

**Layers of Essence,  
The Cognitive Structure of Korean Aesthetics**

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**Prologue : Layer as a Structure of Thought**

Korean aesthetics has long been described through the language of emptiness, restraint, and reduction. Yet beneath this apparent minimalism lies not absence, but accumulation. What seems empty is often shaped by repeated choices, hesitation, deferral, and endurance. Essence, in this context, does not reveal itself at once; it emerges gradually, through time. The notion of layer in Korean aesthetics is therefore not decorative, but cognitive—a structure through which existence comes into being.

The paintings of Seungtaik Jang translate this structure of thought into the language of contemporary abstraction. In his work, layers are not visual effects but traces left by time and action pressing against one another. Color is applied, washed away, and returns again. This repetition does not converge toward a final conclusion; each gesture leaves the next open. The surface does not settle into a completed image, but remains a state in which time resides.

Jang's painting does not ask what is depicted; it asks how existence is formed. The center appears condensed yet silent, while the periphery sustains tension through subtle residues. Essence does not occupy the foreground. It becomes perceptible only through what remains, what is erased, and what is layered again. This exhibition reveals that the layer in Korean aesthetics is not an emotional quality, but a way of thinking.

**I. The Layer of Korean Aesthetics and the Painterly Transformation of Li-Qi Theory :  
“When Qi Moves, Li Appears”**

In East Asian philosophy, essence is not conceived as a fixed substance. It does not exist independently, but manifests only through movement. Neo-Confucian li-qi theory articulates this relationship with clarity. Principle does not function apart from material force, nor does material force take form without principle. Essence is not an abstract core, but an order that appears only through energetic motion. This understanding places essence not outside the world, nor at the end



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of a process, but within material action, repetition, and the flow of time. It remains perceptible only as long as movement continues. Seungtaik Jang's painting renders this structure visually. In his work, color never concludes in a single gesture. Painted layers are washed away, erased surfaces are overlaid again, and color continues to shift. Repetition here is not a means toward an end, but the circulation of movement itself. Within the traces of this circulation, density and balance gradually take shape. These moments mark where essence becomes temporarily perceptible. Application and erasure do not oppose one another. Creation and dissolution operate within the same rhythm. One layer covers another while simultaneously preparing space for what follows. The surface remains not a resolution, but a state of adjustment. Jang's layers do not reveal essence; they establish the conditions through which essence forms. Essence is never given in advance. It becomes perceptible only after passing through repetition, accumulation, and delay. In this sense, Jang does not illustrate Li-Qi theory. He allows its structure to operate within painting itself, not as concept, but as rhythm.

## **II. Painting After Phenomenology and the Horizon of Contemporary Abstraction : Perception as Duration**

Seungtaik Jang's painting resonates with phenomenological inquiries into perception and time. Phenomenology understands the present not as a singular point, but as a thickness in which traces of what has just passed coexist with anticipations of what is about to arrive. Perception unfolds within this layered temporality. This structure closely parallels Jang's painterly logic. Each layer corresponds to a moment, yet no moment stands alone. Earlier layers do not disappear entirely; they persist as residues that shape subsequent layers. The surface exists not as a single present, but as a sedimentation of multiple presents. Perception, in this sense, is not instantaneous recognition but gradual involvement. One does not grasp the work at once, but slowly enters it. Jang's paintings resist immediate consumption. Layers cannot be apprehended at a glance. Vision slows, lingers, and moves. Painting becomes less an object to be viewed than a site where perception dwells. From this perspective, Jang's painting is not a representation, but a place where presence occurs. The surface does not explain meaning. It prepares the conditions under which disclosure may take place. Color does not speak; it remains. Within this remaining, viewers are drawn toward a pre-interpretive state, encountering the work before explanation. Such a structure reopens the question of painting after minimalism. The plane is no longer a closed surface, but a field in which time and perception settle. Formal completion is suspended, and meaning remains open. Through restraint, Jang expands experiential depth, positioning the cognitive structure of Korean aesthetics as a universal inquiry within contemporary abstraction.



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## **Epilogue : Painting After Essence, Thought After Layer**

Seungtaik Jang's painting does not seek to uncover essence. It persistently asks how essence comes into being. His layers function simultaneously as material strata and ontological questions, operating at the intersection of East Asian thought and Western phenomenology. This exhibition does not reduce Korean aesthetics to style or sentiment. Instead, it presents it as a structure of thought. Essence is not a core revealed through subtraction, but a depth sensed only after passing through time, perception, repetition, and delay. Jang's painting organizes this depth visually, reaffirming painting as a site of thinking. Looking ahead, his work suggests an expanded horizon in which layers move beyond chromatic concerns to engage questions of perception, temporality, and ethical presence. In an era defined by speed and instant interpretation, Seungtaik Jang's painting insists on duration. It is precisely there that painting begins, once again, to think.

## **About Ahn Hyun-Jung**

Ahn Hyun-Jung holds a Master's degree in Sociology from Yonsei University, as well as a Master's degree in Art History and a Ph.D. in Art Philosophy from Sungkyunkwan University. She is currently the head of the curatorial department at the Sungkyunkwan University Museum and an adjunct professor at Yonsei University's Graduate School of Public Administration. Ahn has made regular appearances on cultural programs on major channels such as KBS, SBS, and EBS, and she has written columns for various news outlets, including the Dong-A Ilbo and the Korean Bar Association Newspaper. Her books, including *The Gaze of Modernity: The Joseon Art Exhibition* and *Popular Art and Cultural Contents*, demonstrate her extensive knowledge of the Korean art scene. Ahn has participated in numerous significant curatorial projects, including "Munjado from the Joseon Dynasty" at Hyundai Gallery. She is currently a member of the judging panel for the Haindoo Art Award, a public art advisory committee member for the Shinsegae Starfield Library, and an advisor for Art Space Seochon.

