

Suh Seung-Won

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page 1 of 1



Pierre Soulages.
Peinture 130 x
102 cm, 27 août 1986
(Painting 130 x
102 cm, August 27,
1986), oil on canvas.
51 1/4 x 40 1/4".

James is allegedly interred. Soulages's works remind me of Saint John of the Cross's famous poem "Dark Night of the Soul" (ca. 1577–79), which describes the difficulty of seeing God's light. In Soulages's paintings, we take in a demiurgic tenebrosity, which indicates that his faith is couched in a strain of gnostic mysticism.

"Did I begin to love black because of the trees in winter without their leaves," Soulages has mused, "because of the way the black trunks and branches stood out against the background of sky or snow?" The artist had in fact been making tree paintings, which led him to realize that such a subject could be regarded as an "abstract sculpture, an interacting series of forms, tensions and colors." It has also been suggested that Soulages's paintings are informed by France's hideous failures during World War II. His relentless gestures convey inconsolable rage at the country's collapse even as they symbolize it. Clearly, there is an air of bitter tragedy to Soulages's art. It certainly suffers from bad memories.

But however much the death instinct is alive and well in his paintings, the works also paradoxically communicate and preserve what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called the "incommunicado element" that exists at the core of every man and woman, "sacred and most worthy of preservation." Perhaps more to the aesthetic point, Soulages argues in these paintings that blackness is sublime—or in Kant's sense, limitless—and as such a vehicle of numinous experience. Soulages's abstractions are a breed of sanctified art, ever respectful of life's enormity and endless mystery.

—Donald Kuspit

Suh Seung-Won

TINA KIM GALLERY

Born in 1941, Suh Seung-Won is younger than the more-prominent painters—such as Ha Chong-Hyun (b. 1935), Park Seo-Bo (b. 1931), or Yun Hyong-keun (1928–2007)—associated with Dansaekhwa, or Korean monochrome painting. Although commonly grouped in with them, Suh, at least during the period covered by this show (1967 to 1989), seems to come from a different branch of abstraction's family tree. Where their art is earthy, based in process and materials, his hard-

edged shapes are rendered in flat hues and inexpressive surfaces, exuding a spirit more akin to that of Russian Suprematism.

The three earliest canvases on view at Tina Kim Gallery, all from 1967, show Suh working with an orthodox modernist vocabulary of planar frontal forms in primary colors, along with occasional moments of white and black. Note that these are the cardinal colors of traditional Korean culture, known as *obangsaek*, which correspond to the five basic elements (earth, fire, metal, tree, and water) and locations (east, north, west, south, and center) and therefore have cosmological significance. He deploys these hues in rectilinear, geometrical shapes that are set parallel to the picture plane, with the exception of *Simultaneity* 67-13, 1967, in which one triangular area has a curved edge that suggests a page being flipped open—an incipient illusionism that will subsequently become more manifest. (All eighteen pieces in the exhibition were likewise titled *Simultaneity* and numbered, with the first two digits indicating the year the work was made.) In paintings from 1976 through 1989, he switches to soft, neutral tones: pale pinks and aquas, beige, eggshell, sand. Understated differences of color distinguish each painting from the others, so that their juxtaposition in the gallery revealed the variousness of what might at first have seemed a chromatic monotony. The surfaces, which earlier in the artist's career had more body, are austere, deadpan. In these works, Suh reinterprets modernism more freely and intuitively than he had in the 1960s. He continues to use rectilinear forms, strictly quadrilateral, but now implicitly set in axonometric perspective; essentially, these seem to be deconstructed squares tumbling through an undefined space that is predominantly vacant. Also evident is a subtle layering of purely linear shapes atop overlapping planes that are not outlined but defined solely through the

forementioned differences of hue. Finally, in three paintings from 1988 through 1989, the palette deepens and darkens somewhat, with shades of slate gray as the ground. In a pair dated 1989, grays divide the rectangle into two or three distinct vertical zones that cut off the floating quadrilaterals, as if distinct spaces had been montaged together.

Reductive or constructive abstraction has often aspired to represent an absolute, but Suh's paintings, at least from 1976 through 1989, make way for improvisation: The advent of forms in space seems anomalous; the broken squares crop up in just one part of the void, as if by happenstance. Shapes pass through this field like thoughts through a mind that is not attached to them yet would be poorer and more constricted had they never appeared. Although the ancient cosmological resonances of Suh's late-'60s color palette play no part in his subsequent work, neither do the paintings take refuge in self-referentiality. They evoke a contemplative impassivity in the face of the vagaries of time, change, and recurrence. Such phenomena are not only visual—Suh has cited blossoming flowers and the "bland posture" of white ceramics in inspiration—but also sensual: "The scent of . . . dwenjang (soybean paste) and gochujang (red pepper paste) being ripened in traditional jars. The unforgettable rhythmical sounds of my mother using DAEJUMI, an ancient method of ironing using two rollers. Sounds of the landscape in a mountain temple, and sounds of wind and water." This highly refined art is replete with content left tacit.

—Barry Schwabsky



Suh Seung-Won,
Simultaneity 88-724,
1988, oil on canvas.
51 1/4 x 63 1/4".