

Chun Kwang Young at Sundaram Tagore Gallery



Chun Kwang Young, Aggregation 17 - NV093, 2017, mixed media with Korean mulberry paper, 73.2 x 60.2 inches/186 x 153 cm © Image courtesy of the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

By NOAH BECKER May, 2018

Straddling two traditions, both Western and Korean, the other-worldly assemblages of Chun Kwang Young evoke the surface of celestial planets or perhaps formations at the bottom of the sea. This sense of geological time characterizes Young's acclaimed and ongoing *Aggregation* series, which he began in 1995, a selection from which is now on view at Sundaram Tagore Gallery (<http://www.sundaramtagore.com>).

Young came of age in a Korea dominated by the instability and authoritarianism of the country's partitioning into North and South, in which the US was heavily involved. Yet by the mid-1950s the United States was often seen as a beacon of power and freedom. Young moved to Philadelphia in the late 1960's and earned his MFA in 1971 from the Philadelphia College of Art. Initially during his student years, Young was seduced by the seeming artistic freedom afforded by the Western art world, and especially the boundary-

crossing paintings of the Abstract Expressionists. His early work owes much to this influence, but he quickly became disillusioned with the market-mania that characterized life in America. Further rejecting the resurgence of pop art aesthetics in Korea during the 90s, Young turned instead to a practice that mined his own memory and background and fused them with the expressiveness of Abstract Expressionism.



Installation view, 2018, Chun Kwang Young, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, NY

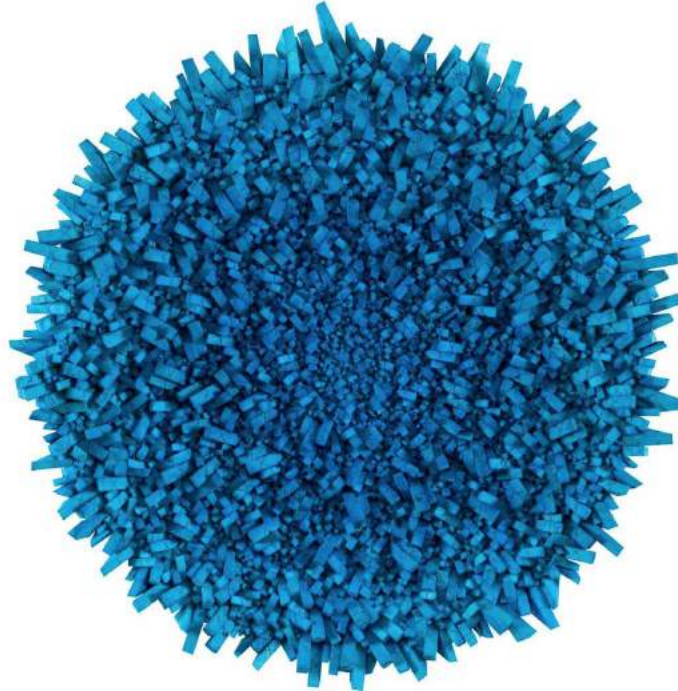
The resulting pieces in *Aggregation* are transportive, not able to be pinned down to any geographical location, they evoke the fascination with surface that can be read no matter their cultural context. They are indicative of the abstraction that swept Korea and Japan as Western culture, and therefore Western modernism, became more accessible, but they do not turn away from a certain specificity of culture. Memory is central to these assemblages. Young often recounts a story, which has become part of his artistic mythology, which explains his inspiration for *Aggregation*. Young recalls being taken to a Chinese Apothecary in his youth, and although unsettled by the medicinal smells and the site of acupuncture needles sitting in plain view, he remembers the tiny parcels of herbs, wrapped in mulberry paper and hanging from string from the ceiling. In this memory, Young found the inspiration for his *Aggregation* series.



Installation view, 2018, Chun Kwang Young, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, NY

Young's relationship with materials is therefore both uniquely Korean and more generally universal, tied both to issues plaguing the planet and to the individuality of his own memory. Young excavates antique Korean books and newspapers for the mulberry paper, or *hanji*, on which their pages are printed. Dying the paper sometimes with tea, sometimes with brighter colors, he then wraps each sheet around a triangular form made

out of polystyrene, a type of Styrofoam. Both materials invoke considerations of time – the mulberry paper, which conjures the specific cultural memory of a people, and the Styrofoam, which activates the eternity of the man-made. *Hanji*, or mulberry paper, is crucial to Korean culture, made from native trees and used for purposes as diverse as writing and drawing to packaging and more commercial uses, and it carries the associated cultural meanings into the works. Both materials might be considered waste in different contexts, but appropriated into Young’s practice they evoke a sense of the eternal future, as well as the historical past.



Chun Kwang Young, Aggregation 18 -JA006 (Star 1), 2018, mixed media with Korean mulberry paper, 63 inches/160 cm © Image courtesy of the artist and Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Young’s practice is meticulous and time consuming, resonating with the obsessive practices of more restrained Abstract Expressionists like Agnes Martin, as well as with the Korean Monochrome movement, which is predicated on what must be a hypnotic repetition of marks and patterns. Yet unlike Martin and the Monochrome movement, Young’s surfaces are often richly colored, three-dimensional, and in many cases closer to sculpture than to painting – a breaking down of the modernist barrier between genres rather than a fortification of it. The presence of the artist’s hand is crucial, as each Styrofoam form is meticulously wrapped, like origami. The forms are then built up over the surface of a canvas, or across the surface of the gallery floor. One work currently on view, *Aggregation 17 – DE094*, sprawls across the gallery floor, the Styrofoam forms that Young combines into almost crystalline arrangements evoking craters on the surface of the moon. The density of the aggregation provoking an urge to touch that is unbearably strong, an urge to explore these strange surfaces with more than vision.





Chun Kwang Young, *Aggregation 00 - NV306*, 2000, mixed media with Korean mulberry paper, 64.6 x 52 inches/164 x 132 cm ©Image courtesy of the artist

Other works are hung more traditionally on the wall. Yet even in pieces like *Aggregation 13 – AUO38*, the geological, Styrofoam forms break the boundaries of the rectangular canvas and push both horizontally toward the viewer and vertically beyond the boundary of their frame. The titles themselves, with their identifying numbers, suggest images that one would expect to have been produced by NASA, and they evoke a certain process of cataloguing and exploration, as though the viewer were traversing at once a moonscape, a mountain-scape or even a cityscape. This otherworldliness gives to the *Aggregation* series a kind of universal appeal, not bound to a specific culture, but still informed by it.

Chun Kwang Young's *Aggregations* will be on view at Sundaram Tangore Gallery at 547 West 27th Street, from May 3 – June 16, 2018. Gallery hours are Monday – Saturday 10 – 6, and by appointment.

A printed catalogue with an essay by Dr. Marius Kwint, reader in Visual Culture, School of Art and Design, University of Portsmouth, U.K., accompanies the exhibition. **WM**



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