GRAMMAR OF THE SURFACE
KYUHYUN KIM
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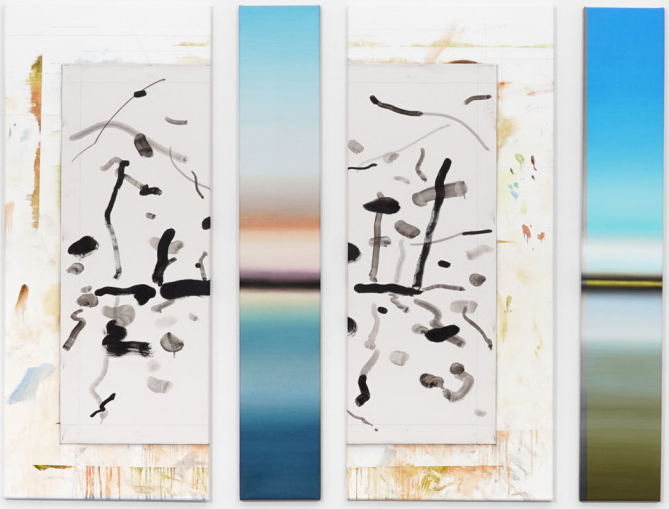

INTERVIEW

Dear Kyuhyun, we warmly welcome you to our gallery for your first solo exhibition. It is titled "Grammar of the Surface." What does the title refer to?
KYUHYUN: For me, what a painting shows is important. But I am even more interested in how a painting exists in the first place. The works I present in this exhibition are the result of an investigation: How can the language of painting be composed on the surface of the canvas? That is why I think "Grammar of the Surface" is the title that most directly expresses this attitude. For me, the surface is not merely an "outside." It is a site where lines press against each other, pull, and react to one another. I continually test the rules that emerge from this—density, tempo, pauses, overlaps, transitions, as well as removal or erasure. What interests me is how a flat painting can contain space within itself, or how it does not simply "draw" space but sets it into operation. This exhibition shows how these questions take form on the surface.

Your new body of work places a focus on the motif of landscape. The strong vertical lines, together with the sequences of short strokes and loops that dance loosely across the surface of the painting, recall closely standing trees. At the same time, a yellow and a light blue field meet at the center, forming a possible horizon. What led you to landscape as a pictorial motif? Where do you find your inspiration?

Landscape always leaves me with questions. I ask myself how the light I see in nature can be translated onto the canvas through color—and how the countless leaves and branches, which can never be painted in their entirety, might be brought into a "language of the image." The fact that one cannot paint everything in a landscape is not because the canvas is too small or the brush too thick. Rather, this limitation naturally leads me to moments of selection and concentration. In that moment, nature becomes a selective translation on the surface of the painting.

The light and lines I encounter on my walks, and the rhythm they produce, make me very alert. I like walking, and I also enjoy climbing mountains. Scenes I encounter in nature while moving through it repeatedly draw my attention. On the one hand, landscape is something "out there," but at the same time it is a fundamental means that helps me continue the work. The process—walking, looking, drawing, returning, and painting again—repeats itself, yet it shifts slightly each time. That shift is the motor of my work.

When I see a landscape while walking, I often begin drawing directly on site. The landscapes I paint are rarely "too beautiful." When I encounter a truly overwhelming scene, I tend to think: "I cannot paint that. It simply has to be looked at." Such beauty awakens less ambition in me; it makes me rather modest. The landscapes I can paint are scenes in which I feel they can pass through me and be translated into painting. From this process the formal decisions in the image also emerge.

The vertical lines and short strokes in these works are less a description of a specific place than a rhythm that holds the gaze. They may recall tree trunks, but they also structure the picture plane vertically. The contact between yellow and light blue may appear like a horizon, but I wanted to treat it more as a boundary of the picture plane than as a "horizon of the landscape." Landscape painting is a theme I can continue working on endlessly—and at the same time the most difficult theme, one with which I begin anew again and again..

Your paintings are scriptural in their formal gesture and almost abstract. In the context of European art history, they recall the early landscape paintings of the Dutch Piet Mondrian, the De Stijl artist, with their elongated rows of trees along the Gein River—motifs that later led him toward geometric abstraction. Which models or influences from European art history have shaped your work?
I find it interesting that you think of Mondrian's early landscapes. To me, his early landscape paintings very clearly show those moments of selection and concentration—and how landscape becomes a language of painting. When I look at his pictures, I can feel which trunks he chooses and how that choice becomes visible in the brushwork. Even though I have never been there, it gives the impression of standing in that place. I think this is because he does not simply "describe" the landscape—he constructs it.

For me, however, it is important: I do not want to "progress" toward abstraction through landscape. I am more interested in a state in which landscape and abstraction operate simultaneously. While Mondrian reduces nature and consistently aligns it toward structure, I construct structure but leave instability in place—so that the structure can wobble or even collapse at any moment.

An important moment for my interest in landscape was seeing David Hockney's Grand Canyon series at the Tate Gallery Although the landscape does not appear realistic, I could feel the temperature and even sense the smell. I think this also has to do with form, but for me, the decisive factor is color. The red he chooses is not a color one would normally "expect" in landscape painting. Yet my body accepts it as "right." In that moment, I felt the power with which a landscape can draw the viewer into the picture.

And are there also (landscape) motifs in Korean painting and art history that have served as inspiration for you?
In Korean art, my reference is more about an attitude: how one sees landscape. In Korea, landscapes with many overlapping mountains are very common. Mountains behind mountains become progressively lighter the further away they are. This also recalls principles of traditional Sansuhwa. Traditional landscape painting does not aim to reproduce a place exactly. Rather, it uses the time spent walking and lingering, the flow of the gaze, and a certain kind of energy as the basis for composition. This is precisely what interests me. That is why I do not see Sansuhwa as an imitation of reality, but as an appropriate translation that can sometimes come even closer to reality.

However, I do not want to imitate this attitude through traditional brushstrokes or forms. I try to reinterpret it in contemporary everyday scenes and through the materiality of painting. I am drawn to works that create a painterly reality possible only within the image. My models are not only artists who paint landscapes. There are artists who observe life and tell stories, and others who have explored new possibilities in painting. From them, I have learned how painting can change its own conditions.

We first became aware of you in January 2024, when you presented your paintings at the HGB Leipzig gallery on the occasion of your nomination for the 2023/24 Study Award. Your unconventional approach to composition immediately captivated us, as you arrange multiple layers in front of, behind, and beside one another. At the same time, your high level of technical skill is striking, particularly in the way you integrate the wooden frame of your easel into the scene with photographic precision. The viewer's gaze constantly shifts between image, illusion, and reality.
I do not believe that a painting represents a single reality. The landscape I have experienced contains not only the scenes "outside," but also the time of repeated drawing, the time of reassembling in the studio, and the time of the viewer's gaze in the moment. I want these temporal layers to interfere with and influence one another within a single image. That is why my paintings contain areas that are very concrete, others that appear more like signs, and still others that remain as traces. When such disparity exists together on one surface, the gaze cannot rest calmly—it keeps moving.

Painting the easel with such precision is not intended to demonstrate realism. Rather, it is a deliberate choice to show how painting creates an illusion, while simultaneously revealing its own means. The easel is a real tool that supports the painting, yet within the image it also becomes an additional frame. The viewer sees the easel in the painting, along with details such as the tacks holding the canvas in place, and repeatedly wonders: "Is this the painting? Or is it part of reality?" This act of questioning is, for me, an essential part of the experience. I believe it helps to clarify a particular reality unique to painting

Touching are the notes you leave almost casually and delicately in pencil at the edges of the canvas. Equally delicate, yet playing a distinctly central role, are your annotations in your works on paper. They offer insight into your personal thoughts and emotions, although the meaning of the longer passages written in Korean characters remains, unfortunately, inaccessible to me. What does it allow you to express in "An Unwritten, Painted Letter" that is more difficult to convey in personal conversation?
Conversations are spontaneous, and words disappear. When I try to explain my work with words, I often feel that the essence slips away. Notes, on the other hand, are less finished sentences than remnants of a moment in which a thought arises. For me, writing things down is therefore not so much a means of communication as a form of preservation.

The pencil notes at the edges of the canvas are not explanations outside the painting. They are traces of what I held onto during the process. That these annotations play a more central role in my works on paper is related to my view of the surface as a place where something happens.

The work "An Unwritten, Painted Letter" began with an experience: I was sitting on a train, traveling to another city. I wanted to write a letter to my late father and had a notebook with me. For a long time, I could only look at it. I could not write a letter. The feeling for him was strong within me, but I did not have the strength to begin with a salutation and carry it through to the end. Still, I did not want to lose this feeling. That is how this work came into being. Its form allows me to leave feelings, hesitation, and a state that is not yet ordered—to exist without forcing them into finished words. I believe that it is precisely this unfinished state that is more honest.

That I write notes in Korean has a simple reason: in this language, rhythm and feeling come to me most directly. These sentences are less meant to convince anyone; they are more like coordinates, guiding me back to the painting.