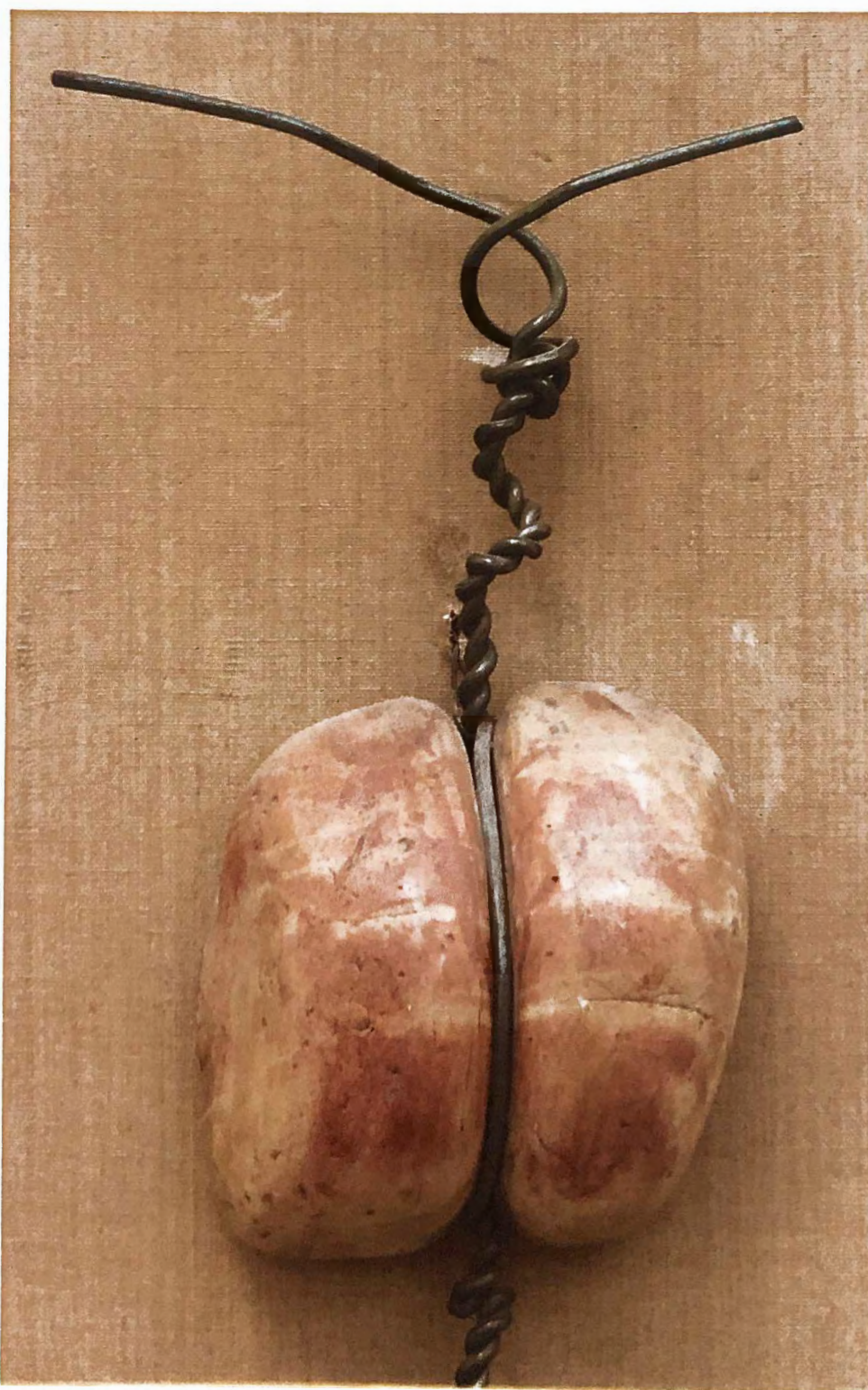

What Contemporary Art Means in Korea

JOAN KEE



We find ourselves inside the Armistice Agreement Signing Hall of the Joint Security Area, the so-called truce village in Panmunjeom just north of the border separating North from South Korea. We sit in the room that bore witness to the cease-fire agreement that nominally ended the Korean War. Sunlight streams in from banks of rectangular windows, bathing the dreary space in golden light. The mood is tranquil, but it is a tranquility born of exhaustion, in this case, after harrowing slaughter that on a per-capita level made the Korean War (1950–53) one of the deadliest of the twentieth century. Of modest dimensions, the painting, by Soviet-Korean artist Pen Varlen (1916–1990; cat. 90) was executed just after “Operation Little Switch,” the hard-won agreement concerning terms for prisoner of war exchange. Pen seats us not at the negotiating table, where the fate of so many POWs was decided, nor are we mere spectators that might have occupied the rows of folding chairs to the right. Pondering the awkwardness of our position, we notice how natural light seems artificial—a hint, perhaps, of the profound unease that Pen must have experienced as a child of displacement. Born in the coastal region Koreans call Yeonhaeju that abuts both North Korea and China but is legally recognized as Soviet maritime territory, Pen was the only ethnic Korean among the Soviets dispatched from 1948 to train North Korean artists.¹

In the United States, Europe, Japan, and many other parts of the world, the end of World War II in 1945 marks the beginning of postwar art. But the physical and psychological destruction caused by the Korean War demands that “postwar” in a Korean context be dated from 1953, the year a cease-fire agreement was signed by the United Nations General Command, North Korea, and China. Four years later, the effects of the war remained fresh in the minds of Korean artists, particularly those old enough to have seen active military duty, as well as those forced to flee the North. Born in South Hamgyeong Province not far from where Pen Varlen was born, Kwon Young-woo (1926–2013) reflected on wartime havoc in his 1957 painting *After the Bombing* (fig. 70). Measuring almost five feet high, the painting depicts what appears to be the hulking wreck of

¹ I thank Soyeon Ryu and Haely Chang for their diligent research assistance. Korean proper names have been transliterated according to the author's preference or following common usage. The Revised Romanization system has been applied only in those cases where no such preference or usage is available.

A few months after painting *Panmunjeom*, Pen would become dean of the Pyeongyang University of Fine Arts, where he prioritized the establishment of an ink painting department, which would be “nationalist in form and socialist in content.” Park Hyesung, “Byeon Weollyong: Simjang eui dongyo sogeseo” [Byeon Weollyong: In the fluttering heartbeat], in *Pen Varlen, 1916–1990* (Gwacheon: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2016), 22.



FIGURE 69
Seung-taek Lee, *Tied Stone* (detail), 1958. Stone, wire, and canvas, 26 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 4 in. (66.3 x 50 x 10 cm). The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas

FIGURE 70
Kwon Young-woo, *After the Bombing*, 1957. Ink on paper, 57 1/2 x 72 in. (146 x 183 cm). The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea

- 2 Pak Sang-ok, "Hyeondae misul eui jiyangjeongsin" [The orientation of contemporary art], *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 7, 1955.
- 3 For Ko Yu-seop, the first formally trained Korean art historian, *hyeondae misul* meant something more than a synonym for the new or recent. Ko Yu-seop, "Hyeondae segye misulgye eui gwiwu" [The return of the contemporary global art world], *Sindonga* 3, no. 11 (November 1933): 38–42.
- 4 Kim Young-ju, "Hanguk misul eui jemunje," *Munhak yesul* [Literature and art] (April 1955): 187.
- 5 The Asia Foundation provided seed money for the Bando Gallery in 1956. Located in downtown Seoul at the landmark Bando Hotel, it was Korea's first modern commercial gallery that exhibited and sold the work of many artists, including Kim Whanki, To Sang Bong, and Park Sookeun. Ki Haegyeong, "Bando hwarang gwa aseajaedan eui munhwagye huwen" [Bando Gallery and the support of the Asia Foundation], in *Geundae misul yeongu 2006* [Modern art research 2006] (Gwacheon: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2006), 223–39.
- 6 For a summary of the Asia Foundation's activities regarding Korean art, see Chung Moojeong, "Asijaedan gwa 1950 nyeondae hanguk misulgye" [The Asia Foundation and the Korean art community of the 1950s], *Hanguk yesul yeongu* [The Korean journal of art studies] 26 (December 2019): 61–71.
- 7 Christina Klein, *Cold War Cosmopolitanism: Period Style in 1950s Korean Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 112.

a train sitting on a broken track segment. Positioned in the center of the painting, one rail appear thrust toward the immediate foreground. Bent toward the wreckage, the other rail gestures to us to fix our sights on the branchlike fragments of metal jutting from the painting's left-hand side. Remnants of some unknown machine, the fragments dangle helplessly on the ground and in midair. The frontal placement of the wreckage conveys how fellow artist Pak Sang-ok described "the era of today" in 1955 as being irrevocably descended from "the production of weapons of mass destruction."² In the distant background, we spy the faint wash silhouette of a large dome-shaped building topped by a squat, triangular structure. Possibly a factory, it has managed to stay upright, even down to the columnar vertical posts attached or next to the structure. *After the Bombing* all but presses the history of recent destruction to the viewer while also making room for images suggestive of resilience.

Introduced into visual arts writing in the early 1930s, the Korean term *hyeondae misul* can refer to either modern or contemporary art, or both. After 1953 the term galvanized artists and critics to reflect critically upon their own positions in a world dramatically changed by the cascading effects of World War II, the Korean War, and what in South Korea was known as the April Revolution of 1960. In this way, *hyeondae misul* recalled its origins as a term originally paired with *sidae eui yesul*, or "art of the times," an earlier Korean phrase used to encapsulate the aspirations of those seeking to make artworks relevant to the specifics of a given time and place.³ Artists and critics like Kim Young-ju (1920–1995), who remained in the South rather than defect to the North, as did many of his prominent colleagues, described the "present" of Korean art as indelibly shaped by having to "bear witness to Communism."⁴ Like the Soviets did for North Korea, US military and political strategy extended to the promotion of contemporary art in the form of cultural exchanges, the provision of art supplies, travel and exhibition subsidies, and even gallery patronage.⁵ Backed by the CIA since it began life as the Committee for Free Asia in 1951, the Asia Foundation ranked among the leading financial supporters of contemporary Korean art. The foundation helped underwrite the costs of the National Museum of Korea when the South Korean legislature slashed ninety percent of its budget in 1953, as well as provided funds for the first overseas exhibition of contemporary Korean art, which took place at the World House Gallery in New York in 1958.⁶

Cold War polarities complicated an existing predicament for Korean artists already grappling with the matter of identity forming outside and in tandem with the question of national independence. Artists whose careers began during the Japanese colonial occupation struggled with the formation of individual and collective identity in relation to lost sovereignty, and again after the Korean War via disjunctions between national sovereignty, cultural independence, and ideological autonomy. Despite government censorship of "Japanese color" (*waesae*), which ranged from bans on using the Japanese language to effacing any representation of Japan on film, the postwar Korean art world still operated according to many of the structures put in place by the Japanese colonial authorities.⁷ Although known since 1948 as the *National Art Exhibition*, or

Gukjeon for short, the annual government art salon remained largely unchanged from its colonial predecessor, the *Joseon Fine Arts Exhibition*, established in 1922. Moreover, although Japan and South Korea would not establish formal diplomatic ties until 1965, the former was a crucial access point of information, as well as a conduit for Korean artists seeking entrée into a broader international art world via such events as the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.⁸

At the same time, artists educated in Japan or in Japanese wrestled intensely with a colonial legacy vigorously denounced on political and moral grounds but which also included the emergence of a distinctly cosmopolitan group of artists and critics whose attunement to happenings outside Korea would help lay the groundwork for a new understanding of modern and contemporary art. Schooled in Tokyo, painters like Yoo Youngkuk (1916–2002; cat. 108) and Kim Whanki (1913–1974; cats. 39, 81, 82, 112) produced abstract and abstract-adjacent works that rechanneled their knowledge toward depicting Korean landscapes and cultural motifs, such as white porcelain jars colloquially known as “moon jars.” Their explorations mirrored critical interest in what Kim Young-gi, one of the most prolific critics in 1950s Korea, saw as the “Asianification” of Western oil painting, in which European artists turned deliberately to Asian art as a vital part of their own claims to modernity.⁹

Other artists and critics frequently criticized modern art in Japan as derivative of European precedents. The painter Nam Kwan observed, for example, how “it may be an advantage” that Korean artists never had any sustained direct contact with Europe.¹⁰ Ink painters sometimes deliberately refrained from using bright colors to signal their rejection of Nihonga, the artistic category referring to paintings that combined techniques of Western oil painting and traditional ink painting endorsed by the Japanese state. The painter Kim Hwa-gyeong, for example, stated that such renaming exceeded mere semantics: “A basic step in the construction of a national art is to first eliminate the color of Nihonga” and produce work that reflected a “national consciousness.”¹¹ Some artists used the word *hyeondae* as a declaration of this consciousness. Formed in 1957 to protest the *National Art Exhibition*’s uncritical resemblance to its *Joseon Fine Arts Exhibition* predecessor, the Paegyanghoe group of mid-career ink painters (including Kim Young-gi, Kim Ki-chang [1913/14–2001; cat. 66], Park Rehyun [1920–1976; cats. 45, 97], and Chun Kyung-ja [1924–2015]) described their works as “contemporary ink painting,” “new ink painting,” and “national painting.”¹²

Discussions of recent art in both North and South Korea became a prime opportunity for thinking more explicitly about which values to uphold. Words like “freedom” (*jayu*) and “personality” (*gaesong*) liberally peppered South Korean art writing, while North Korean critics waxed

8 Japan was also where Korean expatriates aligned with either North or South Korea could exhibit work together. Based in Japan ever since he left to attend art school in Tokyo in 1937, the artist Quac Insik participated in one such exhibition at the Muramatsu Gallery in Tokyo in 1961.

9 Kim Young-gi, “Jeobgeun-haneun dongseoyanghwa segyemisulsa eui donghyan-geseo” [Approaching Eastern and Western painting among the trends of world art history], *Chosun Ilbo*, December 11, 1955.

10 Nam Kwan, “Wongungi,” [Perspective], *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, April 11, 1954.

11 Kim Hwa-gyeong, “Dongyang-hwaroseo eui hanhwa,” *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, January 14, 1950. Kim also used *joeseonhwa*, a word initially used by the Seonjeon to describe non-Nihonga ink paintings. Choe Yol, *Hanguk geundae misul eui yeoksa: Hanguk misulsa sajeon, 1800–1945* [The history of Korean modern art: A dictionary of Korean art history, 1800–1945] (Seoul: Youlhwadang, 2015). That Kim Hwa-gyeong used this term suggests that the ideological divide between North and South Korea had not yet crystallized.

12 Kim Kyung-yeon, “1950 nyeondae hangukhwa eui sumukchusangjeok kyeonghyang,” *Misulsa hak yeongu* (1999): 69. Important to note is Chun Kyung-ja’s objection to calling ink painting “Korean painting” (*hangukhwa*), which she described as “nonsense.” In her view, the insistence on cultural essence would merely replicate the logic behind the creation of Nihonga, which emerged through “nationalistic tendencies.” Using the word *hangukhwa* encourages similarly narrow thinking akin to “building a wall that actually kills the individuality of the artist.” Chun, quoted in “Hanguk-hwaneun hyeongseong doelsuissuikka,” *Chosun Ilbo* 9 (November 1961).

- 13 While both words refer to "the people" in Korean, *inmin* and *gunmin* came to stand for ideologically opposing representations of personhood in North and South Korea since the two Koreas promulgated different constitutions in 1948. Justine Guichard, "In the Name of the People: Disagreeing over Peoplehood in the North and South Korean Constitutions," *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 4, no. 2 (2017): 402–45.
- 14 Lee Kyungsung, "Hyeondae misul eui banghyang" [Directions of contemporary art], *Seoul Sinmun*, October 26, 1956.
- 15 Among South Korea's most dedicated champions of photography, the photographer Limb Eung-Sik deplored the exclusion of photography from the 1956 *Gukjeon* despite photography having "long been accepted within the ambit of modern formative arts." Limb Eung-Sik, "Saenghwal-jueui eui seungni" [The victory of life-oriented realism], *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, December 20, 1956.

eloquently about "liberation" (*haebang*) and "the people" (*inmin*).¹³ Despite the ideological divide that such terminological differences convey, citizens of both countries were deeply keyed into "redevelopment" (*jaegeon*) and "reality" (*hyeonsil*) as constant subjects of exploration. The critic Lee Kyungsung tellingly wrote of how the "new realism" was a question of "direction" refracted through how "machine civilization disrupts human mentality or consciousness from the modern to the contemporary" and how each individual must contend with the fact of their intrinsic loneliness.¹⁴

Embodying the imbrication of art with such questions is *In the Vicinity of a Thermoelectric Power Plant, Tanginli, Seoul* (fig. 71). Taken in the 1950s by Lee Hae-sun, the photograph is divided, with the upper portion showing a single smokestack towering over an accumulation of displaced dirt. Plumes of combustion gas dissolve into the clouds, further emphasizing the verticality of the work. In the lower half, a group of women draw water from a well, seemingly oblivious to the factory behind them. Some wear *hanbok*, traditional attire consisting of a short jacket and a full skirt. By itself, the scene recalls any number of pastoral landscapes or scenes of rustic domesticity popular during the colonial occupation and even well into the 1950s, as may be seen in the works of artists like Park Sookeun (1914–1965; cats. 95, 122, 123), the self-taught painter whose choice of subjects and sense of texture made him a national darling. That the photograph resembles a landscape composition in a traditional vertical hanging scroll, where spatial distance correlates to physical distance from the bottom edge of the work, is no coincidence. Trained as a painter before shifting to photography in the 1930s, Lee may have wanted to make the artistic value of photography intelligible to established painters openly hostile toward the idea of photography being recognized as fine art.¹⁵

A member of the deposed Korean royal family whose great-uncle was Yi Ha-eung, the powerful regent of mid-nineteenth-century Joseon best known as Daewongun (Prince of the Great Court), Lee Hae-sun would have been especially sensitive to friction produced between



FIGURE 71
Lee Hae-sun, *In the Vicinity of a Thermoelectric Power Plant, Tanginli, Seoul*, ca. late 1950s. Gelatin silver print, 23½ × 16 in. (60 × 40.5 cm). Private collection



discrepant periods, beliefs, and lifestyles.¹⁶ The new Korean republic was marked by a distinct hostility toward monarchy, embodied by its president, Rhee Syngman, who condemned his own noble lineage as “a disgrace rather than an honor.”¹⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, Lee Hae-sun gravitated toward Surrealism as a means of coming to terms with the tension produced by non-sensical or awkward juxtapositions.¹⁸ The chain-link fence crowned with barbed wire separates the women from the embankment on which the power plant stands. Together with the vertical orientation of the work, it emphasizes how the division most relevant to the lives of ordinary Koreans was not the arbitrary demarcation separating North and South Korea but the stark difference between large-scale industrial development and less mechanized practices occurring on a local level. *In the Vicinity of a Thermoelectric Power Plant, Tanginli, Seoul* maps another set of coordinates plotted against the axes of supposed tradition and future-oriented development, as well as of continuity and rupture.

Some artists sought to fuse these axes together. In a pair of hanging scrolls titled *Still Life*, Park Rehyun reimagined traditional objects of literati painting, such as bronzes and incense burners (fig. 72). The shapes are familiar, but they also appear to combine and dissolve with other geometric forms whose referents are not entirely clear. In the lower half of the left scroll, Park incises the surface with small, carefully delineated lines resembling miniature tree branches or the surface of a woven basket. The right-hand scroll displays multiple vessels from a variety of perspectives, including one vasselike receptacle that appears foreshortened so that the viewer seems to be directly above its opening. The absence of a stable vantage point underscores Park’s interest in painting as a dynamic constellation of forms rather than as a predictable outcome. As

¹⁶ The prohibitive cost of cameras made photography something of an elite practice in Korea. In addition to Lee, photographers, including Han Youngsoo and Limb Eung-Sik, came from affluent backgrounds.

¹⁷ Rhee, quoted in Chong-sik Lee, *Syngman Rhee: The Prison Years of a Young Radical* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2001), 150.

¹⁸ On the Korean meditation of Surrealism, see Joan Kee, “Translation: Felicitous Infidelities,” in *Global Surrealism* (New York and London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Tate Modern, 2022), 142–43.

FIGURE 72
Park Rehyun, *Still Life*, 1959. Ink and color on paper, each screen
54 1/4 × 16 1/4 in. (138 × 42 cm). Private collection

19 Yi Pong-sang, "Mihyeop-jeonpyeong" [Review of the Korean Fine Arts Association exhibition], *Dong-A Ilbo*, June 19, 1956.

20 In literature being disabled was often equated with being fundamentally unable to live a fulfilled life. A study of thirty-eight Korean novels from the 1950s to the 1970s, for example, showed that most romantic encounters ended in rejection or denial of the impaired character. However, after the Korean War, pity seemed to be the prevailing attitude toward the disabled. Hwang Yong-ha and Lee Seung-hui, "Hanguk soseole natanan jangaeingwan yeongu: 1950 nyeondaebuteo 1970 nyeondaekkajireul jungsimeuro" [A study on the views of individuals with disabilities in Korean novels, focusing on the period from 1980 to 2007], *Hanguk teuksu gyoyukhakhoe* [Korean journal of special education] 39, no. 3 (December 2004): 101–2.

21 Kim Mi-jung, "1960 nyeondae hanguk misul e natanan minsok gwa musok motibeu" [Folk and shamanistic motifs in 1960s Korean art], *Hanguk geundae misulsaahak* [Journal of Korean modern art] (August 2006): 189–223.

Park was able to give her pictures enough tension and slack so that they never calcified into fixed compositions, her reconfigured ink paintings cemented her professional reputation despite the fact that she was a woman in a heavily male-dominated and chauvinistic field. The oil painter Lee Bong-sang, one of the most senior artists of the day, praised her keen "sense of the contemporary" because of how she recognized "form" as more than a matter of applying technique or producing a representation.¹⁹

Joining Park in fielding new perspectives was her husband, Kim Ki-chang. A deaf-mute in a time and place that regarded disabled individuals as objects of pity, indifference, or derision, Kim employed a vigorous brushwork that itself became a megaphone amplifying the voices of those who could not be heard.²⁰ In the *Life of Christ*, the series of thirty ink-and-color paintings he completed during the Korean War, Kim pointedly focuses on scenes involving socially disenfranchised figures, such as fishermen or Mary Magdalen (fig. 73). Christ is reenvisioned as a traditional aristocrat so that the scenes read even more strongly as allegories of a democracy to come.

While Kim's attention to biblical themes reflects the importance of religious belief and Christianity in particular for many Korean artists throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the picturing of Christ as a Korean man emphasizes indigenization as another potent force coursing throughout artistic production in the 1950s and 1960s.²¹ In 1958 Seung-taek Lee made *Godret Stones*, a work based on a traditional method of weaving, in which small stones are used as weights to keep the warp ends in place during weaving (fig. 74). Much of its visual impact comes from how the multiplicity of the small stones plays against the thinness of the string and wooden



FIGURE 73
Kim Ki-chang, *Healing the Sick* from the *Life of Christ* series, 1952.
Ink and color on silk, 24 3/4 x 30 in. (63 x 76 cm). Private collection



bar supporting the stones' cumulative weight. Long interested in so-called folk art and in traditional objects, including *jangseung*, or wooden totem poles originally erected at village entrances to ward off evil spirits, Lee was characterized by his contemporary Park Seo-Bo as an artist who "turns his ear to these legacies which have already been discarded and are considered as devalued in today's society."²² The early sixties would see Lee experiment with *onggi*, or *oji*, the dark semiporous earthenware traditionally used in Korea for storing and fermenting various condiments, which he used to create various sculptural forms.²³ The nativizing impulse expressed through the turn to indigenous materials or subjects also reads as an effort to rehabilitate a Korean history of art and culture prior to its organization into categories and institutions established by Japanese anthropologists, politicians, collectors, and scholars and which occurred even before Japan officially annexed Korea in 1910.²⁴ Small wonder that works having some explicit connection to Korean mythology would feature prominently in the *National Art Exhibition*; affiliations like these easily folded into the ongoing process of national self-determination central to the project of reconstruction affecting Korean society at every level.

How contemporary art emerged through the negotiation of belief with the demands of social reality was vividly demonstrated in the efforts to establish a generative relation between international interests and what might be called an archive of past imaginaries. Rather than lament the belatedness of modern Korean art in relation to the West, critics quickly latched onto what they saw as the indebtedness of Western abstraction to ink painting. Kim Yong-gi, for instance, characterized the development of Western, or specifically, Euroamerican, abstraction as a matter of Euroamerican artists looking to replenish the exhausted medium of painting by integrating tropes and approaches culled from literati ink painting.²⁵ At the same time, artists like Lee Ungno (1904–1989; cats. 98–100, 124) claimed that the matter of ink painting could not be properly accounted for without some reference to the operation of gesture in oil. Well versed in a wide variety of ink painting formats and genres, Lee brought his knowledge of line to bear on works like *Pulse* (cat. 99). The surface is at once dense and buoyant, and the work possesses something of the allover quality associated with Abstract Expressionism in how equally accessible the painting is from all four sides.

22 Park Seo-Bo, "Hwadan eui sae eolguldeul—I Seung-taekgun" [New faces in the art world—Mr. Lee Seung-taek], *Gukdo sinmun*, June 26, 1958.

23 For a discussion of Lee's engagement with earthenware and other traditional forms, see Joan Kee, "Use on Vacation: The Non-Sculptures of Lee Seung-taek," *Archives of Asian Art* 63, no. 1 (April 2013): 111–15.

24 The work of Hyung Il Pal is especially instructive on this front. See *Heritage Management in Korea and Japan: The Politics of Antiquity and Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 114–41.

25 Kim Yong-gi, "Hyeondae dongyanghwa daehan sogam" [Review of contemporary Eastern painting], *Seoul Sinmun*, May 18, 1955.

FIGURE 24
Seung-taek Lee, *Godnet Stones*, 1958. 40 stones, 2 wooden bars,
and cord, 29 1/4 × 68 1/4 × 3 1/4 in. (74 × 173 × 10 cm)

26 Bang Geun-taek, "Hoehwa eui hyeondaehwa munje" [The issue of modernizing painting], *Yonhap Sinmun*, March 11, 1958. As if to emphasize the distinction between modern and contemporary, Bang used the romanized form of "modern artist."

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

As the first generation of postwar Korean artists came of age in the late 1950s, some critics distinguished between older and younger artists according to orientation. Bang Geun-taek argued about how artists aged forty and above were tethered to the idea of a "modern artist" as refracted through the Japanese interpretations of form, whether of Impressionism or of styles considered "revolutionary" in the early twentieth century.²⁶ In contrast, artists in their twenties and thirties immersed themselves in a "period of reflection" about how best "to contribute to tomorrow through today's consciousness called the contemporary."²⁷ Bang added that "the contemporary" was characterized by a critical attitude toward existing influences, which for younger artists meant asking "where to begin."²⁸ It is apt, then, that Park Seo-Bo named his first foray into abstraction *Painting No. 1-57* (fig. 75). There, he seized pictorial space by the horns, treating it as a blank physical site upon which to build an edifice of paint. Thick black, blue, and whitish strokes serve as a scaffold supporting generous dollops of vivid color. While the title of the work suggests an intended association with the numerical titles favored by Jackson Pollock, Park favored blunt strokes that are rougher and more feral than the choreography staged by the American painter. At the same time, Park demonstrated a greater degree of control than the athletic tug-of-war that so often characterized the works of his contemporaries who were associated with the Gutai Group in Japan or Art Informel painting in France.

That so many artists from a wide range of backgrounds gravitated toward abstraction in the second half of the 1950s may be explained not only by a heightened receptivity to overseas developments but also by how the transnational circulation of abstraction was looser and more



FIGURE 75
Park Seo-Bo, *Painting No. 1-57*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 37 1/4 x 32 1/4 in.
(95 x 82 cm). Private collection

agile than what either Cold War geopolitics or festering postcolonial tensions would permit.²⁹ Kim Young-ju described the allure of gestural abstraction, especially the set of improvisatory and highly physical oil paintings known in French as Art Informel, as "an international language that expands into an unknown future."³⁰ Certainly abstraction would be closely linked to Korean definitions of the English word "contemporary," as seen by its prominence in the *Contemporary Artists' Exhibition* series. Hosted by a private company, the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, the series would challenge the *National Art Exhibition* of the early 1960s as Korea's most important recurring exhibition for recent art.³¹ Although Kim Whanki's thickly encrusted representations of cranes, round porcelain jars, mountains, and other images strongly associated with Korean culture attracted favorable attention at the São Paulo Bienal in 1963, abstraction expanded its footprint, especially in the delegations sent to events like the Paris Biennale, which, from its founding in 1959, focused on younger artists.

Interest in overseas developments reached fever pitch with the Korean edition of the *Family of Man* in Seoul in 1957. A seminal 1955 exhibition of over five hundred photographs from around the world organized by Edward Steichen, the director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it proved to be a powerful weapon for a US government keen to promote its interests in politically sensitive areas, including South Korea and Japan. Drawing an estimated three hundred thousand viewers in Korea alone, the exhibition's overt humanist focus and the debates it provoked would shape Korean photography for years to come. An astute chronicler of the Korean twentieth century who portrayed history as an accumulation of incomplete gestures and truncated views, Hyun Il Yeong insinuated that the emphasis on shared human experience in the *Family of Man* merely echoed the shopworn universalism peddled by the Japanese Empire in colonial Korea.³² Those coming to photography through wartime journalism or military service, in which images of death saturated everyday experience, were more positive. Kim Han Yong (1924–2016; cat. 56) applauded how the exhibition not only transcended language barriers but also made a case for the humanity of those suffering from systemic disenfranchisement, including the disabled and those identified as Black.³³ Also notable to him was the presentation of individual photographs as objects worthy of sustained attention.³⁴

In one image, Kim depicts ennui through the unlikely of genres: the wedding portrait (fig. 76). Taken in Namsan, the mountain that once served to mark the southern perimeter of Seoul, the photograph affords us a glimpse of a poker-faced couple, who stand stiffly just off the image's center. Towering above them is a stone likeness of Rhee Syngman. Completed in August 1956 to commemorate the president's eightieth birthday, the statue was erected in the very spot where the Chōsen Shrine, the most important Shinto shrine in colonial Korea, once stood. The position of Rhee on this politically fraught site was a symbolic gesture intended to consolidate the president's place in history as a national hero. For many Korean citizens, however, the gesture may have read as little more than a diversionary tactic by an autocratic government with diminished credibility; 1956 was the year that Rhee had the constitution amended to eliminate presidential term limits.

29 Yet it must be noted that North Korean art writers viewed the South Korean embrace of abstraction as evidence of an internalized colonization, or a "corrupting" by-product of US imperialism. Ri Weon-gon, "Namjoseon misul eui toepesang gwa 'chusangpa' eui bandongseong" [The decadence of South Korean art and the reactionism of "Abstractionism"], *Joseon misul* [Joseon art] 2 (February 1963): 34.

30 Kim Young-ju, "Anghweolmel gwa uri misul" [Informel and our art], *Chosun Ilbo*, December 13, 1958.

31 Only in 1969 did the *Gukjeon* create a separate category for nonfigurative art.

32 In a discussion published in the inaugural issue of the photography journal *Sajin Munhwa* prior to the Seoul installation of the *Family of Man*, Hyun Il Yeong remarked that he saw the images as merely "a continuation" of the photo albums published during the "occupation era" (*waejeong sidae*). Quoted in Park JuSeok, "1950 nyondae hanguk sajin gwa ingangajokjeon" [Korean photography in the 1950s and "The Family of Man"], *Hanguk geunhyeondae misukhak* [Journal of Korean modern and contemporary art] 14 (August 2005): 65.

33 Kim Han Yong, interview with Lee Kyung-min, in "Hanguk sajinisa gusul-peuro-jekteu: Kim Han-yong" [Korean photography history interview project: Kim Han-yong], *Hanguk sajin munhwa yeonguso jaryojip* [Journal of the Korean Institute of Photography and Culture], vol. 1 (Seoul: Hanguk sajin munhwa yeonguso, 2010), 82.

34 Ibid.



35 An especially useful summary identified "mainstream" contemporary art in early 1960s Korea by assessing four key artists' groups in terms of generation and receptivity to abstraction. The Modern Art Group consisted of artists like Chun Kyung-ja, Han Mook, and Jung Gyu, who were interested in abstraction, figuration, and ink painting; the Sinsanghoe, or New Image Society, whose members were *Gukjeon* stalwarts like Lee Bong-sang and Yoo Youngkuk; the Actual group of painters, including Park Seo-Bo, Chung Sang-hwa, and Kim Tschang-Yeul, whose approach to abstraction was "sharper" and more "cutting edge" than that of the Modern Art Group; and the Mudongin, or Zero Group, of very young artists in their twenties whose works involving found objects and knives in lieu of brushes were deemed the most radical. Unsigned, "Hanguk misuleui bunpodo" [Distribution of Korean art], *Chosun Ilbo*, March 26, 1963.

36 Kim Young-ju, "Hanguk hyeondae misulgwa geu banghyang—Hyeoksingwa jaegune daehan jeui" [Korean contemporary art and its direction: Proposals for innovation and construction], *Dong A Ilbo*, August 4, 1960.

37 Ibid.

Kim Han Yong, who would soon become Korea's first full-time photographer specializing in commercial advertising, knew almost better than anyone how a well-chosen crop or angle could change a viewer's impression of an image. The monument was part of Rhee's efforts to create a believable politics of spectacle. Yet far from an imposing monolith, the statue looks curiously out of place. A spray of branches stripped of leaves juts directly into the space of the picture. It distorts the scale of the statue by appearing to overlap with Rhee's raised hand. Kim's photograph betrays no overt ideological agenda, but the extreme distance at which he took the picture conveys the alienation many Koreans felt toward a regime obsessed with its own preservation.

Such alienation erupted into a citizen-led revolution in April 1960. Known as 4.19 (*sa-il-gu*) in Korean, the April Revolution led to the ousting of Rhee, creating a leadership vacuum that resulted in the ascent of Park Chung-hee, a former army general who in 1961 became Korea's president, and whose disregard for civil liberty would become all too apparent in the second half of the 1960s. Coinciding with the April Revolution were several reckonings within the Korean art world over what it meant to be contemporary or avant-garde. The Korean art world reassembled into different alignments loosely corresponding to age and generation, some of which erupted into visible acts of defiance.³⁵ In 1960 a group of younger artists held what was known as the *Wall Exhibition*, where younger artists instigated a guerilla *salon des refusés* by hanging several gestural abstract paintings outdoors on the walls of the palace hosting the *National Art Exhibition*. Kim Young-ju even went so far as to call for the abolition of the salon, musing openly about whether the art world needed its own "French Revolution" to rid it of the factionalism that he saw as having no place in a "modern democratic society."³⁶ In a striking turn of phrase, Kim likened the *National Art Exhibition* to an extension of Rhee Syngman's authoritarian regime, which actively suppressed "opposition artists" whose works might "provide a foundation for social participation by bearing witness to the human condition."³⁷

By the early 1960s, the idea of contemporary art was increasingly shaped by conflicts between efforts to consider Korean art in the context of the international art world and the worlds Korean artists were making for themselves. In an important exchange between the artists Kim Byungki (1916–2022; cat. 94) and Kim Tschang-Yeul published in the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, the former asserted that contemporary Korean art never "properly experienced the historical

FIGURE 26

Kim Han Yong, *Newlyweds and Statue of President Rhee Syngman*, Namsan, Seoul, 1956. Photograph, dimensions unknown. Private collection



process called modernity," which partly explained what he saw as an unhealthy fixation on importing "international styles."³⁸ "Newness that is disconnected from tradition is nothing more than an empty compilation," he asserted, further claiming that contemporary art in Korea began with the start of the Korean War because of how it threw the idea of reality into extreme relief and because of how the experience of war instilled in many Koreans a profound "distrust in the rationalism of modernity."³⁹ About a decade younger than Kim Byungki, and therefore of the generation more defined by the April Revolution than the Korean War, Kim Tschang-Yeul pointedly remarked how the "less developed the country, the more likely its art world would be determined by senior figures wielding the imprimatur of the academy."⁴⁰ In a not-so-subtle jab at a deeply patriarchal artistic establishment, the younger Kim commented that Daoism and its emphasis on organic relationships might be a better means of preventing the "consolidation of authority" than a Confucian worldview based on hierarchies and rules.⁴¹

Against such a context, the attention to materiality and chance assume special relevance. Founded in 1959 by Seoul National University professor Suh Se Ok, the Mungnimhoe, or, literally, the Ink and Forest Group, sought to re-create a place of meaning for ink painting as a reaction to newly introduced artistic practices legitimized as the proper loci of cultural production. The works they produced responded vigorously to the gestural nature of the works of Park Seo-Bo, Youn Myeong-Ro, Chung Changsup, and other Art Informel painters in the putative name of defending ink painting and its place in the contemporary art world.⁴² In a 1962 work, Suh combines water with ink, and then leaves the two to interact with the absorbent linen support; the picture is a result of restraint, that is, a product of chance rather than of human control (fig. 77).

In some respects, the story of contemporary art in Korea after 1960 is also a story of how artists gave themselves over to materials and materiality in an effort to help painting better coexist in a world shaped by the expanded production of consumer and industrial goods. Largely unencumbered by modernist baggage insisting on segregating low from high culture, Choi Boonghyun marshalled plastic tubing, vinyl, and wire to poke sly fun at gestural abstraction, which by 1965 had become so entrenched as to be taught in university art schools (fig. 78). The

38 Kim Byungki, quoted in "Jeonjinhaneun hyeondaemisu eui jase" [The attitude of contemporary art moving forward], *Chosun Ilbo*, March 26, 1961.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 For a discussion of the contested status of ink painting in contemporary art circles and the role abstraction played, see Joan Kee, "Jung Tak-young and the Making of Abstract Ink Painting in Postwar Korea," *Art Bulletin* 101, no. 4 (December 2019): 120–25.

FIGURE 77
Suh Se Ok, Work, 1962. Ink on linen, 43 1/2 x 34 in. (110.5 x 86.4 cm). Private collection

FIGURE 78
Choi Boonghyun, Person 3, 1967. Rubber, plastic, and wire, 63 1/4 x 51 1/4 x 5 1/2 in. (162 x 130.3 x 15 cm). The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea

43 The key women members of Mudongin were Suk Ran-hee, a student of Kim Whanki, and Kim Young-ja. Kim Young-ja and Choi later married, and the uneven distribution of household labor cut short Kim's promising career, as was the case for so many women artists in Korea.

44 Kim Young-ju, "Hanguk hyeondae misulgwa geu banghyang."

45 Unsigned, "Canvas majeo deonjigo—Euiyoge neomchin mudonginhoejeon" [Throwing away the canvas: The ambitious Zero Group], *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, June 6, 1962.

46 Kim Young-ja, interview with the author, June 2, 2019.

47 Kim Young-ju, "Hanguk hyeondae misulgwa geu banghyang." The "incompletion" also circles back to the origin of the group's name, which reflects not only Choi's interest in the Zero Group founded in Germany in 1957 but also his interest in Buddhism. The name was allegedly inspired by a comment made by an acquaintance who suggested Choi consider *śūnyatā*, a Sanskrit word meaning "world of emptiness." Choi Boong-hyun, interview with Oh Sanggil, in "60, 70nyeondae misul undong jaryodel," in *Hanguk hyeondaemisul dasi ilgi II*, vol. 1 (Seoul: ICAS, 2001), 155.

48 The Mudongin preferred to describe their works as advanced (*cheomdan*) rather than as modern or contemporary (*hyeondae*). Kim Young-ja, interview with the author, June 2, 2019. The introduction of Nam June Paik's works to Korean audiences, including a large photograph published in the December 3, 1961, issue of *Chosun Ilbo* of Paik in a business suit pouring a bucket of water over himself for the Fluxus International Festival of New Music in Wiesbaden, helped embolden younger artists to explore other media.

heroic brushstroke is reimagined as a contortion of rubber bands threaded through red wire, all disposable materials impossible to coax into straight lines. Against the shiny black vinyl backdrop, the tubing hangs limply. The puckered vinyl mirrors the tortured surfaces of works like Park Seo-Bo's *Primordials No. 1-62* (cat. 116), but the resemblance of the center tube to medical cannula teasingly suggests Art Informel to be on life support.

Deliberately careless of the conventions he was made to master as a student, Choi completed this paean to the inert and intransigently awkward while a member of the Mudongin, or the Zero Group, which, unusually for an artists' group in Korea, included women members.⁴³ Critics described the group, whose members were among the first in Korea to actively engage with industrial objects, as producing "junk art," or art using discarded objects.⁴⁴ Yet viewers were also taken by how such use denied "any limitations regarding attitudes toward creation and the use of materials."⁴⁵ Mudongin member Kim Young-ja recalls that the group regarded the contemporary as a synonym for antiexclusion: "Everyone or anything can belong to the contemporary."⁴⁶ The ethos of broad inclusivity may be why group members refrained from signing their works, which one observer read as a deliberate signal of "incompletion."⁴⁷ Certainly younger artists like Choi and Kim gravitated toward a definition of the avant-garde (*jeonwi*) or vanguard class of artists typified not only by their engagement with advanced (*cheomdan*) styles but also by a willingness to experiment and, therefore, face the possibility of failure, including general public ridicule, as well as more pointed criticism from other artists.⁴⁸

Such willingness in turn shaped a new horizon of contemporary art typified by heightened interest in juxtaposition, contradiction, and a distinctly nonlinear approach to time and space. Born in 1932 in the southern hub of Daegu, which in the early twentieth century rivaled Seoul as a hotbed of modern painting, Park Kwang-ho enjoyed modest recognition for his commitment to Surrealism. *Historical Field* honors that commitment, although with an eye to the abundance of references immersing Korean artists in the early 1960s (fig. 79). A carved wooden mask traditionally used for village shaman dances (*Hahoe byeolsin-gut tal nori*) intended to exorcise evil spirits smiles genially in the upper left-hand corner, while to its right, a landmass-shaped excerpt of archaic Chinese characters almost kisses the snout of a Lascaux bull drawing. Looming large is an elaborately draped Roman statue, flanked by a figure that might have stepped from the surface of a Greek red-figure vase. A voluptuous Rubensian nude reclines on an improbable bed of hexagons derived from molecule diagrams, while a copy of the Disney character Goofy looks upward, his body and arm curved to mimic the line drawing of a Buddhist deity just to his right. We receive something of a hint of what Park might be getting at in the lower left-hand corner, a space commonly reserved for signatures. Next to the Roman alphabet letters scrupulously written to spell the artist's surname is a Chinese ideograph (*seong*) meaning "to search" or "to watch." Used in numerous Korean words involving introspection or reflection and painted in the same crimson hues associated with seals traditionally used in Korea to verify authorship, this character may be Park's real signature.

No rational connection exists among these jumbled references, which are not even symbols. Like notes tacked to a bulletin board, the images appear eminently subject to modification, replacement, or even erasure. Arrows point us in various directions. Goofy's left middle finger gestures diagonally toward the Greek Attic figure, who reciprocates by crooking his arm upward toward the legs and phallus of the bull. Alluding, perhaps, to the interest many art students professed in industrial design, a thick, bold typeface being used for signage and instructional manuals overlaps with the freeform silhouette of the bull.⁴⁹ *Historical Field* flirts outrageously with modernism and its commodification without ever committing to the idea of the work as a product. Although the word *postmodern* had yet to be coined, *Historical Field* unwittingly foreshadowed its concerns, stating in no uncertain terms how contemporary art made in the first decade after the Korean War was critically shaped by the obligation to sift through multiple pasts, as well as a present suspended between competing visions of a future yet to come.⁵⁰ Indeed, what contemporary art in postwar Korea meant for its creators and audiences was a chance to field new histories which no single time or direction could define.

49 Yi Gu-yeol, "Geoldorihan neukkim 64nyeon eui misulgye" [The feeling of being run over: The art world in 1984], *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, December 23, 1964.

50 Jean-François Lyotard is credited with introducing the term *postmodernism* in 1979, but the word and its implications were not actively discussed in relation to Korean art until 1988, when a slew of publications appeared on the subject, including a special issue on postmodernism and consumer society in the July 1988 issue of *Weolgan misul* [Monthly art] and a special issue on critical perspectives in postmodernism published by *Misulsegye* [Art world], also in July of that same year.



FIGURE 79
Park Kwang-ho, *Historical Field*, ca. early 1960s. Oil on canvas,
27 1/2 x 37 1/2 in. (69 x 95.5 cm), Private collection