

KOREA MEETS FRANCE #1 – BLACK & WHITE

Korean artist Won Sou-Yeol was born in South Korea and has lived in France since 1984. Graduating from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts in Paris-Cergy, she is currently represented by the gallerist Françoise Livinec. Won Sou-Yeol's black and white works are full of energy. Her artistic practice, which was alive and strong in her first paintings, becomes calmer and takes shape in her more recent creations. AMA met this remarkable artist, who left her home country of Korea to come to France, where she became inspired and started her creative practice.

Won Sou-Yeol

Courtesy Galerie Livinec



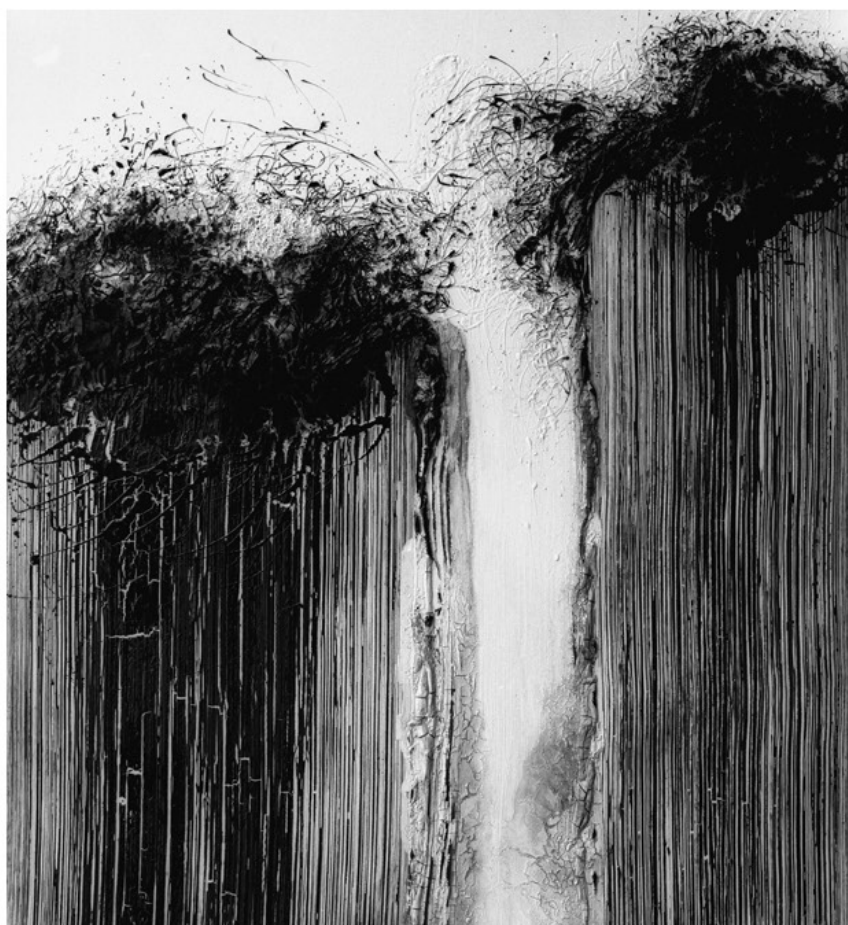
INTERVIEW • WON SOU-YEOL

At first sight, your paintings provoke strong emotions, how do you manage to achieve this effect?

This effect comes from the fact that I express all of my feelings through my paintings. Art allows me to express myself, to open myself up to my passions. Everything is in the act, I throw paint onto canvases and put my whole heart into it. It's actually a very quick process. Once I have begun to paint, it takes me hardly any time to finish. It's actually all the preliminary preparation that takes a lot of time. As I prepare everything myself, it usually takes me several weeks before I am ready to paint. When I mix pigments, I need to change and mix the materials several times per day, every day, adding water to it. I also prepare the frame myself, by cutting wood, and I then place the canvas onto it. Finally, when all the material is ready, I need to clear my head and only when I feel that this is done, can I feel this need to create. And then, I throw everything I have within myself onto the canvas. So I spend maybe an afternoon or a whole day without doing anything, just waiting to be completely able to express myself through art.

How did you get into art?

I was born in South Korea in a small town on the island of Jeju. One day, when I was 12 years old, I stood in front of the sea and I stared at the horizon. It was at this moment that I wondered what there was behind this immensity. And since then, all my works have been filled with marine motifs, particularly those of the ocean. I never really realised this until a man looked at my paintings and told me that they made him think of water, and waterfalls. At first, I was very surprised, but then I realised that it was completely true. Living in France, I have realised the importance of our origins, and how they always come back to us, in an unconscious manner. I came to France in 1984, aged 35, having studied French literature. I then went to study at Paris' École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, without even sitting the entrance exam because the director found my study of literature and the works that I had shown him very interesting. That is how I entered the art world.



Untitled (1995)
Won Sou-Yeol

210 x 178 cm

Courtesy Galerie Leivinec

Won Sou-Yeol at work
Courtesy Galerie Leivinec



How would you describe the development of your artistic practice?

My career has been split into three different stages. The first period was characterised by two paradoxical feelings: hope and sadness. Hope because I had just come to France, I had graduated from the l'École des Beaux-Arts, and I wanted to do lots of things, create works, and let my imagination run wild. But at the same time, I felt sad because I was all alone in a foreign country. It was not easy to have little money, and I couldn't afford a personal workshop, so I shared one with several French artists. But the noise and their movements bothered me, which was why I started painting at night, in the dark and the cold because there wasn't heating or hot water. Contrary to what people might think, the colours black and white that characterise my work aren't representative of these two opposing feelings. They come from a Buddhist doctrine according to which the colour black is made from a mix of all the beings and all the feelings that are associated with the five desires (wealth, lust, glory, greed, and sleep) as well as the seven passions (love, anger, greed, hate, sadness, and joy). Anyway, it was at this time that I started making large works, making a work measuring 220 x 570 cm, thanks to which I was able to express the intensity of my emotions, which really took a weight off my chest. At this time, I didn't do anything else but work. I didn't look forward to holidays like Christmas anymore, my whole life was art, and I loved it. One day, I wanted to know what time it was, and I realised that three years had passed.



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Then came the meditative period, during which I was calmer, and less hot-headed. This second period of my artistic career came about after the death of my mother. This is one of my life's biggest regrets, if not the only regret. My parents constantly asked me to come and see them, but I didn't have time. I spent my days rushing around between exhibitions, fairs, and sales... I didn't see her before she died and a very powerful grief came over me. I then asked her for forgiveness a thousand times by making a large canvas measuring 284 × 554 cm, made up of a thousand small stars gathered together like calligraphy, signatures, and even gravestones for my mother. I also tried, through this work, to offer her a place of peace that would put an end to her wandering. In this second period of my artistic career, I also made other large paintings that were all characterised by a rising upwards, because of my desire to help my mother go up to heaven, so that her soul could leave Earth. I knew that her soul was wandering because she often came to see me in my dreams. But one day, I saw her in my dreams and she smiled at me, and said goodbye. This was ten years ago, and I haven't seen her since. I feel relieved to know that she has finally found peace. Finally, there was the third period of my artistic career. For three years, it was very difficult for me to start working again. I tried many things, such as using colour, but I didn't really like this. So I then went back to using black, which was a real liberation. This sudden rush of happiness that overwhelmed me was transformed into open circles, still inspired by wave motifs, as well as whirling dervishes, and with arms spread open and with one hand turned towards the earth and another turned towards the sea, and their head bent towards their heart and their feet turning on themselves. I felt like I was coming back to life again, especially after the difficult years after my mother's death, and a small health problem, that I had had for a little while, which meant that I always felt like my head was spinning, making me fear that I would never again be able to create anything.

Untitled (1997)
Won Sou-Yeol

205 × 205 cm

Courtesy Galerie Leivinec



Which galleries have you worked with?

After I attended the École des Beaux-Arts, I was represented by the Galerie Toxic in Luxembourg for seven or eight years. They helped me a lot; they launched my artistic practice, and they let me present my first solo exhibitions and participate in art fairs, such as Art Paris Art Fair. Then Françoise Livinec from Galerie Penthievre asked to look at my works. I was very busy at the time so I told her that it wouldn't be possible, but she insisted so I told her to come and I showed her my canvases that I had never exhibited. She liked my work so she began to exhibit it at the École des Filles in Brittany and we have worked together regularly ever since.

What are your plans for the future?

For now, I'm very busy thinking about the end of my solo exhibition at the Young Eun Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, as well as another exhibition running from October 2015, at which I will be presenting my works, for Year of Korea at Paris' Musée Cernuschi, alongside the works of other Korean artists such as Mrs Bang, Chae Sung Pil, and Choi Jun-Kun, who are represented by the same gallery. ♦

Untitled (2006)
Won Sou-Yeol

97 × 162 cm

Courtesy Galerie Leivinec

