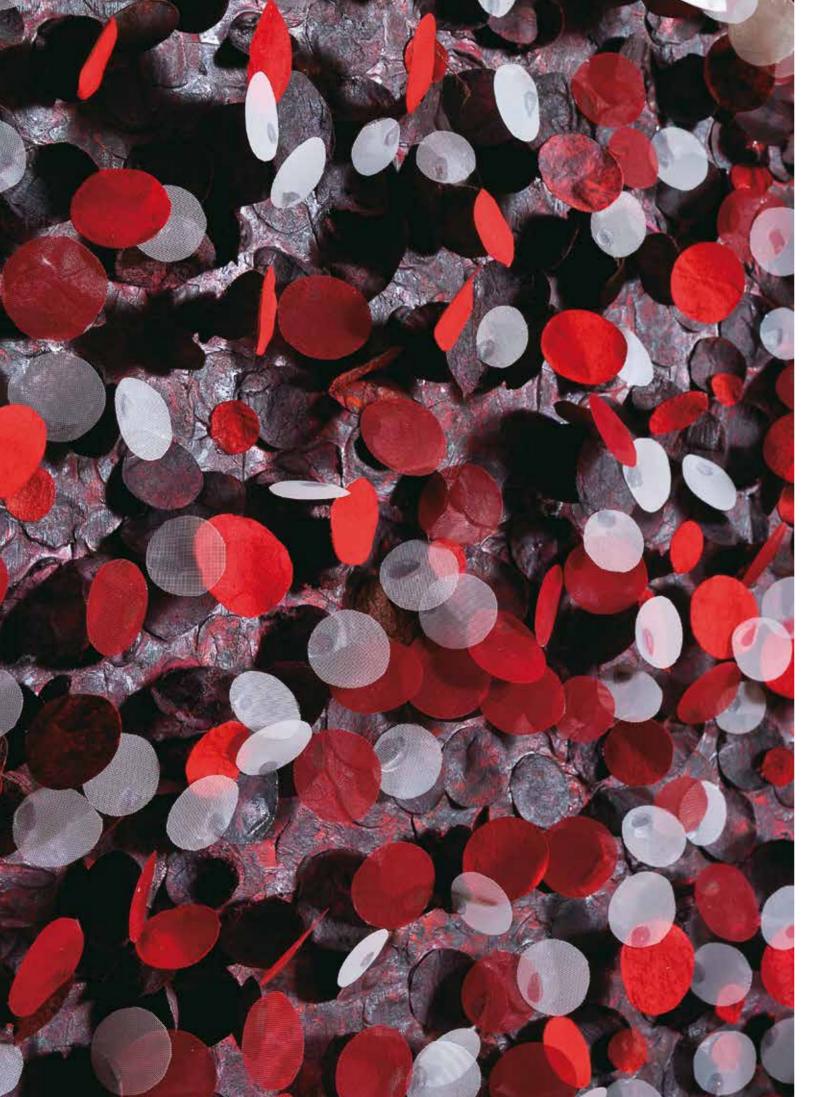
# Cho Sung-Hee Splendid Stars

OPERA GALLERY

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## Preface

Opera Gallery is delighted to present Cho Sung-Hee's first exhibition with us. Korean artist Cho Sung-Hee looks for balance on her canvases through her mastery of materials and colours. She creates through her works a fascinating world that we are pleased to bring forward.

Cho Sung-Hee's works incarnate a string of opposites under a seemingly calm surface. She combines Korean Hanji paper, a traditional material, with oil paint, rather than its archetypal association with Asian inks. Through other creative steps, she comes to her own method and uses this synthesis to create abstract but meticulous works, mesmerising to the eye and the mind.

Cho's works, divided into monochromatic (named after numbers and letters) and polychromatic ones, require a lengthy production. Each Hanji piece is shaped and painted by hand, it is then integrated into the larger composition on canvas. The artist creates a very limited number of works each year. Making a surface that seems to be void, she works intricately with different colours and surfaces inspired by the nature and the world around us.

Many themes interact in Cho's works, from the smallest grain to the infinite. We can observe some of these from her titles - she works with concrete elements of the nature, such as flower blossoms, to something much more metaphysical, the cosmic and the universe. The show's title is a tribute to the artist whose first name Sung-Hee means 'stars' (Sung) and 'splendour' (Hee). Those are some of the feelings her works evoke and we would like to bring to you.

We welcome Cho Sung-Hee to Opera Gallery and are proud to count her as one of our Korean contemporary talents, whom we have exhibited in curated exhibitions throughout the years. We hope you find as much beauty and pleasure in these works as we do.

Gilles Dyan, Founder and Chairman, Opera Gallery Group Sebastien Plantin, Director, Opera Gallery London





## Viewing the Universe and Life

Since the mid 1980s, the Korean contemporary art community has increasingly utilised Asian mulberry paper - Hanji in Korean - as a significant medium of expression. Before this time, Hanji was mainly used by oriental painters or merely used as a currency wrap. Many contemporary artists saw abundant potential to manifest Hanji as an integral part of their artistic vision and over time became a natural medium of common interest. In the 1970s, Dansaekhwa, the Monochrome Art Movement, artists such as Kwon Young-Woo, Chung Chang-Sup, Park Seo-Bo further investigated the possibilities of working with Hanji. Artists such as Choi Chang-Hong, Ham Sup, Han Young-Sup, Han Gi-Ju, Park Chul and Yoo Jae-Gu started to focus on mulberry paper as a main medium for their work and became founding members of the Hanji Artist Association of Korea.

The plasticity of the medium, Hanji, is well suited to express the unique essence of Korean culture. When submerged in water, mulberry paper can be sculpted into any form. As an artist who also shows an exceptional sensibility towards sculptural form, Cho Sung-Hee and mulberry paper form an obvious synthesis and it is as if the artist and the medium were destined to interact. Starting to work with mulberry paper in the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century was a natural course of action for an artist who started her career from representational painting into abstraction.

Cho Sung-Hee's work can be viewed as a condensation of her existence and epitome of life itself. Every facet of her work reflects the artist's limitless imagination. For example, representations of the infinite abundance of the stars above; endless lotus leaves arranged across the surface of a tranquil pond; or an overgrown field adorned with clovers. We can start to grasp the inner thought of the artist as multiple imagery floods into us as one. Unique methods behind the making of an artwork as a vehicle of communication between the maker and the audience. Through this perspective, we can finally have an in-depth conversation with Cho Sung-Hee. And, through this perspective, we can sense her indomitable will and flaming passion that can even melt steel. We ask the question when looking at the remains of her life experience in retrospect: what has fired her passion to this extent?

Using the imagery of leaves, galaxies and mushrooms as a metaphor for the natural object, Cho Sung-Hee's work constantly reminds us of the vastness of nature. When viewing her work, we imagine nature that existed through our experience. That imagination may be of an endless meadow filled with clover, lotus laying on the surface of a still pond, a field filled with roses or

Reflection (detail), 2014

## Cho Sung-Hee's work constantly reminds us of the vastness of nature.

even an infinite sky filled with innumerable gleaming stars. But the most significant response comes when we start to understand her life and realise how much it resembles ours.

As we all know, this mysterious power of art comes from the consistent 'desire of art' present and manifest inside the artist.

We can therefore only start to understand how Cho Sung-Hee has arrived at monochromatic and polychromatic 'objet d'art' through mulberry paper by looking back into Cho Sung-Hee's pilgrimage as an artist.

Life in the Galaxy (132 x 270 cm, 2012) and Floating Sun (132 x 270 cm, 2012) are critical works which show Cho Sung-Hee's insight on universe and life. The representation of the limitless universe we see here is a reflection of her life in a microcosm and equates to the life of an artist. Similar to her older works, Contemplating Death (1982), Cho's recent series, through composing deep blue, black and red as her main palette, delivers a spatial sensation while it fully reveals 'the world of deep silence and that of limitless labyrinth'. Through the use of pure geometry, triangles, rectangles, circles and etc., Cho symbolises fundamentals of the universe and life and through a self-discovered dripping method, she represents the brilliance of the universe. Together with the drippings overflowing and uncountable amount of cut Hanji juxtaposed on the surface is a metaphor for her contemplation on the universe, the meaning of existence and daily life.

Through the combination of mulberry paper and oil based medium, Cho Sung-Hee is a pioneer visionary in creating the stand-alone world of Hanji. It is a labour intensive process, an insular world, which brings about a marvellous admiration from all who view the result of said process. The thought of the artist is embedded in every single Hanji fragment and delivered through monochromatic and polychromatic Hanji series. In Cho Sung-Hee's work, recently favouring towards monochrome, the viewer sees numerous properties of the material Hanji unfolded and manifested, and the result resembles more of a relief than a painting. Considering Cho's

exceptional sculptural sensibility, this convergence is evidence of a sort of synchronicity. Cho Sung-Hee, however, does not only rely on the aesthetical quality a relief brings, but also delivers numerous expressions veiled in layers of paint.

This labour of forming twisting countless *Hanji* to make a stem for the circular *Hanji* must indeed be tedious. Yet it brings forth a remarkable 'visual festival'. Such as a mushroom colony coexisting in the habitat of moss, Cho's work communicates the inseparable metaphoric relationship of nature and human existence. Cho's more recent work Reflection (60.6 x 72.2 cm, 2014) is the best representative for this metaphor of life. Cho redefined the inverse relationship: of good and evil, happiness and sadness, ecstasy and misery; of life itself through a visual language.

Nevertheless, Cho is not only working with cut and collaged Hanji. In order to accentuate the materiality of her chosen medium, she uses her hands to shred Hanji into small fragments and then collages every individual piece by hand. The layers of deep blue, green, red and indigo enhances the depth of the work and the irregularities in the fragmented Hanji are delightfully highlighted. Thus, numerous elements of Cho's work are brought into singularity. Observing at a close distance, Cho's monochromatic work displays multiple layers of visual communication, but when viewed from a further distance, it has a unique quality of converging into one plane. We can start to understand Cho's work from the point of view of the Dansaekhwa movement in its totality as it is devoted to the philosophy of repetition, action and sensibility.

The labour intensive Hanji series created by Cho radiates an essential aura of handmade objects. The artist's self-fought battle of perseverance emits condensation of, or a progression of, time through her artistic sensibility. It can even be viewed as a form of ascetic practice. Recent conversation and dialogues about Korea's Dansaekhwa movement has its fundamental root in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism - its converging point in Korea. In this point of view, understanding and evaluating Cho's Hanji work should happen in the context of cultural heritage.

2012



#### Yoon Jin Sup, Art Critic, Ph.D.

# The Search for Emptiness: Paintings by Cho Sung-Hee

The remarkable collage paintings of Cho Sung-Hee are filled with emptiness. While some may consider this as a paradox or contradiction, this is not exactly how it is meant. The kind of emptiness that Cho Sung-Hee strives to attain is difficult to express in Western terms, because it is not based on a Western concept. It is an Eastern idea integrated with profound feeling. Among Korean artists who work from a metaphysical or 'abstract' point of view, to achieve a feeling of emptiness within one's work is to attain a higher level of understanding with regards to nature. For Cho Sung-Hee, emptiness is a kind of absence filled with energy. The Sanskrit word, sunyata, has been used to express this emptiness or 'void' from which something new and revitalising is brought to life through the act of creation. It is a concept well-known among shamanists who have occupied the Korean peninsula since late Neolithic times - centuries before the advent of Buddhism, Confucianism, and eventually, Christianity.

To speak of emptiness in the work of a Korean artist, such as Cho Sung-Hee, suggests that the spirit of nature is somehow held within the painting, and that the surface is related to the energy of the *qi*, the spirit. When a painting is contemplated and felt to be empty, it means that the artist has touched upon the storehouse of energy, the subtle release and discovery of the *gi*. This process may require days, weeks, months, or years. It is not automatic. To sense the reality of emptiness in the artist's paintings is to intensify the aggregation of the visual field, to delve between the tiny crafted circles so delicately trimmed from *Hanji* paper and then repetitively applied, from two to four layers, one on top of another, until the space is filled. By filling the space in proper cadence, one discovers the paradox of emptiness: to fill space is also to empty it. This is a Taoist idea as much as a Buddhist one. The process works evenly both ways. To construct a surface with traditional Hanji paper through the mixing of oil paint is to strengthen the surface, to give it an indomitable effect, yet retaining a delicacy as soft as air through which butterflies may glide.

To understand Cho's paintings, the viewer is required to slow down. They need to be felt, and require time to be understood. One cannot view her paintings in a rush. They are neither electronic nor digital. They are not virtual signs. Rather they are highly tactile surfaces constructed from Hanji paper and oil paint. In many ways, her paintings are quite the opposite from what is visible in the metropolitan environments of New York, Los Angeles, or Seoul. While these urban centres may appear energetic, they are only illusions of energy. Rather, they are frantic and desperate environments, contingent on material striving that by pass the concentrated aura necessary to release the qi.

Often, Cho's paintings appear as a monochrome surface, a single uniform colour, such as bright red or subtle grey or pure white. Pure white is also a colour from the East Asian point of view. In fact, white is the processed colour of Hanji paper, originally made from the ground leaves of mulberry trees. In constructing the surface of her paintings, the artist uses a collage method in which each circle is hand-cut or gently torn, then layered with oil pigments and placed one atop another. Each tiny circle is the size of a thumbprint. Occasionally, Cho will mix red and green circles, clashing them together. In another example, the surface has a mixture of three colours – red, green and blue. Here, one may see the circular shapes are slightly larger. In looking at such a painting, the references to nature are abundant: sky and water, grass and trees, vivid sunsets and the blood that circulates within the human body. Another deeply textured painting by Cho involves the integration of red and yellow pigments on tiny fragments of thickly layered Hanji, in which each element is saturated with intense colour.

In speaking with the artist, it seems that the circles that appear in her paintings were initially realised in a papier-mâché rectilinear shape from 2009, set on a vertical axis, in which larger cut circle shapes appeared at the top. The artist believes these circular shapes – which symbolically relate to the passing of her father – where the beginning of the circle theme in her most recent work. However, in studying the work of other contemporary Korean artists, it would appear that the circle may also be a cultural signifier that refers to a sense of wholeness within the social structure that functions symbolically as an atavistic sign of the individual soul in relation to the larger Korean community, which would include ancestor worship from the past.

One of the most fascinating aspects in Cho Sung-Hee's work is how her collage paintings attend to what is both visible and invisible – what is present and what is past. This continuity of history reaches beyond the singular soul into the realm of a historical nexus of individuals, each possessing souls that are somehow unified together within the larger Korean family. Cho Sung-Hee's paintings are a search for emptiness because emptiness is the basis of nature and the source of energy as transmitted through the *qi*. What we see in her paintings is the visual splendour of her imagination at work, and what we feel through her work is the hidden past, the tradition of Korean culture that is safeguarded through language and the desire to express inherent feelings that ultimately belong to art. Finally, it is through the art of Cho Sung-Hee that we discover the pulse of Korean tradition and the sentimental traits by which Korean people identify themselves. This is the important value that resides within the visible, yet beneath the surface of these deeply felt paintings.

## For Cho Sung-Hee emptiness is a kind of absence filled with energy.

Robert C. Morgan, Ph.D.

The artist and her son Jungho in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City

## Interview

Can you tell us when and why you first became interested in fine arts and decided to become an artist?

My father sent me to Hyanggyo (the Confucian temple and school installed to teach local students in the Joseon Dynasty, some remained in modern Korea) to learn calligraphy based on oriental painting at the age of six. It is said that I was always telling people that I would go to Paris to be a painter since kindergarten and elementary school.

## What was it like to be in art school and later a woman artist in the 1970s when you first started compared to now?

I realised strongly that I would become a painter, and I always lived in paintings (artistic works) but I think that my enthusiasm as an artist nowadays is even stronger than it was in the 1970s due to my incorporation of collage. The artistic world of my works is firmly established in the present.

# Korean and Eastern ideological concepts, such as Taoist ideals, the void or the *qi* spirit, are often discussed when art critics try to understand your work. What are the predominating themes one should have in mind when trying to grasp the meaning of your works?

When I talk to Korean critics, I refer to the world of works from the start to the completion of my work. As I am Korean, I create Korean-like works. But the fact that I create oriental works does not mean that I am a Taoist. I am a Christian. A work does not come out only through religion. As an artist my aim is to put my message in every single step of the work, so I work with the best endurance until completion.

One day, on the empty canvas, I added a round shaped *Hanji* just like a dot, which was the starting point of my collage work. What I felt at that time was simultaneously 'full' and 'empty'. I found homogeneity from the two paintings; one is nearly perfect as it is filled and the other one is painted with a simple circle on an empty canvas. To me they became the same. It is the aesthetics of 'to fill' and 'to empty'. I could feel 'null' in the work to empty and 'energy' in the work to fill. This 'energy' comes from the work where tens of thousands of circles gather to fill the canvas. However, I am not coming to 'null' the work (to empty) and I don't want to, either. It is because I would like to show courtesy to my works. In other words, I do my very best. Therefore, I stop when it is perfect (to fill). I selected *Hanji* as the material of my work because I could

easily relate to it as a Korean. The other reason was circumstantial. Once, I had to prepare an exhibition in New York. I was staying with my son, and he was living in a small apartment house, I could not use turpentine with oil painting. When I

thought about work that would not produce odour from turpentine, I started to work on papiermâché by using newspapers on the canvas. After I returned to Seoul, I developed it by using *Hanji* rather than newspaper. The general theme of my works is 'Happy Virus', as I want people who see my works to feel happy and I would like to make people happy.

#### Can you tell us what are some of the inspiring ideas and elements behind this selection of works?

The person who has influenced me most is my mother. I am inspired by the things that she taught me and the stories that she told me when I was young.

#### Was abstraction a tentative before your experimentation in using different materials?

In college years, some figurative images were revealed in my work, but as I expanded my artistic world, my works were naturally developed into abstraction.

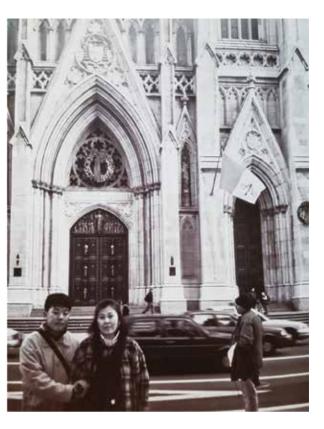
Abstract work has become the main starting point for today's 'Blossom' and many abstract elements can be found in my early work with *Hanji*.

## How and when did you start working with mulberry paper – *Hanji* – in your works? What is your approach to *Hanji*?

I started working with Hanji in early 2012 and selected Hanji for collage work.

#### What are the different stages involved in producing your works?

After making basic collage on the canvas, I complete the work by attaching the prepared paper stick. It can be said that a work is completed by collage which repeats attachment and





detachment hundreds of times. It is an uncomfortable subject for me to ask how I complete a specific art work. I think if I answer that question, the mystery will be gone.

## Is there any particular way for you to determine the colour of a work?

The choice of colour is made in advance in harmony in my thought and when I start the work, the multiple colours are put up and then it is developed on the canvas according to the actual colours.

## A lot of your paintings' surfaces are in three dimensions. Can you explain how you work with dimensions?

A structured paper stick is placed on the canvas. When making a collage what I want is formed during this process, I attach circular shaped *Hanji* on the stick. At this time, various types of spaces are formed.

#### How do you choose the titles for your works?

The theme of my works is circle. I express petals as circles and I give a symbolical title. As the circle is a 'Blossom', I name them using their primary colour such as 'Red Blossom' and 'Blue Blossom'.

#### How do you proceed to go on from one series or theme to another?

If another thought comes in the way of collage, it is time to try new things.

#### Can you tell us a bit more what's a day at your studio in Seoul like working on your paintings?

I talk with my works delicately every day. In other words, I work delicately. The endurance of the artist is made over an exceedingly long time. I almost live in my studio.

## You are an artist who has lived in Korea and abroad. Can you tell us if and how does that experience influence your art?

When I work in a foreign country, I cannot escape from the influence of the environment. I was filled with the idea that I had to make works that only I could do, whist viewing various artistic trends in New York. When I returned to Seoul, I found a way to connect the mysteriousness of Hwaseonji (A kind of *Hanji* usually used for calligraphy, it is sometimes called Chinese paper) to my works through my experiences and experiments. It was a new discovery for me when I

applied the colour to 'Blossom', the circle which is the theme of my work, using turpentine oil. When you paint colour on *Hanji*, the circular shape sinks because *Hanji* is touched by water and it is collapsed. However, it was not easy to colour *Hanji* with oil painting. It is because of the weight of oil paints. After many experiments, I applied oil painting with turpentine and could maintain the circular shape of *Hanji*. I did not find much transparency when I used oil colours, but when I used the method on *Hanji*, I could see the clear colour that *Hanji* has. At that moment, I suddenly felt the joy from the colour and wanted to spread the 'Happy Virus'. Generally speaking, nobody thought that *Hanji* and turpentine would be a good match. But paper is from tree and turpentine is also from resin of the tree. Therefore, the fusion of these two made a good match.

#### Is there any room for accidents - beautiful coincidences in that case - in your working process?

When artists express their ideas with the work, they do it with accuracy. However, during the work, sometimes we encounter an unexpected contingency. Since this contingency was not intended by the artist, I do not think it is meaningful. If contingency is established in my works, it is not from me concretely, or my deep thought. Therefore, an artist never chooses chance or contingency. However, the artist has a lot of thoughts in the mind while working. While wandering we meet good changes in the thought. When it happens to me, I select the change. Especially, I find many changes in the process of colouring.

#### What are some other themes you would like to explore in your upcoming works?

The theme of these works is 'Blossom'. I want to continue the 'Blossom' series. I also made around 100 structural wood pieces with the help of a carpenter. Of course, the base material is wood, but I develop them as collage, putting together partly finished wood pieces and adding *Hanji* collage on it. But I am still waiting to harmonise these. So, it is my task next year to see how I can integrate these sculptural structures with 'Blossom' perfectly.



*Hanji* paper



## Blue Blossom with White, 2018

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 130.3 x 97 cm | 51.3 x 38.2 in



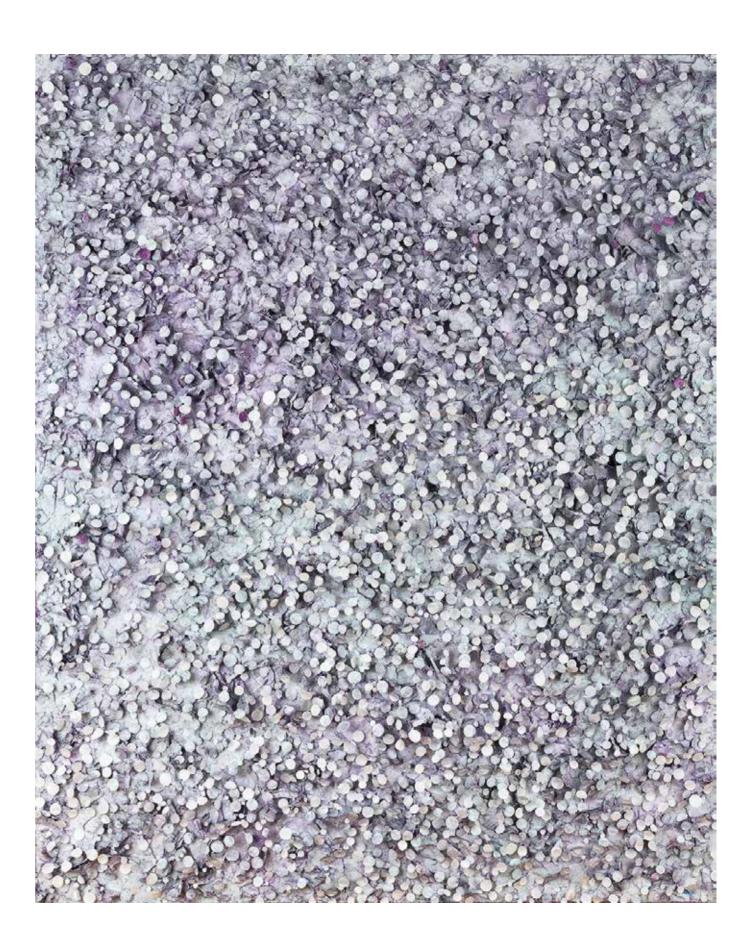
## Illusion with Light Grey, 2017

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 160 x 130 cm | 63 x 51.2 in



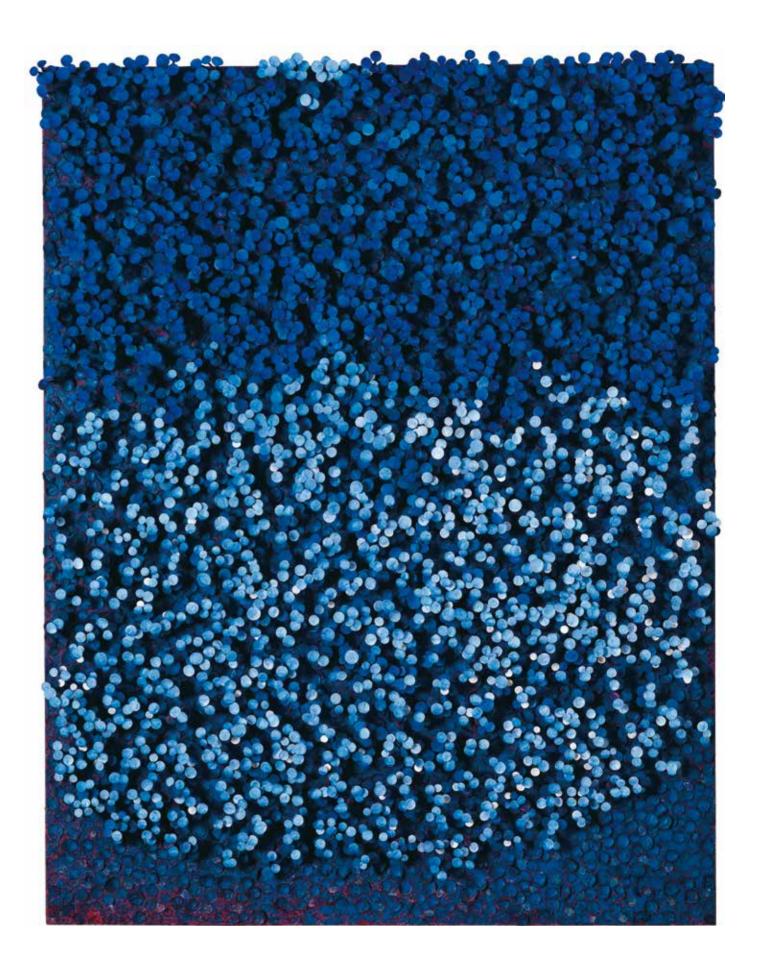
## Illusion with Light Violet, 2017

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 160 x 130 cm | 63 x 51.2 in



## Dark Blue Blossom, 2017

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 116.8 x 91 cm + 46 x 35.8 in



## Red Blossom, 2017

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 116.8 x 91 cm + 46 x 35.8 in



## Work 1, 2017

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 90.9 x 72.7 cm | 35.8 x 28.6 in



Work 2, 2017

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 90.9 x 72.7 cm | 35.8 x 28.6 in



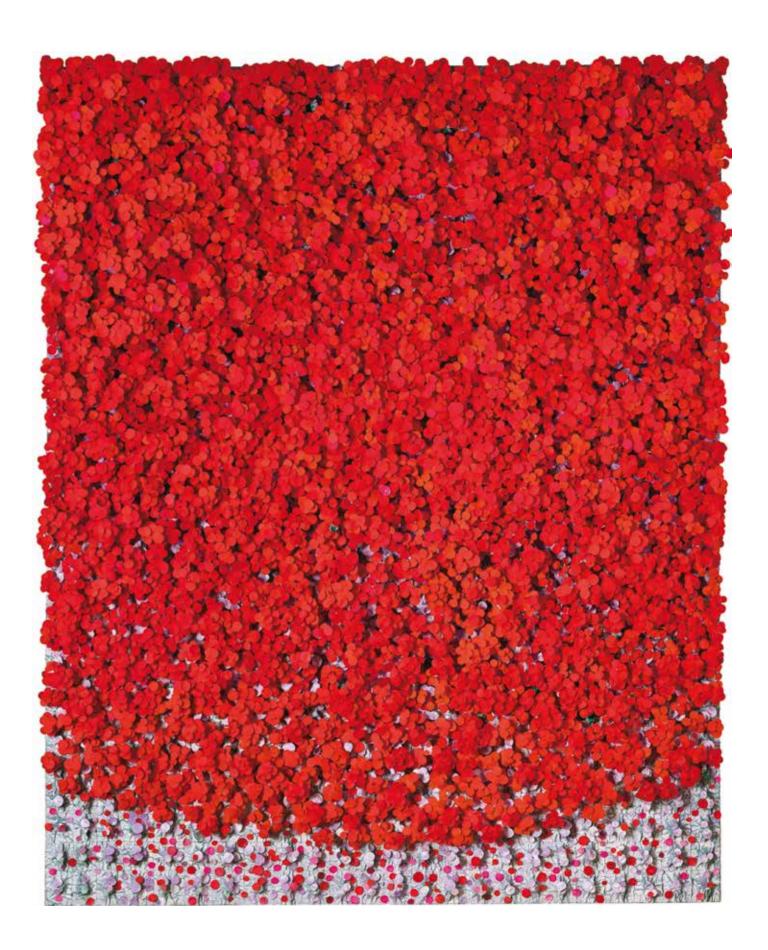
Blossom, 2016

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 72.7 x 60.6 cm | 28.6 x 23.9 in



## Red Blossom A, 2016

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 162.2 x 130.3 cm | 63.9 x 51.2 in



## Black Green Cluster, 2015

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 116.8 x 91 cm + 46 x 35.8 in



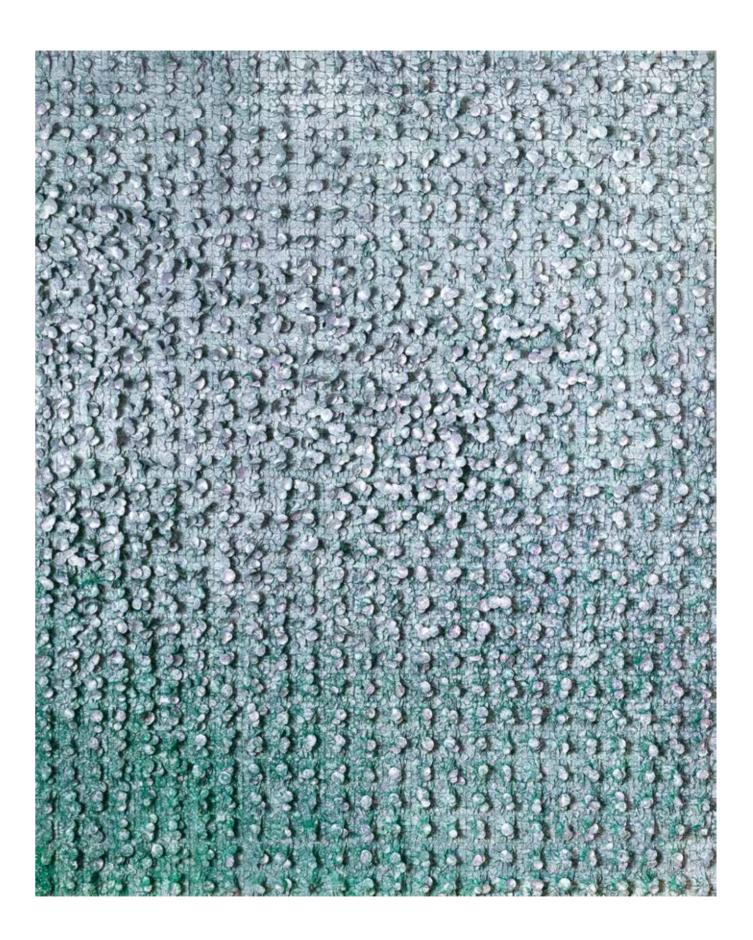
## Work B, 2015

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 162.2 x 130.3 cm | 63.9 x 51.3 in



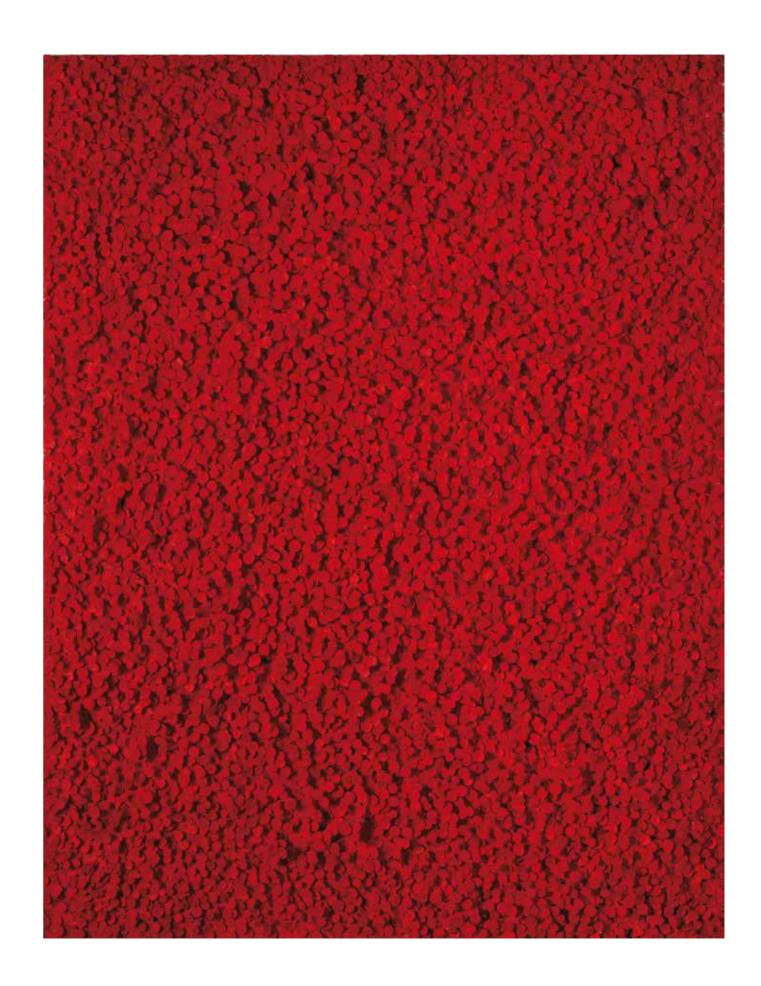
### Green with Violet, 2015

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 162.2 x 130.3 cm | 63.9 x 51.3 in



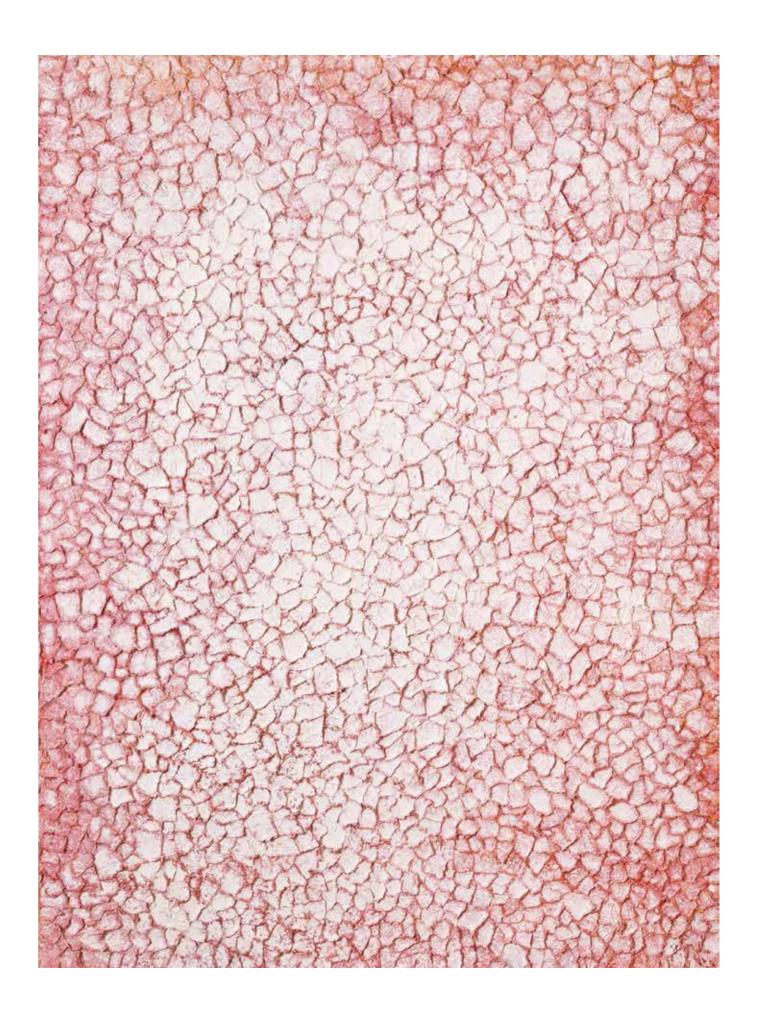
## Cosmic Fog, 2014

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 145.5 x 112.1 cm | 57.3 x 44.1 in



### Work A, 2013

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 130.3 x 97 cm | 51.3 x 38.2 in



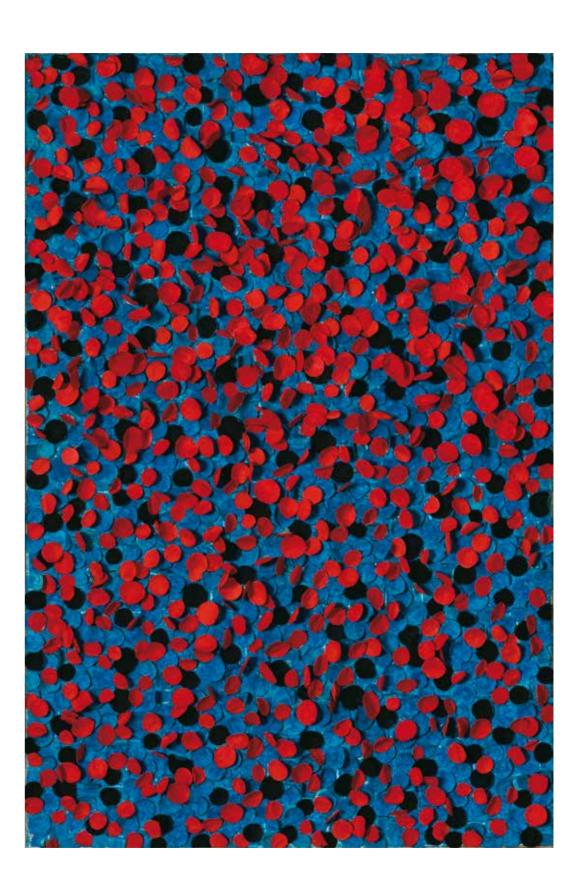
## Work C, 2013

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 162.2 x 130.3 cm | 63.9 x 51.3 in



Heart, 2013

Hanji paper and oil on canvas 60 x 30 cm | 23.6 x 11.8 in





# Biography

## Cho Sung-Hee (b. 1949)

1988	Art Institute of Chicago
1982-83	Pratt Institute of Art, New York
1980-81	Otis/Parson Art Institute, Los Angeles ar
1975	M.A., Graduate School of Education, Ewh
1972	B.A., College of Fine Arts, Hong-Ik Unive

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2017	Sandy Bennet Gallery, New Jersey Tambaran Gallery, The Armory Show, New
2016	Asia Week, Tambaran Gallery, New York
2015	Asia Week, Tambaran Gallery, New York Art Taipei, Dado Gallery, Taiwan
2014	Tambaran Gallery, New York Tong-In Gallery, Seoul
2013	Gallery Mark, Seoul Kang Collection, New York
2012	Gallery Art Link, Seoul
2010	Chicago Art Fair, Chosun Gallery, Chicago Korean Art Show, Chosun Gallery, New Yo
2009	Chosun Gallery, Seoul
1996	National Museum of Contemporary Art, S
1995	Gurun Gallery, Chicago
1994	Lloyd Shin Gallery, Seoul
1993	Lloyd Shin Gallery, Chicago
1988	Korea Art Gallery, Seoul
1985	Park Yeo Sook Gallery, Seoul
1984	Korean Cultural Center, Sculptures and C
1983	Korean Cultural Center, Sculptures and C
1981	Shino Gallery, Painting & Printmaking, Lo Han Kook Gallery, Painting & Printmakin
1980	Otis/Parson Art Institute North Gallery, L American Cultural Center, Seoul

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Construction, New York Construction, Los Angeles Los Angeles ng, New York Los Angeles

- 1979 Tolentine Art Center, Chicago
- 1978 Gallery Hyundai, Seoul
- 1977 Shinsegae Gallery, Seoul
- 1975 Chosun Gallery, Seoul
- 1972 3.1 Building, Seoul

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 Be Someone Spring Group Show, Tambaran Gallery, New York
- 2015 Milano World Expo: Today's Art of Korea, Villa Clerici Milano, Milan
- 2014 Asia Week, Tambaran Gallery, New York
- 2013 Art Show Busan, Bexco, Busan Hong Kong Contemporary 13, Hong Kong Asia Week, Kang Collection, New York
- 2012 Yeosu International Art Festival, Yeosu
- 1995 KIAF, Seoul Arts Center, Seoul
- 1994 Art Exhibition of Music and Dance, Seoul Arts Center, Seoul
- 1988 Exhibition of Five Contemporary Artists, Lloyd Shin Gallery, Seoul
- 1984 Korean-American Sensibilities, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York
- 1983 Korean-American Sensibilities, Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles
- 1982 Korean-American Sensibilities, Korean Cultural Center, New York
- 1979 Chicago Women Artists Exhibition, Three Art Club, Chicago
- 1978Oil Painting Exhibition by Eight Women Painters, Moon Hwa Gallery, Seoul<br/>Dong-A News Times Exhibition of Fine Arts, Modern Art Museum, Seoul
- 1975 National Exhibition of Fine Arts, Modern Art Museum, Seoul
- 1974-78 Women Artists Exhibition, National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul
- 1974 Independent Exhibition, Modern Art Museum, Seoul

### COLLECTIONS

Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul Sejong Art Center, Seoul Tolentine Art Center, Chicago Three Art Club, Chicago Los Angeles Korean Cultural Center, Los Angeles New York Korean Cultural Center, New York Busan Metropolitan City Children's Hall, Busan Domino Sugar & Co., New York Sun Jet Construction Co. Ltd., Taiwan John Quinn Emanuel LLD, Los Angeles Tambaran Gallery, New York Lee Fixel, East Hampton



We would like to thank the artist for her trust.

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Cover: Dark Blue Blossom (Detail), 2017

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