

Formal Analysis of Minjung Kim's *Order-Impulse*, 2017 203 x 141 cm in Conversation with Aesthetic Philosophy

Catelyn Yam



Minjung Kim, *Order-Impulse*, 2017. Mixed media on mulberry Hanji paper, 80 x 55 1/2 in. (203 x 141 cm)

Minjung Kim's 2017 series *Order-Impulse* explores the boundaries of creativity within self-restraint and the dichotomy between unrelenting control and surrendering to natural variation. Kim is consistent with medium throughout this series, but each piece is unique to the calm state of mind she embodied at the time of creation. Kim's practicing philosophies, drawn from her belief in harmony and Taoism, sits in conversation with Schopenhauer's *Essays on Aesthetics*. Through her performative use of traditional Korean calligraphy materials and fire as a method of recording her bodily processes of repetition, Minjung Kim presents a materialization of her meditative psyche for the audience.

Kim's work *Order-Impulse* (same name as the series as a whole) features three main mediums indispensable to her training in traditional Korean calligraphy: mulberry paper (canvas

and Hanji calligraphy paper), rice glue, and incense sticks. The work is about six and a half feet tall by four and a half feet wide. This large, neutral toned piece is defined by its contrast of color and opacity. It is comprised of a grid-like randomized fractal of Hanji paper partial circles that are burned around the edges, creating a subtle gear-teeth quality to each circle. At a standard observational distance, this piece appears to be flat, flawless, and is reminiscent of the pattern of a white pearlescent abalone shell. However, upon close observation, it becomes clear that it is composed entirely of pulpy, delicate paper. Each paper circle contains variations either in its amount of partial folding - up to being a semi-circle - or texture. Variations in texture include wrinkles, lifted edges, transparency, and the number of visible fibers. There are four outstanding colors in this piece: black from the mulberry canvas, translucent off-white from single layers of Hanji paper, opaque off-white from double layers of folded Hanji paper, and the light brown singe around the edge of each Hanji paper circle. The unpredictable folding of each transparent paper circle to build areas of opacity against the deep black background, coupled with the light brown singe at the edge of the circle, creates topographical depth. A visual border between each layer of paper is produced by the carefully singed light brown edges. The entropic placement and folding of the off-white partial circles evoke a sense of intentional disorder and disciplined organizational minimalism that feels sublime.

Born in Gwangju, Korea in 1962, Minjung Kim studied calligraphy from a young age under watercolor master artist Yeongun Kang. She earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts and Master of Fine Arts in Oriental Painting from Hongik University in Seoul, Korea with an MFA thesis on the four core materials of Korean traditional ink painting: mulberry Hanji paper, the brush, ink pigments, and the pigment grinding stone. Following a series of personal struggles, she migrated to Europe to complete a second MFA at Brera Academy of Fine Art in Milan, Italy, focusing on

researching and analyzing the work of Western abstract artists who had studied 20th century East Asian painting and philosophy.

In the *Order-Impulse* series, she records her psyche throughout her processes of meditation, rooted in her belief in Taoism (sometimes referred to as the “Philosophy of Spontaneity”). She describes her works as “the visual representations of the abstractions of Zen and Tao” (*Park Seo-Bo / Minjung Kim - Exhibition at Langen Foundation in Neuss*, 2019). Zen emphasizes discipline and the regulation of attention to achieve a void and peaceful state of mind, while Tao, the parent branch of Zen, embodies harmony through a surrendering of oneself to the universe in an understanding that aspects of our material reality are not able to be controlled. To create the *Hill Order-Impulse* and other works in the series, she waits until she can steady her breath and enter a tranquil state of mind. This allows her to guide the heat of the incense ever so gently to create the subtle light brown singe. If she were not silent and her breath were not steady, she would create uneven lines - vastly diverging from her philosophy and discipline. After, she dips each circle in rice glue, places it on the canvas with a brush, then impulsively decides if and how she will fold the circle. Her beliefs in Taoism and use of art to visualize her state of mind while meditating can be conceptualized in discussion with writing by 19th century philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer. He himself drew from Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, to critique the Western attachment to desire, ego, and individualism. Schopenhauer writes about in his most renowned essays on aesthetics, two perspectives of the world that create a complete metaphysical system: The World as Will and The World as Idea in his book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. He establishes that The World as Will is contained within our minds—our imagination and desires— “to the extent that all ideas are a manifestation of the will” (*Schopenhauer’s Aesthetics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018). The

World as Will is what an individual can create and their surrounding material reality. However, bringing forth anything from one's will, inherently involves some level of discomfort and suffering because pain is inseparable from life itself (Schopenhauer, 1891). He ascertains three ways that an individual can enlighten themselves from "the servitude to the will and its attendant egoism" one of which is, "aesthetic experience and artistic production" (*Schopenhauer's Aesthetics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*, 2018). From the perspective of the Taoist beliefs in harmony with the universe instead of individualism which is achieved through meditation, Kim's form of meditation is her repetitive and painstaking hand cutting and singeing processes which require discipline and self-restraint. Because her works are a representation of the calm and disciplined state of mind she is in, she brings forth The World as Will into The World as Idea, which she has accomplished through an amount of discomfort and surrender of some control over her chosen mediums: heat (from an incense stick) and Hanji paper. Just as there is no perfect manifestation of one's will, Minjung Kim intentionally created *Order-Impulse*, 2017 without detailed planning and was not revised after a circle had been placed or folded. Her initial impulse remained as the finalized artwork.

Through her exploration of the ideology and techniques of Western abstract art compared to traditional Asian painting at Brera Academy of Fine Art, Minjung Kim has developed her own intellectual artistic practices that branch from Korean ancient techniques. This enabled her to break free from the confines of being labeled as a regional contemporary artist, an obstacle created directly by the Western and Anglo-centric contemporary art movement in popular media. Her research during her second MFA on extracting the quintessence of Western abstract art and East Asian art, has developed her conclusion that the major differentiating dogmas between the two genres of art are the medium of choice and commitment to heritage. By constraining herself

to create formless works that portray her psyche and the ephemeral, while only using natural mediums and the four core materials of traditional Korean calligraphy, she is able to decolonize ideas around East Asian art. She transforms the perception of East Asian art from only being accepted when they are figurative paintings to understanding the validity of underlying intellectual movements of East Asian artists by calling attention to her expanse of minimalist performative pieces.

Initially Minjung Kim's pieces are often seen as explorations of technique in a formless manner, however, through deeper inspection of her practicing philosophies and personal beliefs, her work distinctly represents herself and her state of mind. In another series of works, she describes the personal meaning of one of her pieces as, "The successive layers of Hanji paper symbolize my accumulating thoughts" (Cendre et lumière, Musée des Arts asiatiques, Conseil Départemental 06, 2017). When interviewed about her overall creative process she has said, "Hanji [paper] is more than just an artistic medium: it represents" (Cendre et lumière, Musée des Arts asiatiques, Conseil Départemental 06, 2017). Kim's training, mastery of technique, and love for the core materials used in traditional Korean painting and calligraphy are much more an empowering means to share her dedication to Taoist philosophy—achieved through repetitive meditation. She challenges the Western notion that abstract art must be minimalist in idea and meaning by asserting that every aspect of her pieces are recordings of process as representations of her reality and will. She accepts all physical toil that it takes to manifest her state of mind into *The World as Idea*, as part of the process to recognize herself as contained within a universe, rather than an isolated individual. Minjung Kim's *Order-Impulse*, which itself is an amalgamation of overarching ideas that have been distilled from Eastern and Western art ideologies, holds a unique space that embodies the influence of early Eastern philosophies on the

development of Western introspective philosophy. Her combination of restriction and letting go of complete control is what is intrinsic to her experimentation and, ultimately, creation of abstract pieces that are minimalist visually, but maximalist in what it represents.

Bibliography

- Cendre et lumière, Musée des Arts asiatiques, Conseil Départemental 06. (2017). *Dialogue with Minjung KIM*. Minjung Kim. <http://www.minjung-kim.com/Interview>
- Heide, P. (2017, January 28). *Minjung Kim. Phasing*. Meer. <https://www.meer.com/en/23199-minjung-kim-phasing>
- Park Seo-bo / Minjung Kim - Exhibition at Langen Foundation in Neuss*. (2019, September 12). ArtRabbit. <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/park-seobo-minjung-kim>
- Schopenhauer, A. (1891). *On the Sufferings of the World by Arthur Schopenhauer (408ES)* — *Atlas of Places*. Atlas of Places. <https://www.atlasofplaces.com/essays/on-the-sufferings-of-the-world/>
- Schopenhauer's Aesthetics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. (2018, June 14). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer-aesthetics/>