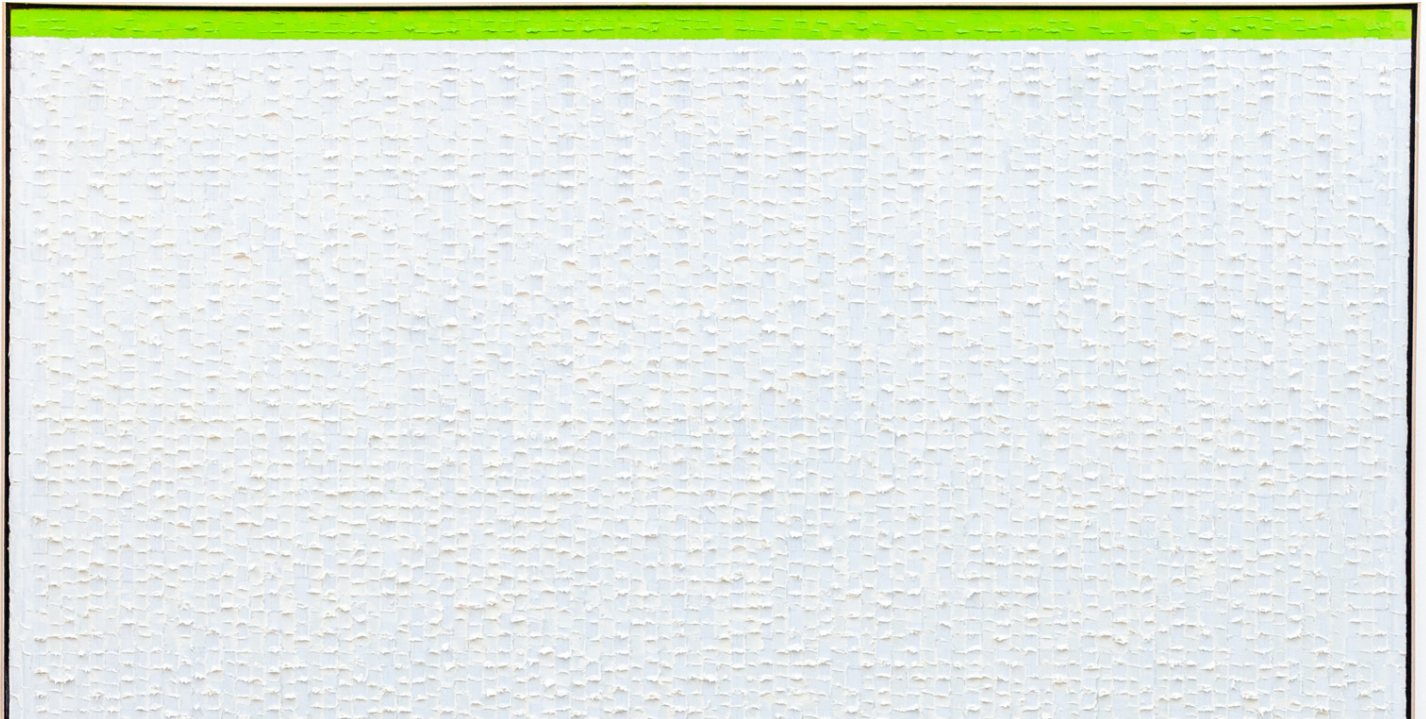


Young-II Ahn: The *Water* Paintings



Young-II Ahn, *Water AHSW 19* (detail), 2019, Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in

Kavi Gupta proudly presents a solo presentation of Young-II Ahn's *Water* series for The Art Show 2021, presented by ADAA. Almost a year has passed since Ahn's death. Born in 1934 in Gaesong—a North Korean city near the demilitarized zone, then part of colonial Japan—Ahn endured his allotment of trauma, from political pressure and war, to his sister's death from drowning in a stream as a child. He found his oasis in the arts. His father, a painter, and mother, a musician, eagerly shared their vocations with their son. Ahn's first solo painting exhibition came at age six, in Tokyo. He won the First Korean National Art Exhibition at age 15, just months before the Korean War began.

Ahn took refuge in the United States at the start of the Korean DMZ Conflict in 1966, choosing Los Angeles as his adoptive home. His earliest California paintings depicted birds, beach umbrellas, and the musicians he counted among his newfound friends. Those paintings

were beloved by viewers and quickly snapped up by collectors, until a legal dispute between dealers robbed Ahn of the agency to sell his own work. Enraged and depressed by the situation, he destroyed much of his remaining work and rejected the commercial art field for many years.

Yet, even through continued personal losses, including a profound near-death experience and the painful repercussions of a late-life stroke, Ahn continuously found respite in painting, exemplifying the triumph of art over misery.

As he wrote in his memoir, "If I didn't paint, I would not have known love and sensitivity for beauty, which have long enriched and broadened my life."

The Water Series

Ahn's welcoming persona and calming social presence

convinced many who met him that he was as cool and serene as his beloved paintings. This comparison between an artist and their work is one we all feel compelled to make at times. It is simplistic and frequently off-base, but in the case of Ahn it is not entirely without merit. Consider his Water paintings, which initially read like minimal, monochromatic studies. Closer examination reveals innumerable impasto ridges casting ominous shadows upon the placid surface, along with hundreds of tiny, multicolored dots. These seeds of chaos hiding within the calm challenge any first impressions that these paintings, or the artist who painted them, represent tranquility.

In the aftermath of his initial discouraging experiences with the American art market, Ahn sought sanctuary in his other childhood pastime, fishing, often taking long solo boat trips between Santa Monica and Catalina Island. On one such fishing trip, he had the harrowing experience of becoming lost at sea in a dense fog, and nearly dying. He writes in his memoir about the moment the fog finally lifted, and the brilliant sunlight illuminated the water's surface:

"My favorite colors from nature stretched to infinity. The sunlight crashed and reflected against the water every moment, dispersing splendid and sparkling colors in layers."

That phenomenal moment inspired Ahn to return to his studio, whence began his Water series, a nearly 40-year-long endeavor to put that profound experience of color and light into the canvas.

Like a psychiatrist driven to the field by their own mental illness, a yoga practitioner turned Yogi by weathering personal pain, or a scrapper turned world champion through pugilistic mastery, Ahn confronted and quieted his torturing demons through his disciplined and methodical approach to painting.

Erasure

Among Ahn's most enigmatic paintings are those in his Self-Reflection series. Featuring abstracted linguistic symbols, most of which reference Hangul text, these works share the idiosyncratic, methodical technique and compositional framework Ahn developed in his Water series. Also in the vein of his Water paintings—which came from a compulsion to convey an ethereal memory through immutable objects—his Self-Reflection paintings are rooted in the struggle to find an effective visual language to express something that is ultimately perhaps inexpressible.

The text in these paintings is readable at times, in segments, if the reader is willing and able to fill in the

gaps and deploy the imagination. But even for those unequipped to deconstruct what may or may not be written on the surface, certain concepts, such as erasure and fragmentation, remain conspicuous in the work. These paintings are reconstructed sanctuaries crafted by the mind and hands of a refugee.

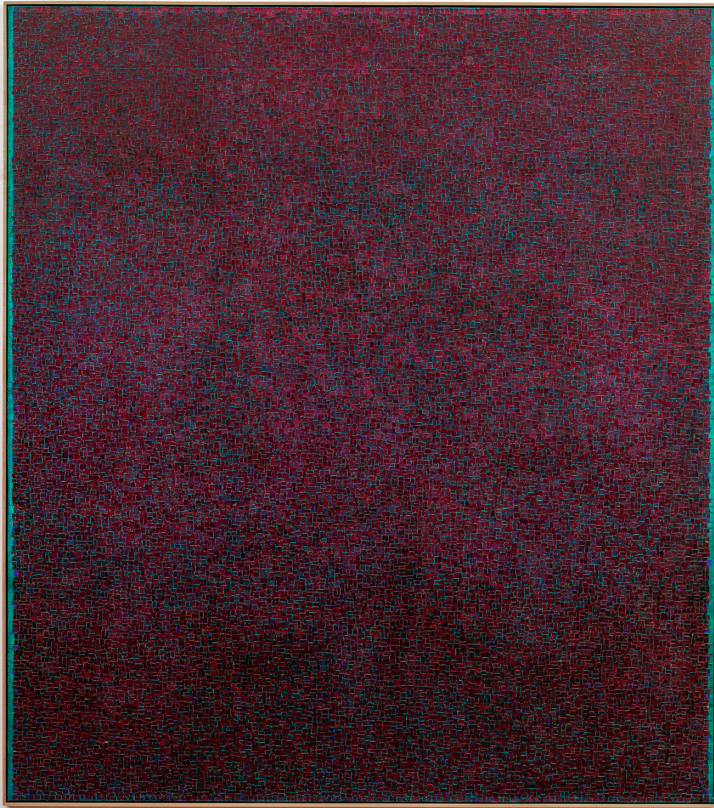
Few works in Ahn's Self-Reflection series speak more poignantly to this notion than the paintings he created in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11th, 2001. Not only did Ahn feel a deep sense of mourning for this assault on his chosen homeland, he had also married his wife Soraya just two days before the attacks, and Soraya's three adult daughters had flown to California from New York to attend the wedding. Contemplating the emotional weight of these events, Ahn created a series of chilling compositions that combine erasure and fragmentation; a nuanced, red, white, blue, and green palette; heavily abstracted, smoky grey clouds; and hints of falling lines and crashing forms.

Dansaekhwa

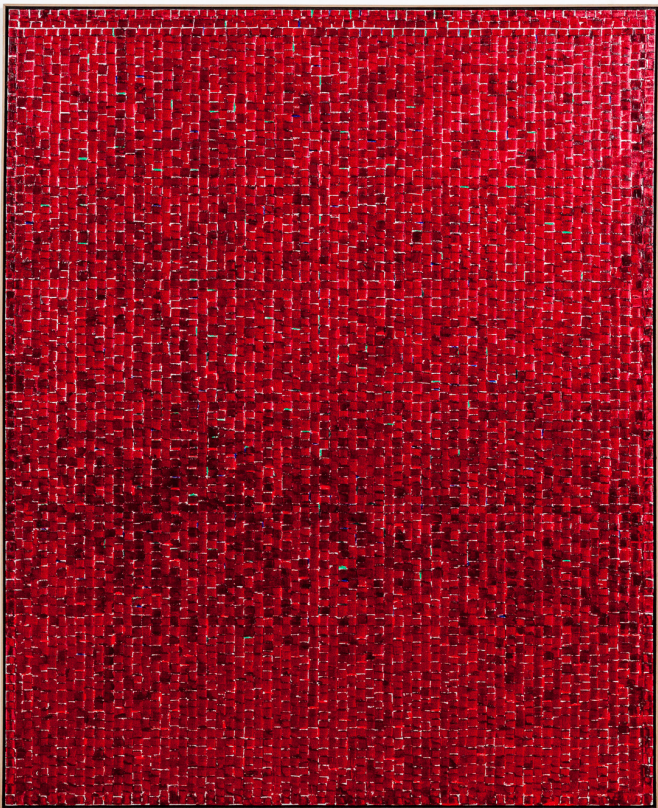
A question sometimes asked about Young-II Ahn's work is, "Are these paintings Dansaekhwa?" The art movement Dansaekhwa originated in Korea in the 1970s. Its name translates into English as "monochrome painting." It was coined by art critic Lee Yil to describe a trend he observed among artists such as Kim Tschang-yeul, Cho Yong-ik, Chung Sang-Hwa, Lee Dong Youb, Lee Ufan, Park Seobo, and others, towards non-objective, earth-tone paintings incorporating a limited range of hues.

Although Ahn was already living and working in the US when Dansaekhwa emerged in Korea, his work eventually caught the attention of Dansaekhwa expert Yoon Jin Sup, who in 2015 curated Ahn into the exhibition Dansaekhwa II: The Traces of Four Artists. In a critical essay accompanying the exhibition, Yoon wrote, "Young-II Ahn's canvases are comprised of small, repeating square-shaped dabs of color. This repetitive feature of his work comes from the same artistic tradition of the first-generation Korean Dansaekhwa painters."

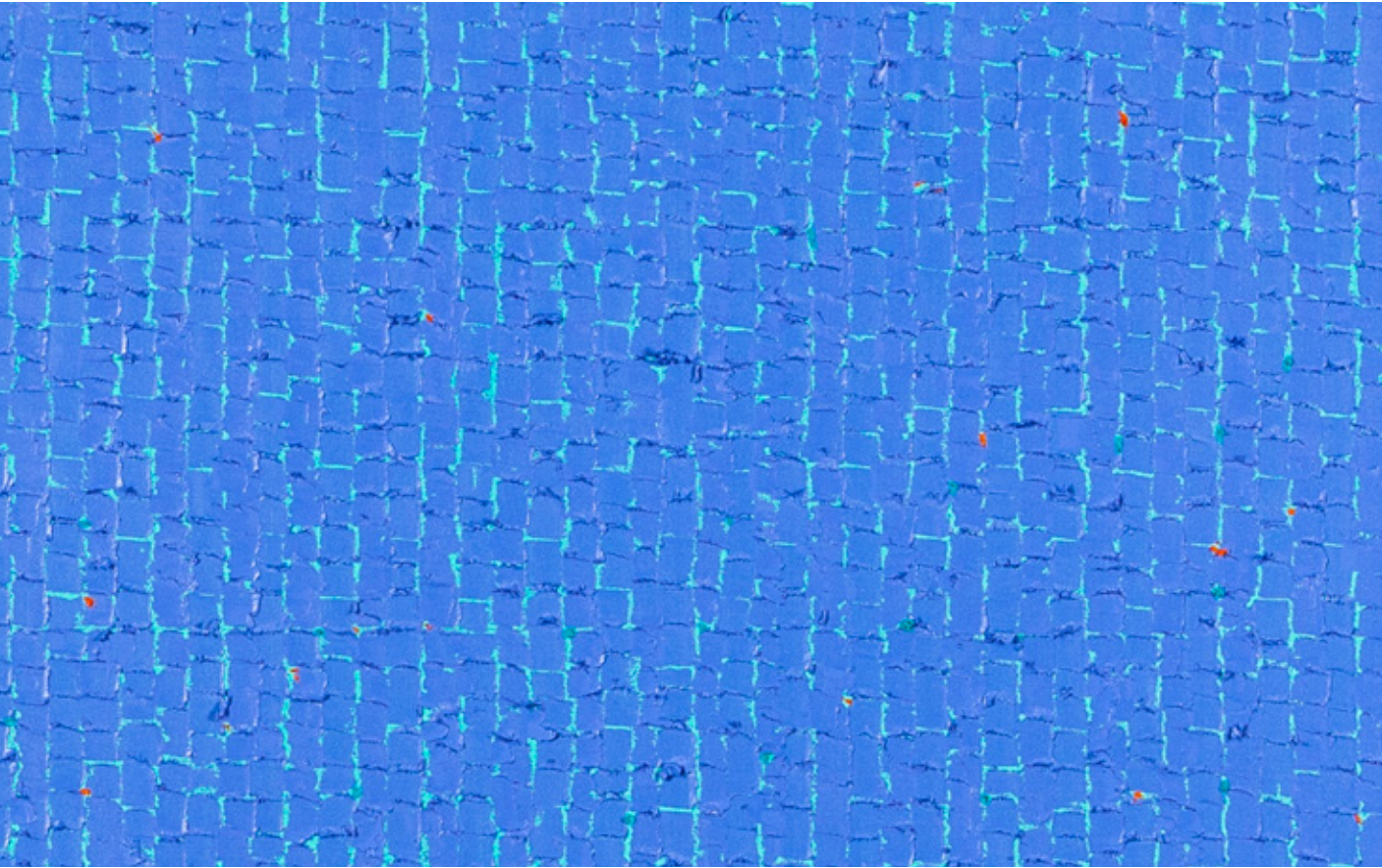
Additional connections between Ahn and the first-generation Dansaekhwa artists of Korea include their mutual reliance on nature as inspiration, and their shared desire to escape the oppressive aesthetic expectations of the market by developing new styles and techniques. And yet, the extremely individualized aspects of Ahn's work, along with his occasional forays into figuration and his largely solitary creative life, position him as more fully understood not only in context with his contemporaries or outside movements, but as an artist who confidently, quietly forged his own way.



Young-II Ahn, *Water A-6*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 90 x 80 in



Young-II Ahn, *Water BLSC 16*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 64 x 52 in



Young-II Ahn, *Water GLGV 20 (detail)*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 60 x 62 in