



Young-Il Ahn, *Sunny Afternoon*, 1998. Oil on canvas. 24 x 30 inches. Photographer: Evan Bedford. Courtesy of the Estate of Young-Il Ahn and Perrotin.

## YOUNG-IL AHN SELF REFLECTIONS

September 9 – October 17, 2026

*When I look out upon the ocean, I tremble as if I am holding part of the universe in my hand. This is why, for the past thirty years, I have ceaselessly tried, through the Water series, to put that "tremble" onto my canvases.*

—Young-Il Ahn

Perrotin is pleased to announce ***Young-Il Ahn: Self Reflections***, the first solo presentation of works by Korean-American artist Young-Il Ahn (1934–2020) at Perrotin New York, and the second exhibition since the gallery announced representation of the estate in 2025. Featuring ten paintings from his celebrated *Water* series, along with a selection of abstractions spanning his fifty-year career of painting in California, ***Young-Il Ahn: Self Reflections*** highlights the deeply personal and autobiographical nature of the artist's practice. Displayed alongside the *Water* paintings are works from additional series including *Harbor*, *Musicians*, *Horse Race*, *Memorial to September 11, 2001*, as well as the eponymous *Self Reflection* series to which the exhibition title nods.

Young-Il Ahn was born in Gaeseong, a city now geographically located in North Korea. As a young boy, Ahn moved with his family 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 won numerous prizes as a student,

including national art contests in 1949 and 1954. After graduating from the highly competitive 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.

In 2017–18, with the exhibition *Unexpected Light: Works by Young-Il Ahn*, Ahn became the first-ever Korean-American artist to be featured in a solo exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, bringing overnight acclaim to his *Water* paintings. Ahn's work 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* paid tribute to Ahn as a "trailblazing painter of radiant abstractions."

Ahn painted nearly 400 works inspired by the light on the Pacific Ocean in his celebrated *Water* series, a subject which he spent over thirty years returning to and developing. The series began in 1982, when he had a life-changing experience on the water. During a day of deep-sea fishing in the Santa Monica Bay, fog enveloped his boat and distorted his ability to navigate back to land, leaving him stranded at sea. Engulfed in fog and unable to see the horizon line, Ahn found his understanding of perception forever altered, and the experience sparked a philosophical and spiritual investigation into the subtle divisions between light, space, and form. He spent much of his career attempting to capture that life-altering experience on canvas and give form to that feeling on the sea.



Young-Il Ahn, *Untitled (Water)*, c. 1985. Oil on canvas. 56 x 44 inches. Photographer: Paul Salvesson. Courtesy of the Estate of Young-Il Ahn and Perrotin.



Young-Il Ahn, *Flute Player*, 1994. Oil on canvas. 34 x 28 inches. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the Estate of Young-Il Ahn and Perrotin.

In the *Water* series, Ahn developed his signature and non-traditional painting technique of applying and layering color with a painter's knife in a repetitive pattern that echoes the undulations of water. Ahn spent most of his career developing the series, expanding and transforming it over time. In *Untitled (Water)* (c. 1985), the earliest painting in the show, Ahn layers color to create an abstract pattern with clusters of fiery red that echo the shape of the setting sun and its reflection on water hovering at the bottom edge of the canvas. The paint application is tight and dense. In nine paintings from 2009 to 2018, this concept of reflection and light is transmuted into color and pattern and organized in a minimal grid. In these later works, the knife markings expand and shift between vertical and horizontal, and his use of color becomes more vibrant and varied. Ahn's use of a palette knife allowed him to manipulate his materials by carving and scraping the paint and applying layers smoothly—a technique resembling the fluid motion of the sea.

While Ahn spent three decades working on the *Water* series, he explored many other passions, interests, and experiences from his life in California in his work. Music was a topic that he returned to often and played a prominent role in his life. His mother was a musician, and he grew up playing the clarinet, piano, and cello. In *Flute Player* (1994), the dense layers and deep shades of blue express the energy and vibrancy of music. Just as he captured the experience of being at sea in his *Water* series, his abstractions of other topics capture their intangible qualities—the vibrations of music and of the rapturous, swirling energy of horses stampeding around a track in *Horse Race* (1997). He achieves this by altering his application of paint and the arrangement of his compositions. In *Harbor Mist B* (2004) and *Self Reflection (Bluebirds)* (2002), the patterns are dramatically different, but both a specific layering technique that appears almost like collage. In these works, Ahn's

abstractions echo the grids of early Piet Mondrian or the circular abstractions of Sonia Delaunay, yet stand out for their ability to grapple with the felt experience of a sunny afternoon or even a tragic memory of the attacks on September 11th.

Memory and loss are evoked in *Memorial to September 11, 2001*, a series that Ahn painted following the tragedy of the Twin Towers falling after the terrorist attacks in New York City. A large, dense painting with an abstract grid reads as a bird's-eye view of Manhattan, and the stains and blotches of wet paint evoke the deep sadness of the tragedy of September 11th. Images of survivors fleeing the wreckage covered in thick gray ash, and of people jumping from the towers were transmitted across television screens and printed in newspapers around the world, serving as haunting artifacts of that day. The trauma, terror, and devastation of that moment are felt in Ahn's abstraction. Just as in his *Water* series, where he creates an evocation of the sensation, reflection, and immutable nature of water, Ahn gives form to sadness, loss, and mourning in *Memorial to Sept. 11* (2001).

The works on view at Perrotin New York present the depth and complexity of Ahn's practice, highlighting his singular approach to abstraction over a fifty-year career and celebrating his lifelong commitment to giving form to his passions, reflections, and musings. Whether the deep impression of his solo journey in a boat on the ocean, or the fragility of life on September 11th, Ahn distilled his personal experiences in his work. Seen together, these paintings showcase an artist clearly in dialogue with lineages of global abstraction, yet who developed a self-reflective form uniquely his own.

—Jessica Beck