**Art Informel in Korea**

*Informel* is an art movement characterized by non-geometrical abstraction and expressive gestures. Emerging in the mid-1950s, *Informel* is generally considered the first radical artistic experiment in postwar Korea, not only because it abandoned representational art in favour of complete abstraction, but also because it initiated a collective rebellion against the government-sponsored National Art Exhibition (*gukjeon*) system. As the French term suggests, *Informel* is closely related to its European counterpart Art Informel, and to American Abstract Expressionism, which were popular in the 1940s and 1950s. The Korean *Informel* found common ground in the young artists’ attempts to come to terms with wartime experience and its aftershock. The proponents of *Informel* were determined to explore alternative artistic means, particularly as they regarded conventional academicism as inadequate in representing their sense of despair. The leading artists are Park Seo-bo (1931- ), Kim Tschang-yeul (1929- ), Ha In-doo (1930-1989), Ha Jong-hyeon (1935- ), and Chung Sang-hwa (1932- ). They received a college education, witnessed the catastrophe of the Korean War, and were increasingly discontented with the National Art Exhibition, especially its conservative academicism and institutional bureaucracy. Among the many artists and artist groups that resisted the establishment and urgently called forth new modes of expression, the Contemporary Artists Association (*Hyeondae Misul Hyeophoe*) emerged as the leading voice. Most of the *Informel* artists joined the group and regularly presented their works in the Association’s Contemporary Exhibition (*Hyeondae-jeon*) from 1957.

The term *Informel* first appeared in 1956, when critic Kim Young-ju introduced European art’s expressive tendencies in his essay for *Chosun-ilbo*, a major daily newspaper. However, Korean *Informel* artists became interested in the movement as a result of the *World Art of Today* exhibition, held at Takashimaya Department Store locations across Japan, including Tokyo, through 1958. The show ambitiously presented the works of the most prominent artists of European *Informel* and American Abstract Expressionism side by side with those of Japanese contemporary artists. Michel Tapié, Georges Mathieu, and Sam Francis attended the show’s opening, and Mathieu demonstrated his aggressive gestural painting on an outdoor stage. The presence of these artists considerably excited the Japanese public’s interest in *Informel*, and the period between 1956 and 1958 is frequently deemed the “*Informel* Cyclone.”

From the end of 1956, “*Informel*” dominated Japanese art magazines such as *Bijutsu Techo* and *Mizue*. As these magazines were widely available in Korea, they played an important part in disseminating “*Informel*” in the Korean art scene. Korean artists, who were already exposed to Euro-American trends through magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, and *Art in America*, found that the “*Informel* Cyclone” was a trigger, encouraging them to break away from the stronghold of the National Art Exhibition and to pursue more direct and independent experimentation.



Park Seo-Bo, *Painting Number 1*, 1957, oil on canvas, 95 x 82 cm, private collection, Seoul.

The Contemporary Exhibition’s May 1958 show is regarded as a watershed in the history of Korean *Informel*, in which Park Seo-bo, Kim Tscahng-yeul, and Ha In-doo participated, among others. In particular, Park Seo-bo’s *Painting Number 1* (1957) is claimed to be the first truly non-representational painting. The work’s dynamic lines, freely applied paints, and thick, barren texture became the central formal elements of *Informel*. Following Park’s lead, the other members of the group began eliminating iconic images from their canvases and introduced aggressive bodily movements in their mode of production. *Informel* became a dominant artistic movement, though it would be supplanted in the mid-1960s by the geometric abstraction, optical art, and Dadaesque activities of a younger generation.

**References and Further Reading**

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