



Young-Il Ahn, *California F-57*, 1994. Oil on canvas board. 44 × 48 in. (111.8 × 121.9 cm). Photographer: Evan Bedford. Courtesy of the Young-Il Ahn Estate and Perrotin.

YOUNG-IL AHN *SELECTED WORKS 1986–2019*

April 11–May 24, 2025

Perrotin is pleased to announce its global representation of the Estate of Young-Il Ahn. In conjunction with the announcement, Perrotin Los Angeles presents *Young-Il Ahn: Selected Works 1986–2019*, a historical survey of Ahn's work over three decades.

Young-Il Ahn (1934–2020) vaulted to critical acclaim late in his career for his exquisite *Water* paintings. In 2017–18, an exhibition featuring Ahn's abstract *Water* series at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art had the distinction of being the first one-person presentation at the museum to feature a Korean-American artist. Despite the late-career attention to his work, the full scope of Ahn's painting practice was little-exhibited during his lifetime. *Young-Il Ahn: Selected Works 1986–2019* introduces viewers to the breadth of Ahn's work across multiple series, providing important historical context to his lifelong engagement with the relationship between abstraction and representation.

Born in 1934 in Gaeseong, a city now geographically located in North Korea, Ahn moved with his family as a young boy to Horikiri, northeast of Tokyo. In 1943 the Ahn family left Japan and returned to Korea when his father, artist Seung-gak Ahn, accepted a position as an art instructor at Cheongju Teachers College. A child prodigy,

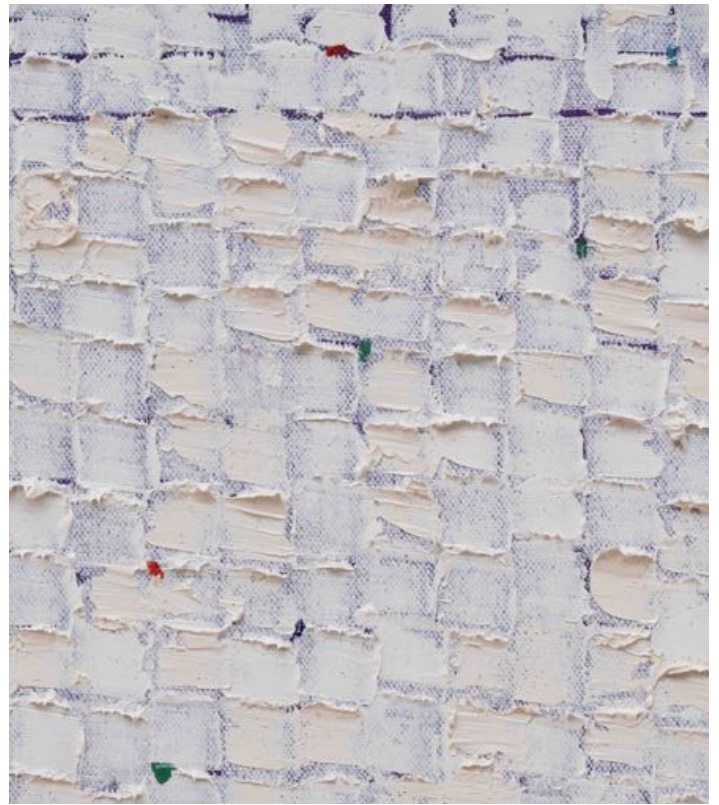
Ahn was awarded numerous prizes as a student, winning national art contests in 1949 and 1954. After graduating from the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University and serving in the military, Ahn eventually made his way to the United States, settling in Los Angeles in 1966.

During the five-plus decades Ahn lived in Los Angeles, the light and atmosphere of California played a prominent role in his artwork. An avid fisherman, his painting practice was forever changed when, in 1983, a motorboat he was operating became engulfed by fog off the Santa Monica coast. Unable to get his bearings, Ahn drifted on the Pacific Ocean; as he later recalled, "I lost all sense of direction. I cut the engine and let the currents take me." When the fog cleared, Ahn's experience of sunlight rippling on the waves was an epiphany: "I became profoundly aware of the surface of the sea being reborn in each and every moment. What I witnessed was engraved deep in my heart. From that day on, the sea lived inside me and I became part of the sea."

Although Ahn's epiphany at sea served as the inspiration for his celebrated *Water* paintings, the artist's decades-long engagement with the refractory qualities of water are also present in other series of work. The earliest painting in the exhibition, *Harbor*, from 1986, is an early example of Ahn's fascination with the color, motion, and variation of



Young-Il Ahn, *Water SQMW 19*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 24 × 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm). Photographer: Evan Bedford. Courtesy of the Young-Il Ahn Estate and Perrotin.



Young-Il Ahn, *Water SQMW 19* (detail), 2019. Oil on canvas. 24 × 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm). Photographer: Evan Bedford. Courtesy of the Young-Il Ahn Estate and Perrotin.

sunlight on water. Painted only a few years after Ahn's experience on the Pacific, *Harbor* hints at the prismatic effect of the water's surface, while still representing the abstracted forms of boats docked in a harbor. In later examples from the series, Ahn's *Harbor* paintings are almost fully abstract, the artist's geometric strokes offering the barest suggestion of boat masts and sails. Viewing Ahn's early and later *Harbor* paintings side by side, viewers can see a progression from representation to abstraction—a development that calls to mind similar artistic evolutions in the work of early-twentieth-century artists such as Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondrian.

A special focus of the Los Angeles exhibition is a group of works from Ahn's *California* series. Begun in the 1990s, and featuring a loose style of gestural abstraction, the *California* paintings draw on the artist's phenomenological experience of California's space, sun, and atmosphere—concerns that similarly captivated the region's Light and Space artists. In Ahn's own words, his *California* paintings sought to capture "the clear and bright infinity of California, where space is filled with stunning colors, forms, and sound waves from living nature"—sensations, for the artist, that caused his body to "vibrate" with awareness.

The deeply personal nature of Ahn's painting practice is especially evident in works from his *Self-Reflection* and *Tal (Mask)* series. These abstracted compositions carry embedded references to the artist's cultural heritage, with strokes and marks that hint, with varying degrees of legibility, to the forms of Korean writing and Korean masks—poignant gestures of self-inscription within the space of painting.

Finally, the exhibition will present a suite of Ahn's *Water* paintings, the series for which Ahn is most well-known, and that he painted with sustained attention until his death in 2020. Looking back in 2017 on the

formative experience from which these paintings developed, Ahn reflected, "I painted and painted and could not stop.... Ideas about water are forever overflowing; no matter how many water ideas I manage to express on canvas, more water ideas continue to surge."

In addition to his 2017–18 solo exhibition at LACMA, *Unexpected Light: Works by Young-Il Ahn*, the artist was also the subject of two solo shows at the Long Beach Museum of Art, *A Memoir of Water: Works by Young-Il Ahn* in 2014, and *Young-Il Ahn: When Sky Meets Water*, in 2017–18. Upon his death in 2020, *ArtNews* described the artist as a "trailblazing painter of radiant abstractions." Ahn's work is in the permanent collections of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.

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Jennifer King