

Une Terre d’Avenir

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I didn’t necessarily go [to Paris] to focus on my painting, or to find exhibition opportunities to boost my career. Paris is a city of art, so I simply wanted to experience the four seasons there. —Yun Hyong-keun¹

The above quote, taken from an oral history conducted with Yun Hyong-keun in 2006, describes only part of the reason why the artist moved his studio and family from Seoul to Paris in December 1980. In addition to offering a different context for art and the seasons, Paris held plentiful professional and personal connections. It also provided a refuge from political turmoil. Born in Cheongwon-gun (present-day Cheongju), North Chungcheong Province, in 1928, Yun came of age during the Japanese occupation and saw his country liberated, only to be divided in half at the end of World War II. In the tumultuous years before, during, and after the Korean War, Yun went to art school, worked as an art teacher, and began to exhibit paintings in Korea and abroad. This formative period, however, was also marked by trauma. By the time Yun was forty-five, he had been jailed, tortured, blacklisted, and put before a firing squad. When Korea exploded into violence in May 1980 with the Gwangju Uprising, Yun, now fifty-two, decided he must leave his homeland. Having already spent time in Paris in the 1970s, Yun chose to relocate there with his wife and teenage son.² The two years Yun spent living, working, and exhibiting his art in Paris profoundly influenced his sense of himself as a Korean national and as a painter.

Yun first saw Paris in 1975 and soon returned, in 1978 and 1979. During these initial trips he spent time with fellow artists, including Kim Tschang-Yeul, Lee Ufan, Chung Sang-Hwa, Kim Guiline, Park Seo-Bo, and Shim Moon-Seup, most of whom had fled Korea in the 1960s.

1. Yun Hyong-keun, interview by Kim Yisoon, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*, vol. 6. 2006 Samsung Foundation of Culture Oral History Project (Seoul: Leeum Archives of Korean Art, 2007). Trans. Cho Nayoung (unpublished manuscript, 2021), PDF.

2. Kim Hyunsook, “Yun Hyong-keun: The Gate of Heaven and Earth,” in *Yun Hyong-keun*, ed. Kim Inhye. Exh. cat. (Seoul: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2018), p. 142.

In letters and diary entries from these sojourns, Yun describes attending dinner parties at friends' homes and Korean restaurants, studio visits, and exhibitions in museums and galleries. On his first trip, Yun visited the celebrated collections of the Louvre and the Musée d'art Moderne. Just three years later, in 1978, Yun presented his own work in grand Parisian style, contributing two paintings to *Peinture coréenne contemporaine*, the Korean section of the *Secondes rencontres internationales d'art contemporain* exhibition held at the Grand Palais—the first time his work was on public view in the French capital. Financed in part by the Korean government, this show sought to “re-establish a new tradition of Korean art on the world stage” and situated Yun’s work in the company of other artists affiliated with Dansaekhwa (Korean monochrome), including Park Seo-Bo, Lee Ufan, and Ha Chong-Hyun.³ Despite having reservations about certain nationalistic and stylistic implications of the Dansaekhwa label, Yun was proud to participate in the high-profile international exhibition. Reflecting on the show in a diary entry, Yun wrote: “Korean art is the best. All the work is big and refreshing. Tschang-yeul said Parisians will be surprised by the quality of the Korean work.”⁴

While in Paris in 1978 and 1979 Yun spent time with his mother-in-law, Kim Hyang-An, who was there on behalf of the Whanki Foundation, which she had established after the death of her husband, the so-called godfather of Korean abstraction, Kim Whanki.⁵ Yun had been close to Whanki, who was his teacher in the Arts Department at Seoul National University in the late 1940s before becoming his father-in-law in 1960. Whanki himself had lived and worked in the French capital for a time in the 1950s, a seminal period during which he merged Western and Korean painting styles. Inspired by his mentor’s transformative experience in Paris, Yun sought a similar one for himself some thirty years later. When Yun relocated in 1980, he brought along a large supply of *hanji* (handmade mulberry paper), a traditional Korean support, which Whanki had encouraged Yun to use.⁶ Like his teacher, Yun enjoyed the natural bleeding that occurred on *hanji*—a painterly effect he likened to “moss on a rock.”⁷ While *hanji* rooted Yun’s work in Korean culture and art history, certain aspects of his practice and his visual vocabulary resonate with his French contemporaries. In the 1980s, French artists such as Daniel Buren and Michel Parmentier were also using repetitive gestures to create bands of black or gray paint on canvas and other supports. Though the comparison is not an obvious one, there is a conceptual affinity between Yun and these painters who, when they formed the BMPT group in Paris in the mid-1960s, along with Olivier Mosset and Niele Toroni, sought to rid painting of the much-mythologized “artist’s touch” through systematic, almost mechanical applications of paint. Yun also demonstrated little authorial control over his materials, seeing his role as more that

3. Yi Lee, “Peinture Coréenne Contemporaine,” in *Secondes Rencontres Internationales d'Art Contemporain: Corée, 9 peintres* (Paris: Les Presses Artistiques, 1978), n.p.

4. Yun Hyong-keun, diary entry, December 6, 1978, in “Diary of Yun Hyong-keun,” trans. Jake Levine and Soohyun Yang (unpublished manuscript, 2022), PDF.

5. Yun, diary entry, December 5, 1978, in “Diary of Yun Hyong-keun.”

6. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

7. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.



Yun Hyong-keun (center) with his wife, Kim Young-suk (left), and son, Yun Seong-ryeol (right), Paris, 1981



Opposite
Yun Hyong-keun with his paintings,
Villa Corot, Paris, 1981

Below
Yun Hyong-keun's studio, Paris, 1981

of a collaborator with paint, brush, support, and time. Brushstrokes are virtually invisible in Yun's paintings, a key feature that led Lee Ufan to refer to them as "unpaintings."⁸ Lee's term could indeed be applied to Buren's and Parmentier's work as well (notably, all three developed undeniable signature styles despite their shared interest in denying the importance of the hand of the artist). Unlike the rational and orderly "unpaintings" of his European counterparts, however, Yun's linear layered applications of paint, especially on *hanji*, breed decidedly organic forms, which alternately conjure tree trunks, rocks, dirt, or water.

Judging from letters and diary entries from Yun's initial trips to Paris, not everything about the art scene, or the seasons, in the French capital pleased him. He frequently commented on the weather, such as on March 8, 1975, when he wrote: "Every day in Paris is overcast."⁹ Several days later, Yun expressed discouragement after visiting galleries with Lee Ufan, noting: "Felt skeptical about contemporary art. Is art dead?"¹⁰ Perhaps he was hoping to find galleries filled with paintings more similar to those by Cezanne and Serge Poliakoff, which he later admired in a touring exhibition of French modern painters at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, in Seoul, in 2000 for being "so elegantly simple and modest. No frills at all."¹¹ Certainly it was Yun's interest in the history of French painting that led him to take a "tourist bus" to Barbizon in 1975 to see for himself the village and forest that inspired many nineteenth-century landscape painters, including Camille Corot.¹² Yun could not have known at that time how Corot's legacy would come to play an integral role in his own career. When Yun returned to Paris five years later, at the end of 1980, he joined a dynamic international community of painters, writers, photographers, printmakers, sculptors, and carpenters working at the Villa Corot, a building in Paris's fourteenth arrondissement that once housed its namesake's own studio.¹³

8. Lee Ufan, "Yun Hyong-Keun no shigoto," in *Yun Hyong-keun*. Exh. cat. (Tokyo: Muramatsu Gallery, 1976), n.p.

9. Yun, diary entry, March 8, 1975, in "Diary of Yun Hyong-keun."

10. Yun, diary entry, March 11, 1975, in "Diary of Yun Hyong-keun."

11. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

12. Yun, diary entry, March 16, 1975, in "Diary of Yun Hyong-keun."

13. "Biography," in Inhye, *Yun Hyong-keun*, p. 175.

The Montparnasse neighborhood where Yun landed in 1980 had been fertile ground to generations of international painters beyond Corot. The impressive roster of artists who gathered in Montparnasse includes those connected to the twentieth-century École de Paris, such as Chaïm Soutine, Marc Chagall, and Amedeo Modigliani. Later, in the 1960s, the likes of Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Yves Klein brought new life—and new artistic styles—to the legendary Left Bank artist community.

Though her style and technique are nothing like Yun's, Mitchell is an interesting example of another artist with a deep connection to landscape, and one who evoked nature through abstraction. Though the American painter had long since decamped from Montparnasse and relocated to the French countryside, she was actively exhibiting in Paris in the 1980s. Visiting galleries as he did, Yun would have had the opportunity to see Mitchell's large-scale landscape-inspired paintings at Galerie Jean Fournier (where he also might have enjoyed Simon Hantaï's version of "unpaintings," folded experiments with pigment and ground known as *Pliages*). In 1981–1982, Yun would have had occasion to see Buren's methodical striped compositions in the exhibition *Murs*, at the Centre Pompidou.





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Views of artists' studios, Villa Corot, Paris, 1981

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Han Mook (left) and Yun Hyong-keun,
Foundation Whanki, Paris, 1981



Deeply inspired by Paris's historic and contemporary reputation as a haven and incubator for artists (especially painters), Yun worked prolifically during his own two-year residency and presented new work at the Villa Corot's annual exhibition and regular open studios. His works on linen, hemp cloth, and *hanji* from this period adhere to the style he established in Korea in the 1970s, but they also are very much of and about the specific time and place of their making. In the artist's own words: "Painting is the story of my life. To explain it more briefly, I'd say 'today.' Or 'now.' Or 'this moment.'"¹⁴ Every moment and every aspect of his time in Paris—from the city's weather to its storied history and rich culture—influenced Yun's creative output. In addition to his diaries and letters, Yun's paintings are documents of and testaments to his *vie quotidienne*.

However, any discussion of Yun's works from the early 1980s warrants a comparison to the work he had been making since 1973, a year during which he served time in Seodaemun Prison for ostensibly violating anticommunist laws. Upon his release, Yun abruptly changed his painting style. Having previously worked with a range of colors, he reduced his palette to just umber and blue paint, which he diluted heavily with turpentine and linseed oil. Using a wide brush to apply layer upon layer of thinned paint, Yun filled his compositions with vertical rectangular forms according to a meditative, methodical, and time-consuming process that required days, weeks, or months of drying time. The striking uniformity of Yun's post-1973 oeuvre makes even slight variations in terms of composition, style, or technique stand out acutely. Such is the case with several paintings from 1980, made just before the artist's arrival in Paris.

14. Yun, diary entry, n.d., 1978, in "Diary of Yun Hyong-keun."

According to the art historian Kim Inhye, in the immediate wake of the Gwangju Uprising—a wave of protests against military rule that were violently repressed—Yun "rushed out to his yard and began drawing thick black pillars slanted across a large piece of fabric."¹⁵ Kim points out the slanting forms as being a dramatic departure from the erect pillars (which have been likened by critics to prison bars and described by Yun as gates between heaven and earth, as much for their verticality as for the chromatic association of umber with earth and blue with the sky, or the heavens) the artist had been painting obsessively since his release from Seodaemun. The uncharacteristic extreme diagonals and weepy drips convey Yun's visceral reaction to what happened at Gwangju—in his words, "a sin . . . for the military to stab and kill civilians."¹⁶

Paris provided physical and emotional distance from the horror of Gwangju. Soon after his arrival, Yun found his way back to more stable and balanced compositions, still featuring his recognizable palette of blue and umber. While he did make some works with slightly slanted rectangles in 1981 (notably, an oil on *hanji* titled *Burnt UMBER & Ultramarine* [p. TK]), a photograph of his studio taken that year (see fig. TK) shows that after several months in Paris, the artist—via his paintings—had regained a sense of equilibrium. None of the in-progress works spread across Yun's studio floor in this photo describe anything close to the precarious falling pillars he had painted the previous year—they are more densely painted and compositionally imposing.

In Paris, Yun produced numerous *Umbler-Blue* paintings that are almost entirely covered with dark brown and structured around two or three thick erect pillars. These works bear so many layers of diluted paint that certain areas appear nearly black, and the pillars bleed into one another so heavily that only faint slivers of brightness between them confirm the existence of what clearly began as distinct forms (see, for example, p. TK). In addition to creating a sense of space within the paintings, the lighter areas separating the dark rectangles emphasize the compositions' overall dramatic vertical thrust. Resurrected, Yun's 1981 pillars appear to gain strength, and even a sense of upward momentum, through their very proximity. The seepage of oil between the dark forms visualizes the tension before complete fusion. Whether consciously or not, Yun here evokes a sense of unity that tragically eluded his home country.

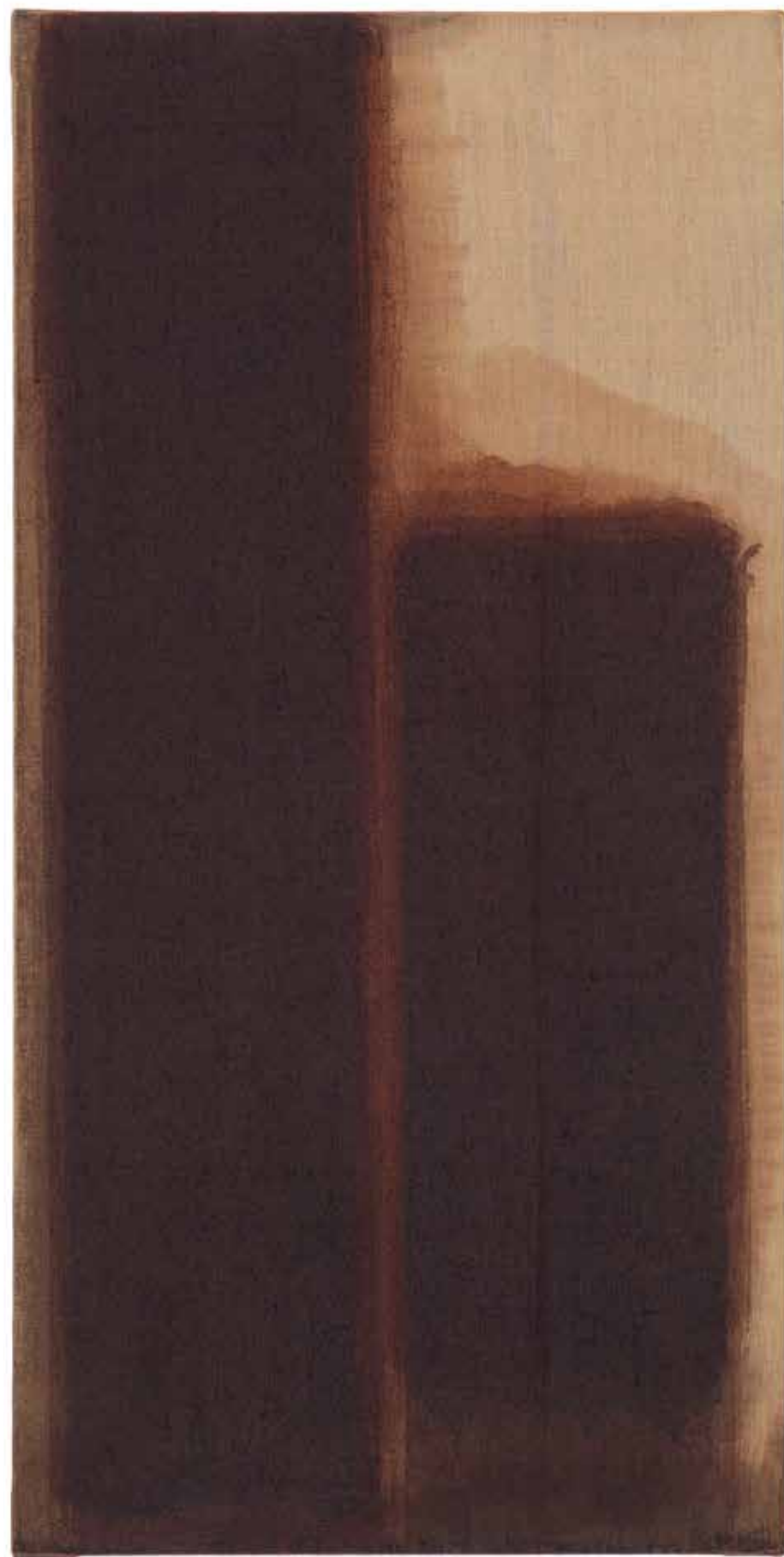
Yun's *Umbler-Blue* paintings from 1981 make a good case for the artist's inclusion under the Dansaekhwa umbrella and often elicit comparisons to work by American abstract artists such as Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt. Yun, however, did not appreciate such associations and described his paintings as "neither monochrome nor minimalist."¹⁷ On the contrary, he preferred to contextualize his work in terms of earth tones and traditional Korean calligraphy. "Although it looks black," he once said, "it is a mixture of the colors of dirt and water; it is a bitter color, like that of rancid ink."¹⁸ When it came to this type of nuanced

15. Kim Inhye, "Yun Hyong-keun: Eternally in the Realm of Old Age," in Inhye, *Yun Hyong-keun*, p. 21.

16. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

17. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

18. Yun Hyong-keun, quoted in Barry Schwabsky, "It's Time to Stop Ignoring South Korean Abstract Art," *The Nation*, December 17, 2015, accessed online.



This page
Yun Hyong-keun
Umber-Blue, 1981
Oil on linen
39 ³/₈ × 19 ⁵/₈ inches
100 × 50 cm

Opposite, top
Yun Hyong-keun
Burnt Umber, 1980
Oil on linen
89 ³/₄ × 71 ³/₄ inches
228 × 182.2 cm

Opposite, bottom
Yun Hyong-keun
Umber-Blue, 1981
Oil on linen
110 ¹/₂ × 70 ⁷/₈ inches
280.5 × 180 cm



understanding of blackness, Yun found validation and new associations in Paris. During a studio visit at the Villa Corot with a French art collector, he came to realize an essential cultural difference: “French people found even black to be beautiful, whereas Koreans tend to think of the color as ominous.”¹⁹ Yun’s observation describes how making and presenting paintings in this foreign context opened up new connections, perspectives, and connotations. In Korea “the black color of Yun’s painting is imbued with the pain, solitude, and emptiness of life,” his friend Choi Jongtae, a sculptor, wrote in 1996.²⁰

This perceived cultural difference was in the zeitgeist. In 1979, shortly before Yun’s move to Paris, the Centre Pompidou presented a major show, titled *L’expérience du noir*, of Pierre Soulages’s all-black paintings. Though the two artists never met, Yun and Soulages shared a common relationship to their paintings’ blackness as a state of being. Soulages (who notably also linked his somber palette to wartime trauma, in his case World War II and the Vichy occupation in France) coined the term *outrenoir* (beyond black) to describe the way light plays off, and ultimately breaks down, the heavily built-up surfaces of his paintings (see fig. TK). Although Yun’s unprimed surfaces, with layers of thinned paints and subtle tonal and textural shifts, are materially antithetical to Soulages’s textured paintings, the concept of being “beyond black” and feeling darker than dark certainly resonates.

In a wider European context, Yun’s affinity for raw materials connects him to the arte povera movement. As an art student in the 1940s, Yun made his own charcoal, to draw with on recycled paper, by sharpening willow tree branches that he put inside beer cans, which he found on a U.S. military base, and burned with rice hulls.²¹ Yun’s technique of thinning oil paint with solvents was another means of conserving expensive, hard-to-procure art materials. In addition to revealing Yun’s process of working on multiple paintings simultaneously, the photograph of his studio in Paris showing his unstretched paintings spread out across the floor brings to mind Alberto Burri’s *Sacchi* (see fig. TK), which the Italian artist stitched together from discarded burlap sacks. Although Yun’s final stretched paintings appear pristine when compared to Burri’s patchworks, there is a common sense of brutality and modesty that stems from their makers’ individual experiences of trauma and scarcities in war-torn Korea and Italy, respectively. Burri related his technique of creating the *Sacchi* to the services he performed as a medic during World War II, sewing burlap together the way he sutured injured soldiers. Though Yun does not physically stitch his paintings, Choi also identified a symbolic pierce in Yun’s work, writing, “His canvas seems somehow to emit the sound of pain, as if we have pricked it with a needle.”²² Intimacy with physical pain, combined with a desire to revive broken bodies and repair lacerated lands, connects Burri and Yun well beyond their use of “poor” materials.

19. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

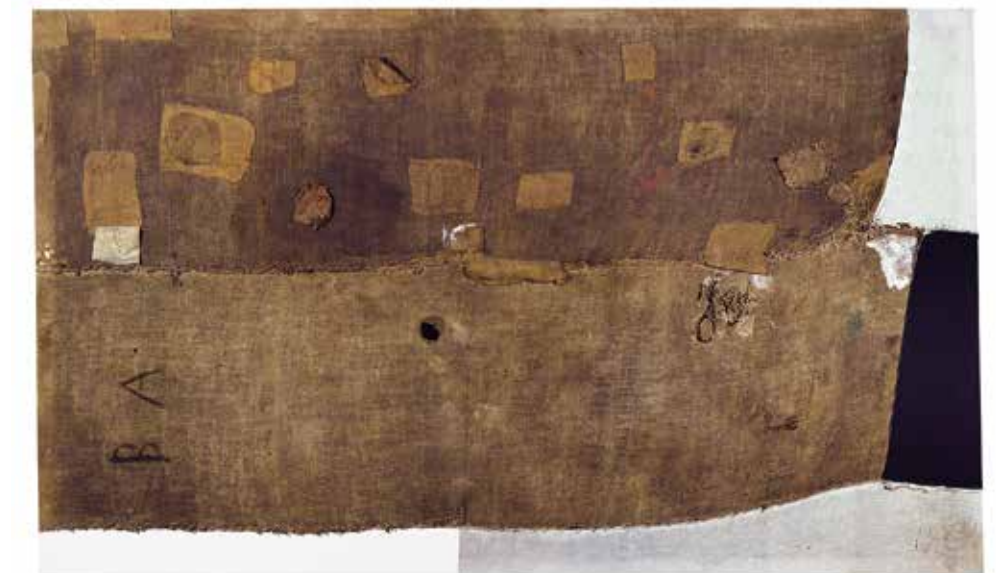
20. Hyunsook, “The Gate of Heaven and Earth,” p. 139.

21. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

22. Choi Jongtae, quoted in Hyunsook, “The Gate of Heaven and Earth,” p. 139.



Above
Pierre Soulages
Peinture 220 × 366 cm, 14 mai 1968, 1968
 Oil and acrylic paint on canvas
 87 × 144 ¼ inches
 221 × 366.5 cm



Below
Alberto Burri
Grande sacco (Large Sack), 1952
 Burlap, fabric, thread, and acrylic on canvas
 59 × 98 ¾ inches
 150 × 250 cm

In addition to being resourceful, Yun—like Burri and other *arte povera* artists, such as Giovanni Anselmo (whose installations featuring dirt and ultramarine paint echo Yun’s nature-inspired palette)—found aesthetic value in the raw physical traits of his materials. Even when he did have the means to prime his canvases, Yun chose to honor “the absolute simplicity and freshness of the natural fiber.”²³ His untreated supports encouraged fresh and spontaneous interactions between paint and the fibers of cotton, linen, hemp, and *hanji*. By simply integrating materials into one another, rather than adopting the typically hierarchical practice of painting onto a support, Yun created works where imagery is merely a byproduct of materials melding in a natural, holistic manner.

The importance of nature in Yun’s practice is most apparent in his works on *hanji*. The durability of this traditional calligraphy paper, especially its ability to absorb and release moisture, made it an ideal partner for Yun’s layers of thinned oils. In Paris, Yun worked on these smaller-format sheets in his apartment, leaving the studio free for his larger works on heavier supports.²⁴ Even more so than canvas, linen, or hemp, *hanji* reveals the conceptual and organic processes at play in Yun’s technique of applying many coats of diluted paints. Instead of turning dark brown and opaque as on other supports, here umber and blue retain more of their individual tones and translucence. Although the palette is technically limited to the same two paints Yun used on linen, for example, the works on paper appear much more colorful. They feature both subtle and dramatic shifts from slate blue and silver gray to salmon pink and dusty orange. Overlapping blue and umber brushstrokes blend to create a rainbow of earth tones. Whereas Yun described the dark color of his works on canvas as “rancid,” the interactions of the same paints on *hanji*, with halos of pigment surrounding the rectilinear forms, suggest ripeness and blossoming, even decomposition.

The compositions are abstract—still based largely around vertical rectangles—but have a softer, more organic quality than the paintings on canvas and hemp. In the works on *hanji* that Yun painted in 1981, the earthy color combinations, the toothy texture of the paper, and the haziness of the bleeding paint alternately evoke reeds, stumps, and riverbeds. Writing in his diary in 1977, Yun explained his attachment to nature in terms of colors, touch, and shape, all of which are expressed visually in these works on paper:

*When you see the color of nature as it is, that’s good. The color of wood that’s been worn by time, isn’t that the height of beauty? When the texture is like dirt, or the color of earthenware pottery or bricks that have been baked is the color of dirt, that’s when the color is pure. Evidence of deterioration like fragmenting rocks, that kind of roughness and simplicity is good.*²⁵

23. Yun Hyong-keun, “A Thought in the Studio” (1976), in *Yun Hyong-keun: Selected Works 1972–2007* (Seoul: PMK Gallery, 2015), p. 10.

24. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.

25. Yun, diary entry, n.d., 1977, in “Diary of Yun Hyong-keun.”

More so than on canvas, delightful imperfections such as stains, splatters, traces of brush hairs, and feathering that occur on the *hanji* collectively reveal the harmony Yun located between a rigorous methodical process and the unpredictable spontaneity of happenstance.

Even while he lived and worked in the center of Paris, nature was never far from Yun’s thoughts. Nor was Korea. Perpetually asking himself complex questions about what it meant to be Korean, Yun had noted, “Koreanness . . . In one sentence, however vaguely put, it’s the earth, the sky and the wind.” Indeed, the works on *hanji* feel especially intimate, emotional, and nostalgic. Yun and his family returned to Korea after less than two years in Paris because, among other reasons, Yun felt that his son, who was enrolled in a French school, was “becoming a foreigner.”²⁶ More than being rooted in politics, culture, or history, Yun and his art remained firmly connected to the landscape of his native country. The French have a word, *terroir*, for such an integral relationship to the land, and it seems fitting that, while working in Paris, Yun would articulate this concept so poignantly.

26. Yun, *Archives of Korean Art: Oral History Journal*.