

NEW YORK

Blum & Poe

YUN HYONG-KEUN

The first posthumous solo exhibition of Yun Hyong-keun (1928–2007) in the United States, at Blum & Poe’s New York space, was a welcome addition to the city’s recent spate of exhibitions featuring Dansaekhwa, the monochrome painting movement that arose in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–53). The featured works, collectively referred to as “Umber Blue,” were named after the pigments that Yun used—ultramarine and burnt umber—and present the medium itself as their subject. Formally, “Umber Blue” is a series not unlike Robert Motherwell’s “Elegy to the Spanish Republic,” with their imposing, dark forms arranged laterally on a light background. Also like “Elegy,” Yun’s serial investigation was remarkable in its duration, an aspect of his work that Blum & Poe’s presentation made clear: spanning from 1973 to 2007, the 12 paintings on view underscored that “Umber Blue” was the result of a lifetime of effort. Together, the works demonstrated the evolution of Yun’s disciplined variations on materials and compositional themes, serving as a testament to the strength of his singular approach to painting.

A protégé of renowned Korean modernist painter Kim Whanki, Yun began exhibiting his work internationally in the late 1960s, showing at the 1969 São Paulo Biennial and galleries in Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei and Paris. Yun was part of a generation of Korean artists focused on interrogating painting materials and techniques. Reconciling Asian and Western histories of art production, these artists turned to the material properties of paint and its varied interactions with canvas. Like many of his contemporaries, Yun incorporated into his painting practice lessons drawn from ink painting (calligraphy being a standard subject in Korean schools when he was a student). In the manner of wet media on paper, Yun’s thin, repeated applications of pigment and turpentine soaked into the fibers of the canvas, embodying an approach to painting in which the medium merges with, rather than obscures, its support base.

At Blum & Poe, one noticed the particular parameters in which Yun worked. Though “Umber Blue” took its name from the pigments he used, Yun negated color by overlaying complementary hues (blue and brown), or applying single pigments in so many layers that they appear as dark stains, with haloes of the original colors seeping from their edges. In some of his paintings, such accumulated layers of pigment give off a grotesque, tar-like sheen when viewed at an angle, an effect particularly noticeable in his larger-scale works. In a smaller, oil on *hanji* (mulberry paper) work from 2001, we see how Yun skillfully translated the material weight of his canvases to paper. The left and right sides of the paper are blackened



with pigment up to the outermost fibers, giving way to a beige ground in the middle. The drawing is not a schematic for a painting, but a material investigation in its own right; in this respect, Yun’s work is as successful as similar works by Richard Serra, who likewise uses paper as a site for emphasizing the physicality of his media.

In addition to his material interests, Yun also worked with a strict formal language: his compositions often consist of small numbers of thick vertical bars crowded together, rising from the lower edge of the canvas and tentatively overlapping. This crowding emphasizes the margins between forms—an interest that Yun further developed in later works. In his most recent painting in the exhibition, from 2007, the canvas’s middle two-thirds are left blank, bracketed by heavy bars of dark pigment on either side. With traces of paint-bleed displayed in sharp contrast along the edges of the blank center, the span of canvas between the two outer bands is just as tense and activated as the thin margins seen in his earlier works.

In its many subtle variations, Yun’s work lent itself to the gallery’s intimate spaces, which invited close comparisons between his canvases. More than introducing a significant Korean painter to an American audience, the exhibition proved that Yun was a creator of gratifying visual experiences that will continue to resonate with viewers worldwide.

ROBERT LILES