impressive command on color, which may well have been the very momentum behind his outstanding productions.

In the context of modern Korean art history, Kwak's artistic standing is closely tied to the Avant-garde movement. In 1969, Kwak founded a group called 'A.G (Avant-garde)' with Kim Ku Lim and Cha Sub Kim. Reputed to be an Avant-garde art group led by elite artists, 'A.G' served as a significant presence in modern Korean art history until its dissolution in 1975. Although Kwak's involvement took a hiatus when he left for the U.S. thereafter, the Avant-garde became the concrete basis of his artistic oeuvre. His unflagging interest and passion materialized in the form of a drawing performance in 2011; belying his age, the artist – well into his seventies by then - drove a fork crane equipped with a giant brush hanging on a six-by-five meter sheet of cloth. His investment in seeking new avenues of expression also led to the production of a musical ceremony performance at the 1995 Venice Biennale, and the cubic structure made of colossal sheets of white cloth, presented at his retrospective at Daegu Art Museum in 2012.

Still, the essence of Kwak's artistic spirit lies in his paintings. His move to the U.S. in 1975 catalyzed reflections on the cultural heritage of his homeland from afar. His interest in Korean Buddhist temples and their architectural traits, ancient tombs, tea bowls, spoons, earthenware, and Chinese texts naturally gave rise to artistic portrayals, encapsulating his emotional response to childhood memories of the late colonial period and the Korean War. The traumatic experiences also translated into Kwak's unique painting techniques, such as sprinkling, applying, scratching, overlaying, and peeling.

The works in this exhibition were inspired by the Palimpsest – a kind of ancient Egyptian scripture made of papyrus, repeatedly written on, erased, and reinscribed over generations. Kwak invites the viewers to contemplate on the cultural forms that inhere in history through unique expressions arising from the repetitive act of delineating, erasing, and overwriting his artistic response to the scripture, molding the material into a symbolic object.

Kwak shares a story about the earth through the invitational exhibition, taking place at PNC Gallery's two exhibition halls. As the title <From Earth> indicates, the earth – or rather, soil – he speaks of does not refer to a specific locale, such as Korea and its territory. Instead, the earth he refers to is more likely the existential and universal habitat of humanity. This comprehensive reference is directly connected to his identity as a poet, sensitive to the texture of language, and an artist, who treats paintings not as concrete figures but more as abstraction. Of course, portrayals of actual tea bowls also occupy a considerable portion of his portfolio, but their production aims to illuminate the meaning of earth as the archetype of soil rather than focusing solely on the objects' descriptive qualities.

Kwak's emphasis on the ceremonial aspect of his work and his attempt to weave various cultural forms together both spring from meditations on the earth as the existential habitat of humanity.

One of the walls of the exhibition hall, a place that was once a warehouse for Korea's oldest noodle factory, features a massive all-over piece wherein hundreds of tea bowls are set into a square module. At the center of the hall stands an enormous piece of whale rib, which Kwak had inadvertently found in Alaska. Why did he station a whale rib on the exhibition hall floor? Does it serve as a 'found object' in itself?

On the other side of the bone stands an earthenware piece, identical to the one he submitted to the Venice Biennale. Cylindrical potteries are put together to resemble a six-holed bamboo flute, hanging from a prop comprising several long wooden rods. Like ritual settings for spiritual evocation ceremonies, the potteries appear to be harboring mysterious music within, waiting to be summoned by the caressing touch of the wind. The earthenware piece complements the whale rib, reminding the viewers of the history it holds within. Sound and language resemble each other in that they are both primal and natural, but also cultural. This uncannily reversible ensemble of natural sound and human language must be attributed to Kwak's linguistic sensitivity, honed through his poetic endeavors. His poetic grasp on the texture of language and artistic sensibility in his treatment of color become fused in these works, conveying his interpretation of contemporary culture while also offering an alternative future vision – a warning against, or a cautious diagnosis of humanity's spiritual crisis, desolated by the evils of materialist culture and commercial capital.

Kwak's paintings often feature oxidized steel (burnt sienna) – the vivid hue of blood, a color he conjectures to be the first-ever shade in the history of humanity. The shade pulsates with the primal force of humanity's primitive days, when our ancestors drew cave paintings with charcoal, soil, and various mineral pigments mixed into animal fat. Kwak's use of ritualistic elements ties back to this primal materiality. Like Gaston Bachelard, who advocated the idea of material imagination, elements such as water, fire, air, and soil urge the tired and impoverished people of our time to return to the roots of their being. As such, the world Kwak sees as an artist/poet, wielding material and substance with sensitivity and intuition, is not an incurable ailment but rather a habitat where we may envision a hopeful future by returning to our roots. As an analogy of the earthly foundation of our being, Kwak's paintings and installations remind us of our right to dream, and hope. The mythical, shamanist, and folkloric tales that were suppressed by the long march of modernity portend a triumphant return through Kwak's persistent interest. It is up to us viewers to locate and excavate these meanings.

Daegu 2016