

# C E R E A L

In this volume, we look towards **Korea**. We explore the architecture of **Itami Jun**, the photography of **Koo Bohnchang**, and the **Dansaekhwa** art movement. We converse with **David Chang** and **Eunjo Park**, visit **Charlotte Perriand's** M  ribel chalet with **A  sop**, and share our cultural guide to **Seoul**.

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THE FATHER  
OF DANSAEKHWHA

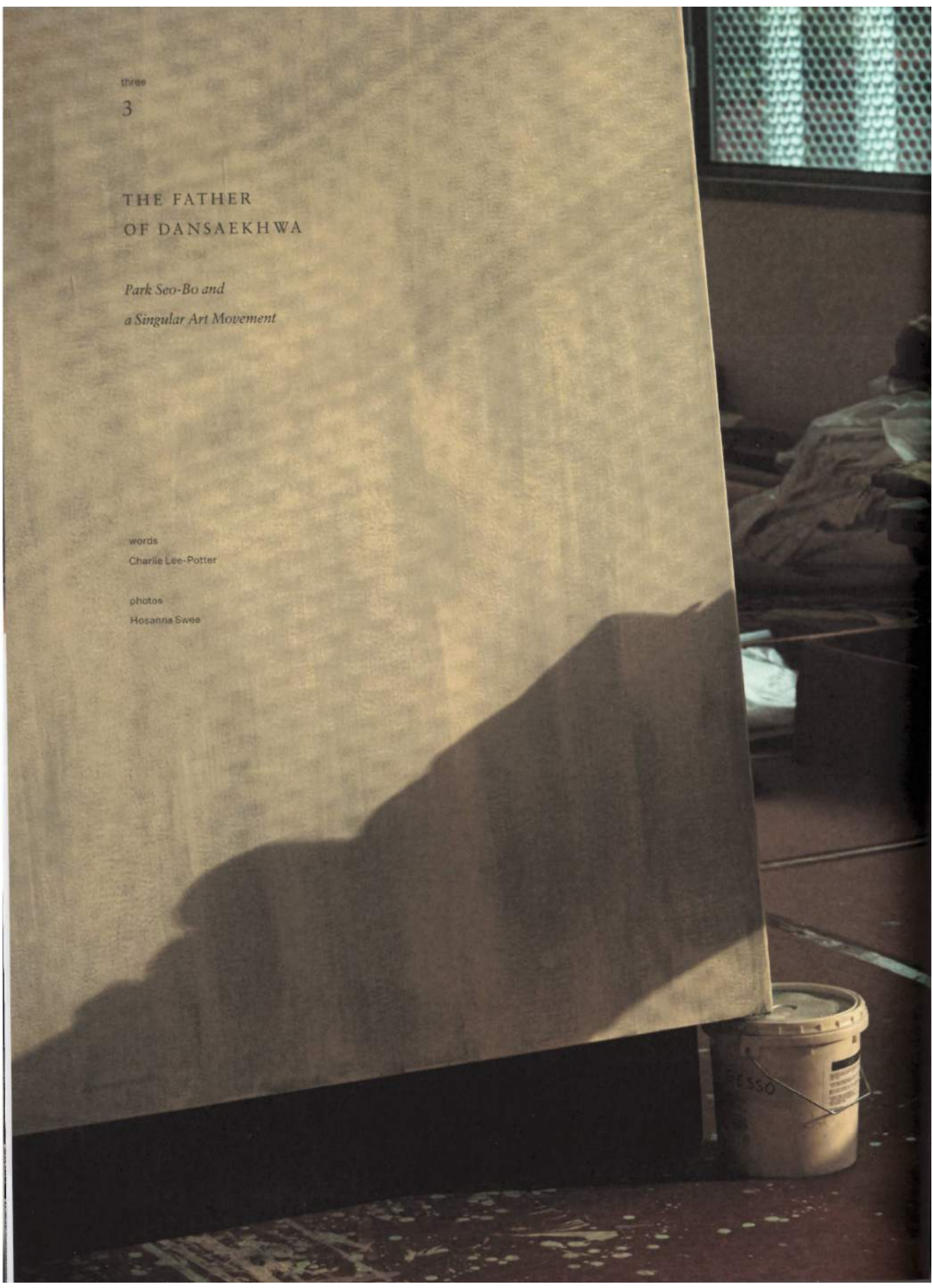
*Park Seo-Bo and  
a Singular Art Movement*

words

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Visualise an 88-year-old man who's endured poverty, war, persecution, illness, hunger and neglect — and you won't see the artist Park Seo-Bo. In his perky trilby hat and sharp leather jacket, wreathed in smiles, he looks decades younger than he is. Yet he's suffered appalling privations, often going without food, and sleeping in a classroom when he had nowhere else to stay. As an art student during the Korean War, he used to stay behind at the end of the day in the hope that he might find fragments of discarded pencil, crayon or charcoal on the floor. When he had no materials at all, he drew with earth or stolen soy sauce. Yet to see him laugh now, you would think his life had been without cares. On Instagram, he poses for comical close ups of his gleaming bald head and competes with his wife to blow out the candles on their 61<sup>st</sup> wedding-anniversary cake. My favourite video clip shows the pair of them dissolving into giggles as they try to broadcast a happy-new-year message in Korean. Their words are translated into English at the bottom of the screen; what makes it so endearing is they have gone to the trouble of captioning their laughter, just in case it's different in Korean: "HaHaHa!" "HaHaHa!" Yet for all the hilarity, it's clear that Park Seo-Bo's joyous energy is an aspect of intensity, not frivolity.

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#### DANSAEKHWA

The style of painting now known as *Dansaekhwa* was initially referred to as 'Korean Monochrome Painting'. It wasn't until the Gwangju Biennale in 2000 that the term *Dansaekhwa* — which literally translates as 'one colour painting' — finally stuck. The critic Yoon Jin-Sup decided to apply the term retrospectively to this loose grouping of artists and their work, much of which had been composed in the 1970s, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue.



Park's paintings appear to hover weightlessly on the wall. With endlessly repeated marks, elegant gestures and purity of expression, he combines rigour and calm on a single canvas. But, he says, serenity has been hard to learn. "Only when I was solely immersed in painting could I forget everything and find peace within my heart. And, to be honest, it's the only thing I do well. This is perhaps why I could paint whilst overcoming all of these hardships. Nothing could disturb

the complete absorption with my true self that I encountered; not even the war, social unrest, poverty, or sickness." It's an intriguing cycle: art allowed him to transcend himself and his troubles, and, in turn, his paintings are simultaneously full of meaning and empty of ego. But there was one thing painting couldn't do for him: "What even I found difficult to endure was the poverty of my wife and my children. It was unbearable to watch them starve."

Park's energy, passion and rigour made him the natural father of *Dansaekhwa*, the art movement synonymous with artists Chung Chang-Sup, Yun Hyong-Keun, Lee Ufan, Ha Chong-Hyun, Kwon Young-Woo and Cho Yong-Ik. Developed in the 1970s, *Dansaekhwa* is a fusion of Korean sensibility and fearless abstraction. It's usually translated into English simply as 'monochrome', but Park fiercely rejects that term. "*Dansaekhwa* means 'a singular colour' in Korean, so people regard our pieces as a Korean version of monochrome. But monochrome alludes to a limitation in the use of colour — and that's a different thing." When I ask him to explain in more detail, he says that singular colour is based on the Korean attitude to the nature of things.

"Understanding the material a painter uses, endlessly conversing with it, and allowing its nature to reveal itself through repetition and long periods of work is the mindset of *Dansaekhwa*," he says. "Koreans are fond of the expression *not going against*. It means to become part of the flow rather than stand out from it. Korean people think of nature as the entirety, and ourselves as a small portion within it. I never once faced nature and regarded it as something that should be controlled or conquered. It's simply the wholeness in which I belong. Therefore, I have no artificial images in my paintings. As the painter, I have ceased to assert or express myself." It's what characterises all *Dansaekhwa* artists: a deep reverence for materials, as well as the desire to empty their work of self-expression.

Given Park's rejection of monochrome as a translation for *Dansaekhwa*, it's probably no surprise to learn that he doesn't like the word usually exchanged for his drawing technique, *Myobop*, either: "The art critic Bang Geun-Taek suggested the French word for writing, *écriture*, to describe my technique. But in truth *Myobop* comes from the Chinese characters 'to draw' and 'a method'. So *écriture* is not an accurate translation." It's a subtle distinction for Park. While the European idea of writing or *écriture* may not define his technique, the East Asian art of writing in the form of calligraphy does. As he

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explains, "When the calligrapher holds the brush upright and perfectly focuses on the very tip, the long, soft hairs that form the calligraphy pen reveal the mind of the calligrapher. The sensitive brush registers the slightest wander of the mind. Just as a calligrapher focuses his mind on the tip of the brush, I focus my whole mind at the end of my pencil for the Myobop technique. But my mind isn't focused on drawing or achieving something in particular, rather it concentrates on forgetting myself through that focus. In that sense, both calligraphy and Myobop share a similarity: entering a state of spirituality."

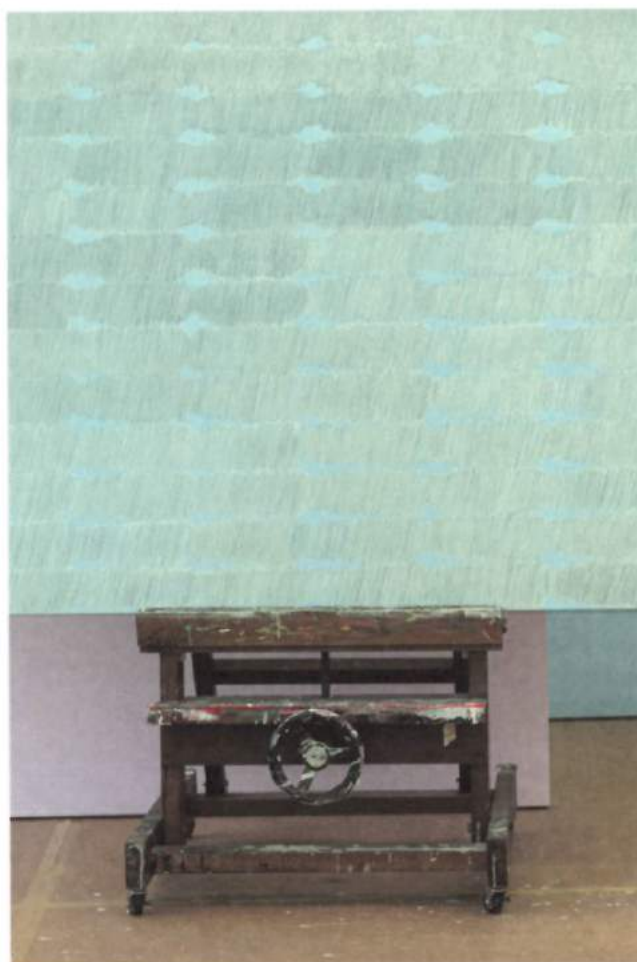
Park's respect for his materials is expressed most strongly in the paper he uses — Korean *hanji*, made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry, or *dak* tree. It's endlessly absorbent, whilst being strong and malleable. "My pieces are products of a dynamic harmony between the material properties of *hanji* and my Myobop technique," Park says. "I've never considered the paint the surface of my work. I consider the material properties of *hanji* the surface." It's a subject he feels deeply about, once debating *hanji*'s qualities with Robert Rauschenberg and David Hockney: "I told them that a new sort of painting can be created once you take a step back and work in a way that allows the paper to tell its own story. So, rather than simply painting an image on the surface of the paper, I assist the *hanji* to reveal its material properties just as they are." Walk round to the side of one of Park's

*hanji* paintings, stare at it edge-side on, and you'll see what he means. *Hanji* has a translucent, milky quality, and it rises from the canvas in waves, peaks, ridges, and overlapping creases. It looks like skin on fingertips that have been soaking in the bath for too long. The exacting skill in coaxing the *hanji* to form such exquisite ridges and folds is at the heart of both Dansaekhwa and Myobop. I was desperate to run my fingers along the raised edges to see if the *hanji* felt soft or crisp, rubbery or firm. I knew the gallery would be livid but, worse, I felt the artist himself would be even crosser. I kept my hands to myself.

That Dansaekhwa has produced a regimented line of monotone, grey paintings is an ongoing misconception. Lee Ufan, for example, has combined vivid blue and orange in his work, although he happens to favour grey more than he used to. As he once said, "The most important thing is the stroke; colour has no meaning in the work." Similarly, Yun Hyong-Keun was known for his palette of rich umber and ultramarine. Where his affiliation to Dansaekhwa revealed itself was in the rhythmic, repetitive strokes on the canvas, which allowed the materials, not him, to express themselves. Cho Yong-Ik's paintings show the respect for materials so intrinsic to Dansaekhwa, but some of his works motion fleetingly towards representation. His 'Wave Series' isn't explicit, but the repeated sweeping gestures marked on the canvas hint at rippling water. The paintings in his







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'Bamboo Series' are oblique, but they're suggestive of delicate leaves moving in and out of the light. Meanwhile Chung Chang-Sup, who died in 2011, focused his reverence for materials on the paper itself. Like Park, he had a deep love for *hanji* from the paper mulberry tree. "I scoop up the pulp," he said, "spread it on a canvas, tap and knead it, and my conversation with the paper mulberry begins. Abandoning my own will, instead I await its spontaneous response."

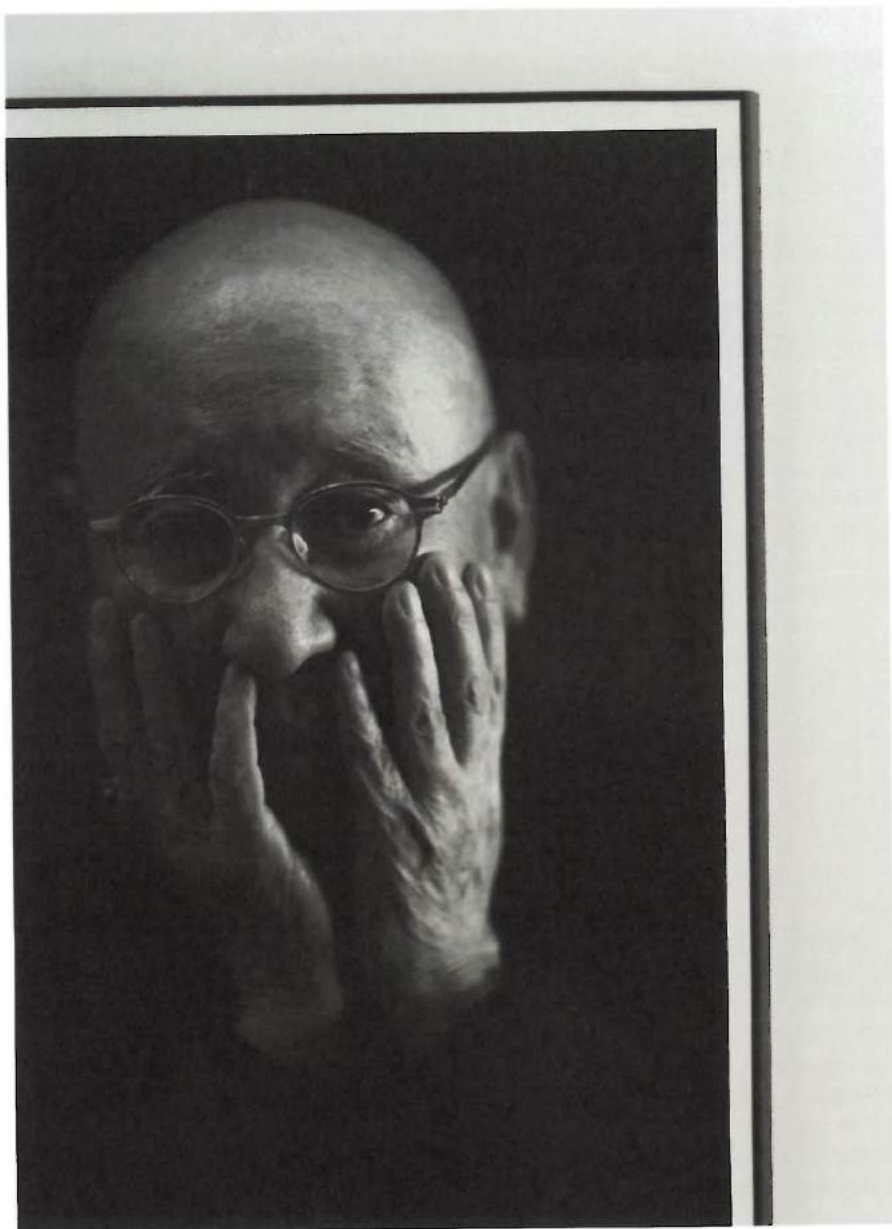
Dansaekhwa artists are renowned for discarding their egos. But that's not to say they don't become irritated if you call their work minimalist. Park rejects the term absolutely, and shared his distaste with the artist Donald Judd: "Judd told me he was awfully offended when people called him a minimalist. Minimalism is a term which refers to the act of revealing one's most efficient self. But I would say I'm rather someone who strives to empty out my excessive self. I repeat similar line-drawing movements for the sake of reaching internal peace." In other words, he rejects minimalism as an overt, even arrogant, performative act, in favour of the trance-like move away from the self facilitated by his Myobop technique. I ask him if Myobop has any connection with automatic drawing, and he's typically precise in his answer: "Automatic drawing is a conceptualised methodology of putting aside one's conscious self, allowing an automatic technique that results in freedom from its control and limitations. But doesn't that seem to be a struggle against the conscious self? The Myobop technique isn't a struggle against my conscious self; it's an endeavour to empty out my excessive energy. It's similar to the repeated action of a monk beating his *moktak* while chanting the Buddhist scriptures in order to empty himself and clear his mind."

I was interested to know if Park's emptied mind managed to clear mine too. Staring at one of his paintings at the White Cube gallery in London, I

focused on imagining myself as a jug and tipping myself out. And something curious happened. The intensity that had gone into creating the painting radiated from the canvas. It turns out that an emptied mind isn't the same thing as an empty mind — perversely and thrillingly, my emptied mind seemed to be full. There were two paintings by Park in the room: intense, limitless strokes of pencil and paint charged with concentrated energy. A devotional chant. Park Seo-Bo seemed to be asking me a profound, searching question.

The restless energy so characteristic of Park Seo-Bo has recently exploded into a new phase. He's found colour. It's another reminder that it's a mistake to equate Dansaekhwa with gallons of grey paint. Yes, Park's new works are singular in colour, but each one is so rich in pigment that it throbs and dances on the canvas: iris, tomato soup, yellow chiffon, menthol toothpaste, bubble gum or powder pink. "I rediscovered the beauty of colour in my later Myobop pieces", Park explains. It's allied to his new quest for the balm that art can offer: "I currently think you should include visual pleasures in paintings if you can. Otherwise, you won't be able to endow the viewer with a sense of peace and happiness. My thoughts are shifting to the concept of art as a form of healing." Perhaps inevitably, there will always be tension between the explosive energy that has fuelled Park all his life, and his desire to forget his ego and soothe the viewer. It's a complex blend of motivations, which has produced an art movement of remarkable power and longevity. He's still painting, travelling, thinking and laughing, despite periods of chronic ill-health. "I think I was just made that way," he says. "I was born with untiring physical and mental strengths. Perhaps that's the reason for the title of my second retrospective at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul. It's called *The Untiring Endeavour*." •

**PARK SEO-BO** is exhibiting at White Cube Bermondsey from 29 April - 21 June 2020.



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