



# INTO THE WILDERNESS

**KIM CHONG-HAK** INTERVIEW (WITH HELEN KIM INTERPRETING)

RAJESH PUNJ



^ Kim Chong-Hak

< Kim Chong-Hak, *Untitled*, 2005  
Acrylic on canvas, 410 x 300 cm,  
Courtesy the artist and Perrotin

There is an endearing simplicity to Korean painter Kim Chong-Hak, that for his age has him retreat into himself when explaining his work. Yet that dissolving of oneself into the background for him has nothing at all to do with fear – as his stoicism and mischievous spirit has served him well during periods of political unrest, and more immediate moments of unease among his contemporaries. For the influx of armies, and the roll of new ideas to Korea during the war and immediately after with the break-up of the country into two, leading to the intrusion and influence of Japan and America, Chong-Hak appeared to call on his inward inventiveness, to substitute the noise and the nuisance of vitriol and violence, for an alternative vision of the world; that involved nature. His is a fascination and fanaticism for flora, that literally spills out and all over his choice cut of canvas. Painting the blood and body of nature. Captured and carried by the artist with the same level of intensity that one's feels of (Vincent) Van Gogh. And as with Van Gogh, Kim's colours illuminate from his paintings as a cannon of his physical and emotional endeavour. Van Gogh went mad for his efforts, while Kim Chong-Hak appears entirely at ease with the natural world. Deciding to walk through its landscapes and gardens as the embodiment of everything he believes in.

And like French Impressionist Claude Monet with his retreating to Giverny, to his gardens in the north of France, Kim Chong-Hak concentrates entirely on the natural world. Seeking sanctuary in the idleness and innocence of everything that spills from the earth, that for him is representative of all of life. What it is to be alive



and present, is for Kim Chong-Hak best explained by the wealth of our wildernesses. Capturing that and still entirely committed to it as a measured way of living, his approach is entirely alien to the modern experience. As technology has superseded our need to feel or follow the elements that hang in the air, and hold themselves close to the ground. Concrete and clean have become critical to the urbanisation of our environments. Tellingly Kim Chong-Hak explains the flower as entirely masculine for its properties. Thus for him what we associate as more ephemeral, is not necessarily beautiful as such, but vital. Which alters entirely our experience of his work. Instead of looking at his wildflowers as idle examinations of earthly objects, Chong-Hak's works are more specifically about systems and structures that come to explain our very existence. For all of that it becomes incredibly interesting to understand beauty, as he might appreciate it, or if such a sensation necessarily exists at all. Monet said that he 'followed nature without really being able to grasp her', owing his becoming a painter 'to flowers'. Which applies entirely to how we might see Chong-Hak's painterly approach.

For him, the flower is not an object of desire, but an organ of the natural world, with his landscapes appearing as the anatomy of life on earth. Monet too saw everything in abstract terms, in spite of being surrounded by the figuration of flora and fauna, explaining everything as colours. Saying, "try to forget what objects you have before you - a tree, a house, a

*The oldest object is possibly over two hundred years old, possibly older, but his furniture collection is much harder to date. The pieces have previously been attributed to the late Joseon dynasty, to the same time as his embroidery collection, dating back to the 1900's, because they have gone through so many wars.*

^ Kim Chong-Hak, *Untitled*, 2019  
Acrylic on canvas  
260 x 800 cm, Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

field. Merely think 'here is a little blue square, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow', and paint it as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape, until it gives you your own impression of the scene before you." Colour was to become so central to Chong-Hak's work he saw its use as a way of explaining everything. Yet unlike Monet painting 'au plein-air', Chong-Hak exercises his eyes over the earth whilst walking, to then return to his studio to paint the sensation of what he sees, in all its emotional and sensual pleasures - as though having inhaled the atmosphere whilst outside, to return to his studio to breathe everything out onto canvas - bringing the outside in.

Interesting as well as citing Monet, Van Gogh, (Paul) Klee and (Wassily) Kandinsky as influences, Chong-Hak revels in the attitude of American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, who for his unorthodox approach, and chaotic style, was to shape the way Chong-Hak wanted to apply paint to canvas. His canvas stretched out over the floor like Pollock, he went further, by using his own hands as brushes. Calling it a more 'vital' way to paint. Chong-Hak saw in Pollock a man liberated of the constraints of confronting the world head-on, to choose to dominate it from above. For his choice of painterly position, Pollock was able to easily move between freedom and areas of fixed control, that appealed to Chong-Hak enormously. For him to be able to paint with his hands, flower heads and blossom, whilst using thin brushes to render the curve of the stems,

and the attractive tangle of the long grass, was a way of drawing on both his savage and more sensitive sides.

Historically with Japan's preoccupation of Korea until 1945, and the immediate break-up of the country in 1953, Korea as Chong-Hak experienced it, would go from being under the control of Japan to the softer authority of America, as it partitioned into North and South Korea. Conditioned by a culture of conflict, Chong-Hak carried a greater resistant and resilience against the turmoil of the tormented world. As well in his forty's, he was painting under the influence of the Japanese Gutai movement known in Korea as Dansaekhwa. That in practical terms was devoted to the introduction of an entirely minimal message. the choice of colours were fewer, and the style entirely empty. It was as if the world had disappeared from view, and for a time Chong-Hak enjoyed its simplicity, as did his contemporaries. But at a certain moment, he became disillusioned with its calculated efficiency. Declaring it a movement made up of other people's ideas. Which heralded his own individualism to that of Van Gogh, who in his own words, explained ideas and ambition as more important than manifestos, or any kind of machine aesthetic. Van Gogh having said, "do not quench your inspiration and your imagination; do not become the slave of your model."

Which would literally take Chong-Hak back out into the wilderness, in search of his own interests. And it was at this moment with his rejection of Dansaekhwa, made famous by the likes of Lee Ufan and Park Seo-bo, that Chong-Hak was calling for greater earthly expression. To paint by means of figuration and abstraction again after 1976, that allowed him to investigate his own soul, and to see the world again as his own.

#### Interview

**Rajesh Punj:** *Having discussed antiques already, can we begin the interview by exploring your collection, and of your talking more about it?*

**Helen Kim:** My father collects, and has collected antiques for many years, because he references elements from them in his paintings. Not immediate associations like shape or size, but more likely proportions, the balance of the object, and its colours.

**RP:** *And can I ask what exactly are the objects that he collects? Because when one thinks of antiques it is as much furniture, or art-deco lighting fittings, as a floor carpet.*

**HK:** He is a very well known collector, and has a dedicated room to his objects at The National Museum in Korea; having donated over three hundred pieces in nineteen ninety-eight. And his speciality is furniture that was originally used by our country's



scholars and literati. These were a very specific group of people who designed this furniture entirely for their own use. Scholars from across the creative fields, whilst advancing their interests, would make objects for themselves. And my father's original passion was to collect those unique pieces. Whilst being together these unique furnishings, he started collecting folk art and craft objects. We call it craft, but he always thought it had a greater value, historically and culturally. His focus was on textiles, and of the embroideries that were produced by the aristocratic classes. For everything he had a reason, explaining that furniture introduced him to proportion and balance, and with embroidery, the women that he encountered never adhered to any kind of rules. More specifically they were from the Joseon (Choson) dynasty, so they were never allowed to leave the home; confided entirely to their living quarters. But he saw that among themselves it was incredible how creative they were, in spite of their circumstances. Evident by the arrangement of their colours, and in whatever they intended to describe, as the content of their work. Honestly for my father their courage and creative liberty proved incredibly rewarding, and another element of his interest in methods and emotions, necessary to his own work.

*In context my father was the first of his generation to see furniture of that period as objects of value in themselves. So he was the one who was identifying these pieces, as historically and culturally valuable. As well as the crafts, because society hadn't yet realised, or come to recognise, the significance of craft-based objects.*

^ Kim Chong-Hak, *Untitled*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas,  
162.2 x 130.3 cm, Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

^ View of "Vitality" at Perrotin Paris.  
Photo: Claire Dorn, Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

**RP:** *When does his collection date back to?*

**HK:** They date back to the 1970's, and then of course it became more substantial when my father started making money from his paintings, allowing him to collect more intensely. If I was to hazard a guess ninety-nine percent of his earnings has gone into antique collecting.

**RP:** *And the objects themselves, how old are they in terms of their historical significance?*

**HK:** The oldest object is possibly over two hundred years old, possibly older, but his furniture collection is much harder to date. The pieces have previously been attributed to the late Joseon dynasty, to the same time as his embroidery collection, dating back to the 1900's, because they have gone through so many wars. And they likely wouldn't have survived being of decades and centuries previous to that. Therefore it is likely the furniture is more than a hundred years old.

**RP:** *It becomes very interesting to hear you explain how the collection has since been housed by The National Museum, in Korea. Which makes one wonder how these individual objects have come to be labelled for an audience. As historical pieces, from particular moments of the country's recent past, or as obscure objects, which a critic might suggest have only seen the light of day because they have been 'chosen' by him. Which further emphasises your father's significance and celebrity, as legitimised these objects, and of the history that bore them. Plucked from obscurity, they have since all become museum pieces.*

**HK:** I think you are likely aware of 'moon jar' pottery that resonates from the Joseon dynasty as well. It appears a lot of western collectors were aware of this specific style of pottery, and at the same time artists were producing a particular kind of painting. And in context my father was the first of his generation to see furniture of that period as objects of value in themselves. So he was the one who was identifying these pieces, as historically and culturally valuable. As well as the crafts, because society hadn't yet realised, or come to recognise, the significance of craft-based objects. But I recall when we curated an exhibition of works at Seoul City Museum, connecting my father's collection to his work, particularly his paintings. And it is true to say that he was responsible for identified all of those objects as commonplace cultural icons.

**RP:** *They clearly were deserving of their relocation to a museum setting then.*

**HK:** And in that regard it is a similar situation to his paintings, whereby he picks and paints a whole selection of wildflowers that are entirely anonymous, and that are only now becoming interesting to a whole audience of naturalists. For example, he painting pumpkin flowers, that have an association in Korea to women who are not very attractive. A woman of that kind is compared to the pumpkin flower because it appears very plain and sprouts almost everywhere. But then for my father it is a very important flower, because it really shows off a special vitality- climbing up, in spite of its circumstances, towards the light, and living off of the sun and sky. So again my father is known to have surfaced things that have been





*My father is known to have surfaced things that have been entirely insignificant for the entire time, until he claims and records it as his own; because he alone really magnified the emotional value of everything around him.*

^ Kim Chong-Hak, *Untitled*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas, 91 x 72 cm,  
Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

entirely insignificant for the entire time, until he claims and records it as his own; because he alone really magnified the emotional value of everything around him.

**RP:** *Where does that come from, this appetite to look at everything as though about to eat it?*

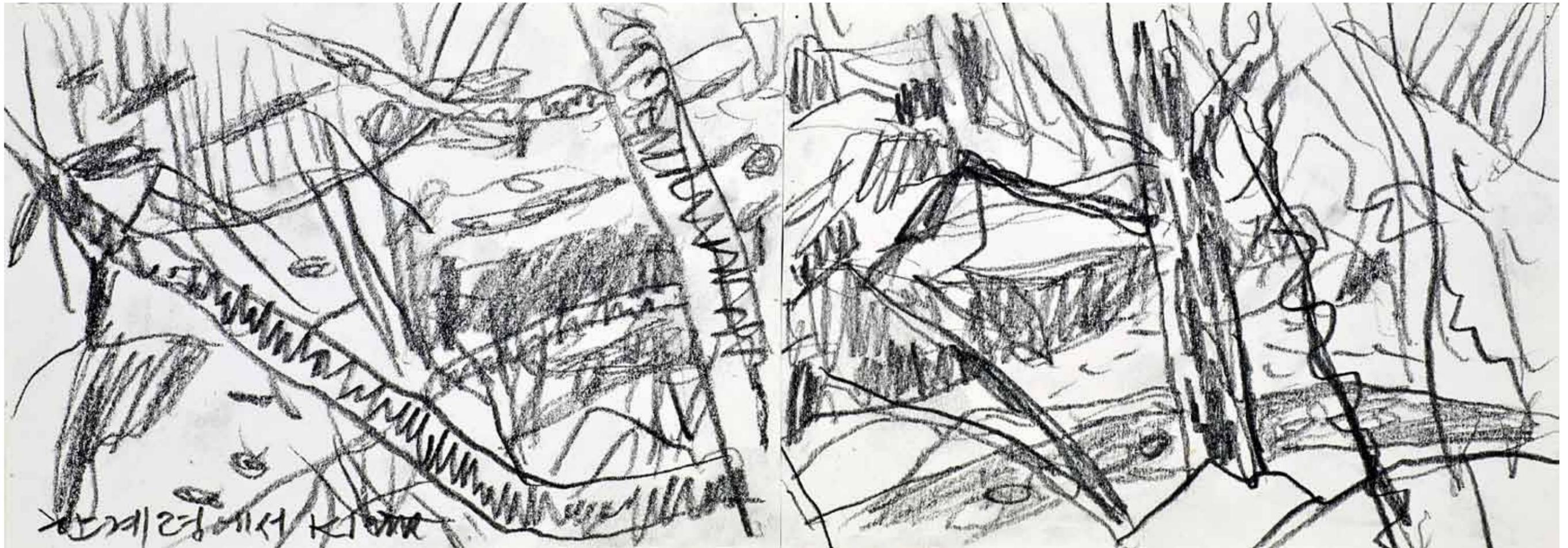
**HK:** He says that in Sokcho, either west or east, probably there is are no only artist's painting the kinds of flowers that he paints. Because these are not highly treasured fauna, and as I have explained, for him to choose something that is otherwise ignored, has its own significance. Which is also why at the end of his gallery video at Galerie Perrotin, Paris, he likes to emphasise that he chose the road 'less travelled, less taken'.

**RP:** *Which makes me think of the American poet and essayist Walt Whitman.*

**HK:** And I think it is in his character because he was so unusual, among his contemporaries, and of where he belonged in Korea. It was difficult for me growing up, having him as a father, because he thinks so differently from everybody else. He never listens to anyone, and for my children, his grandchildren, they have that same DNA. Leading to his and their influencing one another. As brother and sister, they are always telling me because of your father we weren't tall. And perhaps he was raised that way too, and the difference was more nurtured. He explained that his grandfather encouraged that difference from an early age, rather than other Asian grandparents, 'to do this, and to adhere to that'. He was lucky enough to have had his grandfather telling him, because he was a poet, that everything is okay; and to do and think differently. And I think because of that freedom Kim always chose to do something that was entirely his own, and not as others would have wished.

**RP:** *And I have to ask how was that regarding in Korea at the time, for a young man to have chosen to do something else entirely? And that goes even further with his approach to painting being remarkable unique, reminding me of the modern impressionist period, with artists like Claude Monet, literally confining himself to his house and garden in Giverny, and that of his contemporary Paul Cezanne, who recorded some of his greatest paintings whilst engaging with the estranged landscape of Aix-en-Provence; (Vincent) van Gogh and (Pierre-Auguste) Renoir doing much the same. Thus what makes a man choose to be alone?*

**HK:** In the 1970's Kim belonged to a very strong Korean Gutai movement known as Dansaekhwa. Gutai essentially started in Japan, with a lot of artists going there to study, or their teachers having gone there to understand and appreciate the movement. With it eventually came to Korea, influencing and affecting many young artists of the time. Thus



Japan's answer to minimalism, as Korea saw it was to redefine it as Dansaekhwa. During which time Kim was regarded as a very significant abstract artist. Yet for him this all-consuming interest and ambition for Dansaekhwa wasn't entirely what he wanted. But the movement had become so strong, so advanced among his contemporaries, that his decision to reject it in favour of his own more expressionistic interests, was almost impossible. Proving incredibly difficult for him to get out. He recalls it really felt like everybody was doing the same thing, and it was at the time really interesting to see Lee Ufan and Park Seobo's work for their minimalist approach. I would argue it was always more of a practice, and that they never really adopted it as a formal style. Kim stayed with them for a short time, before deciding in the summer of 1976 to leave the movement entirely. Which did create a great deal of friction among his colleagues and contemporaries alike, because as I said, at the time he was regarded as one of the father figures of abstraction in Korea. With his peers and professional colleagues all taken aback by his utter rejection of everything they themselves believed in. Some feeling incredibly betrayed by Kim's behaviour, like Park Seobo, who would later tell me that Kim Chong-Hak was one of his favoured artists, and a major influence on his work; and that they literally stopped

communicating for a time, because in Korea there is such a strong hierarchy among artists and scholars. It was a moment for my father that really shaped his attribute of not caring about the consequences.

**RP:** Which is quite remarkable when considering a movement tends, by its numbers, to legitimise what you do, making your ideas stronger. Clearly for your father being involved or even confined to a group was more of a burden, to someone who sought his own path, as an elixir for his own inventiveness. That said what was it about being part of that movement that was so problematic?

**HK:** I think they were not really listening to their needs. In Asia, especially in East Asia you really follow what everyone else does, and you are educated

^ Kim Chong-Hak, *Untitled*,  
Pencil on paper, 13.5 x 37.5 cm,  
Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

in such a way to conform to a social norm. And the strongest example of that kind of regularity is in Japan because I saw how they walk. They walk exactly the same distance apart from one another - and that you are educated of from when you are very young. So with my father, with Japanese colonisation before the war, that he had to speak Japanese, and that all of his schooling was all in Japanese. So you have to understand that for my father's generation the order of things, the influence of an extremely organised society, was and still is very dominant. Thus when somebody leads it is very hard not to follow. To speak up and go against it, you almost are seen as creating a coup d'état. Which was what my father was doing.

**RP:** I start to think that there is a kind of politics to how he chooses to detach himself from the rest of society. And again I think of (Claude) Monet retreating to his house in Giverny during both world wars. Likened to an act of independence.

**HK:** It is important to acknowledge that it was not that he rejected a style, but at the time that he was the leader of this new approach to painting that had everyone believe in his philosophy. Which meant, as we have already spoken about, that it proved almost impossible for him to get out, because he was the first of his kind stating that movement, or really

endorsing Gutai in Korea, as a legitimate way to paint. But quite quickly he began to realise that this kind of minimalism, of the abandonment of everything, was clearly not it for him. And if you understand historically how Western art settled in Asian, it can be attributed to the transition to an American system, after the defeat of Japan. When they really came in and spread their influence on the civilisation and culture. So suddenly being introduced to that flashy capitalist way of living, Korean artists were very attracted to this new painterly approach coming out of Japan, and America after that, without any kind of filtration.

**RP:** Like bees to pollen.

**HK:** And Kim belonged to all of that immediately after the Second World War. Leading to a greater American military presence, as we said, which meant that Kim's generation has a new influence upon their lives; and in the 1970's they, the Koreans, started to question whether this was their way. So even with the Korean Gutai movement, of adopting a Japanese approach to painting, artists were themselves quickly diverting towards a different way of working.

**RP:** So if your father was, for a moment, flirting with the Gutai movement, and influenced by America,



**how was he painting at the time? Who was he looking to for influence?**

**HK:** A lot of artists at the time were painting like Jackson Pollack, (Willem) De Kooning, (Wassily) Kandinsky, and (Paul) Chagall, Paul Klee and Yves Klein.

**RP:** *It is strange how politics and conflict introduced a whole new way of working, a new kind of liberty, if only temporary to artists in Korea.*

**HK:** In the beginning everybody was studying American action painting, and also in Europe you had a movement called Arte Informale, which (Pierre) Soulages was part of. And for my father it was really about studying them, and copying them for their style. But when the Dansaekhwa movement started, as much as he wholeheartedly adopted it, he felt it was too much of a western invention - deciding 'we have to find our own way'. And what they rejected first was the choice of material, that of oils and acrylic, instead reclaiming handmade paper and inks, as a way of establishing their own identity on what they were doing. So they were consciously wanting a greater relationship to the materials they were choosing, in order to be closer to their country. And when Dansaekhwa altered to find its own voice, disbanding the influences of Japan and America, he agreed to the new movement, but never to the style. Which is why he got out, in order to find his own way of working.

**RP:** *So clearly Pollack at a certain moment was a*

*major influence, for the way he worked on and over the canvas. With that in mind, was it all about the approach to the painting, to have it out on the floor, and stand over it?*

**HK:** I think the approach was really radical for him, and for many of his contemporaries at the time. Because they had come out of art school where there was a very formal structure to using paints and of making works. So when they were initially exposed to Pollock's way of working, they were probably as overwhelmed, as artists and art critics alike in the west. It becomes more of a performing art at some point.

**RP:** *The obvious connection to Pollock is the canvas stretched out over the studio floor, with Kim seated and hunched over the painting, throwing everything down at it, as Pollock did years before.*

^ Kim Chong-Hak, *River*, 1987  
195 x 313 cm,  
Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

> View of "Vitality" at Perrotin Paris.  
Photo: Claire Dorn,  
Courtesy the artist & Perrotin

**HK:** Right, right. Pollock was a huge influence for my father. Even when he went into the wilderness, all of nature looked a great deal like a Jackson Pollock painting - life imitating art. There is a very early painting by Kim Chong-Hak, similar to Pollock's. A blue coloured canvas that I believe is in Australia now. I think what he saw and picked up on from Pollock's approach was not of how to execute a painting, or of how they are spontaneously done, but that there was a real rhythm to how he applied and positioned his paints to the canvas. Which really appealed to my father. That Pollock appears entirely spontaneous but was in fact very controlled with his approach. And in that respect Kim's way of working is very similar to Pollock's. I don't know entirely if he is imitating him, but he confessed to understanding his way of working, as relevant to his own.

**RP:** *But obviously unlike Pollock, Kim Chong-Hak retains presentation and figuration in his work, by way of his choosing to paint flowers, instead of going entirely abstraction. Why was that?*

**HK:** It is true that his own approach is very abstract, but he also admits he is so mesmerised by nature itself. The way flora and fauna survive and construct themselves fascinates him. And all of that curiosity leads him to want to bring figuration out onto his canvas. With his larger paintings, his layered approach is very abstract, because he applies a greater freedom to the overall appearance of the work.

**RP:** *This is something that I wonder, of how the*

*audience look at the work, seeing it as flora and figuration, but as the artist, clearly there is an absolute abstraction to how the paint falls over the canvas. In the way that bodily fluids expel themselves. Thus what interests me is of how Kim looks at his canvas, when painting a leaf or the natural curve of a wildflower; that it is shapes and colours.*

**HK:** Which is why he always says, people suggest I am a figurative artist, but in fact I believe I am an abstract painter. You do see figures but they are not entirely representational. Because a whole series of experiences and ideas inspire him, that literally come out from within him and cover the canvas. So for him he finds that the process is very abstract, working in a way similar to an abstract painter. Outwardly because you see figuration by way of his flowers, he is labelled as a figurative artist. And he never appreciated everyone calling him the 'flower artist', because he says that the flower is actually very male, that has a very masculine energy that drives it.

**RP:** *Which is interesting when considering his admiration for it as well, in terms of its survival instinct.*

**HK:** Yet the flower we usually identify as more female. But Kim is convinced that it is in nature very much a masculine element, with a strong male energy. So he doesn't necessarily see the flower as beautiful, but more as vital, integral even to reality.

**RP:** *And he persists with retaining that particular motif*



again and again, and crucially interesting that the flower for him is less beautiful and more vital. Which is an incredible way of looking at nature and of wildlife, as a series of energies encapsulated as different genders. Which leads to my interest, when we discussed Pollock just now, of understanding more of the technique of Kim using his hands to apply the paint to the canvas.

HK: He does use both, brushes and hands, but obviously when he decide to use his hands it is much more immediate. For him he can control the paints better, as a more constructive rather than painterly approaching. But with that, the larger areas of colours that come from his hands' contrast with the more formal lines, that come with his use of brushes. Which begins to explain the balance of his paintings. Whereby the areas of bold abstraction is countered or controlled by his introduction of thin lines, representing the stems of his flowers. And the immediacy of his using his hands to paint is clearly not entirely sensitive to the subject, but it does allow him to be much more vital and visceral in relation to what he sees. For him there is this blend of brutal and beautiful about nature that compels him to want to paint, by both abstract and figurative means. And also because he paints on such a great scale now, it helps that he uses his hands to cover the canvas quicker.

RP: Which is interesting, because with his hands he is able to literally let go, and that the details of each of his individual flowers brings him back. Which takes us back to the abstraction and figuration of Pollock's work.

HK: Which refers to a duality in his work. Although he doesn't wish to declare it he is actually incredibly sensitive. He doesn't verbally express himself as much as you or I, but his eyes are incredibly animated all the time, and it becomes quite amazing what he is able to notice by looking. Upon meeting people very briefly he is able to describe the smallest of details that reflect their appearance and reflects something of their personality. He personality mirrors that, in that he can be so careless, yet he is incredibly careful with certain things he does. Which is as well reflected in his work. The aspect of abstraction, which reflects his caring less, or allowing for more to happen, and then his interest in detail or figuration, that draws attention to his controlling or taking care of an arrangement of forms. Which is very reflective of his him, and of his being super sensitive to what he sees, to sound, whilst other things. The routine of reality he is more careless with. For him what he sees, what he hears, and touches is incredibly important. He can be very insensitive to other people, yet he is incredibly caring to flowers, to animals and insects.

RP: And has his unique way of working and of being, influenced or interested a new generation of Koreans, who might otherwise be preoccupied (for want of a better word) with modern life.

HK: He is convinced he is not directly influencing anyone, but before 1980 there were no other artists using colour in Korea. It was as if they were afraid of it, with everything in monochrome. And with his



unashamed use of colour, now Korean art is awash with colours. No one acknowledges his contribution to the arts in that sense, of his introducing colour.

^ Kim Chong-Hak, *Untitled*, 2018  
Acrylic on canvas, 65.1 x 53 cm,  
Courtesy the artist & Perrotin