

Park Seo-Bo

17 March – 1 May 2021
White Cube Bermondsey

We plan to open this exhibition to the public on Tuesday 13 April, subject to UK government guidelines. Advance tickets can be booked [HERE](#).

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White Cube is pleased to present a major exhibition of works by Park Seo-Bo. Born in 1931 in Yecheon, Gyeongbuk, Park was part of a generation that spent its childhood under Japanese occupation and came to adulthood in the turmoil and deprivations of the Korean War (1950–53). First enrolled as a student of oriental painting at Hongik University in Seoul, after the interruption of war Park resumed his studies in the department of Western painting, then pursuing his interest in Art Informel during a stay in Paris in 1961. Following his return home, Park played a critical role in reshaping the post-war Korean art world as an educator, agitator and organiser. He went on to develop a practice rooted in a spiritual methodology, drawing on Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist philosophy as well as the Korean tradition of calligraphy, and is recognised internationally as the father of the 'Dansaekhwa' movement.

The two earliest works in the exhibition date from 1968, immediately preceding Park's best-known 'Ecriture' series. Around this time Park was experimenting with new forms, drawing inspiration from both Pop Art and Op Art. They feature an illusionistic sense of space, layering shapes and stripes in bright red, dark blue, green and yellow, mixed with white, and pairing straight with curvilinear lines or hard-edged with rounded forms. Park combines geometric abstraction with *Obangsaek*, a traditional Korean colour spectrum in which colours symbolise the elements and cardinal directions, signalling his interest in evolving a modernism infused with an authentically Korean aesthetic which was later to inform Dansaekhwa.

In the late-1960s Park embarked on the series for which he is best known, and which has remained his focus for the past sixty years. These works are known by the term 'Ecriture', borrowed from the French word for writing, though Park uses the Korean 'Myobop', derived from the Chinese characters 'to draw' and 'a method'. The artist recounts how he watched his toddler son attempting to form characters on the gridded paper used by Korean school children, in imitation of his older brother. Unable to stay within the lines, the child scribbled over his marks in frustration, then furiously attempted to erase them. His son's struggles reminded Park of the instruction 'to surrender and erase all traces of my ordeals again and again' which had been given to him by the Buddhist teacher Kim Iryeop a decade before.

This was the genesis of a meditative practice whereby Park set out to submit his prodigious, restless energy to an arduous programme of spiritual self-improvement, akin to the scholar-monks of ancient Korean tradition. For Park, art is a tool for spiritual development. Executed within a single sitting, harnessing an energy flow through repetitive action, the artwork is not the creation of an image but is the residue of a process of self-discipline integrating action, mind and matter. Park's early pencil and oil paint 'Ecriture' works from the 1970s feature repetitive, delicate fine pencil lines incised into a still-wet, monochromatic, pale surface. This action may be repeated many times, each layer

partially erasing the preceding one. In some, pencil lines cover the entire picture in an all-over 'graphisme' that results in a vibrating effect, their surface suggestive of bristling texture or gentle movement.

During the 1980s, Park greatly expanded his abstract language by incorporating traditional Korean hanji paper which is hand-made from mulberry bark. The remarkable durability of hanji has ensured the survival of some of the most ancient scriptures of Buddhism in Korea and, particularly in the west of the country, is integral to the structure of daily life in the form of wall coverings and door panels. To Park, the material not only offered endless opportunities for exploration and experimentation but represented a connection between his work and the natural world which he had begun to regard as essential. When applied on to a canvas backing and soaked with water, the hanji reverted to a pulp that could be pushed and scraped into sculptural forms. Using sharp pieces of bamboo, fluted lead sticks or sometimes just his own hand, Park at first incised multiple zig zag strokes or furrows to create dynamic compositions, adding more pigment during the final step. In these works, Park enacts a painterly reversal, allowing the materiality of the paper to speak for itself rather than simply being the support, and for colour to emerge through the space of action. 'My pieces are products of a dynamic harmony between the material properties of hanji and my Myobop technique,' he has said.

In the 'Colour Ecriture' works, which date from 2000s onwards, Park began using vivid colours, marking a sharp transition from the neutral tones of earlier paintings. This shift was inspired by nature, prompted, in particular, by a visit to Japan in 2000 where he experienced the exuberant autumn colours around Mount Bandai near Fukushima. Observing that hanji, unlike Western papers, absorbs rather than reflects colour, in these works, Park handles the paper while still wet and flexible, repetitively furrowing lines into its surface to create a rippled, sculptural effect, with alternating ridges and crevices. Once dry, the main colour pigment is applied over the surface, and the crevices infilled with another shade. Taken directly from nature, these colours are vibrant, mixed by Park himself and directly connected to his observations of maple leaves, cherry blossom, jade or even air. Within the compositions, smooth rectangular areas or 'windows' of single colour offer a textural contrast and a 'breathing hole', to let the mind rest.

Park's most recent works, the 'Pencil Ecriture (colour)' series feature horizontal blocks of pencil lines over a single, pale colour, such as light pink, sky blue or acid green. Thin, undulating horizontal bands and cloud-like coloured shapes of background pastel colour are glimpsed through the space between pencil marks shaped, as always, by an intense meditative focus and by the rhythmic, controlled back and forth movement of the artist's hand on wet oil with a thinly sharpened pencil. Park regards them as a 'reinterpretation' of his earlier 'Ecriture' works, but rather than a programme of self-cultivation, the artist's focus has turned to art's potential for collective healing, harnessing the therapeutic properties of colour, nature and meditation. 'My slower movement of pencil tracings overlap on top of one another to reveal the passage of time', he has said. 'Neither black nor white, nor vivid, I am enjoying the last moments of my life on a fine pastel tone.'

Park Seo-Bo has been widely lauded throughout his career for championing Korean art, and received the Art Society Asia Game Changer Awards in 2018 and Silver Crown Cultural Medal in Korea in 2011. His work has been exhibited internationally, including; Langen Foundation, Neuss (2020); Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2019); Museum of Fine Art, Boston (2018); Venice Biennale (1988 and 2015); Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul (2014); Portland Museum of Art, Oregon (2010); Singapore Art Museum (2008); Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2007); Tate Liverpool, UK (1992); Brooklyn Museum, New York (1981), and Expo '67, Montreal (1967). His work is included in the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; M+, Hong Kong; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, UAE; The National

Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul; and the K20, *Kunstsammlung* Nordrhein-Westfalen, amongst others.