

Ordinary People



Text

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Images

Courtesy of
Kukje Gallery

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Working in mediums more associated with domestic life than high art, such as fabric, household objects and packaging material, a few Korean artists transform the ordinary into the sublime. Ha Chong-Hyun is among the generation whose practice evolved out of post-war hardships, and creates his Dansaekhwa-style paintings using burlap and barbed wire
Image by Chunho An

Laundry racks. Scraps of leather. A tree trunk, a burlap sack, a coil of barbed wire. None of these objects are associated with high art, and yet some of Korea's most respected artists utilise them as readily as others might ink and paint. For each, this choice in medium is a measured undertaking that speaks to their individual practice.

Berlin- and Seoul-based artist Haegue Yang is renowned for integrating the everyday into her fantastical sculptures, whether it's Venetian blinds, fans and humidifiers, lightbulbs, tin cans or even envelopes. Her practice of incorporating the mundane can be traced back to *Storage Piece* (2004), one of her most seminal early works, which was the result of a conundrum she faced when an exhibition of hers ended and she had nowhere to store the returning works. The solution? The entire pallet of works, packing materials and all, became her next exhibition. These 'quotidian materials', as Yang refers to them, are now integral to her practice as she distorts their respective purposes in order to subvert the status quo. 'So-called ordinary materials enable us to act and face our world and time in a broader sense,' she explains. 'With *Non-Indépliables*, I wanted to bring the drying rack out of its conventional loop of folding and unfolding. Dressed in textiles, the racks become figures with bodies and distinctive postures. They're able to narrate elements of our lives, such as hygiene and cleaning, even if they've escaped from their functionality. In my installations that use Venetian blinds, the properties of folding and unfolding and of transparency and opacity allude to broader questions of separation, borders and communities.'

Suki Seokyeong Kang, who lives and works in Seoul, creates work that straddles the line between figurative and abstract, exploring mediums from sculpture to performance in order to pose broader questions that explore spatial relations, cultural history, personal experiences and the position of the individual within society. At the 2019 Venice Biennale, Kang presented *Land Sand Strand*, which incorporates painting, installation, video and performance. Here, the artist incorporates the traditional Korean *hwamunseok* sedge mats into generously spaced sculptures, using them as the spaces on which dancers performed a piece inspired by the traditional Korean *chunaengmu* dance. But the mat isn't the only commonplace object: 'Threads embrace the surface of my works, leather scraps placed in between the structures, wooden blocks and tree trunks. I frequently employ materials that I can find in my everyday surroundings,' she says. 'These materials cautiously protect and embrace the surface of one another as they accumulate the unit structures of my work, each functioning as a mediator. It's through such mediation that I seek to portray the timeline of an individual that constantly hones their position in this society.'

While Yang and Kang may be considered contemporaries (there are only six years between them), Ha Chong-Hyun, now 84 years old, is from the earlier generation of Korean painters who first began to experiment with everyday materials in the 50s and 60s as a response to financial strains.

A prominent figure in the Dansaekhwa art movement, Ha creates his deceptively simple



abstract canvases by pushing paint through the back of cloth and then exploring various techniques to manipulate colour, texture and meaning, incorporating elements that range from fire to the burlap sacks once used to carry rations after the Korean war. His co-opting of simple materials such as burlap and barbed wire began out of the necessity to use that which was economically viable and readily available in post-war times, as well as the need to differentiate his practice from those of contemporary Western abstractionists. While in his earlier work, barbed wire was only incorporated into the final piece, his most recent exhibition at Kukje Gallery's Busan outpost showed the evolution of the material to become a tool he uses to etch the oozing paint, which takes months to fully dry. 'I use these materials to speak to contemporary times,' he explains. 'For me, these were the most accessible materials, but after incorporating them into my practice, I found their symbolic nature to be significant to my work.'

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Ha's solo exhibition at Kukje Gallery's Busan location comprised large-scale works created by etching oozing paint with barbed wire. When viewed up close, the tactile and complex nature of the works is mesmerising

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Suki Seokyeong Kang's work explores spatial relations, cultural history and personal experiences

Left: *GRANDMOTHER TOWER — tow #19-01*, 2018–2019. Thread on reproduced industrial dish carrier, woven dyed *hwamunseok*, painted steel, wheel, 51 × 80 × 241.5cm

Right: *Rove and Round — face, mat, belly #19-01*, 2016–2019. Assembled units, painted steel, thread on dyed mesh laundry bag, thread, wood frame, brass bolts, leather, scraps, wheel, tree trunk 60.8 × 61 × 158cm
Images by Chunho An

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In Haegue Yang's work, ordinary objects and materials become all but unrecognisable as the artist manipulates them into otherworldly sculptures and installations

Left: *Non-Indépliable, satin rouge*, 2009. Drying rack, fabric, 90 × 82 × 52cm
Collection of Maeil Dairies Co., Ltd., Seoul

Right: *Sol LeWitt Upside Down — Structure with Three Towers, Expanded 23 Times, Split in Three*, 2015. Aluminium venetian blinds, powder-coated aluminium hanging structure, steel wire rope, LED tubes, cable, dimensions variable. Installation view at Tate Modern, collection of Tate
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