

Ha Chonghyun

BLUM & POE

This selection of nine paintings made between 1977 and 2009 was the first North American exhibition of the work of Ha Chonghyun, a Korean painter born in 1935. As such, it could hardly claim to offer an overview of the artist's career, but it made a convincing case that he is an artist of the first rank, whose Western peers would include the likes of Giorgio Griffa and Robert Ryman: artists who have put the ways and means of painting to the test but never coolly, always with ardor. Like many Korean abstractionists, Ha expresses the steadfastness of his intention—his ongoing project rising above its individual manifestations—by using the same title for each painting (with the addition of a numbering system). In his case, it is *Conjunction*; thus the exhibition ranged from *Conjunction 77-17*, 1977, to *Conjunction 09-52*, 2009.

What the title is meant to convey is the meeting between support and paint—although it could be argued that in Ha's work, the canvas is no longer a support in the traditional sense, not a ground on top of which paint has been added, but an equal partner to paint in the process of painting. His method involves pushing paint through the loosely woven, almost burlap-like fabric he uses and then systematically manipulating it once it has made its way through from verso to recto, or perhaps accepting the form in which the paint emerges without further treatment. In her recent book *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method*, Joan Kee quotes Ha calling attention to "the importance of the weave of the fabric. . . . The act of pushing, or



Ha Chonghyun,
Conjunction 77-17,
1977, oil on canvas,
63 x 47 1/2".

the gesture of pressing has no relation at all to the act of drawing, which takes place on the canvas surface." Only in one of the paintings here, *Conjunction 79-11*, 1979, are two shades of paint used; the others hew to monochromy, or would do so were it not for the fact that the brown of the canvas counts as a second color.

Ha favors shades of gray (from white to black) and earth tones. Yet however subdued, his paintings are far from monotonous; the range of textures he coaxes from his materials gives his works a variousness of feeling that most colorists would envy. At times, the physicality of the painting's surface seems dense and compacted (*Conjunction 92-99*, 1992) or rugged and almost scab-like (*Conjunction 98-23*, 1998), but it can also seem as though the emergent paint has barely grazed the hempen membrane or has been scraped down to the fabric's

tooth (*Conjunction 77-17*, 1977). Exactly what tool or process Ha has used in each painting is impossible for me to reconstruct from the physical evidence. But what is clear is that he worked each piece in a methodical manner, that he has an extensive repertoire of methods at his disposal, and that he wants the process to yield a rich pictorial experience and not a didactic demonstration of method.

Ha's paintings embody a strange synthesis of ardent physicality and visual restraint, a fusion that is perhaps another of the "conjunctions" to which his title alludes. In any case, the results of this conjunction are works whose vivid physical presence feels distinctively characterized—each one entirely individual—yet never blatantly expressive or domineering. The movement of paint through and then across these canvases can be described as gestural, but the gestures are not ones that have exhausted an impulse; their force lies in a sense of continuing potential, or rather, in self-contradiction: Materiality and the promise of meaning meet at a point of absurd and sometimes uncanny beauty.

—Barry Schwabsky