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KIM YONG-IK, *To Ilmin Museum of Art 2016*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, acrylic on paper and pencil, dimensions variable. Courtesy Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul.

CLOSER . . . COME CLOSER . . . KIM YONG-IK

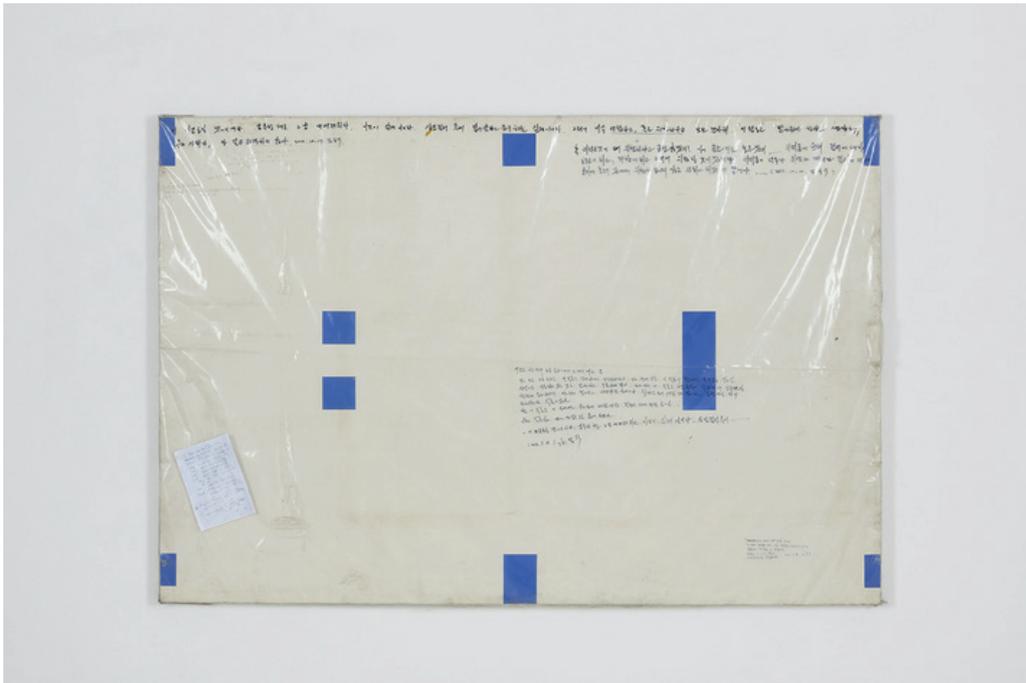
WEB REVIEW BY HG MASTERS
ILMIN MUSEUM OF ART

KOREA, SOUTH

Kim Yong-Ik's cultivated eccentricity is exceptional even by artistic standards. The title of his retrospective at the Ilmin Museum of Art (IMA) in Seoul, "*Closer . . . Come Closer . . .*" comes from a 1996 painting that hangs in the middle of the second-floor gallery, still wrapped in clear plastic on which the artist wrote the following instructions: "Do not peel off this plastic packaging. Leave it in its shabby state. This is the reality. This is the reality demanding to be included in the symbolic order. [...] I am not radical at all. As all avant-garde are . . ." He wrote that on October 17, 2012, and then a few days later scrawled a few more words on the plastic covering: "The dirty used to be a challenge against order, and a resistance, and thus the dangerous. But hygiene, manners and order have now cornered the dirty to an extreme that it no longer seems threatening in this society."

The story of Kim's career is one of a prodigy turned iconoclast. When Kim made his artistic debut with his series of hanging canvas pieces, "Plane Objects," in 1974, he was seen, as Ilmin Museum of Art chief curator Youngjune Hahm described him, as the "legitimate heir to Korean Modernism, the so-called Park Seo-Bo cartel (*sadan*)," referring to the artist's mentor. Park's recommendations carried the young Kim to the 1975 São Paulo Biennial and into prominent exhibitions such as the *Independents* and *École de Seoul* series, organized by Park starting in 1975. But looking at Kim's *Plane Objects* (1974–81), it is obvious that these works are also rejections of modernism. Wrinkled and soiled-looking, airbrushed at the corners or down the spine to highlight the ghost of the traditional stretcher-frames from which they've been removed, *Plane Objects* are tacked to the wall in a desultory manner. They are anti-aspirational—a bit punk, even, like the guy who deliberately shows up for a formal reception in ripped jeans and a dirty t-shirt. This precocious-renegade trajectory culminated in 1981 when Kim packed his *Plane Objects* works into cardboard boxes and displayed them that way in the gallery at the first edition of the Korean Young Artists Biennale—an anti-art gesture that Hahm links to the tumultuous period around the assassination of autocratic president

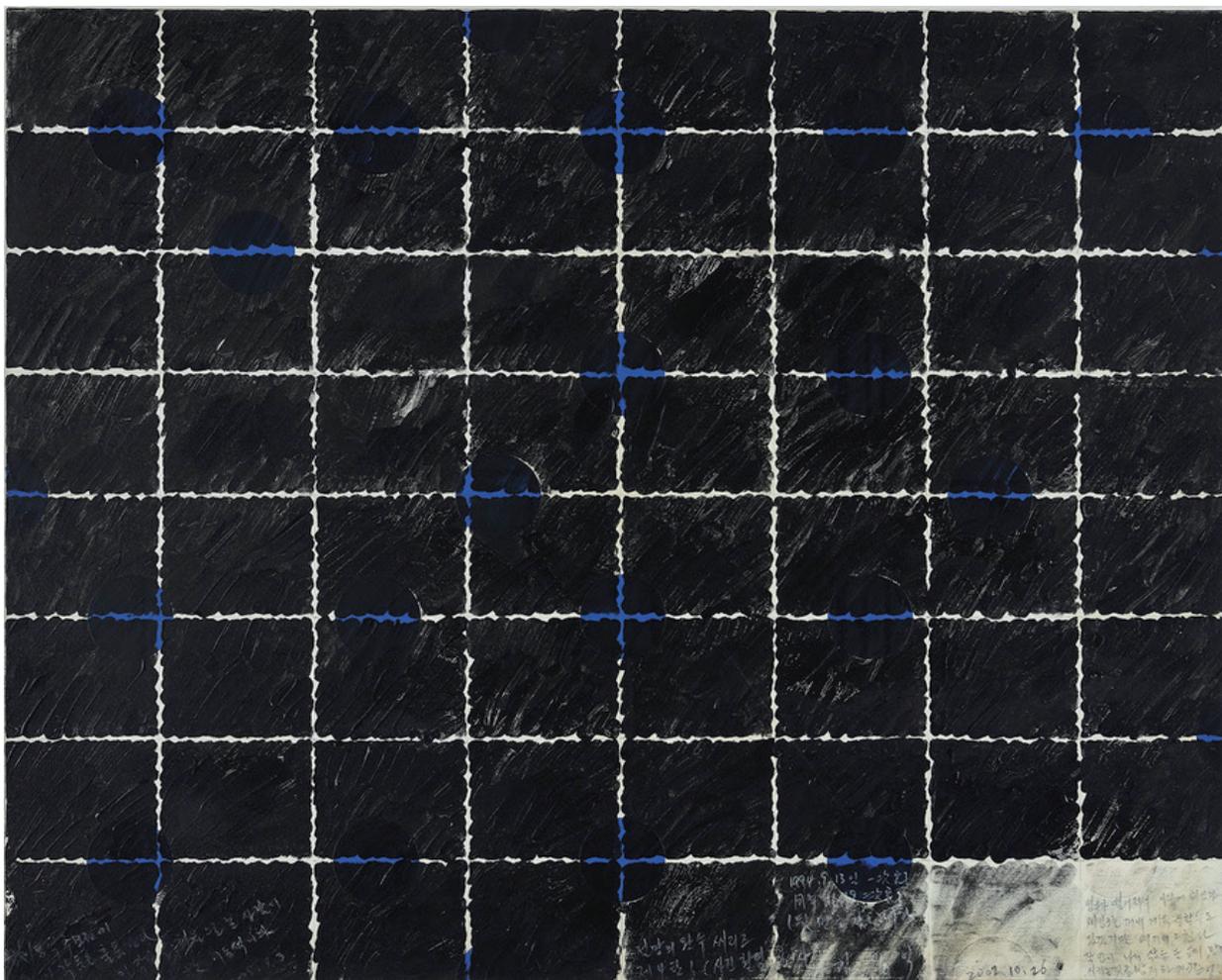
Park Chung-hee (in 1979) and the beginning of Chun Doo-Hwan's dictatorship. Around that same time, Park Seo-Bo rejected Kim, suspecting his former protégé of having developed sympathies for leftist social movements after the military massacre that was the result of the citizen uprising in Gwangju in May 1980.



KIM YONG-IK, *Closer . . . Come Closer . . .*, 1996–2013, mixed media on canvas, 150 × 218 cm. Courtesy Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul.

Despite his mentor's suspicions, Kim was no more interested in making realist protest art (later dubbed *Minjung misul* or "people's art") than he was in doggedly pursuing a pseudo-Korean form of modernism like the *Dansaekhwa* ("monochrome") artists. Kim was invited to join the *Minjung* art movement in 1985 after the police forcefully removed artworks and arrested five people at their exhibition "Power of the Younger Generation." Kim declined to join their ranks officially, because, as Hahm explained, "He believed that the institutionalized Modernism should embrace *Minjung* art, which was the Korean avant-garde, while also contending that *Minjung* art should not be consumed by its purpose and discard the aesthetic potential of avant-garde art." Instead, in his own works, Kim navigated between these two harshly oppositional factions by defying each of their sacred positions. At Ilmin, this is evident in Kim's cut-paper works from the early 1980s on the first floor, where he used cardboard, pencil and ink to make very angular, geometrical abstractions in what at first seem like constructivist-style pieces (some reminiscent of Nasreen Mohamedi drawings). Up close these modest works are revealed to be little *trompe l'oeil* gags about modernist forms, as Kim pushes the cut-out forms outside the edges of the rectangle, or flips them over to reveal expressionistic drawings on the backside of the paper, or confuses the eye by mixing cut-out shapes with pencil-drawn lines. A pair of untitled, red and white works from 1990 presage his works of the ensuing decade, with circular cut-outs, plant-juice stains and diaristic scribbles across the surface. Rather than oppositional, Kim's works remained self-critical over the years.

By 1987, Kim had formulated his own criteria of "anti-standards" for a good artwork. As little energy (labor), cost and skill as possible should be used in making it, and the final work should be easily reproducible, transportable and susceptible to damage. Of course, he also then violated many of his own rules in the 1989 sculpture *Two-pieces*, which is a deliberate mess of un-conventionalism (anti-anti-art): two standing red MDF panels, each 2.4-meters in height, are bolted to each other; their barely visible inner-facing sides are covered in messy, "abstract" paintings. There are randomly cut circles across the panels, a jagged side on one of them and an additional cut portion on the other that hinges outward like a foot. This flap contains a poster of the work's original showing in an exhibition at Inkong Gallery, in the spring of 1989. *Two-pieces* is a completely undisciplined postmodern object: neither social-realist nor purely modernist, nor even "good" by Kim's own standards.



KIM YONG-IK, *Despair Completed*, part of series, 1994–2002, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 100 cm. Courtesy Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul.

Ten years after stuffing his 1970s-era fabric works into cardboard boxes, Kim shifted directions again in 1990 with a series of polka-dot-covered works. These begin with heavily distressed-looking untitled canvases from 1990, on which there are splatters of white that appear as though they resulted from aggressive application of paint on another work nearby. Another canvas features rows of polka-dots, bordered by negative space painted in white, and then finally there are others where awkward portions of their surface (the left half, the middle, or the corners) are covered with the circles. Other polka-dot paintings (all untitled) on the opposite wall at Ilmin Museum, also from 1990, exhibit gleeful insouciance—where colorful brush marks surround unpainted circles; some rows of polka dots are painted in random colors, while the rest are in plain white, and rows of gold dots cover a black-and-white abstraction. If there was any temptation to begin finding these works too artistic, Kim disavowed that impulse in “*Despair Completed*” (1994–2002). Kim made these paintings from sketchy, unfinished rectangles of black paint, as well as with blank portions of the canvas, and other forms such as more polka dots. As the work’s title indicates, these are nihilistic paintings—evidence of the artist pulling out various “sacred” tropes from modernist abstraction and then undermining their supposed integrity, by leaving the canvases incomplete and scribbling notes on the surface. You can imagine that Park Seobo would have hated these works.

For all of his cynicism about art, Kim has also believed in communicating about social and political topics through avant-garde art. He taught at Kyungwon University from 1991 until 2013. In 1997, he was appointed head commissioner of the “Gwangju Biennale Normalization Art-wide Committee,” which sought to reconcile the Modernist and Minjung cliques, where in-fighting had led to the dismissal of the 3rd Gwangju Biennale director Choi Min and had sent the festival into chaos. He was involved in the founding of the alternative venue Art Space Pool (formerly called Alternative Space Pool), with Park Chan-kyong, Lee Yeong-wook and Hwang Se-jun in 1999, and in the early 2000s, Kim turned to public art projects that, instead of “beautifying” spaces, spoke against political



KIM YONG-IK, *Ksitigarbha 2*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, bubble wrap, wooden box, oil-based ink on acetate film, 150 × 116 × 14 cm. Courtesy Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul.

decisions. In response to a government bill that required one-percent of construction costs be spent on “art decoration,” he had 10,000 bricks temporarily laid in front of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which were filled with sand and grass seeds and used as a site for public performances.

But Kim didn't stop at burning his idols. Since the dawn of the current decade, he has also begun to kill off his own oeuvre. The third floor at Ilmin Museum features both archival materials (books, catalogues, slides, photographs and a timeline) and the artist's latest series of “Coffin” works. As a preamble to this accumulation of materials, in a nook at the gallery entrance, was a pile of folded plastic wrapping and cardboard boxes, along with two of his cut-paper works laying on top. Although Kim has been interested in the packaging of his works since 1981, in the 2010s his fascination turned from art-packaging to funereal rituals. In *Ksitigarbha 2* (2015), for instance, a painting is packaged in blue bubble-wrap and laid inside a wooden crate with a transparent window on which Kim has drawn the outline of the robed *Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva* and his sutra. Nearby, *To Ilmin Museum of Art 2016* (2016) is a hanging bamboo stick and a brown-paper package bound in rope, apparently containing a folded-up “Plane Object” canvas, adorned with older images of the work and invitations for the exhibitions where it was previously displayed. The artist's musings are everywhere in these works, most definitely in *Triptych* (2015), a crate hanging on the wall that contains two university-era paintings (a landscape and a self-portrait), other fragments of past works (including a polka-dot canvas) and a copper pot containing the ashes of incense. The crate has a transparent acetate side that features (from left to right) a drawing of the Fall of Adam and Eve, an unhappy looking Buddha, and a depiction of souls being tortured in Hell. On the surface Kim wrote his latest screed, which begins, “The modernist scheme that attempted to pursue freedom, equality and peace for all mankind has broken down,” and concludes, “The collection and re-arrangement of torn, broken, dirty and moldy artworks that are stained with suffering and corruption, death and abjectness, is bestowed to the artist who will usher in the forthcoming dystopian era [. . .] In my imagination, it is the art of a dystopian era that signals acquired creation where yang is transformed into yim [sic] and art it is political art in the form of low-entropic eco-anarchism.”



KIM YONG-IK, *Triptych*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, oil on canvas, cloth, cotton, wood, ink on paper, coin, incense, burner and oil-based ink on acetate film, 157 × 226 × 16 cm. Courtesy Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul.

The death of Kim's own work was in fact prefigured from the very year of its birth. The catalogue for “Closer . . . Come Closer . . .” includes a newspaper clipping that reports that on February 22, 1975, a student had apparently died during a graduation ceremony at Hongik University, transforming the scene into an impromptu funeral. The whole event was later revealed to be a happening by the fierce women's experimental filmmaking club, Khai Du. The person who “died” that celebratory day and was carried out of graduation in a wooden coffin was Kim Yong-ik. The cycle of life and death (or killing and resurrection), which the Ilmin Museum's exhibition described, revealed how Kim productively evaded Korea's polarization while still advocating for avant-garde experimentation and social progressiveness. “Closer . . . Come Closer . . .” made clear how the iconoclastic figure has become an inspiration to several younger generations now: admired for his ability to be political without being partisan, and always brutally honest with himself and his audience.

Kim Yong-Ik's “Closer . . . Come Closer . . .” is on view at the Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul, until November 6, 2016.