

nothing much was said, the room served as a kind of memorial to a whole way of being. As if to complete that thought, the walls were stenciled with a sky-blue pattern made up of a single repeated word—FIN (End). —Molly Nesbit

SEOUL

Yun Hyong-Keun at Inkong

It is a paradox of modern art that as representational elements are eliminated, the potential for an expanded content often increases. Artists who wish to acknowledge a specific cultural heritage may find abstraction more potent than figuration. The Korean painter Yun Hyong-Keun uses a spare formal vocabulary that addresses both modernist universals and the more intangible dimensions of cultural identity. Born in 1928, Yun came of age esthetically during the '50s. His earliest paintings, from the 1960s, explored the expressive power of gesture in defining columnar structures. These reductive investigations of planes and solids were performed with pigments that soaked into unprimed canvases. Not surprisingly, his work of this period bore affinities to that of Mark Rothko and Morris Louis.

By the mid-'70s Yun favored monochrome tonalities, as did many of the Korean artists who are known as the Ecole de Seoul (the name derived from a series of exhibitions held at the National Museum of Modern Art). Jettisoning all colors except indigo and umber, he broadened his stained columns into slabs whose divagating oily boundaries kept up an active conversation with the tangent voids. A few years ago Yun eliminated blue from his palette

and concentrated on a range of browns soaked into or set against cotton or linen supports the color of sacking.

On a recent visit to Korea I noted with enjoyment several examples of Yun's work represented in museum collections, but it was not until I stepped into a solo exhibition of his grandly scaled and sober paintings that I could concentrate on the nature of their appeal. Here were Minimalist paintings of richly sensual surfaces that radiated a muted ascetic content. Some of the rectangular forms were the color of caramelized sugar, others the tonality of rusted metal or dried blood.

Yun's monolithic images are created by the repetitive processes of staining and soaking, as if painting were an activity akin to the workings of nature. He is a master at etherealized boundaries—brown plinths exude loamy haloes whose edges seem to have been shaped by attrition. Significantly, the artist has recounted that a chance sighting of a fallen tree slowly decomposing into earth has been of abiding importance to him. In fact, Yun titles all of his recent paintings *Umbur*, a pigment designation literally derived from the soil.

East Asian critics have commented on the spiritual power of the void in Yun's works and have pointed out that the paintings echo the feeling of traditional Korean ceramics, so-called "art without technique." This characteristic of artlessness was noted by the painter Lee U-Fan, who once described his contemporary's work as "unanalytical, primordial and indescribably non-existent." Initially Yun's paintings spoke to me in the same formal language as the Cor-Ten steel



Kodai Nakahara: Installation view, 1992; at Satani Gallery.

structures of Richard Serra. But these solemn canvases also project a powerful spiritual aura perceptible even to those unfamiliar with Korean cultural traditions. As visual meditations on impermanence, their authority is unrivaled.

—Judith Stein

TOKYO

Kodai Nakahara at Satani

Kodai Nakahara achieved notoriety in the '80s with a number of whimsical sculptures that employed traditional sculptural mediums—marble and clay—to produce untraditional "blobs." Frozen in oozing motion across floors and walls, these big, impossible shapes defied definition. His inclusion in last year's "Zones of Love" exhibition at the Touko Museum placed Nakahara, at just 30 years of age, among Japan's leading younger artists. But that doesn't mean he's gone establishment or even calmed down. A theme of play was central to his *Trampoline* (1989), a sculpture on which viewers were invited to jump. And he himself played with some 40,000 Lego blocks to translate the characteristic form of his earlier work into the brightly colored shapelessness that is *Lego* (1990-91).

Continuing his pursuit of the unconventional in sculpture and his desire "not to fit in," Nakahara in his latest exhibition wholeheartedly embraces the use of children's materials first seen in *Lego*. He transformed the gallery into a pseudo playroom crammed full of toys. Viewers had to carefully pick their way around an assortment of display cases con-

taining toy spaceships and rockets and garish cave-girl dolls to reach the Lego Transformers apparently discarded in the corner. Perhaps Nakahara had been distracted from these by the Lego train continuously whirring around its track on the floor, squashed between the glass cases. The walls were decorated with a profusion of childlike splotch paintings and photographs of boyish collectibles such as frogs. In the center, elevated (on hydraulic legs) like a contemporary throne, was an executive swivel chair. Viewers were encouraged to climb aboard by means of a ladder, take control and spin, surveying the scene like "the king of the castle."

Both in separate ready-made toys and in the installation as a whole, Nakahara juxtaposed innocent child's play and corrupt adult pastimes. Housed within their glass cases, voluptuous comic-book heroine dolls—a Japanese equivalent to Barbie—were simultaneously children's icon and exploited female: skimpily clad and standing on mirrors, they hinted at adult pornography. Embodied in the spaceship and rocket were both pretend war and real war.

Implicit in the vague impressions of childhood gained from a dizzying spin in the chair was a sense of our own maturity and consequent distance from youth. The voids between old and young generations and between the average overworked Japanese husband and his children were also implied. Nakahara's playthings represented a humorous warning against the conservative and passive adult life.

—Lorna Ryan

Philippe Cazal: *Conference Table*, 1991, installation view; at the Musée du Chateau.

