**KIM Whanki (김환기, 1913-1974)**

A leading figure of the first generation of Korean abstract artists, from the mid-1930s Kim Whanki shaped a distinctive style by grafting Korean lyricism into modernist art practices. In 1943, Kim, along with some fellow Japanese-trained painters, formed a group called, the New Realist School (신사실파) whose style combined realistic forms and abstract structures. Kim’s influential status in Seoul’s artistic community led him to serve as a professor at Seoul National University (국립서울대학교) and Hongik University, Seoul (홍익대학교). In his earlier works, ceramics, traditional symbols, semi-nude women, and natural motifs were core subjects. The objects were rhythmically rendered in geometrical shapes, terse lines, and simplified colours and forms. Since the mid-1960s, recognisable images were gradually eliminated, and his work took on a monochrome hue. Many sizes of dots enclosed by layered squares and lines drawn toward different directions suggest islands on the sea or clouds on the sky, which engendered thematic continuity with previous works. The highly refined formal expression and a meditative sense of colour in Kim’s paintings earned him formidable acclaim both at home and abroad.

Born in Gijwamyeon, a small island in Shinan-gun, South Korea, Kim studied Fine Arts at Nihon University, Tokyo, Japan, in 1933. Under Togo Seiji (東鄕靑児, 1897–1978) and Fujita Tsuguji (藤田嗣治, 1886–1968), he enthusiastically absorbed early 20th century avant-garde art. In particular, his use of distinct contours and smooth colours had affinities with Cubism and geometrical abstraction. His Tokyo period was instrumental in that not only did he encounter Western modernism through his participations in Baekmanhoe (白蠻會), Nika-ten (二科展), and Jiyu-ten (自由展) exhibitions, but he was also then able to transfer these movements to the Korean art scene.

Throughout his three-year stay in Paris (1956–1959) and the following Seoul period, Kim reintegrated both natural motifs and still-lifes drawn from folk artefacts in varied compositions and thick *matière*. He employed blue as his chief colour, implying a longing for eternity or nostalgia for his home by the sea. The painter’s expressionist attitude was also reflected in magnifying the size of forms or reducing them and leaving space within the composition.

Kim’s visitation to the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1963 marked a critical turning point in his career in that he then settled in New York, where he devoted himself to various experiments in pure abstraction using points, lines, and planes, resulting in the creation of his dot paintings in 1970. His interests in material was also striking during this time, as seen in the production of works in gouache or oil on newspaper, collages using Korean paper, and *papier mâché* objects. From the late 1960s, he adopted all-over composition on monumental-sized canvas occupied with repetitively marked dots and lines formed in groups. Surfaces were divided, joined, rotated, and transformed into various forms. Formal originality and expressional maturity completed in New York conferred on Kim the status of influential artist both inside and outside of Korea.

**References and further reading**

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