

Where I Work

Ha Chong-Hyun

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY YUJIN MIN

The secluded studio of a seminal Dansaekhwa artist reveals ongoing experimentations with burlap material and monotone paints



Ha Chong-Hyun standing next to signature burlap canvases in his studio in Ilsan, South Korea.

After a 30-minute drive from the bustling metropolis of Seoul, I arrive at the quiet, green suburban neighborhood of Ilsan, northwest of the capital, where Ha Chong-Hyun's sprawling work complex is nestled among pine trees. The utilitarian metal facade of Ha's studio seems to emanate a calm and dignified presence, evoking the resilient and pressed qualities of the signature burlap fabric that the artist has used in his monochrome paintings for over four decades.

Nearly 82, Ha is a seminal figure of the Korean Dansaekhwa art movement. In the postwar era of the late 1960s, Ha became

affiliated with a loose group of young artists in Seoul; together, they explored new possibilities for abstract painting, advanced by attempts to subvert the stylistic influences of European and American modernism. These artists pushed to invent a new minimalist style that highlighted the raw materiality of various media, such as burlap, by piercing and tearing their surfaces. Ha is one of the more established artists among this group, and is known for the "Conjunction" series (1974–), for which he developed a particular method of introversions by slowly pushing thick paint through to the surface from the reverse side of a coarse burlap canvas. Ha scrapes the viscous paint that seeps through and then spreads it to form refined geometric patterns. Even though the process requires physical precision with immense discipline and focus, the results convey a sense of rebellion that make Ha's works appear cutting edge and free-spirited.

In Ha's studio, the door has been left open to let in the fresh country air. Ha and I gather around a small coffee table, joined by gallerists from Kukje Gallery and his wife, who is also a painter. In conversation, Ha is friendly and possesses a great sense of humor. His voice becomes louder when he says something important about his past, such as when he recalls his student days in the painting department of the College of Fine Arts at the Hongik Art University in the late 1950s. At the time, one of his many teachers was Kim Whanki—a first-generation pioneer of 20th-century modern Korean abstract art. Ha fondly remembers how he often borrowed the keys to Kim's studios to experiment with painting, although these sessions were infrequent due to Ha's limited access to oil and canvas.

Today, Ha has more space than he ever could have dreamed of. His open-plan studio consists of a workspace, a small kitchen and an extra storage space in the rear with a stairway leading up to a loft. On the ground floor, a spacious area provides ample room for the ambitious artist to create his large-scale paintings. The floor of his workshop is littered with flecks of dried paint and tattered strips of burlap, indicative of his 40 years closely studying the two materials. An art trolley stands next to a stockpile of hemp fabrics and canvas frames, carrying duct tape, palette knives and spatulas of various sizes and widths, used for manipulating the pigment to form short, thick, scattered or ordered abstract patterns and lines on his paintings' surfaces.

After finishing his morning coffee, Ha gives me a tour of the complex and the four warehouses that have been converted into galleries. In one, a double-height doorway leads to a single-story display room, which Ha uses for installing works and envisioning gallery or museum settings for his paintings. Dozens of canvases fill the pristine white walls, among them the few remaining pieces from the 1970s that Ha cherishes. "Those were the days," he exclaims, as he stands in front of his earliest piece, installed at the far end of the gallery. The work, *Untitled 72-C* (1972), is a rare panel tightly wrapped in barbed wire, evoking the oppressive post-war political climate in South Korea and the prevalence of military bases. Hanging opposite this work is a wooden canvas punctured with multiple coiled springs, conveying his fiercely nonrestrictive use of media during his years active in AG (Avant Garde) group—an experimental collective that formed in 1969 and disbanded in 1974.

(This page, top)

The interior of one of Ha's four warehouse spaces, which he converted into a private gallery. Seen here are paintings from the artist's ongoing "Conjunction" (1974-) series, among others, in varying monotones of whites, grays and blacks.

(This page, bottom)

Another warehouse is used as a storage unit and is filled with hundreds of the artist's works, accumulated over the years. A rare, small-scale painting rests in front of racks that hold neatly organized stacks of canvases.

(Opposite page, top)

Two recently completed, large-scale, monotone paintings in blue and gray lean against the wall, overlooking a small kitchen space at the back of the studio.

(Opposite page, bottom)

The octogenarian's tiny painting mixing room, cluttered with plastic buckets and a stockpile of paint pots, palette knives and tools.

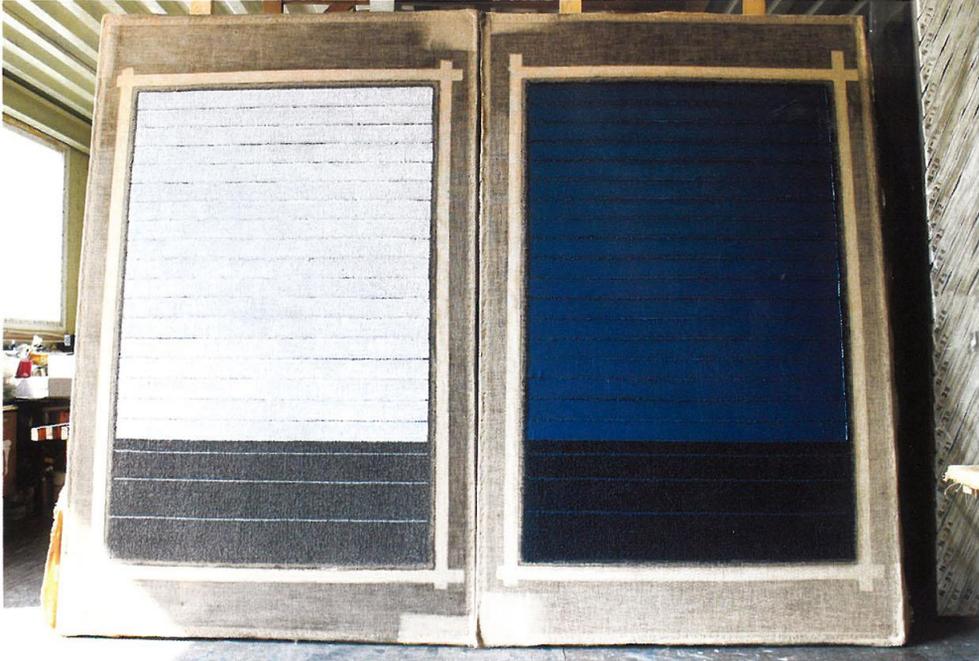


As we near the exit of the warehouse, an unusual-looking painting is brought to my attention—its entire surface is covered with a collage made of old canvases, representing four decades of Ha's practice. In the work, each of the paintings is positioned in reverse on the flat surface and the entire facade is wrapped in barbed wire, forming a barricade that seals the patches off from the world. This piece, *Conjunction (08-101)*, was made during the late 2000s, after a period of severe burnout due to overwork.

Despite this period of stress, Ha's output is remarkable. His concentrated experimentations with technique and material produce new works every year, and he is constantly prepping for exhibitions at galleries and institutions in Korea as well as overseas. I follow the artist to the rear of the studio, which is exclusively used for stocking and mixing paint in neutral and monochromatic tones. The damp air is saturated with sweet, pungent smells of turpentine oil and mineral spirits. Plain wooden shelves are lined with a hoard of shiny metal paint pots, carrying precious reserves of mono-gray and mono-blue, the artist's current choice of palette. Whisks, plastic bowls, spatulas and stainless-steel sieves dangle from makeshift hangers tacked to the walls.

Thick layers of paint cover the floor, which is crowded with empty pots and tiny chairs used by the artist when churning his colors. The process of this paint mixing is rooted in Ha's early experimentations in monotone hues—colors inspired by the earth, white Joseon-dynasty porcelains, and the dark, solemn colors of traditional Korean roof tiles. These tones represented an alternative to Western influences that increasingly pervade South Korean society, which Ha refuted by exploring distinctive local and natural features within his immediate surroundings. Ha says these colors cannot be bought in a can. Even when they are, Ha replicates and modifies them into subtle variations of the shade.

Notions of locality and tradition are also seen in Ha's most recent, ongoing series. He shows me his latest hemp canvas paintings—yet to be titled—that employ a unique method of scorching the surface layer of wet paint. Moving a flame burning from the tip of a wooden stick back and forth across the canvas, he alters the pigments and they become saturated with dark, powdery soot. He then uses a flat brush or spatula to smear the paint, forming a steady stripe composition that juxtaposes the blackened paint with the untainted, lighter layer of pigment. In the case of the first of the two paintings, the charring





(Top)
A warehouse-turned-gallery is situated in a spacious concrete courtyard. Inside to the left is a portrait of the exuberant artist.

(Bottom)
The artist mimicking the action of scraping the surface of a new burlap fabric painting in his studio.

method was used with mono-blue, resulting in a graceful composition of cool tones and a charcoal-tinted blue that appears almost black. According to Ha, the darkened colors are meant to evoke the faded and weathered surfaces of Korean roof tiles. It is clear that exploring these delicate, complex colorations continues to energize and inspire Ha.

In the last few minutes of my visit, I take a spontaneous photograph of Ha posing playfully, mimicking his scraping the surface of a painting. Although it seems his pace is virtually without pause, even at his age, Ha tells me that he doesn't rush the process and meditates on the outcome before he takes action on the canvas. On the floor is an unprimed burlap canvas that will take him several days or even months to complete. From afar, it looks raw in its pure and unprimed condition. But over the course of time, tiny ripples of pigments will permeate the back of the canvas and reappear on the surface. With this newly created layer of thick paint, Ha's spatula will begin to form steady marks, from one end of the canvas to the other.

