

Suh Yongsun: A Recollection, Pines

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Gallery JJ

We look at nature as an object before us, but sometimes we feel its entirety and the body unified, in which we encounter a sense of expansion.

GalleryJJ is pleased to present *Suh Yongsun: A Recollection, Pines*, a solo exhibition by Suh Yongsun, known for delving into human conditions through painting. It is the first-ever exhibition solely dedicated to his pine tree landscapes and anticipates an overview of this subject by period. Suh first became known in the early 1980s with a painting series of pines that can be regarded as a starting point of his painting today. Previously, GalleryJJ presented his self-portraits in 2018, collages and three-dimensional works in 2019, and a year-long site-specific project in 2020, followed by an exhibition, *In Thinking_Garugae Project*, and publication in 2021. Each exhibition highlighted his modus operandi from various angles, and now this exhibition intends to retrace the base of his work.

This exhibition features nineteen paintings of pine tree landscapes, from the early debut series in 1983 to the works recently completed in New York. These include nine new paintings and drawings, as well as early drawings and photographs of pines taken by the artist then. The exhibition pays attention to how his pine landscape as a painterly vision that he examined and pursued in his early career has acquired its contemporaneity and what subject it offers to the development of his work to date. Viewers can take a step back from his most known works - portrait, historical painting, and cityscape - and pay attention to landscape or *Korean sansu painting*, and the pine itself, as well as nature surrounding the body and the unknowns beyond.

Suh's work is well known for its bold canvas with expressive form and robust color, and for inquiring into human conditions and reality. It includes a series of historical paintings, landscapes, cityscapes, and (self) portraits, all of which explore the lives of individuals in the past and people in structured societies across the globe, especially in metropolitans such as Seoul, New York, Berlin, and Melbourne. He questions the invisible agency inherent to the absurdity of life, the human existence in today's urban life, and the lives of historical figures, such as the tragedy of Danjong. Meanwhile, he has been interacting with communities via many public art projects in situ, including *Drawing Cheoram*, *Drawing Dokdo*, and the ongoing *Amtaedo Tenancy Struggle 100 years drawing-history field project* at a warehouse on Amtaedo, a small island in Jeollanam-do. The communal exchanges and on-site experiences can derive an existential question about humans in

the course of life, and a reality imprinted on the body. Based on humanistic reflection and robust plastic language, his unique formative works consistently executed since the 1980s are highly regarded in Korean modern art history and housed in numerous art institutions, such as the MMCA, and collectors at home and abroad. His artistic domain expands faster and draws more attention as he renders the narrative and power that stipulate today's life.

About three years in the early 1980s, Suh mainly produced pine tree landscapes; from the mid-1980s, he focused on a series of cityscapes, portraits of urbanites, and historical paintings, including *Diaries of Nosangun*; and, to date, his work has developed further in the context of real life. His pine series fast forwards to 2009 from 1991 in this exhibition because his work on landscapes spurred since 2009. At that time, *ShanShui* exhibition presented his landscape from the perspective of Eastern *shanshui painting*. The landscape he draws is not a mere nature as an aesthetic object in the picture plane, but it contains a trace of culture and historical life, or an unfamiliar natural scenery embraced entirely with one's bodily senses.

Among the works on view, *A Winter Pine Tree* (2022), *Winter Walking* (2022), and *Sitting under a pine tree* (2022) are differentiated from Suh's early pine landscapes without any figures. They appear more as streetscapes with a figure than typical landscapes and compared to the traditional *sansu* painting that engages both nature and humans, they seem to integrate tradition and modernity as though a contemporary version of *sansu*.

Suh sojourned in New York, working in his Brooklyn studio this past fall. The works at the time were created by recalling Chusa Kim Jeonghui's *Sehando* and Lee Sangjwa's *Songhabowoldo*, a representative traditional *sansu* painting with pine trees. In the stillness embracing the whole space, the attention is drawn to the objects and figures vacantly placed. Suh tends to draw self-portraits first in unfamiliar places or travel destinations. The emotions and corporeal senses induced by the unfamiliar environment are expressed as a strong feeling of isolation in *Sehando*, as his self-portrait sitting alone in splendid moonlight, or as a homage to *sansu*. The recollected *sansu* acts as a metaphor for his bodily senses. According to Suh, "*looking into oneself is also to ascertain the infinite world within.*" The vast and lonesome space in his work, akin to *Sehando*, is an articulation of the mental image and is about profundity in nature and spacetime derived from his somatic sensation. The margin

in sansu begins with a sense of space in the distant sky between branches in his early black-and-white pine landscapes. The latest works on view are a new style of painting that combines his previous pine landscape, urban portrait, and traditional sansu. He recaptures the attributes of sansu that embody the initial ideological space in the world of life he has been scrutinizing to date.

Suh completed *Amtaedo Pine Trees* (2022) at a pine bonsai farm that he stumbled upon while working on the Amtaedo project and *Darigol Pine Trees* (2022) from its studio location. He regards nature as vitality, infinity, desire, and a refuge for humans, from the bonsai cultivation and garden culture. The strong contrast - between the blue background covering broad margin space and the curved pine boughs traversing its picture plane diagonally - draws attention. This method of sansu painting, composing an infinite sky beyond the foreground, heralds the profundity of nature that he recalls. Also, it diverts attention past the pines through its linear division of the picture plane like his early monochromatic works. The new paintings attempt to surpass nature seen by the human eye and proceed to the outlook beyond.

Suh aims to express the phenomenon intact before his eyes without prejudice; and pursues the firmament above and the space enveloping his body through pine, an object in actualities, as a medium. As such, the attempts to grasp the essence of the world began with early pine landscapes four decades ago, in which the Western phenomenological idea of *epoche* has become one of the attributes in his work thus far.

While the latest works seem to indicate human presence in the titles, the paintings prior to 2009 have titles that focus on the object itself, such as *Pine Tree* and *Forest*. The pine series in the 1980s are ideological and foreshadowing nature's transcendence, as the subdued light shimmering towards the foreground deepens the background further whereas the works after 2009 have gradually become abstract with a crisp contrast between bold colors and light.

Before his interest deeply went into human life and existence, the subject during this transition period was the pine tree, and as a young artist just starting his career, the initial study of plasticity and humanities stemmed from pine landscapes. He started receiving attention with a series of monochromatic pines that resembled sansu paintings. He won an award for *Sky I* and its series at Dong-A Art Festival in 1982, and the MMCA collected two of his work subsequently; a drawing, *Pine Tree* (1983), and a painting, *Pine Tree* (1984). These early works exhibit objectivity and perspective and recall the space from traditional sansu as a phenomenological attitude toward the world while the apparently diffusing white margin around pine trees intensifies. As seen in *Pine Tree* (1983) with a vast white margin, the pine series from that time shifts the eye by splitting the picture plane while resolving the conflict between the real space and flat painting space, and soon after the work proceeds with more vigorous strokes and bold colors.

According to Suh, these early monochrome pine works originate from the idea of traditional sansu and his interest in black-and-white photography. There are concerns about the flatness of painting, conflicts between Western sensibility and Korean tradition, and questions on existence and perception. He has chosen pines as the subject matter to deal with Eastern tradition in Western painting. Pines hold significant meaning in the symbolic system in Korea. They reflect universality and the outlook of Asians with their unchanging color and vitality as one of the *Shipjangsaeng* (*Ten Symbols of Longevity*) and retain the sentiments of the Korean people as the subject in *literati painting* and *Eastern ink-wash-painting* along with *Sagunja* (*Four Gracious Plants*). He recalls that awareness of traditional sansu had vanished then, and that he also chose the path to Western painting. But he also thought a lot about tradition while learning the relations between the spirit of sansu, *Jinkyung culture*, and the *Neo-Confucianism* of Joseon Dynasty through Shitao's pine landscapes and exhibitions at the Kansong Art Museum. This is a question and selection of what he has become accustomed to in his life between Eastern and Western sensibilities coming from different reasons and experiences. Shitao's work, which Suh was particularly impressed with, denotes universal profundity, and reveals the artist's consciousness of pondering it.

Both aesthetics and *the views of nature* distinguish Western landscape and Eastern sansu painting. Suh's pine landscape discreetly reflects the spirit of sansu that endeavored to express the life of the whole universe beyond a finite object. The invisible space in his early works implies the distant space and time, a thread from *Qiyun Shengdong* (*Rhythmic Vitality*) rendered in sansu and ink-wash painting.

On the other hand, his early black-and-white expression was due to the photographic procedures he paid attention to at the time. Western minimalism and monochrome, then accepted in Korea, were mainly pale and pristine, combining restrained colors and Korean sensibilities from the *Seon ideology*. However, he recalls photographic images of a pine tree, during its processing, that seemed more like a drawing. It evoked a modern sense of soft and smooth surface; and an aesthetic sense of the ink-and-wash sansu painting.

In the late 70s, during his academic period, minimalism and photorealism bisected and prevailed in the Korean painting scene. Some of the early pine series produced were drawn by looking at photographs instead of real trees. "*Monochrome photography is a way of capturing phenomena in the world with the light passing through the lens as a medium.*" Suh states that it is to understand the photographic image as a record.

"*The pines I painted earlier were not real ones from nature but were a concept of them and a phenomenon that occurred in my body while looking at things, or a drawing process solving the relation between the real world of form recognition and the perceptual sense accepting it.*" - Artist note, Oct. 2022

Suh encounters the natural scenes through his lively body movement, without preconception, which yields the works to

convey expressive colors and materiality. The world humans see cannot be separated from the body facing and feeling it. The pine landscapes unveil the depth of the vast cosmos through such exercise and reconstruct the actual landscape into a universal attribute.

He began with a rather obvious yet tricky mix of genres for a modernist at the time - landscape, figurative, and Korean tradition - but pushed to overcome already prevalent Korean modernism through his unique pine landscapes that subtly weaved East-West views in a humanistic approach. His plastic language, which lies between nature and humans, traditional sansu and Western landscape, and *picture space* and *actual space*, appears today as landscape, historical and urban painting and continues to develop anew as a journey to explore human life.

Lastly, Suh brings up a recollection of sansu with recent works on view such as *A Winter Pine Tree*. *"Because, in the distant future, empathy and attachment to such painting are perhaps a self-conscious invocation to resisting pervasive new scientific civilization and to maintaining the rhythm of life it overlooks."* What does this quest for nature mean in our life? Communicating with nature has become a more urgent issue because of what people are losing from urbanization. And the landscape genre also earns greater importance and thrives than ever due to current global nature and digital environmental concerns. His references are meaningful at this juncture in which various thoughts and expressions of the landscape are being developed globally, from David Hockney's post-pop landscape to Anselm Kiefer's new romantic landscape, and Shara Hughes and Julie Mehretu's abstract terrain.

Suh's work initiates a conversation between the past and the present, the visible and the invisible, and the body and nature in its spatiotemporal depth, connecting nature humans belong to beyond pines and expanding into a vast universe. More than four decades after the first release of pine tree paintings, this exhibition anticipates a new perspective drawn from the accumulated extent of his work.

"Recently, I have started to think again about my way of painting. The white margin in the early black-and-white pine series expresses the orientation about the world that the margin in sansu and my senses cannot reach impliedly. Later pine series employ bold primary colors with red stems and dark greens. They continue into subjective expressions." - Artist note, 10. 2022

서용선 (B.1951) Suh Yongsun

1982 Master of Fine Arts, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea
 1979 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea

Selected Solo Exhibitions (2013~)

2022 *Suh Yongsun: A Recollection, Pines*, Gallery JJ, Seoul
 2021 *Suh Yongsun in Thinking: Garugae Project*, Gallery JJ, Seoul
Suh Yongsun's MAGO: Searching for Goddess of our mind, Women's History Cultural Center, Seoul Herstory House, Seoul
Manchupsanjung - Suh Yongsun Paintings, Yeosu Museum, Yeosu
 2020 *Paper Painting by Suh Yongsun*, Allme Artspace, Seoul
Goguryeo by Suh Yongsun, Gallery Imazoo, Seoul
 2019 *Head by Suh Yongsun_Conflict*, Gallery JJ, Seoul
Pain, Symptoms, and Signs: The Remaking of History in Suh Yongsun's Painting, Art Center White Block, Paju
Suh Yongsun: City of Velocity, Niche Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
Utopia's Delay: The Painter and the Metropolis By Suh Yongsun, Mizuma, Kips & Wada Art, Newyork(NY), USA
 2018 *Self-portrait by Suh Yongsun_Reflection*, Gallery JJ, Seoul
Suh Yongsun: City and History of Landscape, MK Gallery, Vienna(VA), USA
 2017 *My Place*, Gallery Fukuzumi, Osaka, Japan
Suh Yongsun, 37 rue de Montreuil Paris / 222 main Street New Jersey, Galerie La Ville A des Arts, Paris, France
Suh Yongsun: Crossing Worlds, Art Mora Gallery, New York(NY), USA
 2016 *Color 色 and Void 空 - Suh Yongsun*, Kim Chong Yung Museum, Seoul
Expanding Lines - Suh Yongsun Drawing, 2016 Representative Artist, Arko Art Center, Seoul
 2015 *Utopia's Delay: The Painter and the Metropolis*, Kumho Museum of Art/Hakgojae Gallery, Seoul
 2014 *Suh Yongsun's Heterotopia - The Forfeiture of Myth*, The 26th Lee Jung Seob Art Prize, Chosun Ilbo Art Museum, Seoul
Embodied and Embedded Things - Self Portraits and Scenes, Gallery Fukuzumi, Osaka, Japan
Historical Imagination - The King Danjong Stories by Suh Yongsun, Art Center White Block, Paju
Suh Yongsun, DAAD(Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst), Bonn, Germany
 2013 *Memory, Representation: Suh Yongsun and 6.25*, Korea University Museum, Seoul

Selected Group Exhibitions (2017~)

2022 *Scenes of Memory*, Doonamjae Art Center, Seoul
The Birth of Art, Hangaram Art Museum, Seoul Art Center, Seoul
Mountains of South and North Korea, Mountain Climbing & Cultural Center, Seoul
The Moments We Encounter, Suwon Museum of Art, Suwon
PEACE for CHILD, Seosomun Shrine History Museum, Seoul
Hi-story.gif, Zaha Museum, Seoul
30th Anniversary of Korean-Chinese Diplomatic Relations "Empathy-Looking at Korean contemporary Art", Korean Culture Ministry, Beijing, China/ Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangzhou, China
Minimalism-Maximalism-Mechanissmmm Act1-Act2, Art Sonje Center, Seoul
 2021 *The breath of the earth after the DMZ*, Yangpyeong Art

Museum, Yangpyeong
20th anniversary of Halartec: Cheolam Grigi, Taibaek Coal Museum, Taibaek/ Mokpo Cultural Center, Mokpo
Yeosu International Art Festival 'Flowing refuses to stop', Yeosu Expo Convention Center Exhibition hall, Yeosu
Battlefront: 20 Artists Stories of the Korean Peninsula, Odusan Unification Tower Gallery, Paju
The Era and Individuality, Headen Museum, Seoul
The Scenery we face, Our daily gaze, Seoul Olympic Museum of Art, Seoul
Shinjayeonism: The Rhizomes entangled with the Indra Net, Jeonbuk Museum of Art, Wanju
 2020 *The Moment of Gieok(Korean Alphabet ㄱ)*, Seoul Calligraphy Art Museum, Seoul
2020 Busan Biennale, Words at an Exhibition: exhibition in ten chapters and five poems, Museum of Contemporary art Busan, etc. Busan
Early Spring Outing - The House of Artists, Yeosu Art Museum, Yeosu
 2019 *2019 Seong: Fantastic City*, Suwon Museum of Art, Suwon
Immortality in the Cloud, Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul
Visioni di Paesaggi contemporanei dal mondo, Museo di Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, Valmote, Rome, Italy
 2018 *The Sea and the Island*, Korean Cultural Center, Shanghai, China
A New Era of Peace and a Peaceful Land, Grebel Gallery at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Canada
We the People, Ozaneaux ArtSpace, New York(NY), USA
From Vietnam to Berlin, Asia Culture Center, Gwangju
 2017 *Two Reflections, Korean and American Artists Confront Humanity and Nature*, Korean Cultural Center in Washington, Washington D.C., USA
Expression of Landscape, Daegu Art Museum, Daegu
Commodity & Ideology, Klapper Hall Art Gallery, Queens College, New York(NY), USA

Awards

2016 Arko Representative Artist Award, Arko Art Center, Seoul
 2014 Lee Jung-Seob Art Award, Chosun Ilbo Art Museum, Seoul
 2009 Artist of the Year, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Gwacheon
 1984 The 6th JoongAng Special Art Prize, JoonAng Ilbo, Seoul
 1982 Dong-A Art Festival, Dong-A Art Award, Dong-A Ilbo, Seoul
 1978 The 1st JoongAng Special Art Prize, JoongAng Ilbo, Seoul

Selected Residency Programs

Torpedo Factory Art Center, Alexandria (VA), USA
 Art Mora Residency Program, New Jersey (NJ), USA
 University of Sydney Residency Program, Sydney, Australia
 RMIT University Artist in Residence, Melbourne, Australia
 Vermont Studio Center, Vermont (NY), USA

Collections

National Museum of Modern and Contemporary of Art Korea, Seoul
 City Museum, Busan Museum of Modern Art, Daegu Museum of Art, Suwon Art Museum, Seoul National University, Seoul National University Museum, Korea University Museum, Chungcheong University, OCI Museum, Moran Museum, National Defense Graduate School Museum, Yangpyeong Museum, Incheon Art Platform, POSCO, Dongseo literature Publishing Co., Monash University(Melbourne, Australia), Wu Guanjun Museum annexed Gallery(Singapore), Iwami(Yamaguchi, Japan), and etc.