

DOC NYC Film Festival 2021: Part 1

The Man Who Paints Water Drops: Korean painter Kim Tschang-Yeul and the crisis of postwar art

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This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 DOC NYC Film Festival (November 10–28).

The annual DOC NYC film festival aims to highlight some of the best recent documentaries from around the world. The 2021 program included more than 200 feature-length and short films that addressed a wide range of subjects and problems.

The Man Who Paints Water Drops (2021) had its US premiere at this year's event.

In this meditative work, directors Oan Kim and Brigitte Bouillot investigate the life and career of Kim Tschang-Yeul, an internationally known Korean painter (and father of director Kim). The film is as much a son's attempt to understand his distant father as it is an examination of an artist's work. It also sheds light, even if unintentionally, on the crisis that afflicted art in the aftermath of World War II.

Kim is best known for his paintings of water droplets: a theme that he pursued single-mindedly, and perhaps obsessively, from 1971 until his death earlier this year. In these photorealist paintings, drops of water appear to sit atop unprimed canvas. Sometimes the drops are clear, and other times they appear to refract light in various colors. Sometimes the drops are perfect beads, and other times they are irregular shapes that appear to drip or ooze. The paintings evoke a mood of stillness and contemplation.

In the film, Kim often maintains an inscrutable silence. He responds cryptically to his son's questions and sometimes appears unwilling to be interviewed. In voiceover, the director observes that a gulf separates Kim from his wife, his son and the many people who

surround him and wish him well. Yet Kim willingly accepted awards and attended the opening of a museum dedicated to his work in Jeju, South Korea (which, fittingly, is an island).

Kim was born in 1929 during the Japanese occupation of Korea. This occupation ended with Japan's surrender in World War II, when Korea was divided into a northern, Soviet-occupied zone and a southern, United-States-occupied zone. At age 17, Kim, who lived under the Stalinist government in the north, was arrested for possessing an allegedly anticommunist pamphlet. After his release, he fled to South Korea on foot and began studying art in Seoul.

When the Korean War began in 1950, Kim was forced to fight in the bloody conflict. He also was mistaken by South Koreans as a partisan of the North. One day, he found a severed human head on the ground. On another occasion, he saw a man whose stomach had been ripped open by a bomb and who begged to be killed. This period of unspeakable horror traumatized Kim for the rest of his life. In the film, a relative describes him as being "obsessed with death."

After the war, Kim returned to painting. In the 1960s, he lived for a time in New York, where he felt overwhelmed. In response to the Pop Art that predominated, he developed a style of biomorphic abstraction. Then in January 1969, Kim moved to France where he lived in a stable. Penniless and in a state of artistic crisis, Kim awoke one night in anguish. He turned one of his paintings upside-down and threw water at it. This gesture of despair gave Kim the artistic motif for which he later became known. The desperate,

accidental origin of his work is surely telling.

“They don’t mean anything,” says Kim of the water droplets in his paintings. But he admits that painting them has provided a means of consolation and of washing away his fear and grief. The tactic, however, seems not to have worked. Kim notes that Bodhidharma, the legendary 5th- or 6th-century Buddhist monk, meditated for nine years and achieved enlightenment, whereas he, having painted water drops for decades, still lives “in this trivial world.”

Kim belonged to the generations of artists shaped by World War II and its aftermath (including the Korean War). The Holocaust and the nuclear bombing of Japan shocked the abstract expressionists who were active during Kim’s youth. Many, such as Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, had been on the periphery of the Communist Party or left-wing politics generally and became demoralized by Stalin’s extermination of the old Bolsheviks and the other traumas of the 1930s and ’40s. Capitalism and “communism,” it seemed to them, along with “society” and “history” as a whole, had all failed. Disoriented, increasingly pessimistic and unable to see a progressive way forward for humanity, they turned their work away from the social world and toward nature, primitive art, Freudian or Jungian psychology and mythology. Kim himself turned toward Buddhism.

Later, Pop Art cynically took the consumerism and celebrity culture that had developed during the postwar boom as its subject matter, and apologized for it. Andy Warhol, its prime representative, relinquished any critical role, presenting (and implicitly celebrating) society and the art world as he found it. By using industrial techniques such as silk screening to produce their work, Pop artists also surrendered the expressive possibilities of painting and sought to eliminate the artist’s hand. Kim’s paintings of the 1960s combined something of the flat affect of Pop Art with earlier currents of abstraction.

Kim’s assertion that artists must “erase ourselves” reflects the tendency that became still more prominent with the advent of Conceptual Art. This movement opposed the art object in favor of simple documentation of the “idea” that purportedly constituted the work. In practice, the idea was often no more than a statement of objective fact. Japanese artist On Kawara, for example, created a series of standardized canvases that show only

the date of their execution painted on a solid background. These artists, many of whom were Kim’s direct contemporaries, expressed deep passivity in the face of social developments, as well as a disconnection from wide layers of the population.

One can understand the degree of trauma, but that does not make the art that came out of it any richer or more appealing. Kim’s photorealist compositions are not formally works of Pop or Conceptual Art, but they reflect the same unresolved historical and artistic issues. Like his silence and his orientation toward Buddhism, Kim’s sensitively rendered water droplets are manifestations of grief and alienation. By tracing the source of Kim’s art, the documentary contributes indirectly to an understanding of the work of many of his contemporaries. Based on a withdrawal from social engagement, their various approaches have been unable to indicate a way out of the current crises and toward a better world.

To be continued



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