

Pearl Lam Galleries

Hong Kong

Halaayt: Passages of Transcendence HOON KWAK solo exhibition

Exhibition Dates 27 September–8 November, 2019 Monday–Saturday, 10am–7pm

Venue Pearl Lam Galleries
6/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, Hong Kong
9/F, H Queen's, 80 Queen's Road Central, Central, Hong Kong

Hong Kong—Pearl Lam Galleries is delighted to present Korean artist Hoon Kwak's first Hong Kong solo exhibition *Halaayt: Passages of Transcendence* across its two galleries in Hong Kong. On display at H Queen's are a selection of paintings from the *Tea Bowls* series (1980) and *Incantation* series (1980), as well as two site-specific installations *Kalpa/Sound: What Marco Polo Left Behind* (1995), *Poem* (2012). A recent series of paintings titled *Halaayt* is featured at the Pedder Building.

Halaayt is an open term used by First Nations in the west coast of Canada to describe all things spiritual. In Tsimshian terminology, *halaayt* is a ceremony for connecting with ancestors through spiritual means in order to achieve a better understanding of the meaning of our existence in the universe.

Halaayt: Passages of Transcendence sheds light on the different trajectories of Kwak's energetic and provocative art practice that covers a period of over 40 years. Fascinated by the ways in which we relate with nature through earthly and physical means, he breaks down the cultural boundaries by celebrating the universal values that make us human in the first place. Like a contemporary archaeologist of Korean antiquity, Kwak incorporates visual symbols from his past into his paintings to transcend notions of temporality and represent perseverance and survival in an increasingly fragmented world. The artist's distinctive expressionist language deviates from the emphasis on flatness and monochromatic qualities of Dansaekhwa painting, a post war movement that originated in the 1970's.

Born in 1941, Kwak experienced the trauma that resulted from the Korean War (1950–53) as a teenager, which triggered his instinctual attraction towards topics of human fate, mortality and recollection. He was at the forefront of contemporary Korean art in the 1960's and worked as a member of the artist collective Painting 68 and the Korean Avant-Garde Association when Art Informel swept through Korea. Like many Asian artists at the time, Kwak and his wife emigrated to the United States in 1974 to experience the impact of abstract expressionism and pop art first-hand. Caught between being labelled as a Korean artist working in the United States and an American artist working in Korea, the artist soon felt the urgency to come to terms with his own identity.

Kwak's *Tea Bowls* series from the 1980's references his own biography. As a result of the destruction of his primary school during the Korean War, Kwak and his classmates were being forced to rebuild their own classrooms. While digging the ground, they found hundreds of buried antique ceramic flasks and tea bowls, or onggi, from the Silla dynasty. This event has proven to be a life-changing experience

for the artist. Kwak states, "For my work, rather than looking for abstruse motives, I always used objects that would come my way." Drawn by its ceremonial quality, the artist uses the tea bowl as a tool to practice asceticism. These still objects carry a sense of calmness and self-worth, yet their ephemeral representation appears to be ghostly as if it is going through its own permutation. In the *Incantation* series (1980), Kwak uses mixed media on paper to depict a truncated generic figure under restraint. Different degrees of pressure are imposed on an already frail body that is desperate for salvation. For the artist, both series are a means to come to terms with his traumatic experiences from the past.

Poem (2012) is a site-specific installation that uses *hanji*, a semi-transparent Korean traditional paper, to construct an introspective environment. Recalling his own childhood memory of living in makeshift communal camps and later becoming a guest of his grandfather's *hanok*, or Korean traditional house, Kwak was deeply touched by the pure quality of morning light penetrating the window. With the formal economy and linear beauty of *hanji* and its transparent yet unique physical characteristics, *Poem* is an open invitation to the audiences to confront their fates and to achieve stasis with another world.

Kalpa/Sound, What Marco Polo Left Behind (1995–present) was first exhibited at the inaugural Korean pavilion at the 1995 Venice Biennale with a performance by Buddhist nuns. *Kalpa* is a Sanskrit word that defines a long period of time in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. It also refers to the different cycles of life and death by means of extending or contracting time in the pursuit of samsara in Buddhism. The current edition of *Kalpa/Sound* is composed of a series of clay vessels that closely resemble traditional container used for fermenting food. Joining these disparate units together with the use of a bamboo structure and straw rope to form a large flute, or *piri*, this interactive instrument resonates a hollow tone as a result of nearby sounds or breeze. Its long shape suggests a traversal within the journey of life. In a post-modern era in which we embrace cultural diversity and freedom at face value, the actual clashes between different conflicting ideologies in fact demand a common vehicle for mutual reconciliation.

Halaayt is a series of recent paintings that Kwak has been developing over the last two years. *Halaayt* is a form of shamanistic healing experienced through a ceremonial being. Considered as a form of supernatural power by the indigenous community, the practice of halaayt is to achieve a higher level of epistemological understanding of where we stand in relation to a changing world. For Kwak, the intention is to bring positive changes to the world by making peace with nature itself. *Halaayt* describes different scenes of human figures pedalling a canoe and sailing adrift in open water or at times near a whale. Longing to connect to an uninhibited natural force, these mythical drifters are in fact fighting for survival. Such a desolate scene reminds us of the lone survivors who are on the brink of humanity in *The Raft of Medusa* by 19th century French romantic painter Théodore Géricault. In some of the paintings, rays of light painted in red descend on the canoe. *Halaayt* suggests a clash between human civilization and nature and questions the very meaning of our being in a changing world. Kwak's fictional voyages in fact reaffirm a belief that nature is the sole and constant source of our spiritual sustenance. For there are no universal passages for a collective transcendence, but only to become more faithful with one's spiritual journey. The artist recognizes this shared concern for all humans, as Kwak says, "My work is eventually a self-portrayal of myself."

About the Artist

Born in 1941 in Daegu, Korea, Hoon Kwak pursued his education in fine arts in the USA, receiving his MA and MFA from California State University, Long Beach in 1980 and 1982, respectively. His work was included in the inaugural Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Art in 1995. The artist currently lives and works in Los Angeles and Seoul.

Hoon Kwak's work can be found in numerous public and private collections, including the Arkansas Museum of Art, Arkansas, USA; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea; and the Philadelphia Art Museum, Philadelphia, USA. He has held solo exhibitions in galleries across the globe, including *Hoon Kwak: From Earth*, Phosphorus & Carbon Gallery, Daegu, Korea (2017); Gallery Shilla, Daegu, Korea (2016); C.J. Gallery, San Diego, USA (2009); National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China (2005); and the Hyundai Art Center Gallery, Ulsan, Korea (2002).

About Pearl Lam Galleries

Founded by Pearl Lam, Pearl Lam Galleries is a driving force within Asia's contemporary art scene. With over 20 years of experience exhibiting Asian and Western art and design, it is one of the leading and most established contemporary art galleries to be launched out of China.

Playing a vital role in stimulating international dialogue on Chinese and Asian contemporary art, the Galleries is dedicated to championing artists who re-evaluate and challenge perceptions of cultural practice from the region. The Galleries in Hong Kong and Shanghai collaborate with renowned curators, each presenting distinct programming from major solo exhibitions, special projects and installations to conceptually rigorous group shows. Based on the philosophy of Chinese literati where art forms have no hierarchy, Pearl Lam Galleries is dedicated to breaking down boundaries between different disciplines, with a unique gallery model committed to encouraging cross-cultural exchange.

Pearl Lam Galleries represents an increasingly influential roster of contemporary artists. Chinese artists include Su Xiaobai and Zhu Jinshi, who synthesize Chinese sensibilities with an international visual language, are presented internationally with work now included in major private and public collections worldwide. The Galleries has also introduced leading international artists, such as Leonardo Drew and Yinka Shonibare CBE, to markets in the region, providing opportunities for new audiences in Asia to encounter their work. Pearl Lam Galleries encourages international artists to create new work that engages specifically with the region, collaborating to produce thought-provoking, culturally relevant work.

Press Enquiries

Jenny Zhang / Pearl Lam Galleries jenny@pearllamgalleries.com / +852 2857 1328