

서용선의 생생한 생각_단종 드로잉**Suh Yongsun: Thinking in motion, Drawing Danjong**

2026. 4. 23(Thu) ~ 6. 6(Sat)

Text | Juyeon Kang, GalleryJJ Director

"Drawing is, at once, an act and an attitude. I believe it to be the most intimate thing that connects to the mind of the artist." – Suh Yongsun, 2016

Gallery JJ is pleased to present *Suh Yongsun: Thinking in Motion, Drawing Danjong*, the artist's sixth solo exhibition at the gallery, focusing on drawings of Danjong within his broader historical work. The exhibition is part of the collaborative project *Suh Yongsun: Drawings of Danjong*, presented simultaneously across four galleries in Seoul and the Yeongwol Tourist Center Exhibition Hall, each with its own focus, tracing over four decades of his engagement with this subject through drawing since 1986. While Suh is widely known for his intensely expressive paintings with a rich palette, drawing has long been central to his investigation of the human condition. The Danjong drawings, many rarely exhibited or shown for the first time, make this aspect of his practice newly accessible. Despite considerable scholarship on his work, the exhibition's focus on drawing as method and Danjong as his longest-sustained subject allows a closer engagement with the basis of his practice. It considers how his thinking meets a history both familiar and unfamiliar within pictorial space, and why it remains a vital artistic question today.

Since beginning his practice in the early 1980s, Suh has remained in constant movement, working across the Korean peninsula and beyond, observing and recording as he moves. From the metropolises of Seoul, New York, and Berlin to community sites of Cheoram (2001–), Dokdo (2003–), Garugae Village in Yangpyeong (2020–2021), and Amtaedo (2022–2023), as well as places of historical and cultural memory like Cheongnyeongpo in Yeongwol, he has consistently encountered the conditions of human life with a sketchbook at hand. He approaches history and myth through textual study and site visits, internalizing events and encounters and translating them into drawing. Using whatever materials are available — advertising flyers, wrapping paper — he captures passing impressions and moments of thought, leaving precise traces of his evolving ideas. Recording the atmosphere of the cities he inhabits and retrieving ideas from historical documents and oral accounts, drawing has become for him an instinctive daily practice. His curiosity about the human requires direct engagement with the world, witnessed and experienced through the body; the raw, immediate act of drawing becomes the mode that most fully contains his practice. While all visual art contains drawing, Suh's work, marked by the dynamic touch of line, is inseparable from it at its core.

Drawing is central to Suh's practice, the means through which, beginning always from himself, he comes to recognize and record the world, leaving the distinctive traces of his pictorial sensibility. Two published volumes compile his early drawings through 1986; his self-authored booklet *Changes*

in European Art: On Drawing (1986) reveals, through its engagement with both Eastern and Western painting theory, how deeply he had already committed to drawing as a mode of visual thinking. When Korea's first dedicated drawing institution, the SOMA Drawing Center, opened in 2006, Suh had already visited the Drawing Center in New York and served on its founding committee. His drawing exhibitions include a 1995 solo show, *Self-portrait Drawings* in New York; in 2016, the Arko Art Center chose a large-scale presentation of his drawings for its featured artist series.

This joint exhibition is the most comprehensive and concentrated focus on the Danjong series by Suh since *Historical Imagination: The King Danjong Stories by Suh Yongsun* at Art Center White Block in 2014. Beginning with his 1993 solo exhibition *Suh Yongsun 1987–93: Diary of Nosan-gun (Danjong)* at Shinsegae Gallery, the series has resurfaced through numerous exhibitions just when it might otherwise have faded from memory. Built up over decades, it forms the backbone of his work around history and occupies a distinct place in public consciousness — present in our collective memory like a recurring trace. By giving form to dimensions of Korean historical memory rarely encountered in the visual art of the time, the work proved arresting and helped bring discussions of contemporary history painting to the Korean art scene.

Following his debut with pine tree paintings, Suh's practice has moved through self-portraiture, the rapidly modernizing cityscape of Seoul and global metropolises, and mythological subjects, each a distinct cluster, yet all essentially linked to the realities and conditions of contemporary life. As Suh has said, "the face of reality is already historical," and "painting is the act of pushing through the surface appearance of reality, uncovering the traces of fact." The invisible mechanisms and forces latent in the absurdity of human existence, operative in every era, manifest through his characteristic expressivity as mysterious energies across distorted, unrealistic pictorial surfaces, arriving before us as genuine records of experience. From the *Nosan-gun Diary* to the *Korean War* series and *Drawing Cheoram*, each series began a decade or more ago and continues to accumulate, summoning related stories and historical memories along long trajectories —among the most distinctive features of his work. Of all these subjects, the stories of Danjong's tragic life have been his most persistent theme: for most, a minor or forgotten chapter of history. For Suh, it is always *here, now*.

1. Danjong Drawings by Suh Yongsun

To date, Suh has produced over 380 drawings about Danjong. This exhibition presents around forty works, including recent pieces such as *Oseam* (2025) and *Cheongryongpo* (2026), alongside his sketchbooks, artist notes, and other documentation. The selection traces the series back to early preparatory sketches from the 1980s. While the first Danjong drawings originated at Cheongnyeongpo in Yeongwol in 1986, his thinking about historical painting predates the series itself, preserved in earlier drawings on subjects like *The Northern Expedition Plan of King Hyojong* and the *Imjin War*.

The drawings encompass reconstructions of events surrounding the Gyejujeongnan, in works such as *Year of the Fowl* and *Plot* as well as portraits of key figures including Danjong (*The Boy King*,

2006), Sejo, and Kim Siseup, and the associated sites. These subjects appear in a far greater range of configurations than the paintings, often in multiple versions under the same title. The exhibition unfolds across forty years, through the formal elements intrinsic to drawing, line above all, but also plane and form. As figures and events shift in weight across time and formal elements transform between works, gaps open — like breaks in a stream of thought — through which viewers may reassemble the fragments of history and pose their own questions.

Compared to the paintings, the Danjong drawings feel more immediate to the artist's thought. Freed from the subjective charge of expressive color, attention falls more fully on concept; the line-centered formal elements seem to expand infinitely toward some world within the image, resisting a single meaning and leaving the imagination free. Suh's swift, decisive strokes, in lieu of painting's dense materiality, deliver the raw pleasure of physical gesture, the primal energy of bodily movement.

2. The Expanding Line: On the Unfinished

To draw is both to mark a surface and to pull something forth, leaving a trace, and it is among the oldest of human artistic acts. *Disegno*, central to Renaissance art, was understood as more than the making of lines: the process by which ideas of the mind find visible form. In the twentieth century, as line and color coexisted as equal formal elements, the boundary between drawing and painting blurred; with the rise of Conceptual art in the 1960s, drawing shed its status as preparatory step and gained recognition as an autonomous art form with its own aesthetic value. For Suh, drawing is no preliminary: it is the act of drawing out thought and memory, the medium through which his intentions are most directly revealed.

In the Danjong series, drawing functions less as an instrument of historical representation than as a generative field of thought. In *Year of the Fowl* and *Plot*, figures, architecture, and events intersect within a single flat picture plane; different times appear simultaneously; palace rooftops turn transparent to reveal events inside. This spatial logic presents historical narrative as a drawn event immanent on the surface, while positioning the viewer at a remove, looking upon history rather than absorbed by it.

The extreme restraint of these surfaces, spare lines and minimal color, sacrifices detailed narrative in favor of something more immediate: an intuition of intent, a possibility directed toward some not-yet-defined end. Though narrative is depicted, the works retain their intuitive force through the primacy of their formal language. Anchored in bold, assertive mark-making, color, which in the paintings so powerfully governs atmosphere, becomes line or assumes form-generating independence, together producing a dramatic pictorial space. Meaning is produced, yet line and form remain open, refusing reduction to any single interpretation.

Some works exist as drawings; many others, such as *Year of the Fowl* (2006), have been transferred to canvas. Even the smallest drawing carries across its surface a tension no less than in large paintings. Abstract lines that expand and generate without arriving at any fixed destination offer a sensory freedom connecting to the infinite. It is the *impulse of the line* — open to movement rather

than bound to representation — that animates the entire surface. Anti-academic painters like Cézanne dissolved the classical primacy of line through color, yet in drawing — the most primordial of artistic acts — line remains the essential element. Even as painting, sculpture, and architecture each developed into autonomous disciplines carrying the legacy of *disegno*, the foundation of all plastic arts remains figuration through *dessin*.

Jean-Luc Nancy described drawing as "the existence of a line without beginning or end," not fixed meaning but an arriving trace. If art is "the event of something not in the world arriving into the world," then drawing is not the demonstration of something prior but "the disclosure of a thing to which no form has been given in advance." Suh's drawings likewise summon history and memory into the present through the impulse of a line originating in bodily movement, neither anchored to its point of departure nor guaranteeing stable meaning. This is where an aesthetics of openness becomes possible: escaping the schematic, simultaneously beginning and end, finished and unfinished. The unfinished is not a lack, but a form of openness in itself. As Suh states, "in the very act of drawing a line, one already begins to intimate a completed picture." In his work, line may carry something of another tradition entirely: the *yihua* (*one-stroke*) of Shitao, in which a single stroke is posited as the origin of all form, perhaps functioning as another deep source of his vision.

3. Memory, Record, and the Historicity of Life

Open from the outset to writing and drawing, reading and seeing alike, Suh's drawings operate like a diary, fixing in image form the events, stories, and impressions each moment calls forth. He is consistently disposed toward recording and preserving the past: images and writing that slip through time may, if not seized in the moment, be the only authentic face of what cannot be recovered. Suh notes that drawing reveals his intentions more directly than painting, which carries many more resolved elements and layers. The formal character of drawing as sensory experience is grounded not in mimesis but in a will to grasp the real through mental engagement. The overlap of reading and seeing, alongside the sensory quality of line, renders legible what remains indistinct in the mind, bringing the ideas we hold about human life to concrete form, as Vasari understood. As an immediate record that seizes the flash of memory or impression, drawing is the starting point of all social and historical matter, and the foundation of Suh's entire artistic practice.

The Danjong series emerged from his sustained engagement with art history across Eastern and Western traditions. As Suh noted years ago, he found himself searching for his own mode of history painting, a practice conspicuously absent from the Korean art scene and its history, by contrast to the deep Western classical tradition of works drawn from history and myth. His interest in the tragic dimensions of ancient drama and literature found pictorial form in the figures of Danjong and Sejo: tragedy and human desire expressed in painterly means. This was also a question of identity as a Korean artist navigating Eastern and Western sensibilities, curious about what has simply become embodied through living.

For Suh, making pictures is a process of understanding oneself and one's surroundings through formal expression; painting history is equally a means of uncovering the processes that formed him, and revealing the differences and particularities that emerge in his relations with others. For Wilhelm Dilthey, historical consciousness is itself a mode of self-knowledge: life is a continuous interaction with others within which relational bonds are ceaselessly formed. Through the many community projects alongside history painting, from Cheoram to Amtaedo, does not his work point toward an aspiration to exist together, as a community of living beings? All the while posing questions about the grief of those enmeshed in social structures across time and space, and about historical fate and existential life.

The silence of what has been excluded is inherent to history. Nosan-gun, erased from official record, but also Eom Heungdo, Lady Song, and Prince Anpyeong, all expelled from the symbolic order or reduced to faint traces, Suh opens a breach in representation to summon them, and they become real within the picture. The same is true of the nameless miners in other series, the Sewol Ferry tragedy, and the anonymous citizens adrift in the contemporary city. Though grounded in historical fact through extensive archival research, his work cannot resolve into any ideology or heroic myth. It remains a question about the existential suffering of individuals entangled in the conditions of their time, and an attempt to capture the undecidable interior dimension of the person.

History is not closed; it passes through time and becomes the present. Through continuous exploration and record-keeping, memories retrieved from history surface and transform with each moment. In a recent interview, Suh remarked that the Danjong series "began with the stories of human affairs but has gradually broadened into a concern with the early history of the Joseon dynasty as a whole." As Walter Benjamin understood historical writing, "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," Suh's pictorial record forms a constellation from images torn from the passage of time, so that we might perceive the present more richly and see our condition anew.

The recent *Oseam* (2025) drawing, created in New York, resembles a landscape scroll in transparent form, contemplative rather than expressively charged, as though reflecting on the Eastern painting tradition that flows beneath the surface of his art. The Danjong drawings are a condensed mass of thought and sensation at the frontline of a painstaking artistic journey, woven from his bodily engagement with every site where history and memory are inscribed, alongside rigorous humanistic research. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to encounter the core of Suh Yongsun's artistic world through drawing, the most fundamental mode of his practice.