

The New York Times

October 12, 2018
By Jason Farago

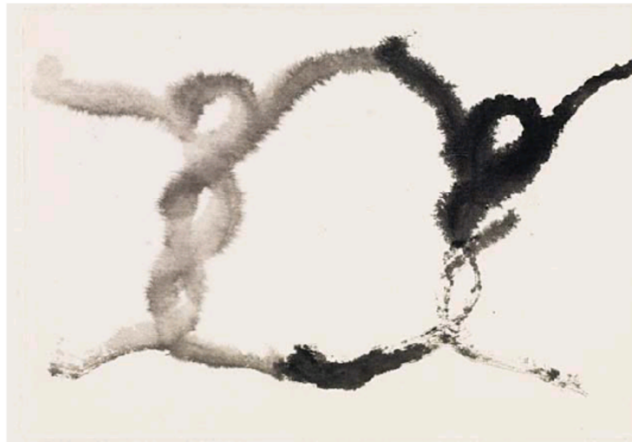
Galleries

SUH SE OK

*Through Oct. 27. Lehmann Maupin,
536 West 22 Street, Manhattan;
212-255-2923, lehmannmaupin.com.*

In the past five years, New York's blue-chip galleries have produced a surge of exhibitions of abstract, monochromatic oil painting from South Korea's dansaekhwa school, by artists like Park Seo-bo, Ha Chong-hyun, Yun Hyong-keun, Chung Chang-sup and Chung Sang-hwa. Grateful though I've been to see so much Korean painting here, the dansaekhwa vogue has left me suspicious — as it's the Asian style that most resembles Western minimal abstraction, and therefore can demand the highest prices.

So the first New York show for the ink painter Suh Se Ok, at Lehmann Maupin, is doubly significant: not only as a belated Western discovery of a Korean trailblazer, but also as an essen-



SUH SE OK, VIA LEHMANN MAUPIN

tial step toward a more plural view of Korean abstraction. (The gallery has a branch in Seoul and represents Mr. Suh's son, the Korean-American installation artist Do Ho Suh.)

Suh Se Ok, 89, uses a traditional ink brush to paint heavily blotted calligraphic abstractions, some composed of just a few strokes, on knobby mulberry paper. (Postwar Korean art schools, following the Japanese tradition, strictly divided oil painting from ink painting, which Mr. Suh studied.) Most of the 16 paintings here come from his "People" series, dating from 1978 to the early 2000s, and each suggests, but never properly represents, human forms through a few bravura strokes: two criss-crossed curves topped by a sagging ellipse, or a sequence of ribbons darting up and looping back down. His people are not people at all but signs — and this calligraphic approach places these abstract ink paintings within a centuries-long tradition of Asian literati painting, in which verisimilitude has less importance than personal expression and philosophical insight.

We think we know what "con-

temporary art" means — but ink paintings like Mr. Suh's, too rarely seen in Western museums and galleries, are as contemporary and as fundamental to Asian art history as oil paintings by the recent stars of *dansaekhwa*.

There is so much out there still for Americans to discover. Get on a plane, dealer friends! At least get on Google!

JASON FARAGO
