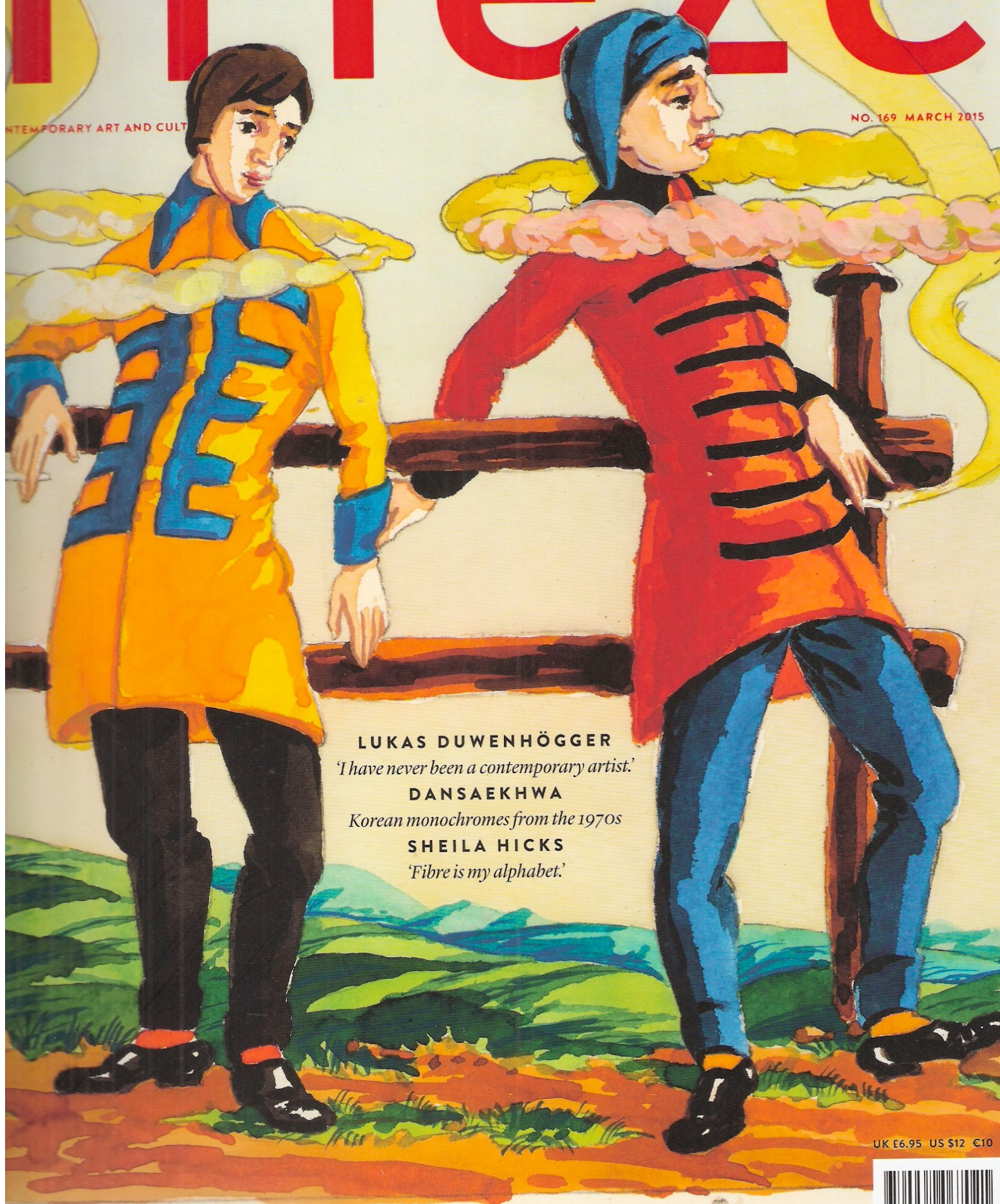


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CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

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LUKAS DUWENHÖGGER

'I have never been a contemporary artist.'

DANSAEKHWA

Korean monochromes from the 1970s

SHEILA HICKS

'Fibre is my alphabet.'

UK £6.95 US \$12 €10



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Dansaekhwa was the result of an organic process: one of many philosophical, political and artistic negotiations and discussions by a number of artists of a certain generation, who found themselves intertwined within a complex network of conflicted histories, geographies, artistic lineages and, ultimately, loyalties. One of the central issues that the Dansaekhwa artists were facing at the time was the oscillation between national identity and artistic identity. This was probably best illustrated by Lee Ufan's comments at one of the roundtables that coincided with the 1968 'Contemporary Korean Painting' exhibition, held at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo and intended to offer a panoramic representation of the latest Korean art. In response to a discussion about what contemporary Asian art could be, triggered by a number of reviews that had accused the artists of following the latest art trends of New York and Paris, Lee expressed his frustration at reconciling the gap between what was expected of him as a Korean and what he aspired to be as an artist.

Discussions around notions of the colour white, monochrome and 'Koreanness' became either a deliberate topic for Dansaekhwa artists or an ongoing association foisted on the group. Various exhibitions reinforced this: 'Modern Art 73' at Myongdong Gallery, Seoul, in 1973; 'Five Korean Artists: Five Kinds of White' at Tokyo Gallery in the Ginza district of Tokyo in 1975; and 'Korea: Facet of Contemporary Art' in 1977 at Tokyo's Central Museum of Art, organized by the prominent critic and curator Nakahara Yusuke. Korea's participation at the 1978–79 'Secondes rencontres internationales d'art contemporain' (Second International Encounters of Contemporary Art), at the Grand Palais in Paris, also comes to mind. Not only did these essentializing evaluations emanate from local Western critics, but also from some Korean journalists. One denounced the works as derivative of Western trends and as failing to adequately represent a country with thousands of years of artistic tradition. Shows that followed years later – 'Working with Nature: Traditional Thought in Contemporary Art from Korea' at Tate Liverpool in 1992 or 'Les peintres du silence' (Painters of Silence) at the Musée des Arts Asiatiques in Nice in 1998, for instance – were still somewhat burdened by such associations.

An interesting parallel exists between the political disposition underpinning Dansaekhwa's emphasis on process (action) and the move away from figuration, and the concurrent political framing of Abstract Expressionism in the US as a distinct American counter-position to the Social Realism that was predominant in most postwar communist nations. At the height of the Cold War, leading American critics and historians such as John Canaday, Harold Rosenberg, Meyer Schapiro, Leo Steinberg and, of course, Clement Greenberg, celebrated and promoted Abstract Expressionism as the culmination of a pure art; a marker of rebellion against both political and aesthetic agendas. The CIA's International Cooperation Department was one of the most active divisions in the agency, playing a leading role in promoting 'American' Abstract Expressionism, but also introducing the US public to similar artistic manifestations elsewhere as an indication of a form of 'Internationalism', thereby relegating the cultural impact of communism's Social Realism to the margins. This could not have been truer than in the case of South Korea, with its North Korean communist counterpart right next door. It should come as no surprise that the US State Department's International Cooperation Administration organized the 1957 University of Minnesota show 'Contemporary Korean Art' and many other similar cultural exchanges.

While the US was recruiting the agency of art to counter the cultural impact of communism by promoting Abstract Expressionism, it was also providing military and economic assistance to President Park Chung-hee's political regime in exchange for sending South Korean troops to help with the war in Vietnam. As such, by choosing to abandon figuration, Dansaekhwa artists made it more challenging for the regime to coerce their work into clearly discernible visuals of political propaganda, while still participating in major national exhibitions: a form of subtle revolution from within, perhaps? This is an aspect of Dansaekhwa that merits further investigation.

Although the term 'monochrome' has long been associated with Dansaekhwa, we embarked on an interesting discussion with Lee and Yoon in a symposium at Kukje Gallery last September in which we challenged its relevance. We proposed the term 'process' rather than monochrome. From speaking to Dansaekhwa artists, or referring to what they have left behind in their writings and other accounts, none of them seems to have been primarily concerned with colour, but rather with the process of a physical action that occupied a period of time and took place in a set space; one that centred on repetition, rhythm and an uncompromising acknowledgment of the materiality and act of painting. It would be interesting to explore the validity of such a term, if not as a substitute then as an equally indicative expression of what

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SAM BARDAOUIL AND TILL FELLRATH

Dansaekhwa attempts to do. Questioning the term 'monochrome' provides us with a platform for critical reflection on the association of Dansaekhwa with abstraction. We see abstraction as, arguably, a consequence of the artists' approach to painting and not a primary formalistic concern or end. Painting to these artists is an act of physical movement and interaction with the canvas and materials rather than a gradual process towards the abstract representation of physical things.

Our interest in Dansaekhwa stems from our ongoing investigation into Modernity as the negotiation of its premises and foundations in different parts of the world. Modernism cannot be viewed simply as a Western construct that was imported to other places only to be simulated to a less successful extent. If European Modernism owes the regeneration of its pictorial and stylistic language at least partly to the influx of the cultural objects of the Other (against a contested colonial backdrop), why can it not be argued that Dansaekhwa is an example of a similar act of negotiation or appropriation? In other words, if European Modernism's adaptations and reformulations of aesthetics different to their own have been hailed as Avant-garde, why is any discussion about a similar, non-European counterpart almost always framed within a rhetoric of imitation and nationalism? This is a critical question to be explored further when contemplating new avenues or frameworks for how to speak or write about Dansaekhwa. ♦♦

Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath are the co-founders of the curatorial platform Art Reoriented, based in Munich, Germany, and New York, USA. Recent exhibitions in 2014 include 'Songs of Loss and Songs of Love' at the Gwangju Museum of Art, Korea, 'Overcoming the Modern: Dansaekhwa' at Alexander Gray in New York and 'Mona Hatoum: Turbulence at Mathaf in Doha, Qatar. In 2013, they curated the Lebanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale Italy. Their latest book Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring: Conversations with Artists from the Arab World will be published by Skira this spring.

1
Lee Ufan
From Point, 1983, oil on
canvas, 1.9 × 2.6 m

2
Park Seobo
Ecriture No. 881106, 1988,
mixed media on hanji paper,
1.3 × 1.9 m

Courtesy
1 Kukje Gallery, Seoul •
2 Alexander Gray
Associates, New York