

Foreword

Virginia Moon

Assistant Curator of Korean Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

LACMA first acquired Young-Il Ahn's *Water SZLB15* (2015) in 2016 as a gift from a private donor in Los Angeles. It was a generous and welcome addition to the Korean art collection and it was promptly debuted in the foyer of our galleries in the Hammer building where it has been enjoyed by many viewers. Both young and old have sat on the long wooden bench in front of it to contemplate the painting.

Young-Il Ahn's *Water* painting was the first gift of contemporary art to LACMA's Korean collection from a private individual, making the gift an intimate and meaningful one. It comes at an exciting time when our understanding of the category of Korean art is broadening beyond the bounds set by early collectors.

It was not so long ago - at the turn of the 20th century - when American collectors began to appreciate the beauty of Korean art. They were captivated by Korean ceramics, in particular the blue-green Goryeo celadons (918-1392) that had been revered in Asia since their inception. As a result, nearly every Korean art collection in the U.S. has at least one or two such pieces, if not more. Only when the prices of Goryeo celadons rose precipitously did foreign collectors turn their attention to other pottery, in particular the buncheong ware and porcelain of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) and then gradually to Joseon paintings. Except for the addition of some gifts and purchases, including religious works from older historic periods, little else has shaped our understanding of Korean art since it first made its appearance in the U.S.

But, Korean art is so much more than this.

Artists continued to create notable works of art, both stemming and diverging from these traditions throughout Korea's history. From the Joseon dynasty to a short-lived Korean Empire (1897-1910) and from the unexpected colonization by the Japanese (1910-1945) to an inevitable civil war (1950-1953) which never officially ended, but temporarily ceased with an armistice, each successive dominating country, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States, opened new opportunities for Korean citizens to find their way to these "new world" countries, whichever was politically in vogue at the time.

Korean artists were among these explorers and practiced in all these new milieux.

Young-Il Ahn came to the States in 1966, 13 years after the Korean War, and he never looked back. His oeuvre of works, as evidenced by his many series of paintings [see essay by Ahn in this catalog] shows a consistent, unwavering commitment to an abstract approach. Though Los Angeles has witnessed many artistic styles over the five decades Ahn has lived in the city, he has stayed true to his approach. His subject matter is always indicative of whatever captured his interest at the time, not in a flighty way,

but according to his deepest passions. It is as though he is unable to paint anything else but that which is on his mind and in his heart.

His works are not overtly “Korean.” Some people have chosen to correlate Ahn's paintings with early Korean art movements of the 1970s in Korea, but Ahn left Korea years before any of those movements gained momentum. Some people prefer that art done by Korean artists make some reference to Korea, or to things Korean. Still, others prefer to take stock of the artwork on its own merit.

What is so exciting about Ahn's work and this 2017 exhibition we have put together for him at LACMA is that it opens the door for a dramatic discussion about what it means for a work to be considered Korean art and what it means to be a Korean artist today. Many artists all over the world now have exposure and access to art of all kinds, and can make whatever statement they wish, with or without reference to things Korean.

In Los Angeles and other parts of the U.S., there are Korean artists who are immigrants of different generations: those with dual ethnicities or more, and those who are Korean by blood but adopted by non-Korean families. There are artists who immigrated to the U.S. as adults and those who came as young children. There are those who speak the Korean language and feel part of a larger social community and those who have never stepped foot in South Korea before.

Korean art today is no longer homogenous. Ahn's works force us to come to terms with this new reality. The old rules no longer apply and we are in the midst of ascertaining new trends and definitions, even as talented artists and unforeseen creations continue to emerge.

Thank you, Young-Il, for sharing with us your love and devotion to your craft.

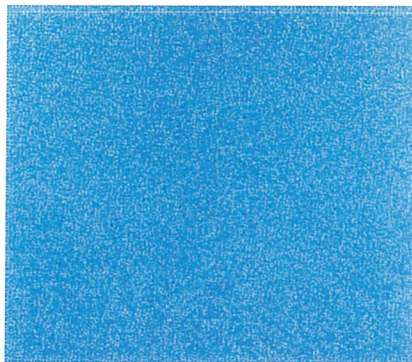
Thank you, Soraya, for being Young-Il's supportive bedrock.

Thank you to all of Ahn's children and grandchildren for being a part of his life.

Afterword

Christine Y. Kim

Associate Curator of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Young-Il Ahn, **Water SZLB15**, 2015, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Susan Baik and Prem Manjooran, © Young-Il Ahn

1966 and the Light in L.A.

1966 was a hallmark year for young artists working in Southern California. As it had been for many European artists from previous centuries such as Caravaggio, Vermeer and Monet, light was a foremost preoccupation of many artists in Los Angeles. The abundance of sunshine and the horizon of the Pacific coast made it an ideal site for those exploring light. Employing the medium of light itself, James Turrell (b. 1943, Los Angeles) moved into the former Mendota Hotel on the corner of Hill and Main Streets in the Ocean Park neighborhood of Santa Monica in 1966. There he cut his first sharp-edged apertures through the exterior building walls to see the unobstructed sky during the day (*Sky Window*, 1966) and the movement of the street lights and headlights at night (*Mendota Stoppages*, 1969–74).

That same year other Southern California artists were producing paintings, sculptures and installations to investigate light and perception. In 1966 Robert Irwin (b. 1928, Long Beach) began painting on aluminum disks with a convex structure affixed to the wall. Fusing sprayed color with properties of light, the disks seemed to both hover and dissolve into the natural light of their surroundings. By the late 1960s, Bruce Nauman (b. 1941, Fort Wayne, IN) who had worked in neon throughout the 1960s, began creating light corridors of narrow passageways which served as thresholds to confront the viewer's perception of his or her own body in space, insisting that experience superseded the actual object in art. But it was the light outdoors and the Pacific horizon that captivated artists like Young-Il Ahn (b. 1934, Gaeseong, Korea) and others from abroad, venturing to Southern California for the first time.

Foreign-born artists like Maria Nordman (b. 1943, Gorkitz, Germany), known for her light-filled installations, flocked to Southern California to probe the land- and seascapes of the Pacific coast. In 1966, she began filming her seminal work, *Filmroom: Smoke* (1967) on the beach in Santa Monica, for which she aligned the filmic picture plane with earth and water along the Los Angeles coastline. The Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which abolished the previous immigration policy favoring western Europeans, marked a shift in immigrant populations of the United States as it allowed more individuals from Asia and South America to enter the country. Among the many Koreans who immigrated to Southern California during that wave, painter Young-Il Ahn arrived in 1966. "When I beheld my new home with its incredibly vast spaces running along the deep blue Pacific," he recalls, "I felt a great sense of relief and joy." Beginning in the 1980s, he painted nearly 400 works as part of his *Water* series, inspired by the light on the Pacific Ocean. Ahn explains:

Beyond the distant horizon, the endless, vast ocean, that boundless space! As an artist who had spent his whole life seeking beauty and trying to express it, I was moved by the ocean's ability to radiate such

profound beauty at any given moment. As the rays of the sun tumble into the ocean, the light spreads in an array of colors as if through a prism. At times, the light may reflect brilliantly and at other times it shimmers with more subdued intensity. The constantly moving atmosphere, the shifting sounds, the changing shape of the waves, light and color changing moment by moment—there is no moment when it can ever stop and no moment can ever look the same as the process of change and rebirth goes forward and yet. . . and yet the sea never changes and is forever constant. So, when I look out upon the ocean, I tremble as if I am holding part of the universe in my hand.

Describing himself as a very private person, Ahn did not socialize much with other local painters who were also exploring light, color, and movement but was well aware of their work. He deeply admired the work of Sam Francis (1923–1994), whose sensitivity to the reflection and refraction of light on water can be seen in “all the shimmering qualities . . . brought to the surface of the canvas,” as described by Debra Burchett-Lere, co-curator of Francis’s 2013 retrospective at the Pasadena Museum of California Art. “You feel like you are stepping into a waterfall . . . or that you’re stepping into a cloud mass, or looking at some continent forms, or that there are meteors falling through the sky.” The same can be said of Ahn’s *Water SZLB15* (2015). Focused on the radiating and pulsating energy of light on the water’s surface, Ahn endeavored to translate the experience of light, liquid, and color to oil on canvas.

Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) also moved to Southern California in 1966. Inspired and invigorated by Francis’s light-soaked studio and the Southern California coast, Diebenkorn began his *Ocean Park* series that year, which resulted in nearly 140 of his most celebrated paintings, named after that particular community in Los Angeles. Abandoning the figure altogether, these works were, according to the artist himself, “still representational, but . . . much flatter.”

This flatness is also a critical element of Ahn’s *Water SZLB15*. While the composition is cool, flat, and meditative, the topography of its brushstrokes and shimmering flecks of lavender, tangerine, and grassy hues are palpable and seem to glow. While Ahn’s work grew out of abstract and monochrome languages of contemporary art in Korea of the 1950s and ’60s, his sensibility is inextricably bound to the Southern California landscape and seascape and to contemporary American art since the 1960s. Like Turrell, his aim has been not to deceive but rather to reveal. In other words, a small yet deliberate thick pink mark applied by a miniscule brushstroke can tell us more about how we perceive than about water itself. “I have been deeply changed by living the past half century in California,” says Ahn. “As long as I live I’ll look to put on canvas ideas that reflect the transformation which California has made in me.”