

## **Artist Ahn Young Il**

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(English translation by Joe McDevitt)

I'm sometimes asked, "Which artist do you like?". When it comes to non-Korean artists there are just so many I struggle to answer, but when it comes to Korean artists I don't hesitate to answer-- it's long-respected "Water" artist Ahn Young Il, who just turned eighty this year. It's been almost thirty years since, as a cub reporter for the culture section I first interviewed Ahn Young Il. I immediately fell in love with his work and personality-- and that feeling continues to this day.

Ahn Young Il was the first Korean artist to have a solo exhibition in the U.S. In 1957, in his senior year at Seoul National University, his work was shown at a US embassy-sponsored exhibit and was awarded a prize by the American judges, which led to an invitation to show his work at New York's World House Gallery. In 1959 it was Hull House Gallery in Chicago, in 1962 the USIS Gallery in Helsinki, Finland where he had a solo exhibition. These shows were ground-breaking events for a Korean artist.

It's difficult to imagine how thrilling it must have been for university student from a poor, war-scarred Asian country to be invited to exhibit his work in the United States when, at a time in Korea, there were no galleries or even people who could afford art, where canvases and paints were scarce and

could only be obtained from Japan with difficulty.

In fact, from his very early days as an art prodigy he built a resume which is impressive to consider: From age four he'd spend time in his artist father's studio looking at Cezanne's work and discussing drawing, and at age six he had his first solo show in Japan, at thirteen while still in middle school he was awarded first prize at a national art exhibition, only for the award to be downgraded to third place when the judges learned of his young age, then at age 20 another award at an invitation-only national exhibition-- the list goes on and on.

In his early adulthood Ahn supported himself selling his paintings through the only art gallery in Korea at that time, The Bando Gallery, in what is now the Chosun Hotel in Seoul. Around that time, in 1967, an American art collector who admired Ahn's paintings sponsored his move to the United States. The following year, Ahn made a contract with the Zachary Weller Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles. His paintings sold well and he was able to focus happily on his painting, but this euphoric period was not to last.

In the early 1970's a lawsuit was filed by Ahn's gallery against Ahn's original supporter, the American collector, who was selling some of his paintings through a gallery in Laguna Beach. The case dragged on for ten years with Ahn caught in the middle like a shrimp between two fighting whales-- he was unable to sell his work in the United States for all those years. There were no winners-- the collector eventually lost the case, the gallery closed, and Ahn's work was blocked from sale.

Ahn was forced into a kind of isolation, retreating into his painting. Already a man of few words, he became even more taciturn, letting his contacts fade and living the life of a hermit. Day after day he'd sit in front of his easel and paint, allowing himself only the occasional diversion to play his beloved clarinet, cello, or piano. Through everything he could never put down his paintbrush because painting was his life, his salvation, his existence.

Ahn is a difficult artist to stay connected to. I tried to get him out of his shell from time to time, but artists like Ahn can be particularly stubborn. A few efforts at new exhibitions failed to bring back the glory days. In recent years, the world of modern art has become vastly more commercialized with artists needing to act as marketers to promote their work. Gone are the days when an artist could just paint and let his paintings sell themselves.

And this is no doubt the reason the name of this pioneering and accomplished artist, Ahn Young Il, is no longer as well known as it once was in the art galleries of Beverly Hills. It's not because of personal misfortune but rather his lack of marketing ability. In my thirty years as an art reporter I've met countless artists and I've never met one who makes such a minimal effort at self-promotion as Ahn Young Il-- which is perhaps why I respect him so much and have made an effort to follow him so closely.

The reason I'm writing this article today is because the artist Ahn Young Il is reemerging. In late January the Korean Cultural Center in Los Angeles will hold a major retrospective

of Ahn's work, and in February The Long Beach Museum will hold an invitational exhibit of his work. He's also been invited to the Palm Springs Art Fair and inquiries are coming from Korea about possible exhibits there. And with these various shows in the works various collectors are showing interest which is raising the spirits of Ahn's long-time supporters. It seems his time has come.

Mr. Ahn has always said, "An artist has to die". He also says his best work is still ahead of him. Though Ahn says the true value of an artist's work is only known when he's gone , I want to see this artist shining brightly while he's still going strong. Let 2015 be the year the art community rediscovers the artist Ahn Young Il.